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**Recorded Message:** The Hennessy Report from Keystone Partners. A free flowing conversation with leaders in the HR community talking about themselves, the industry, and their work. Brought to you in cooperation with NEHRA, the Northeast Human Resources Association.

**Dave Hennessy:** Welcome to The Hennessy Report by Keystone Partners. I'm Dave Hennessy and today's guest is Jason O. Harris. Jason was the closing keynote for this year's NEHRA annual conference and we had the opportunity in front of the live audience to interview him right after his keynote. Jason has an incredible background. He was seven years as an air force pilot also trained others in the air force and became a commercial pilot for American Airlines and has since developed his own business speaking and training and consulting to organizations around trust and leadership and his concept, No Fail Trust. You'll enjoy this episode. And by the way, we bring back the star of episode one of The Hennessy Report, Tracy Burns the CEO of NEHRA. She joins the conversation halfway through.

And, next up on the podcast is Annie Drapeau, the chief people officer of Toast. And now our conversation with Jason O. Harris.

I'm going to get to some questions in the live recording here of The Hennessy Report Podcast brought to you by Keystone Partners and cooperation with NEHRA. Really impressed with your talk and one of the things that caught me is the amount of responsibility that a loadmaster gets at such a young age and the correlation between responsibility and trust. So, as we always do with all of our podcast guests, we try to get an early life experience. And you talked about your mom and how she instilled trust in you and how that impacted your life. Is there another experience early in your life that you see now as an inflection point?

**Jason O. Harris:** It's the people around me that have been the inflection points throughout my career, interestingly enough. It's been those moments where I've realized that people were counting on me. It's been those moments where I realized where I've actually failed. There are a lot of us that, we're afraid to be transparent, we're afraid to fail, and we're afraid for people to see our weaknesses. And I think for me, a couple of inflection points over the last several years of my career has been realizing that failure was okay, I just had to get up as quickly as possible and recover from that failure and not get lost in that failure.

**Dave:** One of the things I always wonder as somebody that's not served in the military. What are some of the things that are the biggest misconceptions for us that have just been in the private sector our whole life about what it's like in the military about the organization, about how leadership is developed.

**Jason:** Number one is that we are not a perfect organization. We haven't figured out diversity equity inclusion just yet. Many of you all are getting bombarded with emails right now about DEI. Some of you all are taking on a secondary role as not only the chief human resources officer or chief people officer, but you're also taking on the role as chief diversity officer as well. The reality is, is that in the military, we're not a perfect organization. We still have a lot to learn. We still have a long way to go, but that said, there are some things that we've figured out. And so when I talk about trust, that training that we do, it helps us to transcend some of those different challenges that we have. When I'm sitting in that



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aircraft, I don't worry about if someone calls me out on my name. Obviously, it might impact me personally if it hits that way and lands that way.

But there are things that we do that allows us to go, look, this is what my training says, this is what my process says and no matter what, I'm going to continue to execute this mission, because that is what I'm here to do. I like to remind people that we are nothing more than a reflection of our society, that we as an all-volunteer force come from. And I think if we understand that, then it will allow us at times to appreciate the military, to appreciate those who volunteer to serve, but also on the other side of that is to be willing to give us a fair measure of grace that sometimes we aren't willing to give because we hold certain institutions to a high standard.

**Dave:** And kind of a reverse question, Jason, you have been a commercial pilot and you've consulted in the private sector. For you, what are some surprises you've seen in the private sector about culture and leadership and organization?

**Jason:** In the chat people are saying, "I wouldn't trust an 18 year old with my life." Some of you guys are afraid to trust that 16, 17 year old with your car to drive, to get a driver's license. The reality is, is what I've seen in some of the clients that I've worked with is that the ability to trust, it takes a lot longer in some cases. And then also the amount of responsibility is different. One of the things when I mentor young cadets at the United States Air Force Academy, or people who are interested, and I say, "Here's what I want you to understand. If you go work in corporate America, there's some phenomenal opportunities there, but it's going to take you a while to progress up the ladder of responsibility. Versus in the military day one, especially in certain environments like the air force, what I'm intimately familiar with, that 18 year old loadmaster, "I'm going to say, "Here's the deal. I trust you, by the way today's mission. We are moving the President of the United States' vehicles and you are responsible to make sure that they don't get scratched. You're responsible to make sure that they get it loaded properly." That's a level of responsibility that's different I think.

**Dave:** I was curious how you decided to shift your life's work to motivating others and No Fail Trust. What's the germ of the idea? And I wondered if you could weave in how the 360 process really influenced you.

**Jason:** I went to a program, I'm not sure if anyone out here is familiar with Center For Creative Leadership. I know Nancy Person is. Her and I actually spent some time at one of their programs through an event that we several years ago. But when I did this program, it was a five day program, Dave, and they did all these different assessments. And again, I was afraid, it said, "Hey, send this assessment to somebody who's worked for you, somebody who's worked with you and to somebody you worked for." And I thought, "Ooh, is it going to come back and say I'm a total turd, I'm a total piece of crap?" I was very nervous. I will be totally honest. And I wasn't nearly as self-aware at the time. And so as this coach was revealing all the data basically, and the 360 and the other assessments she says, "Do you understand where you are on this spectrum?"

And I go, "No, I don't really know what it means." She's like, "Okay." She gave the bell curve example, blah, blah, blah, and says, "This is where you're at." And I go, "Okay, got it." And I had to sit on that and I



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had to process it and as I process it, I basically had to make a decision as to what was I going to do with that, Dave. And that kind of led me down this path of saying, how do I give back and how do I ensure that I share some of these things that I've learned along the way? And the funniest thing is that initially I was going to start telling a story about my overcoming the adversity stuff and I realized that there's enough of those stories. That book has already been written.

What the power was in helping people to understand cultures of trust, helping to understand that frontline person. And that was part of my story. That was part of where I came from and understanding what was important to me and what was of value to me, looking at my mom and the things that she endured and the things that she told me as a kid that she struggled with in her military service and how I was able to kind of make a transition and make a difference. And so those are some of the elements of what helped me to kind of get to where I'm at now.

**Dave:** You touched on how trust is more difficult in a virtual environment and I think a lot of us are thinking about, we have relationships in our organizations that we've built over time, but as we start to bring new people into organizations, we don't know when we're going to go back to normal in-office work. What do you see as some of the challenges and opportunities, solutions to build trust in more of a virtual work environment?

**Jason:** In talking to some of the HR professionals that are here today, I learned that some people are onboarding hundreds of people since this has all started. Organizations packed up and said, "Hey, we're all virtual now. Let's go. We'll see you guys on MS Teams. That's the difference. We won't even get to see people face to face. But again, I go back to that element of hearing, understanding, acknowledging people and in this virtual environment people feel like we aren't connected and so we need to find a way to connect with people in a group environment but as well as on an individual level. People want to feel like that they are cared about. When people feel like they are cared about, when they feel that they are heard, understood, acknowledged, then they begin to feel more committed to the organization. They begin to feel like they are part of it, not just a cog in the wheel, so to speak.

And I think if there's any one thing that we can do right now in this new virtual world that we're living in, it's to ensure that we don't forget the human side of our business. The people, they are our most precious cargo. When I talk about that, we have to give those people the right tools, the right cargo to succeed. And I talk about that in some of the workshops that I do with clients that cargo is creativity, access to the right tools and resources and that's not always dependent on money. Responsibility, give them an appropriate level of responsibility. Again, sometimes we haven't given our people the right level of responsibility. And sometimes as leaders, we haven't given over the right level of responsibility so that our people are trusted. Share our goals and then provide opportunities to succeed. Those elements are what's going to actually allow us to really mature if you would, in this virtual environment and to ensure that we have our people more insulated versus feeling isolated.

**Dave:** That's good. That's powerful. I really got that out of your story about the loadmasters too, how much of responsibility is put on them and how that builds trust. As I know you also trained on implicit bias and consult on that, how is your thinking, approach changing with implicit bias in the workplace?



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**Jason:** Number one first and foremost, Dave, bias is neither good or bad. We all have bias. I've done workshops for pilots and for other people and it's comical that somebody will say, "I have traveled the world and I've climbed Mount Kilimanjaro and I've done all these things and I've engaged with all these different people and I am not biased at all." And of course it's funny, right? But of course, I don't want to be demeaning either in the question I ask and response to say, "Hey, do you have a favorite football team? Mine was the Oakland Raiders." And of course that starts a response, right? You guys are in the Northeast. If I start talking about the Pats, if I started talking about the Jets, but again, we all have bias and it's neither good nor bad and I think my view hasn't necessarily changed on it, Dave.

My appreciation for it continues to go up more and more. But I think what we in the workplace have to understand is that it's becoming more of a upfront in our face issue and we have to be willing to address it. And one organization that I talked to, they said that immediately, the CEO came out and started saying things when you had the civil unrest and the protesting. In the wake of George Floyd, in the wake of Breonna Taylor and all these other things that have continued to happen. And then I've seen in other organizations, one organization that I belong to, where we went weeks without anybody in leadership saying anything. And I will tell you me, as a person of color, me as a person who cares and me, who's engaged in various conversations with different people at different levels, I started realizing that people felt like that they weren't cared about. They felt like the company just had no regard for them. And whether we're talking about diversity, equity, inclusion, or we're talking about other issues that might pop up. Even in people's health, if we aren't paying attention and we aren't letting people know that we care, we aren't getting that message out there like I said earlier in the absence of information, people are going to fill in that void with something.

**Dave:** So, silence is the mortal sin there.

**Jason:** Absolutely, Dave.

**Dave:** What's something that you've changed your mind about with regard to leadership or organizations over the years?

**Jason:** I would say what I've changed my mind about is really how I engage with people. And what I mean by that is again, when I do workshops on bias stuff, what I realize is I always share with them my biases, right? So for example, and this could ruffle feathers and I'm okay with that. We do this exercise and I say, "Well, I'll write down on the paper what is, one or two things that you identify with." And so one day I said, "I identify as a black man. I identify as a military member and I identify as a father." And I intentionally do that. I watch people's faces and I watched a couple of guy's face and they kind of perked up. By the way I knew half of the room was military, had military background, half didn't.

Guy comes up to me afterwards. He goes, "Well, are you saying that you're not proud to be an American?" So afterwards, what I started saying was, this is in no particular order. And what I realized that I had to change, I didn't change myself per se, Dave, but I changed how I engage people because what I did not want to do is I did not want to shut them down. I did not want to shut them out and I did not want to make anyone feel inadequate in any way because of how I view myself or how I view the world. So what I realized was that I had to leave space and I had to leave room for everyone's



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perspective. Once I changed that, it began to be received differently. And I think sometimes as leaders, again, going back to that loadmaster example.

We don't listen when someone says go around and this guy effectively was telling me to go around. This guy effectively was telling me, you might want to consider changing how you approach this because you lost half the class potentially the moment you said it, the manner in which you said it. And so now I lead with, I look at the world as a black man. I look at the world as a father. I look at the world as a military veteran. I look at the world as a pilot. I look at the world as many different things in no particular order. Literally you can just see people, they amp up and then when I say that they kind of just come back down. And so I've had to change how I deliver some of my messaging.

**Dave:** Great. All right. I'm got to bring Tracy Burns back in, the CEO of NEHRA and we're going to have the NEHRA question of the podcast.

**Tracy Burns:** Yes. We have a few. Since I am the CEO, I get to go first.

**Dave:** All right.

**Tracy:** Jason, I want to know, are you still following the Raiders now that they're in Vegas or are you now a 49ers fan?

**Jason:** Okay, when I was a kid growing up in Oakland, the Raiders had moved out of Oakland to LA, but my granddad was always a Raiders fan. I didn't show you guys a picture of my grandfather in my presentation, but that's said, he was always a Raiders fan, so I felt like being from Oakland, I had to be a Raiders fan. But as a kid, the 49ers were there, so I was a 49ers fan. They're a different league, a different division, so it was okay. And then I moved back here to Colorado in 2011. And everybody, the question of the day was, are you a Broncos fan or are you a Raiders fan? And I thought, you know what? My grandfather would roll over in his grave if I ever gave up being a Raiders fan, especially the fact that I live in Colorado. So as such, but it was weird because I saw the Raider stuff and I saw the game over the weekend and you see Las Vegas and you're like, "Something doesn't make sense. It doesn't compute." So yes, I'm still a Raiders fan. Sadly, they're not in Oakland anymore.

**Dave:** Yes. By the way, that's the right answer. Because if you said Broncos, we may have had to just end the interview and go our separate ways, so thank you so much for this morning so far. You've been a dream to work with. I know you mentioned upfront that you had some conversations with our attendees as you were preparing for this. And we really appreciate that. I know that you mentioned that you found your people and we're ready to have you absolutely both as an HR al and here in New England anytime you want. So I have a couple of questions here. One is about what advice would you give on knowledge retainment? And this person put old timers. That's not my word, the old timers or the new timers, that knowledge retainment and transfer any ideas on that as you're working with organizations about how they're doing that or how you might suggest they do it?

**Jason:** When we talk about these skillsets, the number one thing is that professional knowledge. And then of course, there's the other skillsets, situational awareness, assertiveness, decision-making,



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communication, leadership, and adaptability. Those are some of the skillsets that we talk about. In the aviation industry, I fly with... I don't know how to say this the right way, Tracy. You kind of put me on spot with the term of mature people. Hopefully that's okay and nobody...

**Tracy:** Not old timers and young timers.

**Jason:** ... Yeah, right? So old timers. Now, understand this. I can go in an airplane at any given time as an airline pilot and I can show up never having flown a trip to Boston. I think the first time Nancy and I had dinner or a lunch in Boston, I had never flown to Boston. So I show up, it's a guy who's over 60. I've never met him before. Him or her, I've never met them before. I have never been to Boston before. And it's possible that they've never flown to Boston before, and we still have to execute this mission because there's 200 passengers in the back that are depending on us to take off, make sure that our landings equal our takeoffs. And they're depending on us to ensure that we do the job. Part of it in the aviation industry is we do training every six months. What I learned is that in a lot of organizations that are corporate style organizations, if they are not heavy in technical skillsets, we do an initial training and then we don't do any training after that. And then what we end up doing is we just have people learn on the job versus having planned training events and also re-evaluating that training every so often. As an aviation professional, every six to nine months, I've got to go in to get re-certified in that aircraft.

Think about this, as HR professionals, you guys have to do continuing education, things like that. But what are you guys doing like you said, for that retainment piece? And so there's things that we have to do for retainment. And part of that is those processes that help support that retainment of information. So when I go back to flying training, I'm going to review landing the airplane. I'm going to review landing in different configurations. I'm going to review all these things that are important for me to know, but I can't know every single thing. And I can't review every single thing, but that process or that checklist that actually helps me, Tracy, to retain some of that information. It helps me to be able to recall it at a moment's notice. And so I think if there's one critical thing, I would say a checklist or a process that supports the training, but they have to be in sync with each other. If you don't reevaluate the training and the process on a normal basis, then you miss the opportunity to help people and empower them to be able to retain that information long-term.

**Tracy:** Great. And I think we see that a lot, even with onboarding. Our new hires often know more about the organization than people who've been there for a long time, because they're going through an orientation that may look different or they see it with fresh eyes and so, they come and they'll... Reciting things and the people who've done that for a while are like, "I didn't know that," or "I forgot that story."

I have another really great question here. Not that I'm grading your questions, but I love this one. The question is, as someone passionate about diversity inclusion, I'd love to hear about what skills and qualities you'd like hiring managers to know that veterans can bring to the workplace that they might not otherwise be aware of.

**Jason:** That is an awesome question, Tracy. When I talk to certain organizations and especially if they bring me in to talk to veteran groups, but really what I've learned is that they bring me in not just to talk to the veteran group, but to really send the message on behalf of the veteran group as to what we



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bring to the table. I'll go back to that same story, right? It's a great story, the loadmaster in the back of that aircraft. At a young age, we give people a level of responsibility and we empower them to make decisions. If you go back to those seven skillsets, we train them that from the start of training, through those processes checklist that supports the training, we're training them with those seven skillsets. And as a military member, you feel a lot more empowered to, beyond your professional knowledge, to be able to gain a level of situational awareness. Meaning, "Hey, what's the lay of the land here?"

And then to have the ability a lot quicker to make decisions. Again, this is not to negate anyone else's capabilities, but as a veteran, what we can definitely say is that we train to that. To have them have the ability to make decisions, have them be able to lead themselves and lead others and not necessarily have to lead with a title. A lot of people, they think that leadership is about a title. No, a title is not synonymous with leadership. I guarantee you every single body on here knows that specifically. And so those veterans, they bring to the table, the idea of being able to lead without a title, the idea of being able to assess the environment, make decisions, to be able to get engaged and to be assertive, not be sassy, but to speak up when something isn't right. To know how to tell that leader by title to go around and to appreciate when someone gives them frank, direct feedback.

There are times in that aircraft where that young person says something and I have to correct them, or they have to correct me. And so there's a bit of awareness that I think we have as veterans and a lot thicker skin so to speak in some elements that maybe other environments might not have. So, that's what I would say that the veteran person brings to the table. We can train them in skillsets. We can't train them in other elements if you would, because that becomes a little bit harder, especially in corporate America when every dollar counts.

**Tracy:** All right, Dave, I have one more question and then I'll lob it back to you. What advice do you have for assimilating military personnel into corporate America?

**Jason:** They should assimilate just like anyone else because they have to learn how to fit into that environment. And I've heard various stories of veterans having a harder time because in the military, it's this team concept and we know that when I go out there, that quote unquote, that person's got my back, I've got their back and our lives are on the line, things like that and people don't look at the corporate environment in that same regard. I would just say more so, going back to that hearing them, understanding them, acknowledging them. And this is for every employee. When we assess any employee to any organization, let's do our best to ensure that they don't feel like just a number, that they know that they are part of a team, that they know that they're a part of an organization. And that that organization is there to insulate them, not isolate them.

**Tracy:** Sort of goes back to your whole theme about trust, right? Trusting that you can have those conversations, trusting that they're capable of doing that job and more, and just even opening up the conversation about how they might be feeling about it, both on the organization, receiving them, and then them coming into something that's very different, so that's great. All right, Dave, I'll lob it back to you for a question or two.



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**Dave:** Thank you, Tracy. And for those people that asked the questions. Jason, some lighter questions to wrap up the podcast, what's a book that changed your life?

**Jason:** *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. It seems so simplistic, but that book is so, so powerful. I realized that a lot of my approach to how I've been able to succeed it's because of that book.

**Dave:** That was a big book for me early in my career as well.

**Jason:** There's another book, it's very similar to that book, but it's so much smaller and so much simpler. *The Art of Dealing with People* by Les Giblin. I promise you, it is such a short read. On Audible, that book is one hour and 13 minutes.

**Dave:** Wow.

**Jason:** It is, in my opinion, for everybody who is an HR professional, it is essential reading and it will change your world in terms how you engage and deal with your people.

**Dave:** That's great. What's the kindest thing anybody's ever done for you?

**Jason:** When I was at the Air Force Academy, I almost got kicked out for grades, for academics. I remember I was at the end of my sophomore year, I had failed one of my classes and I went to this Lieutenant Colonel. This Lieutenant Colonel looks different from me. We grew up in two different worlds and even now I follow him on social media. We exist in two completely different worlds if you would. He was an air force pilot, experienced. He had been the White House aid for President Clinton. He was on the elevator when the Lewinsky scandal broke, all these things. And so I remember going to him and saying, "Hey, sir, I think I'm going to get kicked out. I'm not going to be able to go and do the summer program. I'm sorry, I think I let you down." And he says, "Jason, don't worry about it."

And I was dumbfounded, right? I had the little RCA dog look like, it just doesn't compute. Me being very transparent when he's talking about diversity equity inclusion, I'm looking at this old white guy, if you would. And we came from different worlds, man, I didn't go to the Academy to fly. I didn't even know I was going to fly airplanes at the time. And he looks at me. He says, "Jason, don't worry about it. I'll take care of it. You go do the summer program, come back, retake the class. You'll crush it and you'll be fine." And he saw the perplexed look I had on my face and he says, "Jason, here's the reason why I'm willing to do this. First and foremost, I see how you wear your uniform and it tells me everything I need to know. It tells me that you care. It tells me that you want to be here and tells me that you're committed to this institution and committed to being a leader and an officer in our Air Force."

He says, "And another thing," he says, "I've had enough conversations with you." And this is where it becomes very personal for me. And for us as leaders, he had a conversation with me. He was willing to entertain me, this kid, if you would in college. And because of that, we got to know each other on a more personal level than I would have otherwise had a chance to know him. And because of that, he took care of that academic review board. And he says, "Just come back, retake the class, make an A in that class and you'll be fine." And that happened. So to me, that's one of the things that was pivotal in



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my lifetime, in my career, and it was an extremely kind gesture that that gentleman did not have to do, And so I'm eternally grateful for that kind gesture that he did for me.

**Dave:** That's great. And last question, and if you could write a letter of advice to yourself at 25, 30 years old, what would you write?

**Jason:** I said, I was flying C-130s before I was ever legal to actually rent a car without extra coverage or whatever, without extra costs. And I got to travel and see the world and I flew and worked with some amazing people. And as I think about what advice I would give myself now, 20 years beyond my career, I would say, get to know the people around me better. What I realize as I look back on my career, Dave, is that I did not truly appreciate my peers. Again, diversity equity inclusion, that's very in our face right now. And what I realized in some cases when it was too late, that I didn't give my peers a fair shake. I thought, "Oh, we have nothing in common." And it was only later on that I realized, wait a minute, we listen to the same kind of music or wait, we actually like some of same things and I never gave some of my peers in certain situations, the benefit of the doubt to be willing, to open up that space, to have the conversation, so I would give myself the advice to be open, be willing to have the conversations, be willing to see people for who they are, appreciate them for who they are and get to know them better because it would've made my experiences that much more amazing had I got to know them on a more personal level.

**Dave:** Well, that's great advice. And it's been so great having you as a guest on The Hennessy Report by Keystone Partners, in cooperation with NEHRA. Thank you, Jason.

**Jason:** Thank you all.

**Tracy:** Thank you, Dave. Thank you, Jason.

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