



**[00:03:37] Ungerböck:** I want to go work for McKinsey. I chased them down and hounded them. Finally, I escalated to a partner and said, "Hey, I've gotten three letters saying that you won't even interview me." In the end, they said, "Well, we're not going to interview you," and gave me a bunch of reasons of actually why they should interview me. I said, "Hold on, you haven't really given me a reason why you wouldn't." He said, "You know what? You were just too aggressive in pursuing the job with McKinsey."

**[00:04:07] Nichols:** You knew what you wanted, and you went after it.

**[00:04:10] Ungerböck:** Realistically, I think that McKinsey, at those days, they weren't hiring people from Indiana University and hiring a 20-year-old kid to go charge \$500 an hour probably was not aligned with the brand.

**[00:04:21] Nichols:** Well, Booz-Allen has a wonderful reputation too so that was a great place for you to start.

**[00:04:25] Ungerböck:** I landed in a good spot.

**[00:04:27] Nichols:** What in the world were you thinking at 15 years old when you were reading Tom Peters' book? Where was it in your environment? Was it your parents that really inspired you? Was it a teacher or a coach? Where did you get that? Because most 15-year-olds are not reading business books.

**[00:04:46] Ungerböck:** Growing up in an entrepreneurial family, my father being a CEO. I think that he always wanted us, myself and all my brothers, to follow in his footsteps in business. For many years, I always knew that I was going to be an entrepreneur, and I was going to run a business. In my 17th birthday, actually, I read the *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* and it said write your personal mission statement. That's actually something that was a turning point moment in my life at that time.

I took three days and I went and wrote my personal mission statement, and it was, "to teach, to learn from, and to inspire people to achieve that which they never thought possible." My lifetime goal was to build one \$1 billion company in my life. Admittedly, this goal just defined me, it was my identity.

**[00:05:28] Nichols:** It defined-- it was your driver. I love that mission statement. I love that. That's perfect.

**[00:05:35] Ungerböck:** Fortunately, I had a backup mission statement or a backup goal because we'll get to it I'm sure in a little bit, the time of letting go of that vision that was my identity. The second one was really more like a-- he also encourages you to not just have a professional goal but have something that's more broad-reaching and it was to live my life as if somebody might write a book about me one day. Not from an egotistical standpoint, but more as a guiding principle for life.

If I wake up in the morning and say, "What am I going to do today?" That's going to be something worth writing about. Also, as an accountability like, "Did I do something today that I wouldn't want written in a book about me someday?"

**[00:06:08] Nichols:** [laughs] That's a great way to live.

**[00:06:11] Ungerböck:** Fortunately, now that the building a billion-dollar company is no longer part of my identity, I have a fallback and I'm working on that book. No one else is going to write it about me so I'll write it myself.

**[00:06:22] Nichols:** You were at Booz-Allen, but your mom and dad had founded Ungerboeck Software. If you are at St. Louis and you may see their big LED sign [laughs] on 40. Talk to us about that journey. It was, I believe, and I'm not going to put words in your mouth, but the business was struggling a little bit, I believe, and your dad had asked you to possibly step in.

**[00:06:48] Ungerböck:** I had worked in the business when I was young, and I worked in the summer starting at age 12 programming. Then it was a summer in college that I worked there and my father fired me. We had a technical disagreement. I was 17 at the time and we were building our first version of the software for PCs, a client-server spectrum it was called in those days. He wanted me to do something that was honestly technically impossible until about 15 years later.

I had already talked to the engineers at IBM and the research lab I was like, "This is just not possible." He continued the Steve Jobs "weather the reality distortion field but just make it happen." After some number of weeks or months of attempting to convince him, he fired me. I said, "Okay, that's fine but I'll never come to work for the business again." That was what was really clear to me that my father and I couldn't work together.

I graduated from college, went to Booz-Allen, and I also worked for a small startup consulting firm. Coincidentally, about three weeks before his birthday in 1997, he called me up and said, "Hey, we got this big project in Hong Kong and if you don't quit your job and come run this project, then I'm afraid that we're going to be in a lawsuit with a court of jurisdiction in Hong Kong, which probably is not going to play out well for us."

**[00:08:01] Nichols:** Yes, it's not a good place to be.

**[00:08:01] Ungerböck:** He said he has an offer I couldn't refuse. I went in, quit my job, and moved to St. Louis and we started at that time at that company I was the 14th employee. We were roughly breaking even. Interestingly, as a 24, 25-year-old kid, I was making more money than my parents together so obviously, that's not a great situation to be in.

If you're in your 40s and 50s and you have four kids, in large part because of this Hong Kong project that they had sold before I came, and we made it successful. That was the turning point in the company. Since then, we've been on an off-road that we grew 3,000% since then and we have hundreds of employees worldwide.

**[00:08:40] Nichols:** At how many countries?

**[00:08:41] Ungerböck:** Employees in eight or nine countries and then customers in 40-50 countries. It keeps going up.

**[00:08:47] Nichols:** Let's back up for one minute and for our listeners who don't know what Ungerboeck does, tell them what Ungerboeck does.

**[00:08:54] Ungerböck:** Probably the simplest one is we're like SAP for the events business. We're like the one all-in-one solution for somebody who does events as their large portion of their business. We're the CRM through a financial solution for those kind of niche businesses. Obviously, there's modules that people can say, "I only want this part. I already use SAP for my financials. I already use Salesforce for CRM," but then they just use the event pieces. That's, in a nutshell, what we do.

**[00:09:22] Nichols:** It's a very niche market, I would say.

**[00:09:26] Ungerböck:** Also, because the events industry is very international, that's what has taken us easily into other countries. Many industries, it's very difficult to go international like that the events and tourism industry because it is about going other places, all other things equal makes it a little bit easier.

**[00:09:41] Nichols:** Talk to us a little bit. How long were you on Ungerboeck? You had amazing success. In fact, I said, "One of the things that you say you charted topping employee engagement ratings at 99.3% and won five top place awards five times in a row." I'm thinking our listeners are going to say, "How did you do that?" Everybody wants to know: how can I increase employee engagement? That's on the top of everybody's list.

**[00:10:09] Ungerböck:** Well, especially in tech, I used to say that if you want to win the war for customers, the first step is to win the war for talent. Because if you win the war for talent, then the customers will come. It's not just about the build it, they will come strategy. If you've got the best marketing people and the best salespeople and the best service people and the best software developers, then put a magical team together, and then more importantly, keep them together for a long period of time.

**[00:10:31] Nichols:** It's not just to attract them but retain them. How did you do that? How did you get a 99.3% employee engagement?

**[00:10:38] Ungerböck:** I think the first is just how do we measure that? We did the top workplace studies and I picked out one question that I thought was indicative of employee engagement which was, "I would like to be working for this company one year from today." We would just look at what's the agrees versus disagrees and we looked at some other kind of ways. The last year before I left was actually, I was shocked when we ran the numbers that 99.3% of the people agreed.

We had pretty broad participation and so it wasn't that we only just sent the survey out to the people who we thought would agree. Which means every single employee except one agreed with that statement, either strongly agree or agree. The interesting thing they say people don't leave jobs; they leave bosses. At that time, I also asked, "Well, who's the one employee who said that they disagree?" Interestingly, that person for many years had reported to me. I was that person's boss. At least the person that probably created the negative environment. I won't take full responsibility because the person was admittedly somewhat toxic, and I wasn't the only person who was not a huge fan of that person.

**[00:11:46] Nichols:** Right. That did cause you to do some self-reflection, I'm sure.

**[00:11:50] Ungerböck:** Yes. I think that was probably the one thing that as a leader, that I was always very open to what am I doing wrong? Whenever something was going wrong, I was always first saying, "Okay. How could I have done this differently?" If an employee was not performing, my first thought was, "Was I not clear? Did I set clear objectives? How is it my own language and behavior contributed to this breakdown?"

In any case, creating the employee engagement, I think for me, I used to always say that from the beginning that smart people like to work with smart people. I think that a big part of it is creating a brand of companies, a company that people are like, "This is where I am dying to work." It goes a little bit back to that McKinsey thing. I remember when I was 15, I read this book and then said one out of 10,000 applicants actually gets a job there or something like that. Creating a brand where people say, "Wow. I would hope to work here." Then you need to follow it up with the place that people really do want to work. Having people that really-- where the people go there and they say, "I really appreciate that I'm learning from everyone I work with or most of the people I work with. I'm growing. There's just not a lot of drama."

I think that the other part of building that kind of employee engagement culture is the hiring process is critical. In the early days, like in that 1997 to 2001, we had a lot of people that just weren't working out. We were growing 100% a year and I just need somebody—I need a body.

**[00:13:26] Nichols:** You need a body.

**[00:13:27] Ungerböck:** Yes. We took our lessons.

**[00:13:29] Nichols:** You got more intentional with your hiring?

**[00:13:31] Ungerböck:** Yes. It's better to go without someone than to hire the wrong person. It took us a long time to really develop that discipline. I think the other thing that was really big for me was that, and this is interesting. When I was in Germany, I moved to Germany to open our businesses in France and Germany. If somebody were to go to the monster.com of Germany which I think was at the time called jobpilot.d, they would submit their resume.

Because of the way most German companies work, it would be three weeks before the company would respond. In the US and around the world, our belief was always that the best people, they're going to get snapped up immediately.

**[00:14:08] Nichols:** They're going to get snapped up. That's right. You better respond quickly.

**[00:14:11] Ungerböck:** Yes. We would try to differentiate ourselves like how can I set up a process where if I see a good candidate, they get a call back within 30 minutes from submitting their job? Then the other part was even more so, how can we get those candidates really unique access? For example, I remember one case where I personally felt my job was to be the chief recruiting officer as CEO.

There was one person that was a critical hire globally that we were looking for. I remember this person submitted their resume and then we were a 200-person company at the time, so it's not like I was literally getting all these emails in my inbox. There was a time when I was, but we were able to actually call him at 5:30 PM German time and he was literally surprised because it was hours after he had submitted his resume. He was literally like, "Who is this?"

I said, "Well, this is Krister Ungerböck." Not only was he surprised as a German getting a call three hours after submitting his resume, but he was also equally surprised that he was getting a call from the CEO.

**[00:15:19] Nichols:** I would imagine.

**[00:15:19] Ungerböck:** It was really flipping that if you've got that one out of 500 people that you want to hire, don't have the assistant HR/recruiter at the bottom of the organization call.

**[00:15:32] Nichols:** Calling that person.

**[00:15:32] Ungerböck:** How can you get them to the vice president or the CEO, or higher up to where they're like, "I can't even believe I'm talking." Then, of course, we couldn't pull that off at the time but then we would also have things that we would do. Like if our HR team and recruiting team would know that if I'm in a meeting and if they're walking a job candidate around the building, giving them a tour for their first or second interview, and when they know that we're in a competitive situation and this is somebody that we really want to impress-

**[00:16:02] Nichols:** They would bring them.

**[00:16:04] Ungerböck:** -they would knock on the door. The knock on the door was the signal that I knew that "Okay," so I would-- assuming it was a meeting I could wrap up, I'd wrap it up, invite them in. The playbook was written such that the HR people would then say, "Yes. Wow. Is that the first CEO you've met at any of the companies that you've been to?" to make sure that-- It was really being purposeful but then again, all these things need to be followed up. If people then couldn't come into my office on a moment's notice after they were hired, then it would be inconsistent.

**[00:16:34] Nichols:** It's so important. We're going to take a quick break and we'll be right back with Krister Ungerböck.

[background music]

**Commercial Break:** Hi, everybody. I just wanted to take a second and tell you about something our team at Technology Partners can do for your business. We have spent over two decades partnering with organizations and helping them solve their IT needs from a 360-degree perspective. A huge part of how we solve those needs is by developing custom applications of all shapes and sizes.

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**Nichols:** Krister, so you did all of that, but then something drove you to retire at the age of 42. Let's talk about that story.

**[00:17:26] Ungerböck:** As I said, I had kind of this, my father fired me at age 17 and this was this conflict was ever-present in our business relationship. At age 42, I say that I went through simultaneously a business divorce and decided that the time had come. There are many, many times over the years that I considered leaving the company. Over the last 18 months, I started building a team that I felt that the company could be equally successful without me.

Preparing for the possibility of going to-- initially going to the owners and saying, "Hey, this conflict needs to end, and I'll buy the company, and then we'll go forward." But I knew that if I was going to put that offer on the table and make it real, that it was going to be a parting of the ways moment if we couldn't come to an agreement. I knew that also my duty to our employees was that if I was going to go down that path, that I needed to make sure that I left a legacy of a company that would be equally successful without me.

Otherwise, and this was probably 10 years prior. I'd had an equally turning point moment that ultimately resulted in my father retiring and me becoming CEO. At that time, I knew that if I left, I wouldn't be putting our employees in a situation, that the company would be equally successful. The net of it is, is we couldn't come to an agreement on that buyout. I said, "It's time for me to move on." I've put in place—I've hired a team of somebody who I think can run the company equally well.

Fortunately, now it's three, four years later, the company has been performing equally well and grown and achieved similar revenue growth and also increased profit margins over the last three years. I'm happy. The business outcome is good. The hardest part for me was that I walked out on this vision of building a billion-dollar company.

Six months before that moment, I had stood in front of our customers and we did it on video and said that I shifted the vision from building a billion-dollar company to building a billion-dollar

company, but with the intention of sharing the financial fruits of that with our employees to create 500 employee millionaires. It was really because my family is not overly money motivated.

I'm not personally overly money motivated and realistically, we have a business that's valued at probably more than our wildest dreams today. There was an opportunity to share all the extra, all the something extra because there was a lot of something extra and potential of something extra to go around. When it became clear that I didn't see that I was going to be able to have the control to bring that vision to life, that I felt it was time to move on.

Walking away was walking away from this defining vision that I created at age 19. It was really like walking out of my identity. I say I walked out on the CEO job that I love and then two weeks later, my wife walked out on me. I was nothing.

**[00:20:14] Nichols:** No identity.

**[00:20:15] Ungerböck:** It was in March, three or four years ago. I remember I was at the YMCA signing up for a gym membership. The woman asked me, "Who is your emergency contact?" I broke down crying because I didn't have someone off the top of my head. I was like, "Not my father nor a wife." It became clear to me that we'd built this great business, but I was a leader with no followers. I'd started reading these business books at age-- Whatever-

**[00:20:40] Nichols:** 15?

**[00:20:41] Ungerböck:** Yes. Sometimes I wonder if it was earlier than that, but whatever it was is I started reading the business books and all these things that had led to being a successful leader of a business, yet I felt that I was a failure as a leader of people. Admittedly, I think that a lot of the employee engagement and things like that, I think that some of the people who reported to me...

Steve Jobs was a good example where people were like-- he was really a jerk, for a large portion of his career. What I'm convinced is somewhat similar to and it's like the next layer of people below can insulate.

**[00:21:14] Nichols:** More and more people.

**[00:21:15] Ungerböck:** Now, you can have a really toxic boss, many people who worked me you wouldn't say, "Hey, you were not a toxic boss," but I certainly had my big jerk days. I think that there's some level of if we do have toxic leaders, then the next layer down can really be insulation to insulate. I believe that based on some of the reading and things I've done, is that's a large part of what happened many years at Apple when Steve Jobs was that person firing in elevators.

The challenge in tech is that we read Steve Jobs' biography and after that came out people were like, "Ah, well," young founder start-up CEOs were like, "That's why I'm kind of really tough. That's what made Steve Jobs successful." In any case, I looked at myself and I said,



"What was I missing?" I went on this three-year journey really looking for-- what I felt was that my heart was in the right place, but what I learned is that my words were not. Being an engineer, emotional intelligence was just not something that really came-

**[00:22:13] Nichols:** Not in your vocabulary [laughs]

**[00:22:14] Ungerböck:** Yes, it was not-- But despite reading Daniel Goldman's book about emotional intelligence-

**[00:22:17] Nichols:** Sure.

**[00:22:18] Ungerböck:** -in 1997, I knew intellectually what emotional intelligence was all about. I knew that I wanted to be better at emotional intelligence. It was a weakness of mine-

**[00:22:29] Nichols:** Your heart was there.

**[00:22:30] Ungerböck:** Yes. But the challenges-

**[00:22:32] Nichols:** Enacting the behavior.

**[00:22:33] Ungerböck:** I never could crack the code. It wasn't until I discovered that it was the words that I was using, it was just how I was speaking. Because I'm an engineer and I'm fairly analytical, I want recipes. You have fill-in-the-blanks. This is what I discovered over this journey is what I call the "language of leadership." Simple fill-in-the-blanks phrases and say there's not that rules for leading more powerfully, but also with empathy.

It's the balancing toughness with kindness, results with relationships, and analytical intellect with emotions. This is something I just never really did very well at. I was very good at being tough, I was very good at being analytical, and I was very good at the results part, but it was the relationships and the kindness, and some of the other things.

**[00:23:21] Nichols:** That is where *The Language of Leadership* came from?

**[00:23:24] Ungerböck:** This is what it was, yes. A big part was also formed through the-- Shortly after September 11th, I moved to Europe to start our businesses in France and Germany. Once I started to learn how different words could shift--sometimes there are very subtle shifts in words--can shift the whole relationship and interaction. I looked back at when I moved to Europe in 2001, I had to learn French and German from nothing, and learn to lead and do business in these languages.

I hired some of the best French and German business teachers, and they helped me with the shortcuts for learning French. A lot of this how to teach people this new language of leadership is built on how did this--Jean Luc was his name--how did he teach me business French in-

**[00:24:11] Nichols:** Interesting.

**[00:24:12] Ungerböck:** -a shorthand way. Which really came down to memorize how to say it this way, fill-in-the-blank phrases, simple, don't say this, say that. I think that that for me is how I went from never having anyone ever saying, "Hey, you're empathetic or emotionally intelligent," to now three years on, actually it's something that I do get actually compliments on.

**[00:24:34] Nichols:** Complimented on. I love that. I always say, even if you are weak in an area, if you've got the right growth mindset, you can change those things. You can move the needle on those things, and clearly you're an example of that. You're an example of that, Ungerböck.

**[00:24:51] Ungerböck:** We can grow but we also need the tools.

**[00:24:53] Nichols:** Yes, you need the tools, that's right.

**[00:24:54] Ungerböck:** This emotional thing for me was-- I read tons of books on it but I never found the right practical tools. Even if you google today, "How do I improve my emotional intelligence," there's still not like really concrete-

**[00:25:05] Nichols:** A tool kit out there.

**[00:25:05] Ungerböck:** Yes, of how to do it. For me, it was simple like just change our words, just-

**[00:25:10] Nichols:** Change the language.

**[00:25:10] Ungerböck:** Just something like three to five different simple language changes we can make.

**[00:25:12] Nichols:** I love that. Well, we could talk about that all day long. I love that. I do want to talk about something extra. Tell us about something extra that was missing in you. You've already alluded to it but go ahead and re-state.

**[00:25:26] Ungerböck:** For me, the something extra is just the words, the language. What was in my heart was not matching what was in my words. It wasn't until I went on this three-year journey talking to-- Actually, what I purposely did was I set aside all the business books. I was like, "I'm not going to read any business book even closely."

I went off on this journey talking to people who were admittedly some thought far out, weird, but I always had my CEO business hat on. Like how can I translate their words? In fact, I'm planning a conference for next year in Boston. A lot of these people I'm trying to bring in, but what I realize is that the challenge that I have is that some of these people have great, great concepts. But when you sit in front of a group of business leaders and you talk about the universe and the new age concepts like that, people just check out.

They're in the bathrooms and checking their phone. A lot of it is helping these individuals and that's part of what *The Language of Leadership* is about, is taking some of these concepts that were kind of new age and frankly a little out there, taking away all the new age and maybe not as useful stuff and translating it into words that business people can really get value from.

**[00:26:35] Nichols:** Very good. What do you believe is this something extra that every leader needs?

**[00:26:40] Ungerböck:** I think it is the simple rules of how we can speak with more emotional intelligence and empathy.

**[00:26:46] Nichols:** Empathy.

**[00:26:47] Ungerböck:** What I always struggled with, the day that I learned that I was maybe a jerk, was actually in about 2011. I did a 360 survey and discovered I was tougher than I thought I was. For five or six years, I was trying to develop this how can I be more emotionally intelligent, but I never honestly-- We still achieved good results, about 15% to 20% growth. I never felt like I really cracked the code of how to balance toughness with kindness until after I retired and really said, "Hey, I want to figure this out," and now-

**[00:27:19] Nichols:** You did the hard work, and that's hard work to do what you did and take that time, and you're doing a lot of self-reflection. Like you said, you went on this cracking-the-code [chuckles] mission, if you will. That's hard work, but certainly, it's paid off. Do you have something that is coming up that you want our listening audience to know about?

**[00:27:41] Krister:** The one thing that's coming up for people who are in St. Louis or near St. Louis is on August 20th at the Touhill Performing Arts Center at UMSL, I'll be giving the first ever language of leadership experience. We're going to have-- tickets should be on sale by the time the podcast airs. People can go to [thelanguageofleadershipexperience.com](http://thelanguageofleadershipexperience.com), or they can come to my website, [Krister.com](http://Krister.com), and buy tickets for that. There I'll be sharing some of the actual tools for how to speak with the language of leadership.

**[00:28:09] Nichols:** Absolutely. If you are out there in our listening audience and this is resonating with you, I would highly encourage you to go and hear Krister. He's a phenomenal speaker and I know that it'll be time worthwhile. Thank you so much for being here today, Krister.

**[00:28:24] Ungerböck:** Thank you.

**[00:28:25] [END OF AUDIO]**