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RECENT EVENTS

Nicole Malachowski: Harnessing the Headwinds of Change (January 12, 2021)

Col. Nicole Malachowski, retired combat pilot and the first woman to become a US Air Force Thunderbird pilot, encouraged Coalition members to harness the headwinds of change and rewrite the scripts of their lives. Malachowski was the featured speaker during LVBCH's Special Virtual Event on Jan. 12 that included a Meet and Greet virtual networking experience.

Using the aviation-based idea of headwinds as a metaphor, Malachowski shared inspiring personal stories and practice tools to ignite attendees' ability to successfully harness the challenges in both their personal and professional lives. Leaders across every industry and experience level share one thing in common: To be successful they need to effectively navigate failure, organizational change, and the unknown. Like the headwinds to a pilot, these perceived barriers can force you to change direction, cost you momentum, and even take away options. These headwinds can feel confusing, disorienting, and downright uncomfortable. However, with the right mindset, anyone can learn to harness the energy of these headwinds in their personal favor, and to the favor of their teams and organizations. This was the message Malachowski shared with leaders at all levels of an organization, looking for inspiration, self-reflection, and actionable tools to harness their headwinds in a way that works to the advantage of the individual, their communities, and their organizations.

Nobody Wants to Lead a Scripted Life

Malachowski grew up in Las Vegas, near Nellis Air Force Base, watching the Thunderbird pilots practice. Later, as a combat pilot, she decided to apply for the elite Thunderbird squad. She shared this story, and the messages of self-doubt she received from herself and others:

"You know Nicole, it's hard to be a thunderbird." "You know Nicole, you probably won't get picked." "You know Nicole, they've never had a woman Thunderbird pilot before."

She felt sucker punched. Overcome with self-doubt, she felt embarrassed and ashamed and considered not applying. Later, she went to the officer's lounge for a beer. There, to her surprise wing commander Maj. Gen. Mark T. Matthews, came to her and began chatting. Her immediate commander joined them, telling the colonel that Malachowski had planned to apply for the Thunderbirds. The general asked how her application was going. Not knowing what to say she repeated all the nay-say comments she had heard.

The six-foot-six general looked down on feet-foot-four Nicole, squeezed her shoulder hard and said, "Nicole, nobody wants to lead a scripted life." In that moment Gen. Matthews was telling her to dream big. He was saying don't ever write yourself or anyone out of the script. She realized she had a choice about which voices to listen to, the ones that followed the same old script, or the ones that urged her to think bigger.

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“I don’t care where you are in your journey,” Malachowski said. “At the end of the day, self-doubt is something that impacts all of us, but growth requires risk.” Take a chance, rewrite the script for your life and create a culture where’s it’s OK to take a measured level of risk – where making mistakes and failures are not the be-all, end-all.

“People tell me Nicole, you’re so resilient.” she said. “It’s not about resistance and bouncing back because my old self doesn’t exist anymore,” she said. “I like to call it resurgence.” Challenging experiences change us and can make us stronger and better.

ABOUT NICOLE MALACHOWSKI



Col. Nicole Malachowski (USAF, Ret.) defies stereotypes. Yes, she was a jet fighter pilot, but if you think you know her based on that, you’d be wrong. A leader, a combat veteran, the first woman pilot on the Thunderbirds Air Demonstration Squadron, a White House Fellow, and an inductee into the Women in Aviation International Pioneer Hall of Fame, Nicole’s distinguished 21-year Air Force career exceeded her wildest dreams. But the dream came to an end when a devastating tick-borne illness left her unable to speak or walk for ten months. An indomitable spirit, Nicole fought back against overwhelming odds and prevailed. Drawing on stories from her career and personal life, Nicole inspires audiences to rethink the challenges they face every day. She urges them to go beyond resilience and become resurgent. Nicole’s empowers people with three key beliefs: failure and risk is the price of entry for achieving something great; sometimes you need to yield to overcome; and her personal mantra – “nobody wants to lead a scripted life.” Nicole brings her experience to the stage and holds audiences spellbound with an easygoing authenticity of someone who’s achieved greatness. She’s been a member and leader of exceptional teams. She has faced overwhelming challenges and adversity and has come out on top. While other high school students were practicing for their driver’s license, Nicole was accumulating flight time. She was sixteen years old when she took her first solo flight and from that point on there was no stopping her. While in high school, she joined the Civil Air Patrol and participated in Air Force Junior ROTC. Nicole’s professional story began when she earned her commission from the United States Air Force Academy in 1996. Following graduation, she attended Undergraduate Pilot Training (UPT) at Columbus AFB, MS and began her career

as a pilot. Competitively selected to fly combat aircraft, she was among the first group of women to fly modern fighter aircraft. As a career pilot, she served in combat as an F-15E Flight Commander, Evaluator, Instructor Pilot and Flight Lead. Over her 21-year career, Nicole achieved the rating of Command Pilot with over 2,300 flight hours in six different Air Force aircraft. She was also selected to fly as Thunderbird #3 with the USAF Air Demonstration Squadron – the first woman to fly on any Department of Defense military jet demonstration team. Colonel Malachowski has served as a mission ready fighter pilot in three operational F-15E fighter squadrons and has flown over 188 combat hours, including her proudest moment as a fighter pilot: leading the first fighter formation to provide security for Iraq’s historic democratic elections in 2005. On the ground, Nicole was a White House Fellow, class of 2008-2009, where she served on the Presidential Transition Support Team (PTST) while assigned to the U.S. General Services Administration. She has served two high-level staff assignments at the Pentagon – one in the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD P&R) as well as the Secretary of the Air Force Office of International Affairs (SAF/IA). She also served as the Executive Director of the White House’s national ‘Joining Forces’ initiative where she directly advised former First Lady Michelle Obama and Dr. Jill Biden on all topics relating to service members, veterans, and military families to include employment, education, mental health, veterans’ homelessness and more. Nicole’s operational F-15E assignments include two tours of duty at RAF Lakenheath, United Kingdom as well as one operational assignment to Seymour Johnson AFB, NC. She has also served alongside the United States Army 2nd Infantry Division, Camp Red Cloud, Republic of Korea, as an Air Liaison Officer. During her second assignment to Seymour Johnson AFB, NC, she had the honor of commanding the 333rd Fighter Squadron, leading an elite cadre of F-15E Instructors in the training of the next generation of combat aviators. Further, she was responsible for resources totaling over \$1.1B and the execution of a \$119M annual flying hour program. Nicole earned a Master of Arts, with honors, in National Security Policy from American Military University and a second Master of Arts, with highest distinction, in National Security and Strategic Studies from the U.S. Naval War College. While there, she earned the Admiral Stephen B. Luce Award as the class honor graduate, the first Air Force officer in the history of the Naval War College to do so. Nicole has been recognized with several honors for her consistent contributions to community service. As Nicole continues to recover from her neurological tick-borne illness, she embraces any opportunity to educate others about her medical journey and gains energy from educating others about this growing epidemic. She is on the Board of Directors at the LivLyme Foundation and is a Patient Advisory Board Member of The Dean Center for Tick Borne Illness. Colonel Nicole Malachowski (USAF, Ret.) was born in Santa Maria, CA and graduated high school in Las Vegas, NV. She and her husband Paul have twin children; son Garrick and daughter Norah. Paul is a retired Air Force Lieutenant Colonel and former F-15E Evaluator Weapons Systems Officer.

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