

Episode 90

FS Thrive x Stefan Underwood: Be a trickle of water

Stefan Underwood:

So I'm looking at my whiteboard right here, where my eight-year-old will tell you about her dreams. And the key point that I've written down on the whiteboard says be a trickle of water. And so I had to explain that to my daughter, but my daughter will tell you one of her rules is be a trickle of water. And the analogy that I give her is water running over stone.

Does that make a change? And she's says no. I say, but when it consistently does for a long time, it carves canyons.

Ginevra Czech:

Welcome back to FS Thrive, a podcast by FS Investments. I am your host, Ginevra Czech, and I am very excited to be joined by Stefan Underwood. He is the Senior Vice President of Methodology at Exos. You might know Exos as one of our value-add partners. We run a sustainable high performance workshop, as well as a couple of other sessions and seminars really focused on this idea of sustainable high performance and whole person performance.

So I'm really excited today for our conversation. We're going to be trying to point out some insights for individuals as well as organizations really looking to improve their performance and overall well-being. So before we jump in, Stefan, I'd love for you to just introduce yourself, in your own words.

Stefan Underwood:

Yeah, Ginevra, thank you so much for having me on. I appreciate it. It is great to be here. Introduce myself in my own words. Gosh. I always like to start with non-work stuff first. First and foremost, my wife and I have been married 17 years. We've got two wonderful children, so my son is 11 years old. My daughter is eight years old, and the Olympics are going on right now.

I don't know when this is going to actually post, but while we're recording, we're right in the middle of Olympics. I'm up in Canada, but my wife is American. So we've got a fun little rivalry going on in the house. And I just absolutely love seeing humans performing at their peak, which I guess brings me to what I do professionally.

I started off...my degree was in exercise science. I started off as a strength and conditioning coach working with elite athletes. That was where my career started about 20 years ago. That led me to the U.S. and I moved all over the U.S. I ended up actually working pretty heavily with elite athletes, Olympians, professional athletes, the likes, running NFL combine prep.

I really worked heavily for about a decade with the U.S. special operations community. But I'd say about six years ago, there was a little bit of a pivot for me. And nowadays you find me working almost exclusively with corporate populations, corporate executives. I've actually gone back to school and I'm one class away from finishing my master's in organizational psychology, just to put a different perspective on things. Because I do believe in lifelong learning.

So it leads me to where I am today. I've been with Exos for 14 years, and have started out as a coach, like I said, with Exos and progressed through the years. And I now oversee what is called our methodology team, which is a transdisciplinary team of various different subject matter experts, where we all have different perspectives on human performance. And we get to look at all things—human performance for every population Exos serves, and work to inform our stance.

Ginevra Czech:

So, very impressive background. We use Exos here. We are one of the corporate clients of Exos. So we partnered together on a lot of the exercise facilities here, as well as our gym, our cafe or our cafeteria. We're really focused on nutrition and then movement. I do think there's a big aspect of recovery. Nutrition and all of the different components.

But you mentioned that your team really takes this transdisciplinary approach, which is a word I had to practice before this podcast. Could you talk a little bit more about what those different fields are that you focus on, or the different teams of people that you work with?

Stefan Underwood:

Absolutely. As I look at the different fields of expertise on our team, we've got an individual with a PhD in applied neuroscience, an expert in flow state. We've got a clinical psychologist and executive coach. We've got an individual with a PhD in rehabilitative medicine, who's also a sports dietician; stole him from professional sports, where he was in the NFL for eight years. We've got strength coaches, physical therapists. What am I missing? And who am I missing?

Ginevra Czech:

...data and analytics.

Stefan Underwood:

I was going to say, we've got data and analytics. We've got a couple of different researchers. We can do our own internal research. So we've got a team that has pretty comprehensive views at both the psychology and biology of what makes humans human.

Ginevra Czech:

So I know one of the goals that we want to try and talk about today is understanding why having multidisciplinary team is important as it relates to the idea of performance. I think maybe it's obvious, maybe it's not obvious in the athletic space. But, I even think in this corporate space as a corporate athlete, as I like to consider myself, how would a multidisciplinary team...how can we make some parallels there? So I'd love to understand a

little bit about how you think there's parallels between, one, how it applies to an athlete and then how we could make those parallels to the corporate world.

Stefan Underwood:

Absolutely. I think, if I step back for a moment, I would say that there's a book I love that's called "Where Good Ideas Come From." And one of the concepts that the author discusses in there is this idea of the adjacent possible. So when you're talking about trying to push a field forward, when you're talking about innovation, when we're talking about trying to be at our best, our best ideas tend to come from conversations with adjacent fields.

So the example in the book that the author uses is one of the biggest, or I'd say most important advents in pediatric medicine in the last, however many decades, is the idea of an incubator. So if you look at before an incubator, premie babies didn't stand much of a chance. And you look at modern medicine and what it means for premature births now, and it's been a wonderful advancement and it came from a pediatric doctor.

Visiting someone on a farm and seeing heat lamps over chicks and being like, oh, we could control the environment for babies. And so, when I think about humans and human performance, they're incredibly complex. We, by nature as a species, are complex adaptive systems, which means frankly, I think it's arrogant to think that any one person or any one profession has all of the answers to unlock all the truths of human performance.

And I think we need to pull on these adjacent possibilities and these different ideas. And so I can have my experiences and have a thought and then have the neuroscientist on my team say something. I'm like, oh, I've never seen it from that perspective. And so I think that's the first thing I would say is to drive us forward into the highest levels of performance, we need different perspectives. We need diverse perspectives to achieve that. If we then look at athletes and draw the parallel to the rest of us who are not—I'll say corporate athlete as well—but to the rest of us who are not at the Olympics right now doing amazing things. I said humans are complex adaptive systems within humans.

We have all these different systems and each of those systems is its own complex adaptive system in its own right from our immune function to everything endocrinology based to how we build and grow muscle, to our metabolic systems. I mean, everything is complex. So I think it's important for individuals to create teams around them, of people who have expertise and perspective on each of the different areas that play into their own performance from nutrition to how they move, to how they sleep, to what's going on between the ears and everything else. And so I think it's important because no one person can know it all.

So if you look at any sports team and you look at these Olympians in Paris, they're supported by multidisciplinary teams to help them get the most out of themselves. We should all get that. So look, if I go to my doctor and I say, listen, I would love to do some blood work to proactively look at my biomarkers, to proactively look at my health, my doctor's most likely not going to be all about that.

That's not what the traditional medical system is about, but that isn't to bad-mouth the doctor because if I do need reactive medicine, should I be diagnosed with cancer. My mom

has cancer right now. I'm very grateful for the doctors supporting her. And I'm very grateful for the reactive medicine available to her.

And so it's just to say, we have a place for these medical providers. But could we also contemplate a proactive approach with a naturopath or a dietician and looking at blood work and biomarkers—as we look at speaking to the population at FS—we would never make decisions, financial decisions or decisions about our business without data. So why shouldn't we make decisions about our health and performance with data? And so as we look at that, how I sleep, my biomarkers, what I'm eating, again, going back to the question of multidisciplinary teams that clearly calls for differing sets of knowledge to be able to answer all those questions, to put together my personal game plan, to do my best, to be my best.

Ginevra Czech:

So if we summarize that, obviously with athletes, we know that they probably have a nutritionist. They probably have some physical therapist, a trainer. And that's probably focused on, there's two different trainers. There's probably preparation. So making sure that you're training your body on the front end, but then also on the recovery side of things. And then the maintenance side of things. I think mindset's a really big one. I see that application all the time.

And actually, I don't know the name of the athlete, but it was the men's 400 relay. This guy came from pretty far back. And in the last 150 meters, he made this unbelievable comeback and you know, all the comments section on Instagram, everyone's saying, who's his sports psychologist, who are they paying? Because you can see the mental toughness that these athletes are having, and so often it seems like it's the physical is there, but it's actually that mental component that really seems to be pushing a lot of people into this next level of greatness and physical performance that we've seen.

Stefan Underwood:

I couldn't agree more. And what I love is that we're seeing it talked about more on a global stage. I look at people like Simone Biles leading the charge and speaking openly and criticized heavily a few years ago, as she got the twisties and as she was mentally struggling and her courage and what she's done.

And then holy smokes, the way she performed in Paris, absolutely the best there's ever been. And to see more and more athletes willing to have those conversations, I think is really helpful for everyone out in society. But I agree with you. I go all the way back to Yogi Berra and the Yankees with the old baseball's 90% are sports are 90% mental. And I believe he then said the other half are physical, which is just one of the best quotes of all time. But you're right. You need to have all these professions there to support you. It's about a team supporting you. And the only difference is the athletes have the team provided to them. And I think we need to sometimes be our own advocates and create our own teams.

But at FS, I know the system, the way Exos supports you there, the ability to go down to the kitchen and have your meal plan and have that food wonderfully prepared to fuel you right. And then to be able to get in and speak with your trainer and to have people there to

support you. I just firmly believe it would be arrogant to think there's one person that can tell you everything you need to know about your performance.

Ginevra Czech:

And what we do with...we're lucky here at FS we have access to that. And then what we're doing with our value-add programs when we're partnering with our different external clients is we're trying to bring a lot of these concepts around this interdisciplinary approach to performance and that idea of sustainable or durable high performance.

We're trying to educate people on a lot of the things that we'll touch on today. But letting people know that it is accessible, this idea of creating performance in your individual lives. And I think that again, there's so many parallels between your individual performance and your professional performance, your athletic performance, and you really can create a blueprint that you can just rinse and repeat for those different facets of your life.

I do want to shift a little bit. We touched a bit on some of the female athletes that we're seeing at the Olympics. And I know that Exos has been doing a lot of research into women's performance. I was a collegiate athlete. I still am actively participating in sports so I'm definitely interested in some of the research you guys have done in that space. I'm just curious, any thoughts you have on the research and women's performance in sport.

Stefan Underwood:

I mean, let's step back for a moment and just appreciate the moment that women's sport is having right now. I say this as a girl dad. I'm looking at my eight-year-old daughter who lives her life through sport. I coach her. I love it. It's my greatest joy and just my excitement for the world she hopefully grows up in. But if you look at the Paris games, the first games that had true gender equity, that's amazing. You look at what's going on right now, the WNBA, Kaitlin Clark and the views that she's getting. I do firmly believe we're at this inflection point around women's sport.

And so as we look at that, the reality is there is different physiology for women, right, different biology. Especially when you look at endocrinology and hormonal systems and obviously being governed by the menstrual cycle. And so as we start looking at these changes in hormones through the menstrual cycle, that's going to have an influence on performance and specifically recovery.

So in the sports world, if the notion is, we can do our best to support whichever individuals in front of us, taking all the variables that are true for that individual and of one, then if that individual happens to be a woman, we should be considering those things. I told you I had a shift in my career and it's been some time since I've coached.

I'll be the first to say, I want to go back to some of the women that I coached and apologize and give them their money back. You know, I worked with a woman who went to the Olympics and we didn't have one conversation about her menstrual cycle. And how naive, how much did I miss out and failed to support her the best I could have supported her.

Ginevra Czech:

Yeah. It's so interesting you say that because I had a baby 10 months ago. He's going to be 10 months old in two days. There's no one that knows hormone fluctuations more than a postpartum mother and maybe the husband or partner of a postpartum...

Stefan Underwood:

Yeah, yeah.

Ginevra Czech:

...mother But I wholeheartedly agree that the way I had to fuel my body, the way I had to prioritize my mental health, so different than any other stage of my life because of the obvious baby that I had, but also because my body was going through hormonal changes it had never gone through before. And I'm so lucky I have access to Exos to help navigate me through some of those different changes. And then even the recovery component physically, right. I mentioned I'm an athlete, so getting back into training, making sure I was doing it correctly and safely and at the appropriate pace. So really, it's great work you guys are doing and I'm very excited to continue to see more research in the space.

Stefan Underwood:

And there needs to be more. There is still a massive gap in research representing women. If you look at so much of the research that's out there that create our guidelines, here's what's healthy for you, here's what's right for you. When you go and you look at it, it tends to be research that's done on men, and men within a certain age window quite often. There is a research gap for women. That gap is starting to close and there's wonderful leaders. Dr. Stacey Sims is on our performance advisory board. She is a world leader. The work that she has led is incredible. There's a group we've spoken with here. They're a Canadian group up near where I live. It's called My Normative and is dedicated to closing that gender gap in research for women. And so, like I said, I think we're seeing a moment, we're seeing an inflection point. And an understanding that if you're looking to support someone, the best you can support someone, and they happen to be a woman that needs to be inclusive of their unique physiology, the way you support them. And so that's what we're doing. Exos is figuring out how to modify fueling strategies, training strategies, largely based around that individual cycle.

Ginevra Czech:

And I think that, the other takeaway, from an athlete perspective, it's pretty obvious how we want to treat individuals differently based on their unique circumstances. But in a corporate setting, for me, I think you have to consider the policies that you have, whether those are policies or resources or benefits, there's a variety of different ways that you can support people there. And then also I think that some of the comments we had made earlier around diversity, thinking back to our earlier conversation about building a diverse team, understanding you're going to have people with different backgrounds, unique circumstances, and sometimes those circumstances are changing or fluid or in fluctuation. So it definitely all ties together.

Stefan Underwood:

I'm thrilled to say we submitted a manuscript so it will be published—peer reviewed journal article—coming out in the next couple months. Fingers crossed. But Exos led hundreds of women across the United States that were not athletes.

So this was geared to general population. We did the Exos female physiology questionnaire, looking at women's perspectives and perceptions around their understanding of unique physiology, their desire to be supported around that, and what is available in the workplace. And what we learned was an overwhelming percentage of women said, I would like to have a culture at work and services to support me based around this.

And an overwhelmingly low percentage of women said they had that kind of a workplace. And so again, I think we're coming to a place where we can make some informed recommendations. And I think we're going to see over the coming years, or the next few years, shifts where we start seeing more of a conversation around this.

Ginevra Czech:

It's awesome. So I do want to shift a little bit into one of the key tenets of the Exos methodology, but one thing that we talk about a lot with Exos is this idea of flow state, something super interesting. So what is it? How can you help people achieve, maintain this flow state, both obviously in an athletic, but also in a corporate setting?

Stefan Underwood:

Absolutely. So let's start off. You said, what is it? Look, largely if I were to start describing to someone, I'd say, what are those moments? It can be so many things for so many people, but I say, what's that moment where you feel and perform your best? Perhaps time gets warped. You lose track of time. Maybe, it feels like five minutes and it's been an hour. You get immersed. Maybe time gets warped the other way, but time gets warped. There's an intrinsic motivation to do what you're doing. It's what's called an autotelic state. You're not doing it for some external reward.

You're doing what you're doing for the value of that thing you're doing. And you have deep clarity on why you're doing it. And as I'm talking through that, the joy, some people could be thinking of, man, that's when I pick up a guitar and play the guitar. Some might say, that's when I pick up a paintbrush and I paint.

Some might say, man, that's when I'm shooting hoops. Sometimes that's when I'm playing hockey. That's when I'm on the pitch. That's when I'm on the field. There's so many different things that can be. But that's flow state in the sports world for a long time. We'd hear that, in the zone, but the problem is it was hard to define in the zone.

You watch a Michael Jordan interview or something. What does that mean? You were in the zone. I don't know. It just felt easy tonight. I can't describe it. I don't know what I did to get there. Well, as we look over the last, say, 15 years with fMRIs and neuroscience, we know a lot more about what flow state is.

So the term was coined by a man named Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. And essentially, Csikszentmihalyi's work looked at largely the lived experience of flow. And so he described

a lot of those elements that I just described to you, it's autotelic. There's deep clarity. There's appropriate challenge-skill ratios.

There's an appropriate amount of challenge to meet the skill you have. If I do something that is too much challenge for the skill I have, that breeds anxiety. If I do something that has too little of a challenge for the skill I have, that leads to boredom. So I always say, I won't get into flow playing basketball against Michael Jordan and Michael Jordan won't get into flow playing basketball against me.

Ginevra Czech:

That's right.

Stefan Underwood:

But like I said, over the last 15 years, we've been able to get more clear on what it is. So we could define it as part anatomy or region of the brain. Part geography, part electricity, right, and part chemistry. Parts of the brain. What we see during flow, the frontal lobes, so the front part of your brain is right here, which is responsible for executive function. It's the chief executive of the brain. Interestingly, they tend to get quiet, tend to go offline.

If you think about what else lives up here in the frontal lobes, it's the inner critic, right. That chief executive, we can get into paralysis by analysis. So in flow, we are our most creative self. Because the inner critic, that voice and our paralysis by analysis, that thought, that gets quiet. So regions of the brain, you see this go quiet and then other areas light up a little bit more. Part chemistry, we see this beautiful chemical cocktail that all have names as street drugs as well, but you get just a little bit of the right things to come together to feel wonderful. So it is characterized by adrenaline. So typically there's has to be a little bit of a threat there, a challenge.

But adrenaline on its own feels sketchy, right. There's no such thing as an adrenaline junkie. People aren't chasing the adrenaline. But when you choose to engage with that thing, on the backside, what you get when you choose to engage with the struggle is you get dopamine. Dopamine is at the center of every addiction that exists. Dopamine feels good. So really, the adrenaline junkies are actually dopamine junkies. But we get a bit of dopamine. We get endocannabinoids, right. Like it's like weed in our body. So anandamide is one that we get. So you just start seeing this blend of this chemical cocktail that has us focused yet feeling calm, feeling really blissful, feeling centered.

It's this perfect state. And then our brain waves slow down. Our brain waves go from these big focused wavelengths to longer, slower rolling around 10 hertz is this magic area of where it is. So these are all the things, to say, this is how you can define and recognize flow state. But at the end of the day, it is when you're feeling your best, happiest, most creative self, feeling super locked in, in the zone, in the pocket, whatever that means to you, that's what flow state is. And so the question becomes, how do we manufacture it intentionally?

Ginevra Czech:

So everything you were describing for me is exactly when I'm playing lacrosse. But to your point, trying to make that comparison to the workplace...

Stefan Underwood:

...that's I was about to say.

Ginevra Czech:

Yeah. How do we do that?

Stefan Underwood:

Well, yeah, so that's exactly what I was about to say. It's because we have this conversation. A lot of people say, well, that's great for you in sports, but what does this have to do with me in the workplace? First of all, if you heard what we said, we just described the person that is their most creative, innovative self who feels the best. In fact, in organizational psychology, where flow state shows up in org psych literature is as a motivational construct. And there's a host of research out there looking at the protective role on our emotional health that flow state plays.

In Wuhan, China, during COVID, there's really interesting research that was done on over 5,000 people that went into the most intense lockdown isolation of anywhere in the world. And what they found is then the top predictor of making it through that isolation, without it negatively or adversely affecting your mental health, was the amount of flow state you got. People who exercised in their apartments, people who played musical instruments, people who found passion in cooking, they made it through.

So I say that to just reiterate, this is not something for athletes. This is a human experience. And as we talk about things like burnout and anxiety and stress in the workplace and all things we discuss, flow, absolutely matters to all of us in a corporate context. So how you go about getting it...

Ginevra Czech:

Yeah, how do we achieve it?

Stefan Underwood:

Look, there isn't this perfect formula of do this, this, this and you're in flow. But there are some things we can take from what I've already said and we can call out really overtly. Number one, that we can talk about, is that challenge-skill ratio.

So am I choosing the challenges that are appropriate to my skill level or as a leader of people in the organization? Is the work that I'm providing mundane and boring or way, way, way beyond the skillset that that individual has right now, or am I hitting the sweet spot and challenging them, but the right amount of challenge? That'd be one thing. Flow follows focus is something that I believe I said, and if not, I'll say it now.

So let's talk about the workplace for a moment. And say, what are all of the tech devices that we engage with? They're designed to distract us. Like Slack, GChat, our cell phones, get into all your social media. These devices are literally made to distract us. Now, I don't want to downplay it all, especially as we get into this dispersed workforce, the connectivity we gain from things like Slack are fantastic.

But if I want to get deep heads-down work, I've got to be able to put on do not disturb. It takes two things. It takes me knowing I need to do that to protect my time so I'm not distracted because I won't find flow if I can't focus. I also need a team culture at work where that's acceptable. It's not seen as me, social loafing or slacking, but I can communicate to people, I've got this thing I need to do to help our team win. And I need to be locked in and being able to go and do not disturb. So we can look at flow blockers. And say, how do we get rid of distractions? We can look at challenge-skill ratio. We can do that. And then we can just look at, I'll say the way a person is able to show up in life.

Flow follows a cycle. So it isn't this thing where you're in flow, you're out of flow. It's not a light switch. It's a cycle. And so the cycle goes like this: Struggle, release, flow, recovery. We like to start with recovery. If you're under-recovered, one of the surest ways to block flow out of your life is to be under-recovered.

So if I have a workplace culture and climate that allows me to prioritize my sleep, that allows me to prioritize recovery, I'm more likely to get into flow. So that'd be one. The next we come to the other, the front end. Struggle was the first thing I said. All flow is born from struggle.

Think about your lacrosse game. There's an initial struggle. There's a competitor, there's competition, there's struggle. Think about a work meeting. Maybe we're having a tough conversation and we're, as a team, trying to solve something creatively. We need to have the right team dynamics in place that allow us to go back and forth and sit in that struggle respectfully and not have it get to this place where this struggle goes to negative into self-thought, oh, I'm not valued. They think I'm crap. You need to have the psychological safety to speak up and challenge. And so there's a lot that goes into it. But, if I were to simplify it, say team dynamics and a mentality or mindset that allows you to sit in struggle. Workplace, climate, culture and individual responsibility to prioritize recovery.

And then appropriate challenge-to-skill ratios and avoiding distractions. Those would be the four things. There's more we could talk about, but those would be four things that if you start playing in that world, I bet you flow shows up more frequently for you in the workspace.

Ginevra Czech:

Yeah, a hundred percent. I think those are four very awesome takeaways and I also like that they're very approachable. The other thing that I really liked you touched on and I was going to highlight it, if you didn't, was one of the tenants of your talking points. It was also the idea of leadership and coaching and the role that a coach has to have, or a leader has to have, in setting the right environment for a flow to happen. And then also at the idea with the challenge ratio, that has to be also something that's appropriately said by a leader or a boss.

Stefan Underwood:

Yeah, absolutely.

Ginevra Czech:

One of the other topics I wanted to touch on was this idea of leadership. So throughout your career, as a coach and now in the work that you're doing, you've worked with elite athletes, you've worked with elite military, Special Ops, Fortune 100 leaders. What are some of the commonalities in how you're approaching performance with these different groups and working to try and help these different groups improve or enhance their performance?

Stefan Underwood:

Yeah, absolutely. The thing I would say is that, to anyone I'm talking to, let's say it starts with you. Good leadership begins with self-leadership. And so when I look at the leaders that I work with and support, the very first thing we talk about is what are you doing for your own sustainable high performance?

What does your sleep game look like? What does your movement game look like? How are you fueling intentionally? And it's for two reasons. The first is the obvious that the best version they can be of themselves allows them to be a stronger servant leader to serve and support the people that they're leading.

If you want to be an even-keeled leader that displays good emotional intelligence and emotional regulation and doesn't fly off the handle and yell at people, diminishing the team dynamics, then you've got to be able to be self-aware and self-regulate. And right there, those two things in and of itself, that's a skill for people to work on, for leaders to work on.

But then we say, but what about the biology to support those things? You said you have a 10-month-old. The first things we see is what a bad night's sleep does to our ability to self-regulate. Wait a few more years till you get into sleepovers and you'll send your kid on a sleepover knowing that it's part of him developing relationships and having a childhood.

And you'll just know that the next day is going to be awful. We don't outgrow that. And so if, as a leader, I'm not prioritizing my sleep, the research unequivocally displays, no matter what you think, no matter how good you think you are at short sleep, it displays that it is negatively impacting your decision-making ability, is making you more emotional and more highly reactive. And if that doesn't sound like the type of leader you want to be, then prioritizing your own sleep and leading yourself is the first step. Right.

Ginevra Czech:

I mean the concept of self-awareness and self-regulation, we could have a whole spinoff series on just that topic in and of itself. It's really funny that you said it starts with you because the framework of our value-add program have this concentric framework and the first circle is you.

Stefan Underwood:

Oh...

Ginevra Czech:

And I always make the terrible joke, you can't love others till you love yourself. Because when we're trying to deliver our value-add programs, we're doing that exactly. We're trying

to help you as the individual, whoever you are as an individual, whether that's professionally or is it personally, we want you to get yourself right first.

And then you can work on building your team, your business and your community. That's our little concentric framework. But I mean, it's because of everything that you said, you have to be able to have that self-awareness and self-regulation as a leader before you can expect that of your team or of others.

Stefan Underwood:

Absolutely. I'll say this as well. I completely agree. But when I say it starts with you, that's the first part. The other thing that starts with you is then the culture and the cultural, the culture shift that you provide for the people you lead. People will—especially your high performers—they will look at you and the example you set for what the direction would mean. So we can have all these workplace benefits and all the value-add partners and all of that. But if the leader is saying, hey team, I want you to do that. I care about you. You need to do that. But then they martyr themselves and they don't model that, then it's not setting a culture of permission and go a step further from permission. It's not setting a culture of expectation to do that. And especially the high performers.

Let's say I work for a CMO and I know one day, I want to be a CMO. And if I'm a high performer, the person that that leader cares about the performance of, the high performer on the team, those are the ones at most they'll say, I'm not doing that. I see that that person is martyring themselves. I see what that person is displaying, and that's obviously what it means to be a CMO. So that's what I'm going to do. And so you have a responsibility to be the best version of yourself; to lead, it starts with you. But the cultural shift and modeling and culture of permission and expectation also starts with you for what you set for your team. So it's important that you show your team that vulnerability and taking advantage of those value-add partners and doing all that yourself as well.

Ginevra Czech:

Yeah, it's a great point that we lead by example. That's a timeless expression. But when you start to think about how it all ties together, it's very important and fairly powerful to have a leader that is demonstrating their ability to regulate, to have self-awareness, set a good example, invest in themselves. Couple of things I want to touch on before we wrap up. Emerging trends in human performance, anything that you're really excited about, how you see them shaping the future of sports and corporate environments. I know we did talk a little bit about women and some of the research that's happening there, but any emerging trends in performance?

Stefan Underwood:

Actually the one that comes to mind the most is actually in the corporate setting more than in the sports setting. But I think when we look at emerging trends, it's really interesting to look at the general generational divide in the workplace. And so when we talk about leadership, team dynamics, we have four generations in the workplace and we're about to see a pretty large mass exodus of baby boomers.

And, and as you look at Korn Ferry statistics and things of that nature, by 2030, there's going to be, I think that Korn Ferry estimated an eight, 85 million jobs could go unfilled for an \$8.5 trillion global hit. And so as we look at the generational divide, the talent war is going to be more important than ever.

And so when leaders look at what that next generation, the Gen Z-ers, is coming into the workplace, what's important to them, it's something they need to pay attention to. When I look at future trends, I think what we're going to grapple with—and it's another one of those inflection points—is how do you have sustainable high performance? How do we create a workplace that allows for a focus on recovery? Because when we talk about this, so many leaders inevitably hear things like, I'm not turning my workplace into Club Med and just putting nap pods everywhere. Or they hear things like I had to work the 80-hour work weeks to prove myself. And I think to be clear, sustainable high performance and the model of what we can learn from athletics, the blend of work plus rest equals success. There's no suggesting that you remove all of the work. We're not saying remove the work and create Club Med. You can absolutely go crush very intense work weeks and take on high degrees of workload, but there are certain cultures and environments, team dynamics, leading with vision, it gets all in the motivation.

There's certain things that remain true for the cultures you can create in the workplace to still allow a person to recover and to be able to feel whole, not be burnt out. And I think what we're seeing in Gen Z-ers—especially stating through their actions—is they're less willing to put up with something that completely buries them at the expense of their mental health.

And so I believe the future trend is this natural friction of how might we maintain a high emphasis on work being done and success of the bottom line while respecting the recovery needs of the individuals doing that work. And the companies that can solve that equation, accurately balance that equation, are the ones that are going to win the talent war that is coming in the very immediate future as we look at the generational divides in the workplace. So I think the trend we're going to see is over workplace dynamics, workplace climates to attract that top talent and retain that top talent.

Ginevra Czech:

That's really interesting. We just had 27 interns here. We just had a little luncheon right before we sat down to record and it is very interesting to engage with them and ask them what's important to them. And I would agree with you that I do think there is a big focus on this idea of, I don't want to call it work-life balance because that's not what it is. It's really more so what you're saying, this idea of balancing high performance and execution with the person that's doing those things.

Stefan Underwood:

A hundred percent.

Ginevra Czech:

So it's a really interesting concept. And it's something that I think about often. We have this with Exos, the sustainable high performance workshop. That's what we do, right. Because

yes, it's all about high performance, but it's about doing it sustainably over the long term and that's the goal.

Stefan Underwood:

Absolutely. And then if we remove...I'd say the other future trend I'd look at again, not in sports, but in the general population is the shift to the emphasis on, I'll use the word that's going to use the most, longevity. I think the other future trend is you're going to see more and more people that are focused on that longevity.

Peter Attia—for those that know that name—calls it Medicine 3.0, this idea of being proactive with your health care. But I'll quote Mark Verstegen, our Founder, who for years has talked about lifespan and for a long time people say, yeah, there's lifespan, but we also care about health span.

Ginevra Czech:

Yeah.

Stefan Underwood:

Mark takes it a step further and says, yeah, what we really want to do at Exos is improve people's play span. For how many years can I go play? I want to be 65 years old and still play with my kids. I want to be able to play with my grandkids. And so, I think the other trend...I'll say the future trend we're seeing emerging and getting a lot more traction is this proactive, the sustainable, increasing your play span.

Ginevra Czech:

So, it's a good place to end because it's actually one of the places that we start when we are connecting with people, with our sustainable high performance workshop, which is the idea of values exploration and really understanding your motivating factors. It does resonate really well with a lot of our clients who are financial advisors a lot of times.

Are they focused on serving others? A lot of times that is a big motivating factor, is that service component to it. You know, is it a healthy work-life balance? Whatever it is, it is really fun to go back to that motivating factor. The reason for why you do things that you do.

And then I know that ties into flow state. And then, it is this sort of continuous cycle. I think you used a better word for it. So, we've talked about a lot of things. We obviously talked about the benefit of having a multidisciplinary team, whether that's in your pursuit of physical performance or building a team of diverse thought.

We talked about flow state, how to achieve flow state, removing some of the barriers. I think there's a lot of really good takeaways and strategies there for trying to find that flow state, putting yourself in the right environment with appropriate level of challenge for the work that you're doing. The stuff for me about women's performance, women's health and emerging trends. I think that's really, really interesting. Very timely. I think it's something that people are going to have to start paying attention to, obviously in sports. And we're seeing more of that, but also in the professional setting.

If there's one piece of advice that you could leave people with on achieving their personal or professional goals, what would it be? You can give them more than one. That's hard to do. Give me one final word.

Stefan Underwood:

One piece of advice. Ah, I mean, I would...

Ginevra Czech:

What do you tell your kids?

Stefan Underwood:

So I'm looking at my whiteboard right here, where my eight-year-old will tell you about her dreams. And as I talk to her and I'm looking at the whiteboard, the key point I've written down on the whiteboard is, it says, be a trickle of water. And so I had to explain that to my daughter, but my daughter will tell you one of her rules is be a trickle of water. And it's the analogy I give her, water running over stone.

Does that make a change? And she says no. I say but when it consistently does for a long time, it carves canyons.

Ginevra Czech:

That's right.

Stefan Underwood:

And so to be a trickle of water, I guess said differently, I used to tell athletes that, intensity is king, but consistency rules. And to tie it again to athletics, there's actually a paper that came out of Australia in the world of sports, where people are chasing hundreds of a second, a one percent improvement, over a five-year span with elite track-and-field athletes, the athletes who made it to 80% of their training sessions. We're 700%. I think it was seven times more likely to achieve their athletic goals than those that weren't. And so, as I say, be a trickle of water.

There's not one day that is going to make or break your pursuit of increasing your play span, but consistently more days than not. Do I get up and have morning light hit my eyeballs more days than not? Do I prioritize sleep more days than not? Do I move my body more days than not? Do I play with my kids more days than not? Have those things that are important to you. And you know, none of these things are expensive, fancy, time consuming. Other than sleep, sleep should be time consuming; give as much time as possible. But none of these things are. If I can just say, perfect is the enemy of good enough. But if I can be consistent in my approach to those things and be a trickle of water, that's where I'll notice a difference years from now. So I'm playing...when I was younger, I was in a sprint. I'm in the marathon now. I'm playing the long game and the long game is to be on top of a mountaintop with my kids when I'm 65.

Ginevra Czech:

And that's your motivating factor.

Stefan Underwood:

Absolutely.

Ginevra Czech:

That's it. Well, this has been a really, really fun conversation. It's been super interesting. I wish, honestly wish we could keep talking, but I've got date night tonight with my husband, and our is turning 10 months old soon. So, quality time with family, that's one of my motivating factors.

Stefan Underwood:

More days than not. That's fantastic. I do not want to get in the way of that. Absolutely not. Ginevra, thank you so much for having me on. I've really enjoyed this conversation. I have so much respect for what the team at FS brings, and the workplace environment that you all have created there. And I know Exos has been a part of it for a long time and we're genuinely honored and humbled to be able to be a part of it. And thanks for having me on.

Ginevra Czech:

Yeah. Thanks for joining. If anyone is interested in learning more about our value-add offerings and our partnership with Exos, you can visit us at fsinvestments.com/fsthive. We do a variety of different programming with Exos, including a virtual app-based coaching experience. So get in touch. We'd love to talk to you more about how you can unlock your potential and achieve some sustainable high performance. Thanks so much.