

Michael Mitchel 00:00:13 Welcome to CXO conversations, where we talk with C-level executives on how to reach the C-suite. And what advice would you give those who want to be one? Hi, I'm your host, Michael Mitchell, managing director of Aussie National Search. First off, I'd like to thank CXO conversation sponsor ACG Denver for their support of this podcast. As a board member, I'm proud of our mission to connect the middle market business community through trusted relationships, dealmaking, and growth. Joining us today is Mike Murphy, Managing Partner of Sunstone Management Advisors. His experiences as CEO, CMO and CRO within the insurance industry would be invaluable thought leadership for those who strive for the C-suite. Please see show notes for more on Mike's background. Welcome to the conversation, Mike.

Mike Murphy 00:00:58 Thanks, Michael. Thanks for having me.

Michael Mitchel 00:01:00 So for additional context, because that was a very high level intro, I realize. Right? Say you're on an elevator. What's Sunstone's focus?

Mike Murphy 00:01:08 We have a singular focus and identity.

Mike Murphy 00:01:11 We exist to help companies, dramatically improve their enterprise value. Our areas of expertise are insurance and certainly health care though not all parts of health care, we're not really in early stage biotech, biopharmas, those kind of things. On the insurance side, it's all things life, accident, health. But our purpose really is to work with business owners and executive teams to demonstrably improve the value of their company. That's growth strategies, sales efficacy, client management, product marketing, that sort of thing. So growth focus, harvesting margins, improving operations, better pricing. Margin enhancement, strategy, strategic direction, branding, that sort of thing. Future looking things. And last but not least, we can do some fractional things where we're another set of arms and hands on, helping your company through a near term pinch.

Michael Mitchel 00:02:11 Sounds like I mean, you get a lot of well-rounded experience within the insurance industry, and you're touching on different areas. Your career started out as an underwriter, correct? Yes.

Michael Mitchel 00:02:21 That's correct. So what did you learn from those days that you're still using today?

Mike Murphy 00:02:27 Well, on the underwriting side, it's a skill set I never lost. And, and a little bit of good fortune to get into, you know, potentially if you're going to the insurance world, underwriting is probably the bridge between the actuarial operations and the field, marketing and sales. So you have to have a good understanding of the details, command of the business, the profit drivers of the business. but you also have to understand the market, because the essence of underwriting is the highest number that you can sell and live with over time. So it has a combination of structure and discipline, but it has kind of a trading, kind of negotiation aspect to it as well. And I still to this day deploy my underwriting skills, still use them from time to time, whether it's for work or analyzing pricing or structure or things along

those lines. But it also the negotiation and the quote unquote, "the highest number that can sell" elements.

Michael Mitchel 00:03:26 So what's the best piece of advice you received?

Mike Murphy 00:03:31 Yeah. So I think I'm going to go back to right from the beginning. I think I know I when I started my journey, I had gotten out of college and I never wore a suit or a tie or anything. During my college years, it was always working blue collar farm driving trucks, forklifts, whatever I could do to kind of contribute towards my education. My father got out of the military, and while he never went to college and wanted to be a tradesman, he went to night school to be an electrician. And while he was kind of trying to support the family on that journey, he got a job at United Technologies, loading tapes and the data room back in the day when you loaded tapes to the data room, right. And ended up staying close to 30 plus years there. One day he pulled me aside. And he not a particularly loquacious guy.

Mike Murphy 00:04:19 He's not, you know, sits up and just, you know, spits out pearls of wisdom. But he said, you know, Mike, you're about to go into the corporate world and a place you've never been before. And I made that journey some 30 plus years ago successfully. I'd like to think. And for what it's worth, my "tips for teens" on how you ought to conduct and guide yourself. And the first thing he said was how to out earn your pay. So in an equal partnership you always get 51%. And why? Well, it's your pride and that's, you know, that's it's got to be your kind of sense of accomplishment. And, you know, it's your responsibility to do that and you've got to look yourself in the mirror no matter how things are going. Make sure you are, irrespective of how happy you are, in a position you never, ever, ever let down. You always push. And the great Bill Russell's corollary on that which his father told him, you know, William, I don't care if you're a ditch digger, you become the world's greatest ditch digger that ever existed, so that they come from miles around to watch you dig ditches.

Mike Murphy 00:05:20 And so the reason for that is, is that because you become more valuable to the job, and the job is to you, you can then tell your boss to go to hell. So as his way of leverage and, you know, and that sort of thing.

Michael Mitchel 00:05:33 I love the outearn your pay.

Mike Murphy 00:05:34 So the second thing my father said is, besides out earning your pay is don't spend other people's money, you know, don't get caught up into the politics and the green eyed goddess of envy and worry about who's doing what, and politic and preening and positioning and playing that game, which gets played a lot of times in organizations, he said. Keep your nose clean. Stay out of that stuff. It's poison. It destroys locker rooms. And the last thing he said was, if you're doing something, oh, make sure your boss knows who you are and what you're doing. So if you're doing something well and you're doing something that matters and you're with the right organization, everything works itself out.

Mike Murphy 00:06:12 So that to me is gold. I have approached certainly my professional career into some elements of my personal life as well. You know, in equal partnerships, I want

to get 51%. I want to be constantly figured out how I can give more than I can get. And I'm not worried about what I can get, because if I'm doing the things that I know that are important and matter, everything else works itself out.

Michael Mitchel 00:06:33 How about in your thirty three year career -advice you've received?

Mike Murphy 00:06:39 . So I've fortunately had mentors or people that I refer to as you know they called rabbis or sherpas or whatever and more than mentors. right. And a mentor to me is and I've had, you know, the good fortune and still counts them to this day. They're kind of that sage person you go to and kind of give you advice and counsel where a Sherpa to me is somebody that's taking an active role, interest in what you're doing and promoting what you're doing. And so the first one I had was, again, very young age.

Mike Murphy 00:07:12 I was a young underwriter, was 23, 24 years old, walked out of the building every day like I own the joint was a little full of myself and cocky.

Michael Mitchel 00:07:22 And you gotta have that swagger.

Mike Murphy 00:07:23 Yeah, but I was good, you know? And I knew I was good, right? And so, and I, you know, I wasn't afraid to tell everybody how good it was. Right? So anyway, he, the head of the department pulled me in, and he said, been keeping an eye on you. And, here's what your next move is going to be. And he says, we're going to send you over to a customer service billing production area, and you're going to manage 37 billing clerks, hourly based billing clerks. And I go, no, I'm not. You know, I'm the kid. You know, I'm the pro from Dover. I'm going on to glory. I'm going to go to marketing or I'm going to go to sales. No, no, he said, you want your journey to be a series of left-hand turns, constantly doing lots of different things, especially early on in your career.

Mike Murphy 00:08:08 Build your portfolio of your skill set. Don't chase jobs based on dollar, because at the end of the day, your real dollar is going to come ten years, five years, ten years, 15 years down the road. And if you have been going through and constantly building your skill sets, you're going to be much better shape than if you follow the road the most traveled. And some of that was you, just some checkbox things you need. You need to learn how to manage people, and the sooner you get that skill set under your belt, you get down the road and you've been done a bunch of doer jobs, and suddenly you're 10 or 15 years into your career, awful hard for somebody to say, hey, come in and manage the department when you've never managed people before. And it is it takes time and energy and it's a skill set. And he said this is the first place we're going to go. You're going to go manage 37 hourly based billing clerks like it was the virtual back office of the organization.

Mike Murphy 00:09:01 It was a production environment, it was customer service, and it was fraught with some of the challenges that go with that. Not really because of the people, frankly. It was because organizationally and operationally it was challenged. So, you know, get into a sales role or get into some sort of tangential market facing role, get into some sort of finance pricing, analytical role. And so there was a series of check a box things that he said you have to do. And if you build those things into your portfolio, your path to the C-suite will

be much smoother. And he was hundred percent right. And that that was been my career. It's a joke, on take "I have a unique set of skills". You know, I was like, I got all this weird stuff, you know, that I started doing and, and he was on a percent. Right. And so he took an active role in helping me kind of guide my way. And so big chunk of my career early on was really these left-hand turns.

Michael Mitchel 00:09:56 As I say, you've been through a series of left turns. Yeah. What would you say you learned each time?

Mike Murphy 00:10:04 Well, you're getting challenged with a different skill set. Right. And so the first skill set that I got challenged with, which is going into the supervisory role where, you know, I had this sense of, I'm coming in on a white horse and I'm the young star of the corporation and I'm on my way to great things. And, I'm managing people in a very difficult environment. And we were under-resourced. We were challenged to try and get, basically just to work out the door. The people were overworked. They were, you know, they cared tremendously about what they were doing. But, you know, they were they were their works lives were stressed. And so I had to work our way through a production environment, but also figure out a way to kind of motivate and keep people up and moving.

Mike Murphy 00:10:48 And navigating through the kind of the corporate thing right there was, you know, it wasn't a straightforward it was there were process oriented, not results oriented. And so there were a lot of things that made it particularly challenging. So I also learned a lot about how to manage my own stress levels because, I was constantly stressing over what was working and what wasn't working. Right. And then I learned to kind of, you know, have a bigger, broader view, keep my eye on the prize because people could see that on me. Right? So if I walk through the departments, stressed these 37 wonderful people that are trying to come to work every day to feed their families, see me stressed like, oh my God, we're going in the ground like a dart, right? So you had to learn to kind of grace under fire, right? And you had to learn to, you know, even though you might have been that duck with the legs going 90 miles an hour underneath, you had to have that steady hand on the tiller, you know, from a leadership perspective.

Mike Murphy 00:11:43 So big learning there. The second next one, I went right into sales management. Never toted a bag. I never carried a bag. I mean, I had sales instincts. I thought I knew what good sales part of being an underwriter is, being able to assess the salesperson. But then I had to learn really what it was like to earn leadership because I, you know, my first job was I had the business card and said I was assistant director, like, oh, he's a big shot. Everybody got to pay attention to me. Then I go running with the wolves in the sales organization. Who could give a fig about what my business card said and even some of them. I was more senior than they are in terms of age. They could care less. You know, it's what can you do for me? And so there was a lot of painful learning about having to become the alpha wolf and to justify your leadership was not based on an org chart or a business card that you had to earn it.

Mike Murphy 00:12:32 And, so once that learning kind of went off, I set about learning it. And the last key piece that I got was good people find a way to make things happen, and I was used to that. You know, variation on the AA model, which is you figure out what you could control and you focus on that and don't worry about what you can't. And I had a boss

that was, you know, particularly tough. And he said, look, I mean, these are my words, not his. But if I had to be in a meeting somewhere and I came out, a tree had fallen on my car, that was my fault, you know.

Michael Mitchel 00:13:04 Because you barked at the tree.

Mike Murphy 00:13:06 Take ownership. Ultimately because it's such a free right. Suddenly, when you're not thinking about what you could do to limit your focus on the end, you start to get set free about what you can accomplish. And so, at every step along the way, I've had these kind of forehead slapping moments, but they're especially early on those lessons really were particularly large for me.

Michael Mitchel 00:13:29 You know, use the term a few months ago called Internal Sherpa. Yeah. I thought it was an interesting term. You know, there are lots of conversations about mentorships. Yeah. But, you know, there is this other role that's just as important to one's career. And I've never heard used in that way. I've heard internal sponsor. I kind of like Sherpa better, you know. What are your thoughts on that?

Mike Murphy 00:13:55 Yeah. So, I differentiate it from a mentor. And both are equally important. A Sherpa to me is a mentor that is also actively involved in what you're doing and promoting what you're doing. What does that mean? Well, it's not just banging pots and pans together telling the world how wonderful you are. It's also, if they're in a position of influence and authority, is advocating for you and putting you in positions where you can continue to grow and build out that portfolio. And I had the benefit of having some really great ones in my career.

Mike Murphy 00:14:34 So I referenced that VP who sent me over to field and account services. To this day, I'm eternally grateful. the person that I worked for when I was in the large sales office, challenged me every, every day. I used to joke every day was an interview. And it was. But the corresponding side of the story was that he knew I was hungry. And so was he. He relished the idea of sticking me into roles where I had to kind of fight my way through, let's see what the kid can do here. And, he was constantly advocating for me and putting me in situations that, we're probably the chair was probably bigger than me, but he believed in me. And, plus I was working with a net. He could always pull the string and pull me out. But he knew I was excited to do stuff like that. And so he took an active role.

Mike Murphy 00:15:23 Years later, as our relationship ended and I moved on and got my own office, he still was kind of behind the scenes, the puppet master, you know, Guiding me through conversations in HQ and things like that. On what my next step ought to be. It's a combination of things. It's I think for them, you know, and having tried to play the role myself a couple of times, we love coaching, right. And we love getting results for others. And there's nothing more spiritually uplifting to have some person that you've taken under your wing go on to great things. But there's also a very practical side that is you get credit, right? It's not made by like, I didn't put the made by stamp on somebody or, you know, these people that wouldn't say they made me right, but they certainly guided and helped and, and helped develop me and get all due credit for it.

Mike Murphy 00:16:18 So for their own careers and their own, kind of checkbox things, leadership, that advocacy of so and so has been promoting Mike and Mike's a star and he picked it out early. You know his ability to pick talent. I guess it's like a GM and a ball game, you know, who's been able to pick talent. And, obviously they take risks too, because if I turn into a mess, that's going to look bad on them as well.

Michael Mitchel 00:16:45 How do you find your internal sherpa?

Mike Murphy 00:16:48 I don't think you find them. I think they find you. I don't think it's something you go around. I know there's. And I had this was kind of new speak, I think, over the last ten years were career coaches who say, go ask somebody to mentor you. Hey, you know, Mike, can you mentor me? Look, I don't know, it feels a little forced to me. I think it's something that the Sherpa finds you.

Mike Murphy 00:17:13 You don't find them. But part of what you do is you keep yourself open. If you demonstrate that you are coachable, that you're leaning on and you're listening, particularly if you're listening, if somebody's talking, you're listening. Early on, I had that horrible thing of talking over people because I already know what you're going to say. And. But when I jump in and you, you know. And it took me a long time to put that governor on and just. Mike. Shut up. Actively listen. And so I think that endears you to people that say, oh, this this kid, you know, this kid is listening. And so you invite those Sherpas into your life by basically seeking guidance and direction, listening. And then they find you and then you, you know, build that relationship. You can't you can't ask for it. You have to earn it.

Mike Murphy 00:18:03 And they pick it, not you.

Michael Mitchel 00:18:05 So basically, you demonstrate with your actions that you're worthy of their, I want to say attention, but internal sponsorship and efforts.

Mike Murphy 00:18:16 100% I mean I don't think you can ask for it. You can't say, you know, hey, you know, Joe Jane, can you if you go into the big management meeting, can you tell everybody how wonderful I am and advocate for me? And, you know, I think it's you. Through your words and through your actions, you know you earn your way into that kind of a relationship and the things that you can do to invite that is to be eyes and ears open for people that can help you and not in any sort of disingenuous way, you know, because, you know, there's nothing there's nothing worse than if. And every now and then you've seen it where somebody advocates for somebody and they turn out to be less than what you thought because they were maybe a little, you know, a little on the phony side.

Mike Murphy 00:19:00 And they weren't real. And that's a horrible situation. And again, back to my 51%. The last thing in the world I want to do is have anybody who believes in me, caused them any sort of discomfort because I made a mistake or did something wrong.

Michael Mitchel 00:19:14 You know, the internal Sherpa can not only I think I welcome your thoughts, help you internally with you know, like you said, they they're your advocate in the room. You know, a project's coming up, and that's how you get noticed. And you do on that project, and you get more. Right. But it's also from a career development perspective as

well as professional. You're you have you could potentially have access to that person's network, right?

Mike Murphy 00:19:47 Yeah. And that's the other side of it. It's not just like, you know, my own example. I not only got exposure to things that were inside the realm of the organization, but because of the size and scope of some of the things that we were working on, they had enormous external exposure as well.

Mike Murphy 00:20:08 One example, I suddenly I found myself working with ten of the largest accounts. I mean, these are gigantic multinational organizations. And I was first chair, you know, describing things to them at a relatively young age. So suddenly your reputation not only gets enhanced and built inside the organization, but because of the exposure you get outside these folks network and their network and their network. Suddenly you find yourself with a broader appeal.

Michael Mitchel 00:20:44 As the person receiving the sponsorship, what else could they do to facilitate that relationship?

Mike Murphy 00:20:59 You feel obviously the first thing which we've talked about is listen, have an earned mindset. Think about every day on what you can do to earn. And it's a gift to be earned, bestowed. Not it's not you know, it's what one of the Marines say.

Mike Murphy 00:21:18 never taken, always earned. Right. And so having that kind of a mindset and wanting to earn that respect. I think as a mindset and you're not earning that by loving wallpaper. Mrs. Cleaver, you know you're not doing Eddie Haskell, right? I've got data myself there. Okay.

Michael Mitchel 00:21:35 Ok well, I did catch the M.A.S.H., reference on the the Dover crack.

Michael Mitchel 00:21:40 Okay. Yeah. So,

Michael Mitchel 00:21:42 So that's M.A.S.H the movie, not the TV series.

Michael Mitchel 00:21:45 Yeah.

Mike Murphy 00:21:45 So little. I was Hawkeye Pierce in my ninth grade play, so I'm just telling you.

Michael Mitchel 00:21:50 Oh, there you go. Okay. Yeah.

Mike Murphy 00:21:51 There you go. So that's that. It's that it's that mindset is like, I'm going to earn it. And then part of that sometimes is really listening to things that you don't want to hear, and putting down the defense mechanism and really zeroing in and listen to things that maybe you don't want to hear and try to because that, that Sherpa, what do they want for you? And is our is are they coming from a place where I should be listening? Yeah.

Mike Murphy 00:22:20 Because they're not asking you to. They don't want something bad to happen to you. They want something really good to happen to you. And if they got that kind of motivation and they got that wisdom and that kind of juice, and you probably should just shut up and listen and take the hard lesson so you can create the environment for it to happen. You can create the right relationship. You're not a sycophant. You know. They're not. Nobody wants to. So nobody wants a sycophant or a toady or, you know, Sancho Panza, you know somebody else's Don Quixote. They want somebody that's going to be real, but they want somebody who's going to be coached. They want somebody that's going to, you know, have moxie and drive and somebody that they could be proud of putting their "made by" stamp on.

Michael Mitchel 00:23:03 Have those direct candid conversations and seek that immediate feedback.

Michael Mitchel 00:23:08 Absolutely.

Mike Murphy 00:23:08 Yeah. Just give it to me both barrels coach what can I do better.

Mike Murphy 00:23:12 And good coaches will tell you. I mean, you know, I used to like I joke that every day was an interview and it was. And someone was brutal, right? You're screwing this up, son.

Michael Mitchel 00:23:24 Like I'm doing a good job.

Mike Murphy 00:23:26 You look like someone. And it's hard lessons, right? So. But you get through it. What's magic?

Michael Mitchel 00:23:32 So what do you feel are two key takeaways so far in this conversation?

Mike Murphy 00:23:37 Well, I mean, I hope that folks, get a sense for, again. What, I don't know. I believe these truths are universal. it's the same advice I give every person that I've ever managed or led in my life and including my my children. And that is in the development of your career. Build your skill sets. Build your portfolio. Follow those simple precepts Fran Murphy laid out about earning your pay. And don't spend other people's money and living. Your boss knows who you are. Don't chase money early on.

Mike Murphy 00:24:11 Oh, I got a big raise. I'm going to keep doing the same thing over and over again, because you'll wake up 10 to 15 years down the road with a singular set of skills and miss out on the 2 to 3 times. Four times which you could have earned had you really built your skill set and really cut your teeth. And then the second thing is, when you have the tough boss, be thankful for the tough boss. And particularly if you can find that not only mentor but Sherpa, you know, hang on every word you know, and build those relationships and let them guide you and take the risk, your guts going to tell you that you want to do things. You're going to be motivated by instinct that says, I want self-gratification and everything. Your gut is going to tell you not to do it, and that's why you should do it. Listen to what the Sherpa has to tell you and take a risk.

Michael Mitchel 00:24:59 Any other thoughts? Anything else you'd like to add?

Mike Murphy 00:25:02 Enjoy the journey. Because the other side of this is, is that it's, I don't want to make it sound dreary. There's nothing more fulfilling and more fun. And it's the same thing. By the way, if you're a hiring manager, hire that person that's high potential. Just ready. Throw them in the deep end of the pool without the swimmers on, you know, don't let them drown and watch what they do. And if you're on the other side of that, but there's nothing more fun than learning while you're doing, you know, and it's there's a sense of invigoration. I mean, all these roles that I walked into, I knew I wasn't proficient day one, I could contribute, I knew I was going to be okay, it wasn't like the organization was going to go down. But while I was building my skill set, I was learning. And it's just it's a blast.

Mike Murphy 00:25:48 So make your career a journey, have fun, go into things like, okay, I don't know what I'm doing, but I'll have the confidence to figure it out. And, constantly you'll wake up, you know, five, ten years into your career and go, wow, look at all the cool things I've done, and you'll be set for the rest of your career and set for your life, and enjoy the journey.

Michael Mitchel 00:26:10 And pay it forward.

Mike Murphy 00:26:13 That's it. Take the lessons that you're learning. And I'm kind of like what I'm trying to do here and what I try to do with, you know, with the folks that I've led in my life and pay it forward. And it's a joy. You're just like, okay, I had the benefit of having these remarkable people in my life, and I want to be one of those remarkable people to somebody else, too. And, that's just that's very fulfilling to me.

Michael Mitchel 00:26:36 Well, Mike, I, I really appreciate you being on, CXO conversations. We've talked about an area that people I don't think really think about much. You know, like I said, mentors get all the ink, they get all the headlines. But it's that internal sherpa, that internal sponsor that is quietly getting probably having just as big of an impact, if more, if not more in your career.

Mike Murphy 00:27:02 Way more because they're actively engaged and they're steering. Yeah. The more they've got their hands are on the steering wheel along with yours, as opposed to the mentor, which feels a little more passive to me.

Michael Mitchel 00:27:14 Well, Mike, again, thank you for your time.

Mike Murphy 00:27:16 My pleasure.

Michael Mitchel 00:27:17 I will also thank our listeners for obviously listening to the show. Hopefully you enjoyed it as much as I enjoy the conversations. Please leave five stars on Apple. it's how others can find the show. It's all about the algorithm. If you want to find me on LinkedIn, it's Michael Mitchell with one L at a Denver.

Michael Mitchel 00:27:34 The one L. That's the test. I am fortunate to be surrounded by an amazing team that makes CXO conversations happen. Thank you to John Crosland for allowing me to use your amazing music on the show. shout out and thanks to my engineer Karl Moore, Digital Director Samantha Hunter, and of course, many thanks to my researcher, my researcher of 18 years and counting. Angie Johnson. Thanks all. Thanks, Mike.