

## ***The Insightful Leader* Podcast Transcript**

### **Be Bold and Get What You Want**

**JESSICA LOVE:** Craig Wortmann is a professor of innovation and entrepreneurship at Kellogg, and he knows a thing or two about asking for what you want at work. As someone who's served as CEO of several companies, he's had to make and respond to a lot of challenging requests. So he's giving a talk on that subject at Kellogg when he poses this question to the audience:

**CRAIG WORTMANN:** What are some of your acts of boldness at work?

**LOVE:** People start shouting out examples of the brave things that they've done. Taking on a leadership position, speaking up in a meeting, asking for a raise...

**WORTMANN:** "Asking for a raise!" Now we're getting into it!

**LOVE:** After half a dozen people have chimed in, he asks a follow-up question—one that gets a very different response.

**WORTMANN:** How often do you do this?

**LOVE:** This time the room goes silent. Some people laugh uncomfortably.

**WORTMANN:** Why are you all smiling? How often do you do this? Am I guessing that it's not often enough, maybe?

**LOVE:** We can't get what we want if we don't ask. So why *don't* we do it more? The problem, Wortmann says, essentially comes down to practice. Sure, we may know what we want, and we may even know what it will take to get it. But because we so often shy away from making difficult requests, many of us never build up the discipline and the skill we need to feel comfortable in those moments. And that is what Wortmann wants to help us change.

**WORTMANN:** Let's define the skills and disciplines that are required to ask for and get what you want.

#### **[musical interlude]**

**LOVE:** Welcome to *The Insightful Leader*, from Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management. Craig Wortmann is a clinical professor at Kellogg and executive director of the Kellogg Sales Institute. Today on the podcast, he'll walk us through how you can build up the skills you'll need to boldly ask for what you want, and the steps you can take to position yourself for success. Along the way, Wortmann will challenge you to embrace the tension that comes with being bold.

**WORTMANN:** Don't be afraid to have an edge about you. Now, I'm probably making some of you uncomfortable. And that's good, because this is boldness we're talking about. But remember the other side of this coin, boldness has to be counterbalanced with humility.

**LOVE:** There are a lot of ways you might "ask for" something at work. Of course, you can literally ask for a raise or a new responsibility. But you also more figuratively "ask" for

someone's attention by making a controversial point in a meeting, or "ask" for more power by vying for a promotion. Whatever kind of ask you're making, the first order of business is to figure out is what, exactly, you're going to ask for. Now, maybe that sounds obvious—but Wortmann says a lot of people actually get this step wrong. Too often, we hamstring ourselves at the very outset because we're afraid to ruffle feathers. On this point, Wortmann likes to paraphrase his Kellogg colleague Suzanne Muchin.

**WORTMANN:** One of the things she talks about is owning your point of view and having it be pointy. Don't be afraid to have somebody get scratched by your pointy point of view. She actually said this out loud and I quoted her in class: "If people are not disagreeing with you, you don't matter." How's that for pointy?

**LOVE:** A "pointy" point of view might mean asking for a bigger raise than you have in the past, or a title change that you know your supervisor may not like. Once you have your ask figured out, spend some time thinking through how exactly you're going to make it. And there's some nuance involved here that many people miss. For instance, Wortmann says that even the way you SCHEDULE this meeting could impact how it plays out.

**WORTMANN:** Have you called a time-out and structured a conversation that is only about this? It's not in the flow of work, like, "Oh, by the way..." Slow down for a nanosecond and make conversation concrete. 'I would like to talk to you about this and only this for the next 15 minutes. Can you give me that time? And I will do my best not to insert other stuff that we're working on in here to muddy the waters.'

**LOVE:** Once that clearly defined meeting is on the calendar, there are a number of ways you can start preparing for it. For starters, there's a good chance that your ask is going to meet some resistance—otherwise, asking for it wouldn't be such a big deal. So the first skill you can build up is anticipating the other person's objections, so that once you're in the room, you can demonstrate that you have a plan to address those objections. For example, imagine you're planning to ask your boss to put you in charge of an exciting new project. But you know that she has some doubts about whether you're the most qualified person.

**WORTMANN:** If that's the situation I'm in, I'm going to show up at those interactions where I say, "Here's the list I'm tracking. I have understood from you, in the past, that I have been weak on some of these, relative to my peers. I just want you to know I'm working on them. And by the way, these two things, I actually found an online course that I can take. I just need you to know that on my own time I'm doing this, I'm going to knock these things down. And I'm going to show you over time that I belong in charge of this project."

**LOVE:** Another thing to prepare for these types of meetings can understandably be stressful. And stress often brings out our worst behavior. Another useful example Wortmann likes to borrow from his teaching partner Suzanne Muchin is the Incredible Hulk.

**WORTMANN:** The Hulk is only a monster because he comes out when he's stressed. We all have a different style under stress. I get sarcastic. I get a little snippy. Some of us go silent.

**LOVE:** But if you can recognize how you respond to stress ahead of time, you can plan for it. That's the second skill that Wortmann recommends mastering. For instance, if you realize that you, too, tend to get sarcastic in tense moments, you can work extra hard to avoid making snippy comments in the meeting. Or, if you know that you always clam up and go quiet when

you're stressed, you might practice speaking up more in the week leading up to your big ask, so that you can get used to the feeling.

**[musical interlude]**

**LOVE:** When the day of your ask finally comes, in order to truly be prepared, there's still one critical question that you'll need to address: How bold do you *really* need to be? On a scale of one to ten, should you go into this meeting a nine? A five? A two? Left to our own devices, many of us tend to miscalculate, Wortmann says. Often we're afraid of offending our boss, or someone else whose opinion matters, so we under-shoot on the boldness scale. As a result, instead of being direct and clear...

**WORTMANN:** We bury our asks under layers upon layers of courtesy and small talk, and we never really articulate what we want.

**LOVE:** To be fair, Wortmann himself is no stranger to being overly accommodating—and he knows how difficult it is to break the habit.

**WORTMANN:** When I started my first company, one of the reasons it was a disaster is because I wanted everyone really bad to like me. And I learned in my second company, I'm not gonna be liked by everybody and that is okay. And I just had to get comfortable with that.

**LOVE:** Sometimes we miscalculate in the *other* direction. We know we're going to meet resistance, so we come out swinging, and over-do it on the boldness. Wortmann has seen this in his work consulting for the sales department of one of the top three tech companies in the world.

**WORTMANN:** One of the things that this very morning on video conference I was talking to them about is that they over-index on bold. Because they can. They're wicked smart, and they run the world, and they can be bold. And guess what they're hearing from their clients? "You are not going to get what you want, because you are all up in my face. So back off." The question they're asking is, "We should be proud, but how do we walk in a room and get that across in a way that's not off-putting?"

**LOVE:** Getting this balance right is the main "discipline" that Wortmann says you have to master. So how do you do it? His first recommendation: Don't just ask "how bold" you should be. Instead, imagine trying to balance out two scales—one that measures strength, and one that measures warmth. Wortmann says that many highly effective leaders, from Oprah to Martin Luther King, Jr., have gotten things done by balancing a strong position with a warm presence. And you can do the same.

After all, it's easier to be clear and direct when you're confident that the other person won't see you as a jerk. So, if there's a situation where you need to up your strength by three notches... think about how you can get three notches warmer as well, or three notches more humble. One way Wortmann says you can strike this balance is by being really honest.

**WORTMANN:** We all fail. And we do it repeatedly. And I just think that our ability—and we can't over-do this!—but our ability to just say, "I've tried this a bunch of times, I feel like a couple of times I've let you down and the team down. Here are the lessons that I've learned. I'm ready. I'm ready now for a leadership position. Do you agree with me?" Notice how I transitioned from humility to boldness. That's what it is.

**LOVE:** Another strategy for being humble and firm at the same time: listen carefully—but *not* passively. One of the best ways to do that is by asking meaningful questions.

**WORTMANN:** I strongly believe that high performers ask better questions than other people. They're deeper, they're broader. I call them impact questions. And then the book-ended discipline on the other side is confirming. And folks, we take this right from sales research. One of the things that separates high-performing salespeople from low to moderate performers is the confirm. "Let me make sure I heard what you just said. You just said your two biggest concerns at work are this and this, do I hear you correctly?" That's a confirm. I'm talking, I'm not listening, but I'm actually demonstrating to her that I've listened. I think all of that rolls up to a demonstration of humility. The older I get, the more I teach, the more I believe this is actually the most powerful thing we can do.

**[musical interlude]**

**LOVE:** So to recap: There are some hard skills that can make you more effective when you're making an ask, like anticipating other people's objections, and knowing how you react under stress. And there's also a key discipline that great askers have to hone: balancing warmth and strength, boldness and humility.

That's a tricky balance to strike, especially if you're not used to being bold. The voice in your head can urge you to dial it back. But you have to forge ahead, Wortmann says. And as you keep building these skills, you might be impressed with how much others respond. To wrap up his lecture, Wortmann tells a story about a friend of his who had been waiting to hear back about an amazing job she wanted, working with a major CEO.

**WORTMANN:** And she said, "Craig, I've e-mailed him like, four times in eleven days and I haven't heard anything. And now I don't want to be that person that's like, needy and chasing him." And I said, "Have you called him? Go call him right now, and say, 'I'm your gal. My excitement has not waned. I'm your gal. Let's make this happen.'" We went out to the parking lot, and she called him, and she got the job. She was so pumped! So the last thing I want to leave you with, is, lean into the ask and make it super crisp and defined.

**[musical interlude]**

**LOVE:** This episode of *The Insightful Leader* was produced by Kevin Bailey, Jessica Love, Fred Schmalz, Jake Smith, Michael Spikes, and Emily Stone. It was written by Jake Smith, and edited by Michael Spikes.

Special thanks to Craig Wortmann.

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We'll be back in a couple weeks with another episode of *The Insightful Leader*.