Breaking into Cybersecurity Leadership - varun vij

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[00:00:23] **Christophe Foulon:** Welcome to another episode of Breaking into Cybersecurity Leadership, where we talk to different types of cybersecurity leaders, get tips and tricks from them so that we could prepare the next generation of leaders. Today our guest is joining us from all the way around the world giving us a perspective from the Middle East and India based on their consulting and leadership experience.

[00:00:48] **Christophe Foulon:** Varun, he'll be talking about his different experiences with the outsourcing model and how do you motivate and lead within that environment. Varun, do you wanna [00:01:00] introduce.

[00:01:01] **Varun Vij:** Yeah, surely Chris, thanks for having me here. Hello everyone. I am . I am responsible for managing cybersecurity transformation program for many companies within Middle East.

[00:01:11] **Varun Vij:** At presently I'm working for MEI which is maintaining Doha Metro. And I was one of the key person in complying to the FIFA Cyber Security framework. I have 12 years of experience implementing cybersecurity projects, transformation programs in US and Canada, in Middle East. And currently I am involved in building a cybersecurity transformation program for DHA Metro.

[00:01:35] **Varun Vij:** This is my profile in inertia.

[00:01:39] **Christophe Foulon:** What made you as you grew in your career focus on growing from an individual contributor to one that led people or led clients in different perspectives?

[00:01:51] **Varun Vij:** Yeah. So for me it was a very exciting journey. I was quite technical in nature and I spent quite some time [00:02:00] understanding the fundamentals of cybersecurity, which is quite generic in nature.

[00:02:04] **Varun Vij:** But the time came in my career where I wanted to have a holistic overview of cybersecurity. And at the same time, I realized that one of my core skill was actually a strong communication skill, strong persuasion skill.

And that's where I. Came out of the verbal offer, technical cybersecurity, and started interacting with a wider audience, which covers all verticals within the organization.

[00:02:29] **Varun Vij:** And that's where I found that I can connect with the key stakeholders and trying to bring a difference. Because when it comes to cybersecurity, building a security culture is something very arduous task. And I have been into some programs where I have brought a very significant pragmatic cultural change.

[00:02:49] **Varun Vij:** So this is one of my key skill.

[00:02:52] **Christophe Foulon:** So as you think about Motivating and leading people that are outside of your organization, [00:03:00] what are some of the things that you think are critical for that sort of leadership style?

[00:03:06] **Varun Vij:** Yeah, Especially in middle East you have less In-house team members mostly is, it's an outsource model.

[00:03:12] **Varun Vij:** You are heavily dependent on vendors, and that's where, because those people are not truly dependent on your performance review. So motivation and inspiring is something which is one of the key factor. And that's where what I have relies. As long as you understand that what is the.

[00:03:33] **Varun Vij:** Commonalities between a particular relationship, whether it is with a vendor or someone who is rendering services to you. You can build a connection and a relationship with that person. Motivating the people, helping them in their career growth, understanding their pain points. I think one of the soft skill which is not pertaining only to cybersecurity.

[00:03:54] **Varun Vij:** A general skillset a soft skill which helps to understand people, understand [00:04:00] what are their pain points, what kind of aspiration they have, really help to nurture the relationship. And that's where, they foster the creativity. So one of the instance was like we have this 24 into seven infra team back in my previous.

[00:04:15] **Varun Vij:** So again, they were vendors. They have to work on a contract basis. But once I understood like some people are not enjoying working on a particular set of security technologies, I somehow shifted them to other core area skill sets. And that's where, they really started enjoying and doing something out of the box for you.

[00:04:36] **Varun Vij:** So this is something which I think one of the key skill which you have to.

[00:04:42] **Christophe Foulon:** But being able to have that relationship, that even that influential relationship, even though you can't manage them, you can still motivate them. What other critical skills do you think that you need?

[00:04:52] **Varun Vij:** So one of the thing like when it comes to a strong communication skill, I think having a basics an understanding if you know a [00:05:00] person you are greeting that person even the start of the meeting, you're not always to the point.

[00:05:05] **Varun Vij:** It brings a sense of comfort for them so that they can also open up. These are the challenges, what they face in building certain things and you always try to protect them because in corporate culture it's quite common. And our cybersecurity field is very sensitive in nature. So one small move.

[00:05:22] **Varun Vij:** Yeah. One small wrong move can actually jeopardize your career. So having a set of. Responsibility clear roles and responsibility really helped to strike a very good balance with your vendors or your stakeholders. So a simple example would be, let's say some cyber breach happened in your organization because of a misconfiguration.

[00:05:43] **Varun Vij:** So rather than just having a stick in your hand and come up with a blame game, you should have a very good relationship and try to see how we can improve rather than knocking people. So this really helps to motivate people and encourage that we are all part of one team, one goal. [00:06:00]

[00:06:02] **Christophe Foulon:** And as a leader in an outsourced environment, what do you think the top three critical skills are?

[00:06:10] **Varun Vij:** Persuasion is quite important because if their salary hike end of the year is not dependent on you definitely the skillset is pretty much important. So this is one factor. Second thing, I also do believe, whether it's in-house or outsource, I think having an emotional intelligence is a pretty key factor because things.

[00:06:31] **Varun Vij:** Gonna become chaotic. There is no silver bullet. hundred percent security is a myth. So emotional intelligence really help you to remain

very calm and composed and poised in difficult situations. I also believe if you are innovative and diligent, it also really helps you having.

[00:06:50] **Varun Vij:** Very smooth cybersecurity journey because digital transformation has literally evolved the cybersecurity landscape dramatically. And it's [00:07:00] not humanly possible for you to know everything. So as long as you are innovative and diligent to learn new things I think what is your oyster? You will certainly grow.

[00:07:13] **Christophe Foulon:** And so you talked about persuasion and oftentimes, at least here in the US we use another word for it, influence. Why do you think that is so important? Outside of not being able to control their salary?

[00:07:28] **Varun Vij:** What I've seen one of the general thing is People which you come across in corporate are actually adults.

[00:07:34] **Varun Vij:** The moment you're telling adults what they're supposed to do this is something which is generally gonna be a turnoff. So the end of the day, there is only one thing left, which is a strong communication skill. But even with that strong communication skill, if someone is not finding anything, which is gonna nurture them, which is gonna foster their creativity and bring wellbeing, you.

[00:07:55] **Varun Vij:** There is nothing in it for them. Why are they gonna actually have a buy-in? So that's where [00:08:00] having an influence, that's where, when it always comes down to leaders and globally, they always say, oh, there are not many leaders out there. Mostly end up having some autocratic leaders. It's very important to actually, think about other people, how you can Find and recognize a leader around them.

[00:08:17] **Varun Vij:** So one, one of a very simple skill set. What I have generally used whenever I'm ha having meetings with the direct employees or outsource one, is I always ask them, okay, what are your Current goals for this particular week and in the next week, what are the challenges you will come across and how I can be of help?

[00:08:34] **Varun Vij:** So these basic things give them some sort of empowerment and that's where, you can have a very collaborative and a one team goal standpoint.

[00:08:44] **Christophe Foulon:** Perfect. And, This is something that most people don't think about, but in an outsourced environment, this is especially critical. And that's networking.

[00:08:55] **Christophe Foulon:** Networking with both individuals within your organization cuz it's [00:09:00] usually a multinational organization as well as your clients who might also be multinational organizations. How do you network effectively in, in such a. Diverse environment that's spread across so many c.

[00:09:15] **Varun Vij:** Yeah, this is one of the challenges I have come across back in my previous company a part of the team is actually in uk.

[00:09:22] **Varun Vij:** The part of the team is in India. Then you have people in Middle East. You have to work with them. So understanding the cultural element is something one, one of the thing you have to spend some time upon and once, once you are having some sort of a framework, like one of the framework I really love, and I always use it as a reference point, is sand security awareness culture framework.

[00:09:44] **Varun Vij:** So you have a measurement, you have a scoring that how much People are aware of cybersecurity, how much responsibility they undertake when it comes to cybersecurity, because we always have this slogan going on. Security is everyone's [00:10:00] responsibility. But do we have a mechanism to measure it?

[00:10:02] **Varun Vij:** This is something which is not an easy task, and once you Use this framework and just replicate across your various stakeholders, various entities. Your relationship become quite better, as long as I would say roles and responsibilities are clear. People are aware where exactly this roadmap is steering.

[00:10:21] **Varun Vij:** There is a. Hope and there is a light at the end of tunnel. And that's where I generally strive for certifications is also one of a key driver I have seen most of the time when I'm working with some stakeholders, I try to ensure, or even I go outside my purview and say, okay, for these guys I.

[00:10:42] **Varun Vij:** Expect them to do some certifications, which would really excel their career. So these things keep people motivated, they feel empowered, and you build a good relationship. Additionally, I also run a cybersecurity WhatsApp group. It's not it's just people around the globe

whenever they got, get stuck in [00:11:00] their job, so we try to help each other.

[00:11:03] **Varun Vij:** So this is one of the initiative to build a wide cybersecurity committee.

[00:11:07] **Christophe Foulon:** That's definitely a great approach for instant troubleshooting and taking advantage of crowdsource knowledge. For sure. So as we wrap this up, what advice would you give to future cybersecurity leaders?

[00:11:21] **Varun Vij:** Yeah. One of the thing because all the CSO forums, a lot of webinars and seminars I have attended, one of, one of the biggest challenge what leaders nowadays are facing is, Too much information.

[00:11:34] **Varun Vij:** So IBM has got something called a IBM prediction curve, which says in every 13 months, the amount of information exposed to you is actually gonna be doubled. So basically, when it comes to cybersecurity, and we look at digital transformation, which came up with so many new domains. You have iot, big data, ai, cloud, you name it.

[00:11:54] **Varun Vij:** So for a cybersecurity person it's not an. Journey, so you have to learn a lot and [00:12:00] having stress and long hours is something which is inevitable. As I always say, average tenure of CISO is relatively less compared to other C level. It's around 18 to 26 months. One of the key advisors for you to shine out from rest of the crowd, ensure that you have.

[00:12:17] **Varun Vij:** Good marketing skill. What is not being conveyed is not being done. That's how management looks at. So try to have some sort of a some sort of a collaboration. Go out, attend events, do some certifications, and always try to learn something new because everything in this digital landscape is changing very dramatically and try to collaborate because one person cannot do all.

[00:12:47] **Varun Vij:** Makes sense. Makes

[00:12:48] **Christophe Foulon:** sense. Thank you so much for your time today. Really appreciate it. And for those that are listening, follow the cybersecurity, breaking into Cybersecurity [00:13:00] Leadership series on LinkedIn, YouTube Anchor, and Spotify as well as on Twitch. So join us for the next event. Thank you very much and have a great rest of your day.