

Breaking into Cybersecurity Leadership - George Finney

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[00:00:23] **Christophe Foulon:** Welcome to Breaking Into Cybersecurity Leadership. Today's guest is George Finney. He's an author of Well Aware and Project Zero Trust, as well as a respected cybersecurity leader. George, tell us a little bit about yourself.

[00:00:39] **George Finney:** First thank thanks for having me on, Chris. I'm really honored to be a part of your show to to help tell my story to your community.

[00:00:45] **George Finney:** Yeah, so I'm George Finney. I'm, I've I've been a CSO for a while. I'm the CSO for Southern Methodist University here in Dallas, Texas. I'm also an attorney, but don't hold that against me. But gosh, it security's just been an awesome. Career to to find myself [00:01:00] landing in.

[00:01:00] **George Finney:** And you know what, whatever it is that I'm doing, I think back to, when I was a kid and I was a latchkey kid in the eighties, and man, I, of course being an unreliable, eight year old. I'd forget my keys. I had to learn how to break into my house to, to just, get home and, before my parents got there to, to be upset that I forgot my anyway.

[00:01:18] **George Finney:** Yeah. think all the way back to those experiences wow, security has always been with me, and I think it's I think it's the same true for everyone, right? Security plays a role in everyone's life, and I think being a part of. Security, in the community as a career.

[00:01:33] **George Finney:** It's just one of the most fulfilling things that that I think I could have ever landed in.

[00:01:36] **George Finney:** And

[00:01:36] **Christophe Foulon:** why did you decide to become a cybersecurity leader versus staying an individual contributor?

[00:01:42] **George Finney:** That's a really good question. I I think back into my early days, I started my career at some startups. And, I think back to this particular one, it's a family owned startup.

[00:01:51] **George Finney:** I was never gonna have the ability to make a difference at this organization. Nobody was ever gonna listen to the. The random it guys, saying, things like, ah, we've gotta, [00:02:00] secure these configs and, harden our devices. They just didn't, it didn't get traction.

[00:02:05] **George Finney:** And so I think the real impetus for me is in my career, whatever I wanna do, I wanna make a difference. . And I think, for me, taking that leadership roles when I first got the opportunity that, that was really the impetus. It was, oh my gosh I'm actually going to be able to influence change here.

[00:02:21] **George Finney:** It's not, It's gonna be easy necessarily. We've gotta find ways to be successful and help lift up, our teams to be able to do that and got, again, be, being able to do that insecurity and have success at that is, is such a rewarding thing to to be a part of.

[00:02:35] **George Finney:** And in your career. Yeah, I, I totally feel like I I've been able to make more of a difference at least for me and my unique weird personality. Your mileage may vary, but yeah I, I've really enjoyed being on the leadership side. And what

[00:02:47] **Christophe Foulon:** do you think the critical skills for a cybersecurity leader.

[00:02:50] **George Finney:** I think humility a little bit. I definitely encourage my teams to, to challenge my ideas, right? And there's a reason and that reason is I've got blind spots, [00:03:00] right? I don't want to create a team environment. Where it's just an echo chamber where everybody says, repeats what the boss says and they go do it.

[00:03:07] **George Finney:** And Okay, cool. I know for sure that I don't know everything. And so when I can bring something to a team and get feedback right sometimes, It really sucks. It, cuz may, maybe I really had my heart set on that thing and somebody pointed out like, nah, that's not the best idea.

[00:03:23] **George Finney:** We're not really ready to do that right now. Or what, whatever it is. I, I think having that. Ability to not kill the messenger sometimes

is actually really healthy. And it I think that's one of the most challenging skillsets to master.

[00:03:35] **George Finney:** But, I think empathy also, particularly as you become a leader understanding, you know where people are coming from. We've all. know, Human things we've gotta deal with in terms of families or, what whatever challenges we face in our lives.

[00:03:48] **George Finney:** Being able to understand that and have people appreciate that you as a leader care about them as a, as an individual. That is something that, again, not everybody has and or and can show really well. But I, I will [00:04:00] say feel like we've had lots of continuity on my team, right?

[00:04:04] **George Finney:** The some of the longest serving folks on my team are, 25 to 30 years, and the shortest serving people on my team are in the six, seven year category, right? So I, I think we as leaders can help. Solve the the talent crisis just by being better leaders.

[00:04:19] **George Finney:** And, making sure that people like where they're working, right? That's what they always say is people don't quit their job. They quit their boss. Don't be that kind of boss that people wanna quit. And, I think tho those two skills, humility and empathy our what we have to.

[00:04:30] **George Finney:** And as

[00:04:31] **Christophe Foulon:** a leader, how do you delegate to your team? What's your comfort

[00:04:34] **George Finney:** level with. I think it I've had to force myself to get more comfortable with delegation, right? I and I that's one of the challenges with with going from being a technical person that's an individual contributor to, to, to being a good leader.

[00:04:47] **George Finney:** I, man I know the way that I want it done. I can visualize it, I can see it. I've got all the skills to make it happen. That, that's gonna come at a cost of other things. Really, being comfortable handing that off just that one act [00:05:00] I is really hard sometimes.

[00:05:02] **George Finney:** Definitely for me. But, being able again to let go of that and not just, let someone else do it, but also help coach them up to, to be successful at whatever we're asking them to do and making sure that they're set

up for success. I, I find that the delegation is easier when, I can make sure that a person has the resources they need to actually get it done.

[00:05:21] **George Finney:** And you know that again, whether it's an opportunity for coaching or or empowering somebody to to take, to jump to the next level. I The, that, I think is one of the most rewarding things we have as leaders, right? That you're making a difference by , sending your teams to training or, believing in someone that they can do something that, that maybe they didn't have that belief in themselves.

[00:05:39] **George Finney:** That's, oh my gosh. That, that's been such a, an amazing, experience for me I love that part of the job and

[00:05:45] **Christophe Foulon:** collaboration. How would you describe, its, how would you describe its criticality to any.

[00:05:51] **George Finney:** Again, I think we all learn from one another. It's, it, the, there, there's no, in, in your job.

[00:05:55] **George Finney:** There's no classroom where somebody's telling you all of the things you need to know. And I think for [00:06:00] me as I go I've gone through my career right when I first got started I was a network engineer, but I was asked to be a cis admin for this system where the guy had just left.

[00:06:08] **George Finney:** And oh my gosh he had secured this Linux system in ways that I didn't know you could secure systems, right? And it was to the point where one of the things I learned from him was you can change the name setting on your dns.

[00:06:22] **George Finney:** You don't have to like, reveal the version information of what version of Bind you're running. And when I came to S M U, I'm just naturally oh I, changed the version to SM U'S D n s server. And I remember one of the security guys coming in and Wow, that's really cool.

[00:06:33] **George Finney:** Like you went to that level of detail. But it was through that kind of collaboration with different folks that, you learn the best practices, you learn the tips and tricks. And again I think there's this mythology and security that, that we're the lone, Wyatt Herb Sheriff, in, in the Wild West locking stuff down.

[00:06:49] **George Finney:** But there has to be a way where you collaborate with others to to hone your skills, whether that's through like your local BSides

or we, we, here in Dallas, we have the Dallas Hackers Association, or I mean e
[00:07:00] everybody in those groups right, is committed to giving back. You see everybody you know presenting and coming up with, sharing their insights, right?

[00:07:07] **George Finney:** That's how we get better as a community to so important, particularly in, in the security field to to keep that, I don't know, tribal knowledge going. . And

[00:07:14] **Christophe Foulon:** as you think about communication, how critical is that? Why?

[00:07:19] **George Finney:** I'm a professional writer. I've written not 10 books now.

[00:07:22] **George Finney:** So I obviously feel pretty strongly that communication's re really important, right? Tell, telling our stories, right? I if and, I've seen this actually is how my team evolved. But when I started as as the head of a security team 15 years ago, , I was told by our cio these security guys, it's a black box.

[00:07:38] **George Finney:** I have no idea what's going on. And a lot of, security people I've worked with, they play their cards super close to the vest. They don't share. And we've had to break down those those conventions. And I've found that the more I communicate, actually, the more I learn.

[00:07:52] **George Finney:** And, the more partnerships you can build. It's not just my security team securing everyone at the university. It's it's a much larger
[00:08:00] team effort, right? It's the infrastructure team, it's the help desk making a difference. embraced kind of the shift left mindset but all of that success comes through.

[00:08:09] **George Finney:** Communication, right? We have to all be on the same page and understand what the mission is. What challenges we're facing. All of that is, is, is enabled through communication. And when, when I'm teaching my students here at S M U that's one of the first things I'll tell them is in your career really the most important trait to advancing in your career is communi.

[00:08:26] **Christophe Foulon:** That kind of pivots slightly into influence. How would you describe influence and its criticality to a cybersecurity?

[00:08:32] **George Finney:** Again going back to the olden times you'd hear, chief security officers, pounding their fists on the desk saying no. That's an example of whatever the opposite of influence is.

[00:08:41] **George Finney:** And I think particularly as I've learned to work with, our board or other business leaders in, in, in the community you have to, in a way become. A salesperson, right? You've gotta help. Not that we're implementing, social engineering techniques necessarily but you've got to figure out how to to lead with influence rather than, pulling everybody by their [00:09:00] nose to, to get them where they need to go. And sometimes that, you have to embrace failure with that, right? You aren't gonna necessarily be successful at influencing every time. A lot of it is about building relationships and. Fostering trust to to build influence, right?

[00:09:12] **George Finney:** So when I go ask for say, budget folks are, need to be comfortable that, I'm not, buying every flashing tool out there which I'd love to. We are asking for this cause we need it. And here's why. And here's the whole story and how that fits together with everything we're already doing.

[00:09:27] **George Finney:** That in a way, I actually talked to one salesperson a few years ago. And we all feel like sales people are the enemy, they're the dark side. But actually, he reframed it and, as the CSO. , you are the salesperson here.

[00:09:39] **George Finney:** You've gotta do the hard work of going to get budget and figuring all that stuff out. The people with the title salespeople, are facilitating the transactions. It's really the internal sales of why we need it. That that's so critical for us to have success.

[00:09:52] **George Finney:** And man, I it, what we would like to arrive at in security is being proactive rather than reactive. And how do you convince [00:10:00] someone that, they need to do something for their own good before they get hurt rather than after? It's really challenging, cuz people live busy lives and that they want to do the things that they're passionate about.

[00:10:11] **George Finney:** And not everybody is as passionate about, passwords as, as maybe you and I are .

[00:10:14] **Christophe Foulon:** Earlier you mentioned building relationships. How important would you consider networking as a skill and why?

[00:10:22] **George Finney:** Yeah. I think, in, in my book well aware I talk about this a little bit, but I think there are nine cybersecurity habits.

[00:10:27] **George Finney:** So it's, if you've not read it, my summary is, it's like Stephen Covey's seven Habits for Cybersecurity. And one, one of the questions that I get most, often is okay, nine habits. That's a lot of habits, man. Like, where do I start? What's the most one important habit?

[00:10:40] **George Finney:** And it's c. And think about the ways that plays out in in, in cyber, right? We know the bad guys are collaborating. And, how do we respond to that in, in the security? We've got information security advisory councils, right? Every industry has that states have their iacs or ISOs.

[00:10:53] **George Finney:** Collaborating is one of the chief ways that that we keep up to speed with what threats that are out there, right? A lot of [00:11:00] security folks , have quit Twitter. And, guess what? We've moved over to Mastodon. And again, I think, even if it's, just networking.

[00:11:06] **George Finney:** In the community going to a happy hour or whatever. Again, those are the opportunities for us to to connect with others, to find out what folks are doing, but also from a career standpoint, right? Those are the connections we make that can help us get other jobs and help us advance in our careers.

[00:11:20] **George Finney:** Again I think networking when I started, at least in, in security, we, we don't do that cuz you know, the you know what, we might give away some piece of critical opsec or whatever. Oh man. The, I'm not saying that's not a valid concern and you sh you shouldn't share your company's secrets, at Starbucks.

[00:11:36] **George Finney:** But the, there are ways to do that. And I think that's, that that's something that, that I think we've gotten much more of a handle on today than we did, 15 or 20 years ago for.

[00:11:44] **Christophe Foulon:** What advice would you give to future cyber security?

[00:11:47] **George Finney:** So gosh there's so much advice out there.

[00:11:49] **George Finney:** Definitely, make connections, right? I think some of the most powerful things that, that, that have influenced my career are the people that I've developed relationships with. The they're p they're mentors that I can go to for [00:12:00] advice.

[00:12:00] **George Finney:** I'm on multiple text threads with different CISOs where, Hey, have you heard this new breach? Have you, what are you guys doing for for Log for J or Circle ci, or whatever it was. Th those kinds of things ha, have made so much of a difference, I think definitely.

[00:12:14] **George Finney:** Our, our, cyber program here at S M U has totally been transformed and shaped by all of those great security leaders that I've had the privilege of working with over the years. And for us future cyber security leaders, Guess what, you're gonna have that same, challenge to to empower that future generation of security leaders, right?

[00:12:33] **George Finney:** So making those connections, empowering people, right? We don't want, the next generation after us to have to learn all of our same, lessons over again. So being able to give back. In, in, in whatever ways, that you uniquely as a person can give back. Man, invest in those make a difference.

[00:12:48] **George Finney:** Is what I would tell them.

[00:12:50] **George Finney:** Oh I think I lost audio.

[00:12:51] **Christophe Foulon:** Just a little bonus question while I have you on the line. How would you describe using Zero Trust? [00:13:00] And artificial technology where you can't really understand what's what the AI is doing, but still be able to trust it within your business processes.

[00:13:10] **George Finney:** That is an awesome question.

[00:13:11] **George Finney:** For folks who don't know I wrote a book called project Zero Trust. And I was so fortunate to, to be able to collaborate with the gentleman who created or coined the term Zero Trust, John Kinder Vogue. He also happens to live here in Dallas. Just an amazing guy, right?

[00:13:24] **George Finney:** I've talked to so many people who he's mentored just, randomly they're like, oh, yeah, John. Wow. It's crazy. But you know what John will say is your trust, is your strategy, right? It's not any one tool or whatever.

[00:13:35] **George Finney:** I I think as we think about creating, code with ai. I will just tell it, Hey, write our next security newsletter. We had one of our researchers create a game in under 60 seconds. So it's like a, super Mario version, right?

[00:13:46] **George Finney:** But to think about that kind of power where in 60 seconds I can have a fully functioning video game you, oh my gosh, what does that mean? What does the future mean for code? Yeah, I think you would treat AI in that instance. Maybe you'll maybe more skeptically.

[00:13:59] **George Finney:** Than than [00:14:00] one of your DevOps people. It's gotta go through code reviews. You've gotta, make sure that that's a, overall definition, o of zero trust is that we are, we, it's a strategy for preventing or containing cybersecurity breaches by removing the trust relationships we have in digital systems.

[00:14:14] **George Finney:** So we don't, we trust people, right? We have to collaborate with one one another and trust each other to do our jobs cuz it takes a team to do that. AI isn't on the team. That's ano, that's another, digital trust relationship that we want to have humanize actually be able to vet the code or have.

[00:14:29] **George Finney:** Compensating controls like a, a C I CD pipeline with testing embedded a along the way to, to make sure we're looking at that. Are we doing, the things that we would normally do source code, pen tests the, those kinds of things all still have to apply when it comes to, to, to AI is doing stuff in our environment.

[00:14:44] **George Finney:** But yeah, I think the first. Person out there that, that implements AI to, I'm sure they're already doing, that for the stock market, right? Some people probably made some money that way, but also, some people probably, lost everything that way.

[00:14:56] **George Finney:** And, we want to be able to to make sure that, again we [00:15:00] contain or prevent those bad things f from happening. That's our mission in life as security.

[00:15:04] **Christophe Foulon:** George, thank you for coming on.

[00:15:05] **Christophe Foulon:** Before we leave anything next on the radar that you wanna share with the public?

[00:15:11] **George Finney:** Yeah I've I'm not gonna write another book for a long time. I've done enough of those, but my last book it was called Aware. And you know what we've done with that there? So we think there are nine cybersecurity habits. habits. We know, 50% of all human behaviors are based in habits.

[00:15:27] **George Finney:** And habits work like a muscle. So they can get stronger. They can also get tired, right? And that, changes throughout the day. But if habits work like a muscle, think of the nine cybersecurity habits as like muscle groups, right? When I'm thinking about security awareness, I, we have this tendency to think about we'll do everything perfectly.

[00:15:43] **George Finney:** And again, that, that's from an athlete perspective, right? If you had muscle groups, that's more like a decathlete. Not everybody's a great decathlete. Some people are, endurance runners. Some people are power lifters. So I think if we think of ourselves as a coach we can help people improve by focusing on their strengths.

[00:15:58] **George Finney:** So what I've done is I've [00:16:00] built a cyber personality test based on the nine cyber security habits to help orient you with what your strengths are. And from there, we, we're building training that it's like security awareness training or it's more like professional development for cybersecurity for non-technical folks.

[00:16:14] **George Finney:** But we want you to help you find whatever strengths you have. When it comes to cybersecurity, and then we use that to start building momentum. So you find out what your security identity is and we wanna reinforce that and help you believe that you can be a part of the the organization's mission to to get more secure.

[00:16:31] **George Finney:** Yeah, that that's my next big thing is it's a side hustle for the time being. But, having a security awareness company that that focuses on habits is, oh my gosh. It's been I impactful for for us here at S m smu, I, I've implemented it here as well as for some other clients.

[00:16:43] **George Finney:** And yeah it's I'm super excited about it. It's really cool.

[00:16:45] **Christophe Foulon:** We're looking forward to it. Thank you for joining us, everyone, and have a great.