

## Ep27: It's Leadership, Not Likership!

October 25, 2019

**PATTI BRENNAN:** Hi everybody, welcome to the "Patti Brennan Show." Whether you have \$20 or \$20 million, this show is for those of you who want to protect, grow, and use your assets to live your very best lives.

Today I have a special guest with me. Kristopher Thompson is a member of the team here at Key Financial. I want to just tee this up for all of you, to give you a sense of what an incredible human being, and how lucky I feel in having Kristopher as a part of this team.

About a year ago or so, Kristopher was introduced to me and I received an email and there was a cover letter. Along with the cover letter and the resumé, there was a letter of recommendation.

Folks, this was not your average letter of recommendation. Let me just tell you. It came from a gentleman by the name of Christopher Midberry who was as it turned out, Kristopher Thompson's battalion commander. In this letter of recommendation, it was a memorandum for the potential employer of Kristopher Thompson.

He basically outlined very succinctly why he believed that Kris was an incredible, hire of potential asset for any company smart enough and wise enough to bring him on board. He talks about Kris's experience in the army. He starts out, for example, in talking about his performance.

I'm quoting right now, "Captain Thompson was without a doubt one of the most confident and inspired soldiers serving in the ranks of my battalion. I have absolute faith in his abilities. He was deliberately assigned to company Executive Officer because of his intelligence and drive."

He goes on to talk about intelligence and drive and what he believes are the most profound characteristics of Captain Thompson. "Honesty, team work. He continuously sacrificed his time for others. Leadership, Captain Thompson consistently managed difficult situations under stress timelines. He was tasked with a job that could not be failed without terrible repercussions.



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“Plagued with complex difficulties and minimal guidance, Captain Thompson achieved success in all endeavors. His presence. He is a quiet, professional with a strong sense of pride and duty. Intellect, he has a unique ability to handle multiple scenarios and tasks simultaneously with very little guidance. He exercised mental agility without unnecessary stress.”

In summary, Kristopher is a driven and intellectual person that continuously strives to not only be the best but to make those around him better in the process. He is moldable, adaptive, and best suited in tough and stressful conditions.

By the way, can't think of a better place than a financial planning firm managing a billion dollars for people who are relying on us to make sure that we are preserving and growing their assets to do the things that they want to do. Captain Thompson, welcome to Key Financial and welcome to the podcast.

CAPTAIN KRIS THOMPSON: Thank you, Patti. Thanks for having me on. I appreciate that.

PATTI: Folks, when we were talking about this today. I was talking with Kristopher about what he'd like to talk about and share with all of us. I wanted to bring his Army experience, to explain what his experience, and how it has helped him in his role here at Key Financial.

We're talking about leadership today. You might think, “Well, gee. Most of the people who talk about leadership have had years and years of experience and lots of gray hair to go about it.” I think it's important.

Whether you are a millennial who is listening to this or parents of a millennial, it's really important for you to know that you don't have to wait to have gray hair to have great leadership skills like Captain Thompson here. Thank you again for joining us.

Let's start out, Kris, and talk about what you believe is important as people engage in this topic of leadership.

CAPTAIN THOMPSON: Patti, thank you again for having me on. The introduction was – I haven't read that recommendation letter in quite a while, so I really appreciate that.

PATTI: Folks, I want you to know. He was blushing.

CAPTAIN THOMPSON: Yes, absolutely. One of the more important things that a leader brings to the table and probably the biggest impact that a leader can have is the culture that a leader creates. I, again, from the Army. The Army is steeped in tradition and in culture from the highest ranking generals in the Army itself, all the way down to a company.



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A squad leader, which is a leader of about 12 guys or so, everyone has their own culture. Every leader brings a different culture to the table. I just felt like that is something that I wanted to expand on. Just building, at any level, whether you're the CEO of a Fortune 500 company, or you work in the back here at Key Financial with me and you're in the planning department. Just bringing a culture of trust and a team mindset to the table.

PATTI:

It's so interesting because one of the things that I've learned about you, Kris, is that you kind of exude...you become that go to person because of your own credibility and your willingness to be not always the leader, but also a great team member.

A great follower. Someone who's really thirsty and eager to learn different aspects of not only what you're doing, but what other people are doing as well, so that you can lend a hand and be a go to person in whatever we might need.

CAPTAIN THOMPSON: Absolutely. I think in my time that I spent in Ranger School and the time that I spent in the leadership positions, in the various ones that I had in the Army, it was about understanding that you are a role player.

Often times that means that you have a team that looks to you to make wise decisions in tough times. You also have leaders of your own that rely on you to take the helm and make those decisions and carry the ball forward, so to speak.

PATTI:

Exactly, you've got to be able to execute. Tell me about Ranger School. This is a side bar, folks, I always wanted to ask Kris what Ranger School was like. What made you to do that and become a Ranger?

CAPTAIN THOMPSON: My brother is in the military as well. He's a Special Forces Major right now and a Company Commander in the Fifth Special Forces group and he is an Army Ranger. He was before I was. Essentially, through the time, my late college career, I was deciding whether or not to join the military.

Ultimately, I came to him for advice and he basically told me, "If you're going to join the military, here are some things to look for" and "Ultimately, if you want to be the best that you can possibly be and really stretch yourself beyond what you think you can do, Ranger School is the place to go do it."

I would say to sum up the couple of months that I spent at Ranger School, it's tough. They put you in situations that, day to day, I wouldn't think today that I could do it had I not already done it and been there.

They not only put you in those situations, but then they expect you to lead up to 50 soldiers and still complete a complex task. It was a tough situation. Not a whole lot of food. Not a whole lot of sleep either. I learned a lot about myself and I learned about



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leadership and just being a team member and all that.

PATTI: Wow and you carry the other people right along with you and as long as everybody's in the situation together, you win together.

CAPTAIN THOMPSON: Absolutely.

PATTI: To me, that is the hallmark of a great leader. To really understand the importance of everybody on the team. Nobody's better than anybody else. I think that in Ranger School, just hearing you makes you realize that we're capable of a lot more than we might think in this little brain of ours. It's a cerebral thing.

We all have these limiting beliefs and these things that we think, "Oh, I could never do this, I could never do that." That's one of the reasons why I also want to bring these topics on our podcast. Again, whoever you are, whatever you do, you can do these things.

There's a framework to follow where you can really elevate yourself. Not only in your own eyes, which is the first and most important thing that we do, but in the eyes of other people so that you get additional responsibilities and that you are able to do things that maybe you never thought you could do.

CAPTAIN THOMPSON: Absolutely. A much wiser man than myself once said, "The problem is not the problem. The problem is your mindset about the problem." Just learning how to rewire yourself to accept adversity and strive to drive through it and accomplish your goals.

PATTI: That's phenomenal. Again, that comes from the top also. Believing that your team has the ability to drive through whatever it is that might be facing them. That's really interesting.

I think that as you think about the tactics. We can talk fluffy stuff until we're blue in the face but let's talk tactics and develop a structure for everybody that's listening in terms of, "What do you think are the most important principals?"

CAPTAIN THOMPSON: For the principles of leadership, there is, the be, the know, and the do. Be, technically and in tactically proficient. Know the factors of leadership. Who are you leading? Who are you as a leader? What is the situation? How can you communicate that to the people that you're leading, your team?

Then the do, seeking responsibility, setting the example for others to follow, developing responsibility amongst your teammates, getting buy in from your team. They are not necessarily the ones making the final decision if they're not in that position. However, they should have buy in. They should have input.



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PATTI: Let's go back. This is really interesting, folks. You've got three major categories. They are be, know, and do. Let's start with be. You said something really interesting, Kris. It's something I want to drill down on.

That is when you are a leader, in order to be respected, in order to be followed, you have to be demonstrating the values and the qualities to make people want to follow you.

To be technically and tactically proficient, to be somebody that they will look up to and say, "Wow, this guy, Kristopher Thompson, is really good at what he's doing. He's not asking me to do anything that he wouldn't do, himself."

The knowing, this is also important. When you think about you as a leader, know yourself, how would you describe yourself as a leader as it relates to other types of leaders?

CAPTAIN THOMPSON: Me, personally, I like to know what I know and understand what I don't know. By that, I mean, if I don't know what I'm looking into, I try to find the nearest subject matter expert to help me either get there, or I may delegate that task to them if I'm in the position to do so.

Me, as a leader, know your strengths, know your weaknesses, and then use your team to work within that frame.

PATTI: You don't have to be a person of all strengths. We all have our weaknesses.

CAPTAIN THOMPSON: Absolutely.

PATTI: I'm a big believer in focus on your strengths and delegate your weaknesses, because if we work on improving our weaknesses, we end up having a lot of strong weaknesses.

There are other people who are good at this thing that I am not very good at. I, as a leader, am going to delegate that, let them do that, let them run with it because they can do a much better job at it that I will.

It's so important that in the Army, you learned that you've got to understand yourself as the leader, and understand what your strengths and your weaknesses are, and then be able to work with that and your team to lead them effectively.

CAPTAIN THOMPSON: Again, it's cultivating that team through, knowing yourself, and building that culture up. If you're grasping at straws, people will see that eventually. You don't want to be in



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that position.

**PATTI:** Exactly. Again, that would take away from your credibility. One thing that I've also noticed about you is that you genuinely care about the team.

**CAPTAIN THOMPSON:** Absolutely.

**PATTI:** As a leader, we can all seat on our high horses and think that we're better than other people, but we're not. We're not.

When you reach, weather you're the leader of a company, or a hospital, or a team of any kind, or the leader in your family, to understand what motivates your team and the people that you're working with and strive to create an environment, the culture that emphasizes their strengths and help them to be their best self is really important.

You do this so incredibly well, because you do it in a very nontraditional way by asking questions. People love to be the experts. Even when you might know the answer, you're elevating that person by asking the right questions.

Also, you motivate. You have a way of motivating in other ways. You don't always necessarily motivate with money. You motivate with other types of rewards like, "Hey, if you'll help me out with this, I'll take over that case for you."

**CAPTAIN THOMPSON:** Yeah. You can build motivation through just the team mentality in and of itself. If you and I are trying to tackle a subject or an issue and we're bonding together over it, ultimately when we accomplish that goal, we've motivated each other just by being good teammates. You can do that without the false third party motivation like you talk about.

**PATTI:** Absolutely. How often do I go to all of you and say, "You know what? I'm struggling with this issue. I'm not sure the best approach. Let's spend a half a day figuring out different creative approaches. We're not going to do all of them. Let's figure it out." I just unleash you guys to do what you're good at.

**CAPTAIN THOMPSON:** Absolutely. We all get buy in and like being a part of that team culture.

**PATTI:** It's fun. It's really fun. We've talked about the be, and the know. Be the best person you can be. Know yourself, and know your team and the people that you are leading. What about the do? Let's talk about these things a little bit more and, like the first one that you talked about, seek responsibility and take responsibility for your actions.

**CAPTAIN THOMPSON:** If you're in a leadership position or you're perceived to be a leader, nobody is going to follow you if you're not looking for that next thing, trying to create goals in order to accomplish goals. It's just important to maintain that drive behind you. Then it



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bolsters your team to that level as well.

**PATTI:** It comes down to communication, doesn't it, Kris? Again, if people don't know that the ladder is on a particular wall, they can't know that that's where they want to go, but communicating what those goals are and also emphasizing why it's important to them.

**CAPTAIN THOMPSON:** You have to create a vision and just keeping everyone informed as either the vision changes or the circumstances within that vision change. It's important that everyone is on the same track.

**PATTI:** Can you give me some examples of as the captain, as you were leading your group, where you might have had a challenge of some sort or where your commander gave you a particular goal that you thought was insurmountable? You didn't know how you were going to achieve it. How did you deal with that?

Did you go back to your commander and say, "I've looked at this different ways, and this is not achievable in a particular time frame"? Did you go to your team, the people that you're leading, and say, "OK, no [indecipherable 17:26] . We got to find a way to make this happen"? Give me an example of how you did that.

**CAPTAIN THOMPSON:** I can give you two examples and one of each, because one eventually does lead into the other, actually. We had, like you said, an insurmountable goal that we needed to accomplish. I went to my commander knowing that the time that we had allotted, it was not going to be possible.

I came to him, and I said, "Sir, we cannot do this. It cannot be accomplished." He looked at me, and he said, "Build me my battleship. You and I have had this discussion once before." He said, "Build my battleship." "I don't know what that means, sir. You're going to have to elaborate for me."

He said, "When I was an Executive Officer, I told my commander I couldn't do something he looked at me and he said build me my battleship. If I tell you to build a battleship, I expect a battleship." He kind of sent me on my way. Ultimately, the goal's not accomplished. The time frame was literally impossible.

We made some concessions, we made the objective of the training happen at the end of the day. In a way, we built the battleship. Maybe a smaller battleship that day, but it taught me something. Go ahead.

**PATTI:** I think it's interesting because what he did was he set the expectation. He set the goal for you and sent you on your way, and you're probably shaking your head saying, "There is no freaking way I'm going to be able to get this thing done." Yet you still did it, and you recognized that maybe you got to renegotiate the timeline.



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The end goal, the issue was training. A particular training exercise that needed to happen. He got his battleship, didn't he?

CAPTAIN THOMPSON: Exactly, yeah. The particular way he wanted it accomplished wasn't necessarily possible. However, the end state, what we needed to do to get soldiers trained was ultimately accomplished, which is all you can really ask for at the end of the day and certain circumstances. That's what we went for.

PATTI: Good. I interrupted you, so how did that lead to the second example?

CAPTAIN THOMPSON: Well they taught me a sharp lesson. That there are speed bumps and there are road blocks. Speed bumps, I can get over speed bumps. When it comes to a road block, you may need to rely on others. Rely on higher headquarters, things of that nature. For example if I have a really tough question I got to go to Patti Brennan, right?

It taught me the difference between those two and how to navigate those waters and what's what. Seeking out the end state. Ultimately, some time later down the road when I was a little bit more seasoned we were met with an even more difficult task. This time, I rallied the troops. This was a "we must make this happen" goal.

There was no go to the commander and tell him it can't happen. I rallied the troops and essentially started with organization. Disseminating the information of this is what we're doing, this is why we need to do it. This is the plan, if you have any sort of objection or if you have...

PATTI: Another approach maybe?

CAPTAIN THOMPSON: Exactly. A better approach of how we could do this, maybe we can work that in, so come to me, let me know. In the meantime, get moving. I'm still open to options. We are going to keep pedaling this bike.

PATTI: That is terrific. You really got your buy in from your team because you weren't pontificating, you weren't pretending to be the man with all of the answers, and you appreciated the fact that they may have expertise or ideas that you don't quite have. That made them want to do well, to really accomplish this task, not only for themselves but also for you.

CAPTAIN THOMPSON: Exactly.

PATTI: A lot of times, people will go to the end of the Earth really, to really make a difference in the people that they care about, that they respect. Again, it's all about leadership.

You think about other things...I love that roadblocks versus, what was the other thing,



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the speed bumps and roadblocks?

CAPTAIN THOMPSON: Speed bumps and roadblocks.

PATTI: That's a great metaphor. I'm going to have to remember that. Is this a speed bump? "Fine, find a way to get over it yourself," versus a roadblock, "I'm totally here, we're going to figure this out together."

CAPTAIN THOMPSON: Absolutely.

PATTI: That's terrific. What you did in that example was you communicated. In other words, you explained what needed to happen, why it was important, and then laid out the road map for the team.

In getting the buy in, you welcomed the feedback and made sure that they understood what the task was at hand, that it really was a drop dead "We got to make it happen."

CAPTAIN THOMPSON: Absolutely, time was of the essence. In all honesty, I would have sat down with them to hash the plan out even more if the time permitted, but it was kind of, "We got to go. We'll build the plane in flight if ideas come up."

PATTI: That is terrific. I think about the army, and I think about your role as our front line, and a lot of times, that's really what you're going to have to do. You're going to be building the plane in the air, and figuring it out as you go along.

You think about the life or death decisions that you have to make on an ongoing basis. It just gives me chills, in terms of what you've learned and what you've done for our country.

I also think that it's important as you lay these things out, that it is leadership. Not everybody is going to like it. Not everybody is going to be your best buddy and your friend, nor is that usually appropriate.

What do you think is the mistake that leaders often make as it relates to you leading a team?

CAPTAIN THOMPSON: I sat down, it was not Colonel Midberry, but another colonel. The first battalion commander I ever had sat me down. I was a young second lieutenant. He said, "Listen, first things first. It's leadership not likership," which at the time I thought nothing of it, but it resonated throughout the next five years.

Ultimately, I think I've had great respect for every one of the soldiers that I worked with. I felt that they respected me in the same form of fashion. We had friendships,



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but ultimately, we were not so familiar with each other that my ability to make tough decisions on their behalf often played into that.

I remained impartial because they knew we were professionals and we had to maintain everything above board and I wasn't going to make a decision based on favoritism or anything else like that.

**PATTI:** I think that if that comes into play, then your credibility goes by the wayside. If people think that you're playing favoritism, that you're doing for some and not for the others, it's a virus that leaks through the organization and really undermines your effectiveness as a leader.

It's hard to do though, isn't it? You want to be friends with all these people, there a lot of fun and that sort, but you got to draw that line from time to time.

**CAPTAIN THOMPSON:** You're also in in positions that you're mutually going through tough times together. On one hand those tough times drive your friendship closer but they also create situations where as a leader I have to distinguish myself.

I have to make a tough call here and separate myself from being again just too familiar. Not too friendly, there's nothing wrong with being friendly but at the end of the day when things happen you have to make the call.

**PATTI:** Wow, that's really amazing. It's interesting this is the 75th anniversary of D Day. I had the wonderful opportunity go to Normandy and learn what happened on that day.

I think about you and I think about all of the men who gave their lives and the people that had to make those kinds of decisions to send certain people or let certain people stay behind. My own father in law was there.

He was in the Army and he was asked to stay back. He was not in that first tranche of men that landed on the beach. He often asked, he never talked about it, but he often asked and wondered, "Why wasn't I one of those that was in that first line of boats?"

He ended up going into Normandy and he ended up serving and doing that. I thought about the people that had to make those decisions and how difficult that must have been.

It's really amazing and so neat to be over there and to see that the people of France especially in Southern France. The Americans to this day are still the heroes. That the American soldiers...If it wasn't for what the American soldiers did, they'd all be speaking German.



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It's just hopefully and I really mean this, we'll never have that kind of a conflict again. I can't begin to tell you how comforting it is especially as I've gotten to know you Kris and to know at such a young age you have so much presence and ability to make those tough decisions and that sense of duty that your commander spoke about.

I think that there are people in our military just like you who are willing and able and trained to go there and serve on our behalf. It's just the coolest thing in the world. I'm so grateful.

CAPTAIN THOMPSON: Thank you. I appreciate that.

PATTI: Getting back to leadership now. Now here we go and folks you might be wondering, "OK, what happened after the Army?" Let's tell your story because I think it's a great story, right? You're in the Army, you're getting all these accolades, your rising the ranks very quickly, much faster than normal.

You have a fork in the road. You've got to make your own personal life decisions. What brought you to Key Financial? What brought you to this point? I know this was not what you were expecting, but it's a personal side. I think it's really interesting.

CAPTAIN THOMPSON: I ultimately made the decision that...I met my now wife Sarah Thompson down in Nashville. She was going to school at Vanderbilt. Through a mutual friend of ours an Army buddy of mine, Jim McIlvaine, he introduced us. They went to school together and fell in love.

I ultimately knew that I was going to be leaving the military to start a family. That was how I started that fork on the road and then Key Financial. I am lucky enough to now work with my mother in law.

She works in the marketing department here. She's actually in the room right behind me. Hello. She introduced us to us. I don't even know if you remember this. This was a few years back when I was still pretty deep in the military. It was a very...

PATTI: Casual conversation. We just connected, and one thing led to another. To me, one of the things that impressed me so much about you as we were talking about this is that you're always striving to be better, to get better, to learn more.

When the opportunity came to my attention that you were looking for something that you ideally would like to go for your MBA, and you were looking for something to transition into that next degree and your MBA, which I'm so proud to say that you are starting here in September.

I thought, "This is the kind of guy I want to have here, somebody who's always striving



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to be better, to learn more, and to look at different ways of solving problems.” Frankly, as you all know, that’s what we do here all day long. Let’s get back to leadership. Let’s talk about the experiences that you had while you were in the Army, what different styles and different types of leaders.

What’s so interesting, Kris, for me at least, is your emphasis on culture and your emphasis on setting the tone. You mentioned one commander in particular, that the Army was going through a very difficult transition. This commander came on board and, right away, the culture changed.

**CAPTAIN THOMPSON:** Yes, I was specifically talking about Sergeant Major in the Army, Daniel Dailey. The military was going through some sequestration problems. There’s budgeting issues and cultural issues that followed along with it because everyone was tightening the purse strings.

He came on and drove the focus back to the soldier and not the money that dangles around the soldier in order to get them trained. His emphasis was all about readiness. Train the soldier and just be ready for anything, and we will figure out the rest in the meantime.

He actually came out with a list of 10 tips for leaders. There’s a few of them that resonated with me even more so than others. I just wanted to mention that to you. One of them is, “If you have to keep reminding everyone you’re in charge, you’re probably not.” Right, that’s something that stuck with me. That’s simple enough.

Actually, Colin Powell mentions in his book that if you ever have to say, “That’s an order,” then it’s...

**PATTI:** It’s over.

**CAPTAIN THOMPSON:** Yeah, exactly. Another one of Sergeant Major Dailey’s top 10 tips for leaders, “If your only justification for being an expert on everything is having X number of years of experience, then you need to retire.” I thought it was funny.

He obviously made a little bit of a joke about it when he wrote that down but, at the same time, it sat with me because I find myself continually trying to strive to be on the next level, at least in term of learning and things like that, progressing continually.

If you’re not continually progressing, then you have credibility issues maybe within your team. I thought that was very interesting.

**PATTI:** One of my favorites of Sergeant Major Dailey’s top 10 tips is this one, “Think about what you say before you say it.” He’s quoted as saying, “I’ve never regretted taking the



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distinct opportunity to keep my mouth shut.”

CAPTAIN THOMPSON: I like that one.

PATTI: Me too. I think that's great. That's outstanding because, all too often, we, as leaders and I'm going to include you on that we have the experience. We have ideas and ways to solve the problem. We're so quick to offer the solutions. Unfortunately, when we do that, it shuts everybody down. Unfortunately, even worse is that those ideas are probably better ideas.

CAPTAIN THOMPSON: They very well could be, at least coming from a more diverse set of minds.

PATTI: The people who are really doing the work. Why in the world would I know about doing your job that would be better than what you know about doing your job and maybe another way of approaching it?

CAPTAIN THOMPSON: That's actually what you were talking about earlier when you come in the back, and there's an issue. We have to solve it. That's where it comes in. We're trying to figure out process implementation, things like that, and smoothing out all the edges.

You go down on the ground level to get that information. It works great for the team because, ultimately, you have meetings and all the stuff. We're in the trenches trying to get it done.

PATTI: Yeah. What's cool about it is...Again, this is the way I feel. I feel like everybody cares. Everybody cares. Just like your commander said, it's about the soldier. To me, it's about the client.

How can we make sure this client experience the end result of what they not only achieve but also feel, is the best experience that we can possibly do? Let's just use all of our resources and all of our talent to arrive at those ideas and solutions and, most importantly, execute. Get it done.

CAPTAIN THOMPSON: Absolutely.

PATTI: Kris, this has been phenomenal. Thank you so much for bringing your perspective of being in the Army, rising through the ranks, being a ranger. Now we have the great honor of having you here at Key Financial where you get to apply those things and teach all of us those same things.

What a privilege it is for me to hear this and to know that I can go to you when I'm struggling with something and get your honest feedback and say, "How's this coming across?" As you all know, and I think that anybody that knows me really well, I may be



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the CEO of Key Financial, but I'm the last person. There's a saying, leaders eat last. I believe that.

These people don't work for me. I work for them. I work for everybody that works here. I work for the client. That's the spirit that we have. That's the culture that I've developed and hoped to continue to nurture and grow with great people like you.

**CAPTAIN THOMPSON:** I appreciate you having me as a part of the team and having me on the podcast. Thank you very much.

**PATTI:** Absolutely. Thank you all for being here as well. I hope this was helpful. For those of you who may be younger, recognize Kris is in his early 30s. He's already developed these characteristics, the integrity. He's a go to person for so many people already.

If you have any questions, if you'd like to hear different topics, go to our website at [keyfinancialinc.com](http://keyfinancialinc.com). Until next time. I am Patti Brennan from Key Financial. I'm so grateful that you joined us today.



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