Ken Tarcza:

Leadership isn't... There's a part of it about, yeah, you're in charge and you provide direction or you tell people what to do, but I'd say that's like the preschool version of leadership. I mean, what true leaders do is they care about people, they love on them, and they create conditions where people can thrive and succeed. So ultimately, the leadership is not about the leader, the leadership is about everybody but the leader. So, and I would not have learned that before I got to Tennessee, had I not had my journey through the military, so.

Speaker 2:

You're listening to Further Together, the ORAU podcast. Join Michael Holtz and his guests for conversations about all things ORAU. They'll talk about ORAU storied history, our impact on an ever-changing world, our innovative, scientific and technical solutions for our customers, and our commitment to the communities where we do business. Welcome to Further Together, the ORAU podcast.

Michael Holtz:

Welcome to another episode of Further Together, the ORAU podcast. As ever, it's me, your host, Michael Holtz in the communications and marketing department at ORAU. And as has become tradition, I have my co-host, Matthew Underwood with me. Matthew, here we are again. It's been a minute since we've recorded one of these.

Matthew Underwood:

It has been a minute. We've run into some things, some travel stuff, and just some time off for this, but I'm excited to get back to it and it's a beautiful day here in East Tennessee, so. It's a wonderful warm day, so I'm excited to get this podcast going and we have a very exciting guest that we're going to talk to. So I'm super excited about this.

Michael Holtz:

Yeah, I'm really excited about our guest today. It's a relatively new role at ORAU, the Chief of Staff, and he's been with us for just a little over a year now. Ken Tarcza, welcome to Further Together. We're so glad you're here.

Ken Tarcza:

Thank you Michael and Matthew, good morning. It's great to be with both of you.

Michael Holtz:

So, you have the role of Chief of Staff. Just briefly if you would, explain what that role is and what your role is at ORAU.

Ken Tarcza:

Okay, we could probably spend a couple of hours talking about that. So, a Chief of Staff could be many things or anything or nothing, and it's really unique to the individual, the position in the organization. So in this case, why I was brought into ORAU was to assist Andy with leadership standards and organizational alignment, that's the top level headline. Within that, there are numerous facets, but that's it.

So to be a little bit more detailed, I think as I have been here, as my time elapses, I have moved into additional roles and it really, it's just a function of the relationship between Andy and me and the level of trust and his ability to have somebody to hand things off to just to help lighten his load so he can focus on bigger, more strategic things and there's somebody that can, I won't say necessarily keep the trains running because I'm not a COO, I'm a Chief of Staff, which is helping Andy to advance the strategic vision of ORAU.

Michael Holtz:

Awesome. So Ken, how did you get to ORAU?

Ken Tarcza:

Oh, wow. Where would you like to begin? So I was born and raised in Northern Virginia. We'll start there, long ago, far away. My parents... My family background is Hungarian immigrant. So my grandparents were all either Ellis Island immigrants or born in the US and sent back to the old country to be raised in Hungary. So my family on this side of the ocean hails from the New Jersey area, Edison, New Brunswick area, which at the turn of last century, so early 1900s into the 1920s, was a huge melting pot of European immigrants, Hungarian, Polish, German, Italian. There's a huge Hungarian population in that area. So that's where my parents were born and raised.

And then long story, but the short version is, as young adults, they both settled in the Washington DC area for their careers. My mom was actually a female in STEM and in a time when there really wasn't such a thing and that terminology wasn't even used. So she had a degree in microbiology and worked for the Food and Drug Administration. And my father was an aeronautical engineer and worked for the Department of Defense for many years.

So, I was born in Northern Virginia, very close to all things government. Not with many particular military background though, but when it came to be that time to look at what was next after high school, the academies, the military academies were a very appealing option. And you would've thought that Annapolis being closer to DC would've been my first choice, and actually it was, but through a series of events, I ultimately landed at West Point. And so I went there, graduated long ago, was commissioned in armor as an armor officer, which is tanks and armored fighting vehicles. Along the way, I got to do a lot of fun training such as US Army Airborne School, US Army Ranger School, mortar, Platoon Officer course, and on and on. And so I spent a 30-year military career. Earlier in the career, I was involved in very much operational tactical tip of the spear type things and was deployed for Desert Storm, that was my one combat deployment. So that was circa 1990, 1991, with a tank battalion in the First Calvary Division out of what was then known as Fort Hood, Texas. It's been renamed Fort Cavazos now. And did that, and then eventually transitioned to research development, acquisition management contract oversight, which was the last two thirds of my career.

So I retired in 2015, and then at that time we lived in Maryland and I had been working at Aberdeen Proving Grand, Maryland, which is just north of Baltimore, and was there for just about another year after my retirement, working as a supervisory physical scientist at the Army Research Lab. And then saw job opportunities, at that point as I retired and I was trying to figure out what was next, what I wanted to be when I grew up, I felt like I really had a lot more to offer and contribute to federal service. So I was seeking a senior executive position. And somewhat on a whim, we saw an opportunity in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, working for the Department of Energy and the Office of Science and I applied for that position.

And again, much more complicated story, but I ended up being hired into a role and moved to Oak Ridge, Tennessee in the summer of 2016 and I served as a Department of Energy senior executive up until I retired from that in February of 2023, and then I signed on to the Chief of Staff position at ORAU.

Michael Holtz:

You've retired twice, you can't stop working

Ken Tarcza:

Twice retired, yeah, third times the charm. As some would say, I've failed at retirement, but I wouldn't say it was anything that I was trying to succeed at. It was just time to transition to the next thing.

Michael Holtz:

Sure, sure.

Matthew Underwood:

Ken, it sounds like you've had all these different facets of your life. Let's talk specifically about that military background and how do you think that that experience has then transformed yourself to where now you are at ORAU, and how do you take that military background and apply it to the job you're doing now?

Ken Tarcza:

That's a great question, Matthew, and it's a philosophical train of thought too. My military experience, I'd say really going to West Point was a trajectory changer for my life. It's really made all the difference, and there's always the question of, well, are leaders born or made or both or neither? I think it's a little bit of both, but certainly whatever I had that got me in the door was improved upon by my experience, both in a military academy environment, but also military training.

And it's really interesting as we, I'll try to bridge decades of experience and tie the two together, but there are so many things about fundamentals of leadership, which they're in your heart, I guess, and I don't know how they get there unless you live a journey that puts them there, and that is what I gained through my military career.

I will say that I wasn't always the best leader. In fact, I'd probably be embarrassed if I had detailed review of how I was as a lieutenant, a second lieutenant, first lieutenant, how I was as a captain. But all of those experiences, it's like, I'm not a cook. My wife is a great cook, but when she makes stew, you throw all the ingredients into the stew, into the Crockpot or whatever, and then they do their thing. And when it is technically ready is not when it is technically best, right? It cooks and the meat's cooked and then you say, hey, it's dinner time or whatever, but that stew actually gets better over time, right? Couple days, the flavors meld more, and I think it's the same with the leadership journey that you experience things and they go into this recipe, this mix of leadership evolution in a person, and over time they take hold and get better. So I mean for me, certainly the journey has been real.

And I think probably the most important part of that, what happened along the way is how it gripped my heart and how I care about people and developing empathy. I mean, leadership isn't... There's a part of it about you're in charge and you provide direction or you tell people what to do, but I'd say that's the preschool version of leadership. I mean, what true leaders do is they care about people, they love on them and they create conditions where people can thrive and succeed. So ultimately, the leadership is not about the leader, the leadership is about everybody but the leader. So, and I would not have learned that before I got to Tennessee, had I not had my journey through the military.

So, going back again to the early days, I mean, when you're in an environment where you're getting rained on and your tank or your Bradley Fighting Vehicle is stuck in the mud and you're out there at 2:00 AM with the mechanics trying to get your vehicle unstuck and you troops are miserable and you're hungry and you're cold, I mean that's real, right? That is, you are being squeezed, you're being pressed through this experience of, either you can grow from that and develop the appreciation for the people that are giving so much just for that little thing, that not you're stuck in or you go, wow, this sucks. I don't want to do this anymore, I'll go do something easier and I'll go drive Uber or something. Nothing against Uber drivers, but it's a completely different world, so, and that was my journey too, just having been through these things where you're forced to either shape and turn one way or shape and turn another.

And I'll give you another example too. Going back long ago and far away, because I mean, it seems long ago maybe to [inaudible 00:12:39] but it's really not. And going through US Army Ranger School, that is a... I mean, Rangers are elite soldiers and they're trained how to do raids and ambushes and inflict violence upon enemy in very specific ways. But part of that experiential journey, the training is, how do you lead and compel people who are, as you are. Tired, hungry, miserable, don't want to do anything, how do you cause them to do the thing that they don't want to do that you have to do because that's your mission, right? And people actually, I mean the way it worked long ago, and I'm sure it's still the same is, as the Ranger school back in the day was 58 days long, so basically three months. You would go through these various trainings and mission scenarios and the leadership positions would rotate and for each one you would get graded on how well you did. You would get graded by your cadre, your ranger instructors, but you would also get graded by your peers. And you could get peered out of ranger school if you are just a despicable human being, you would get peered out. You would get rated out, like this person is consistently not looking out for others, they're looking out for themselves, they're doing things.

We had a guy in my class that was peered out for stealing food. Because I went through in the winter time, I went through it from January to March, it was 1986, so I was a winter Ranger. We started with 200 and, I don't know, 275 or something like that, and we ended up graduating only 90-ish. And of those, only 70-ish were the originals and the other 20 or whatever it were, were recycled in from earlier classes because they had medical issues or something like that. So I mean, it was a pretty tough cut. We had people that were peered out because of, or whatever, rated out just not performing or doing things they shouldn't. So, being in a situation where you have to compel people to do the thing they don't want to do because it's the right thing to do, that's the essence of leadership. But doing it with compassion, empathy is huge.

So, fast-forward to now, we're not carrying rifles or machine guns or grenades, we're not getting shot at or shooting at anybody, but the essence of leadership is the same. It's like, how do we get people to see the greater vision? How do we create the conditions where they can succeed? How do we encourage and compel them to do the thing which they may not want to do? And how do we do it with the empathy and compassion that they know that you care? And what I've found is that if people know that you care and that you have their back, I don't mean to be the wishy-washy piece of jello. I mean, you can be firm and decisive, and then when people know that you care, they will climb mountains and run through walls for you because they want to honor your commitment to them.

Michael Holtz:

Well, and not to get political necessarily, but in a world where grievance seems to be the prevailing mentality of the day, empathy is critical. I mean, it's an important thing. So, developing those skills and showing that empathy for others I think is important and I think it makes a huge difference.

Ken Tarcza:

Yeah, thanks, I do too. And another thing, one thing I'll say too, Michael, is it was kind of funny, when you are in the military or working in DOD, so working at Army Research Lab as a department army civilian, I mean, it's very army military centric, so that's fine.

So when I showed up at the Department of Energy as a senior executive, I learned later, subsequently, it was amusing actually, that two things that surprised me, and this is just organizational culture. This isn't people or bad, this is just completely different culture and Department of Energy as it is in ORAU. I'm happy to report that ORAU was not like this, but when I got to Department of Energy, there were two things that became apparent over time. One was, people were watching me to see what I would do, like being a laboratory mouse.

My experience in the military is rotation of people and leaders coming and going, that's just what happens, right? It's just, that's the way it is, right? So somebody shows up and typically go, okay, the new person's here, great, let's figure out what their priorities are as they figure out who we are, and then we'll mesh together and let's go. When I got to the Department of Energy, it's like, well, why is this guy here? Oh, he's a military guy, he's going to militarize us. He's here to shut us down. He's here to X, Y, Z. He's here, he's going to make us, I don't know, march around in the field and do physical training. Really? Come on, I'm here to do a job. What is this?

So, and I learned later too, that they were very much watching me to see what I would do as I was watching them to try to see what they would do. So it was like the stalemate, it was described me like it was the soccer field and the soccer ball, and we're all looking at each other trying to figure out, well, who's going to go kick the ball? And I was expecting them to just play on and they were expecting me to run out there and kick the ball. So like I said though, I'm happy to report that when I got to ORAU, it's been nothing but welcome and embracing, and I felt very much part of the team and just really got welcomed into ORAU from the day I arrived.

Michael Holtz:

Awesome, that's good to hear.

Matthew Underwood:

Yeah, that is good to hear, for sure. So you talk about the culture at those other places you've been, and even going back to the culture of the military and the culture at some of your other stops, what would you say is especially unique about the culture of ORAU?

Ken Tarcza:

The sense of family. That's a great question, it's the sense of family, the sense of oneness and teamwork. I know the one ORAU mantra is there and it looks different from where you sit, I will say, and I appreciate that. These things always do, but in general, I think people really want the best for each other and for the organization and the longevity that so many employees have with ORAU is evidence of that.

And that's one of the things I love to talk about when I do the new employee welcomes. It's a joy to see the eagerness and people signing on, as it was with you, Matthew, when we did your new employee welcome. Just excited to be here and so full of energy and all that. Plus in your case, you have some family history, which is a typical story. You are here because you had somebody that you knew, and in your case you, your dad's here. But whether it's a spouse or a sibling or best friends, that is so often the story and it's like this magnetic attraction to draw people into this culture that is just such a friendly, warm and embracing culture.

Michael Holtz:

What I love about that thought too about our culture is, not only are we family while we're working here, but you have retirees that still want to be around, right? They come back for annual lunches and want to be part of employee's club events and that sort of thing, so-

Ken Tarcza:

And Earth Day [inaudible 00:20:41].

Michael Holtz:

... those family ties don't really ever end, right?

Ken Tarcza:

They don't. Earth Day was two weeks ago on south campus and I know that there were retirees that came back just to be a part of the crew, and just be there and see people, so that's a beautiful thing.

Michael Holtz:

So, digging back into your history a little bit, you said that your parents both worked in the sciences. So did your working in... Was that just felt like normal and natural?

Ken Tarcza:

It did.

Michael Holtz:

For you to become a scientist, basically?

Ken Tarcza:

Well, yeah, I think so. My dad was an engineer and my mom was a scientist, I'll say microbiologist. So I think that there was a predisposition they had that way and I'm sort of... My basic wiring is an engineer brain and a scientific mathematical mindset. So I think so, I was always drawn to the sciences. But, so it's an interesting contrast in my academic training in mechanical engineering and material science. So I was very fortunate, not only did the Army sponsor my attendance at West Point, one of the big three federal military academies, but the Army also fully funded a master's degree in mechanical engineering and subsequently, a doctorate in mechanical engineering materials. So that was always my mental bent, I would say.

But I would also say that the actual practical engineering and being a practitioner of sciences is fairly limited. That training and those skill sets really, I guess, helped shape my perspective on these things. I would like to think so. I could effectively blend my leadership background with my scientific and engineering insight to be able to lead, manage and encourage behavior in that arena. So ultimately, I guess where I'd settle was, I didn't necessarily want to be a bench scientist, but I definitely wanted to be in a place where I could influence science and shape and strategically prioritize scientific efforts and that sort of thing.

Matthew Underwood:

That's awesome, and then it is interesting how you took a piece of both of your parents and combine them into one and one career and one career path, so I think that's super cool. As you talked about some of the things that you do on a day-to-day basis, and one of the things that you've mentioned with me was going to those new hires and introducing yourself personally to each new employee. Why is that so important to you and why is that something that when you came on, that was a priority for you?

Ken Tarcza:

It's the leadership thing, Matthew. It's just that human connection and just having that care, concern and empathy for somebody, even if it's the first day there. I don't need to get to know them to know that I care about them, especially, they're part of ORAU, so they're part of our team, they're part of our family from day one and the days to come.

And again, Michael, as you said, even when after folks retire or move on, it's with blessings that we receive and with blessings we say farewell to, and then certainly everything in between. So it's just because I'd say it's really a God-given care for people at this point, for every individual, which is also why I love wandering around and talking to people. I've done, I'd say probably more of that and more effectively on South campus just because you tend to see more people concentrated on a daily basis, but it's just a joy to walk around and just assault somebody in their cubicle with curiosity, say, hey, who are you and what do you do and why are you here and what's going on? And all that, because you can just learn so much just with that inquiring mind, the inquisitive approach, underpinned by true care and compassion. You can learn so much about people and what's going on in their lives and you probably learn more about people and what's real doing that, than you do in a formal meeting or anything like that, because people are much more inclined to share what's on their heart in those individual settings. So you don't meet everybody that way, and certainly for our ORAU family that are located in Arvada or Cincinnati, I haven't had the chance to walk the hallways there as of yet, but I will at some point and I'll look forward to it.

And that's very much an imprinting from my army days because not all army experiences are the same, but certainly me with doing the things I did as a leader of soldiers and combat specialties, we spend a lot of time together, whether in garrison or in the field or deployed. So I mean, that's just that relationship building is what I saw modeled in effective leadership, where leaders walk around and just see what they find. I've heard it called checking the traps, you just go wander and you just see what you find. And whether it's in the motor pool or the barracks or wherever it might be, that's where rubber meets the road, that's where life is happening in the organization, and that's where you see people at their best and sometimes their worst. And you learn about what's really going on in their lives but also, that's how you touch the heartbeat of an organization.

Michael Holtz:

One of the things that I love about ORAU is you mentioned the concept of one ORAU, that we are a family, we're all in this together, so to speak. And we are in the process of rewriting or looking forward, I guess, the next iteration of our strategic plan. And employees are involved in that process, right? It's not just a totally leadership process. Talk about to the extent that you can, why even that level of organizational development is important.

Ken Tarcza:

Yeah, I love that question too, Michael. I'm trying to think where to begin. Well, all credit to Andy for the employee engagement. We knew a couple of things going into the current strategy development and planning cycle. One was we needed to do it because the last effort took place in the 2017, 2018 timeframe, which was well before I arrived, but also, a lot has changed since then. We've been through a pandemic, the organization has changed, priorities have changed. So we are basically operating off of a strategic plan, which is, the pages are yellowing on it at this point. So there was certainly a time driven need to do it.

But also, we need to reassess who we are and where we are. We also knew as we looked around the room, so to speak, with the executive team and the five team, that as this next plan is being implemented, it's likely that some or a number of those people in the room won't be there. So we need to ensure that whatever we do is not envisioned by those who won't have to live it out. But also, from the employees that would be the beneficiaries hopefully, of the plan, they wouldn't have the sense that, oh, well these people had this great plan and now they're not going to be here to see it through, so it's going to fall on us to make it happen.

So, Andy was very insistent on employee engagement in the process. So that's why early on we put out what we called a casting call, just to have volunteers to see who stepped up. And we actually were pleasantly surprised, actually. I won't say shocked, that's probably too strong a word, but we were super excited that so many people applied to be, volunteered to be, hey, I want to be involved in this thing. And part of the volunteering process was to say who you are and what you do, where you are in the organization, and what is your background in this and what is your interest in this? Do you have experience in strategic planning and why do you care? Why do you care about the strategic plan? And what we found is that some of the volunteers did have background in such a thing and some didn't, but in every case it's like, I care about ORAU. Kind of going back to what we said about the family, and we're one ORAU. I care about this organization now and I care about what it's going to be in the future, and I want to be involved in the process to shape that future. It's like can't argue with that, right?

So when we got all the volunteers, we initially thought, well, we'll just have, I don't know, a smallish group, I don't know, 10, 15. Then they'll be our sounding board. So the executive/five team will come up with great ideas and we'll bounce them off this other group and they can say, hey, that's great, or that doesn't make any sense, we don't get it. But we ended up with 40. It's like, all right, well, who are we going to tell not to be involved? I mean, all this passion here, you can't tell people to go away.

So no, again, Andy, all credit to Andy. He's like, nope, we're going to use all 40 of these people. So what we did is, broke them into cohorts and we leveraged HR insight to make sure we had good mix of positions and levels and diversity, because what's great about this cohort is we have representation from all across the company, very diverse, very different experience and skill levels, but the way they have come together and are incredibly responsive and effective whenever we... The way the process is basically working is we are stepping through the strategy journey, which I'll detail a little bit more in a moment, but as we step through and we go, okay, we need a little bit of course correcting and or feedback, we engage either the entire group of stakeholders or we take one of the four cohorts and we say, okay, here's where we are, this is what we got. What do you think? And then there's not much drama in the feedback we get. It's like, here's what we think, and not good, good, or whatever. And it's just been really effective.

You would think with the complexity of so many stakeholders in the five team in the cohorts, that it would be a lumbering slow process, but it's really not. It's very much more effective than I even would have predicted.

So the process we're following overall is outlined in the book, Good Strategy, Bad Strategy, by Richard Rumelt, and that book was published in 2011, I think. And that has been the basis for now the third iteration of the ORAU strategic planning process. The first iteration was circa 2012, and that was really going from not much of anything for strategic plan, to something. And then the next iteration was after the successful ORAU's Recompete in 2015 timeframe, just after that was the next iteration of the strategic plan. And the first iteration was not much of anything to something. The second iteration was from something to something way better. And now, we're taking the way better to, we're going to have something great coming out of it. So much of what was done, especially in iteration too of the Rumelt framed strategic planning process, was really good. I mean, it was a year and a half was devoted to it with many people involved in many different ways, different sorts of stakeholders and teams and committees and implementation groups and all that. So it was a super sound process. And the good news is, is a lot of what they did is still relevant and applicable today.

And then the basic process that we're following is to diagnose the organization, this is the Rumelt process, diagnose what the situation is, which is essentially answering the question of, what is going on here? And then next is coming up with guiding principles or policies, what he calls them, but policy not in the sense of here's a paper, here's the HR policy. It's, what are the thought processes we're going to apply to address the challenges identified in the diagnosis? And then lastly and most important, I think, is actual, what you do about those things, and those are called the coherent actions. And the coherent actions are, fall within the guiding principles to address what you have diagnosed.

So the analogy would be if you are not feeling well, you're feeling ill, you go to the doctor and he goes, well, you're sick. It's like, well, thank you, I know that. That's the diagnosis. The guiding principles would be, okay, you appear to have the flu, so we need to give you rest. We need to give you fluids, we need to give you antibiotics. Those would be the policies or principles. And then the coherent actions would be, I need you to go home and get 24 hours of rest. I'm going to prescribe this specific antibiotic and you're going to do these other things. The specific, what are the steps that we need to follow to implement the policies, to address the diagnosis? So it's no different in the organization. We diagnose, we come up with the guiding principles or policies, and then we come up with the coherent actions.

And where we are in our current process is we are at the cusp of the diagnosis. So even though the strategic planning journey that we are on currently has been underway for some months, really, we could point to late summer last year when the Five Team essentially embarked on the journey and then it became a organizational performance goal for this year that we're in now. We're at the diagnosis, but what has led up now is to do a lot of soul-searching and self-assessing. We have developed an organizational purpose statement, which previously didn't exist. We've revised the mission and vision and just recently, within the last week, we solidified a revised set of organizational values.

When we are currently in the midst of diagnosing ourselves, which goes back to the stakeholder cohort I mentioned, the cohort of 40 and the Five Team were collectively surveyed, and they were asked to provide, if they chose to provide three, they could provide up to three, what do you see as the biggest challenges for ORAU for the next three to five years? So we had tremendous feedback from that NOVI survey we did, and that has been the basis of identifying our challenges and ultimately a diagnosis statement, which will then lead to the guiding principles/policies, and then subsequently, the coherent actions.

Michael Holtz:

So a lot of work has gone on and much work still to be done, and I'm honored to say that my cohort is up next, working on the diagnosis piece.

Ken Tarcza:

You are. You have been engaged, you've been sent on to the field of play.

Michael Holtz:

That's right. That's right, but like I said, I love that it's really just the culture of ORAU to involve employees in all of those processes, those high level processes for, where do we go from here as a company? And it truly is an honor to be part of that process.

Ken Tarcza:

We're thrilled to have everybody, you and every stakeholder that volunteered. It's tremendous to have, again, that level of interest and the desire to be part of the future of ORAU, whether or not you're a strategic expert or you don't even know how to spell strategic. It doesn't matter, you know what is important, you experience life in the company, you know where the issues are. And if we can gather all that, which I think we've been able to do very well, then that can certainly be the basis for a bright future for ORAU.

Matthew Underwood:

Ken, just with strategic planning being a small piece of this, also with what you've learned about the company in your first year plus, where do you see the trajectory of ORAU? Where do you see the company heading?

Ken Tarcza:

Oh, wow. The future is bright and it is most bright because of our people. I mean, the people are key. Going back to the new employee welcomes, I get to read every resume of every new employee, and we just have such an amazing talent pool that adds to what we already had. And the fact that we have a national draw now is really, really neat. I mean, there are, as I would share with any new employee that I welcome, whether physically welcoming them at the Oak Ridge main campus or welcoming somebody virtually because they're in California or Texas or Maine or wherever they might be, they are equally important and have an equally important job to do.

So with all that is underpinning, I think that the past performance of ORU speaks for itself. I mean, how effective and how well ORAU performs its mission, whether it's the ORISE contract, whether it's NIOSH, whether it's NASA postdoc, whether it's public health, whether it's STEM workforce development or whatever it is, we have tremendous street credibility based on tremendous performance and track record.

So I think that the future is bright because we can certainly build on that as we look at a couple of key events. There are a number of those that I mentioned or alluded to that are re-compete windows here in this next year, fiscal year '25 will be a really big year for all that. But I'm confident that we will do well in all of that and we will continue to expand our portfolio, what we're able to do, and the customers that we're able to serve.

Michael Holtz:

Awesome, I love that vision. Ken, is there anything that we haven't talked about as we wrap up our time that you want to make sure that we mentioned before we close things up?

Ken Tarcza:

Yeah, I do, there's one thing. I thought about this ever so briefly before we signed on here. So, I will show you a friend of mine, this guy right here, hopefully you can see him on the podcast. He's supposed to have the rifle in his hand right here, that's his broken and the bayonet is broken off too, but what this is, is it's actually a trophy. I'll talk about that. But the statue is called the Iron Mic, and I don't know where that name came from, but the Iron Mic, and there are a couple of them, couple versions that exist but this one is based on a statue at the fort, formerly known as Fort Benning, Georgia, it's now called Fort Moore. It was renamed recently.

And the history of this particular iron mic right here is, I mentioned all the training I went through, especially at the early part of my career. So one of the courses I went to was the mortar course, the infantry mortar platoon officer course, where we learned how to use and employ and direct fire for mortars, which are in infantry units and cab units, different sizes of mortars, 60 millimeter, 81, 4.2 inch, all that.

So back at that time, and I'll date myself, but this was the fall of 1985, ballistic computers were just now coming in, so we did a lot of what we did as far as classroom training and plotting where the mortars are and where the targets are, and how you calculate that, and how you do that was all on paper. We called it charts and darts, where you had to look and there's a process because not to go down a rabbit trail here, but when you are calling artillery fire on something, whether naval gunfire or a 60 millimeter mortar, the observer is somewhere looking at something and the guns are somewhere else. So you have to account for that difference in perspective and distance, and if it's a long range thing, you have to account for weather and temperature variations and stuff like that. So there's a lot of math behind the process. Anyway, so went through this course and I was almost the honor graduate, but not quite. If I'd been the honor graduate, the number one graduate, I would've gotten an Iron Mic trophy. I was number two. I did not get a trophy.

So, but more recently, and really just in the last couple years, I got to thinking about that and I got to thinking about the essence of, it wasn't so much the course or the trophy, but what it represents. So again, this is going to sound very, very militaristic, but that's not the point, the point is leadership. So what this guy represents and the iron mic and the, it's the spirit of infantry I'll say, it is, this is an infantry leader and he is saying, follow me, do as I do. Follow me, do as I do. And that applies everywhere, whether you're leading infantry soldiers to attack the hill, whether you're trying to shoot mortars at somebody, whether you're working as a senior executive in the Department of Energy, or whether you're a Chief of Staff or just an employee in ORAU. We talked about, everybody's a leader, and this is everybody's a leader. Follow me, do as I do. If you can live up to that and represent that, then you never have anything to worry about, right?

So I can't think of a stronger advertisement for the leadership standard of individual leadership or being a manager or being a supervisor or being a chief of staff or an executive, it doesn't matter. If you can live up to follow me, do as I do, then you're in good stead. So that's why I keep firing Mike around because it reminds me of that. It also reminds me of fact that I was the number two grad, so.

I bought this one off of eBay. I thought, it's a shame he's on eBay. That's why his bayonet is broken, and that's why there's no little name placard down here that says anybody.

Michael Holtz:

[inaudible 00:44:40].

Ken Tarcza:

That's the little slide in thing, but that's not the point. The point is it reminds me of that foundation kernel of who I want to be as I represent myself in the organization.

I think the last thing I'll leave you with too, is as Chief of Staff, it's really a privilege to be here because of where I am but also because I don't have any particular commitment to any piece of the organization. I'm not in charge of this thing. Well, strategy and whole campus, yes, but if you look an organizational chart, you don't see lines reporting to me or boxes, but that's actually a beautiful thing because that means I am a free agent to move across the company at any level and talk to anybody about anything, learn about it, understand, find out where folks are struggling, or that something needs to be brought to light.

And because of that, because of that approach, I've gotten to meet some great people that I maybe wouldn't have gotten to meet, and I've had people reach out to me say, hey, I just want you to know about this and maybe you can do something about it, kind of thing, and I'm honored. It's a privilege to have people that have the level of trust in a leader to say, hey, I don't want to expose myself, but maybe you can do something about this thing. And it's a privilege to be presented, challenged with situations like that, to respect that trust, but also try to make change for good and use my position to, as I said earlier, as a leader, create conditions where others can thrive and succeed because if people are able to do that, then everybody wins, right?

Michael Holtz:

Absolutely.

Ken Tarcza:

And the organization succeeds, so.

Michael Holtz:

Awesome. Well, Ken, we'll leave it there, and thank you so much for your time today. I really appreciate the opportunity to get to know you a little better, talk about your role at ORAU, and what's coming ahead for us.

Ken Tarcza:

Thanks, Michael. Thanks, Matthew. It's been a joy to spend some time with you, and if you ever want to have me back, I'll be glad to come back, but thanks for reaching out and thanks for letting me be on the podcast.

Michael Holtz:

Awesome, thank you so much.

Matthew Underwood:

Thank you.

Speaker 2:

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