

Steve Zalewski 2022-11-04 12.05.28

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[00:00:23] **Christophe Foulon:** Welcome to another episode of Breaking into Cybersecurity Leadership, where we talk to cybersecurity leaders who want to share their advice with the next generation looking to go into leadership today we have Steve. I'll let him say his last name so I don't butcher it. But he is a lifetime practitioner and he's gotten to that stage where he wants to give back and share with those that are coming up behind the rungs.

[00:00:49] **Christophe Foulon:** So Steve, why don't you share a little bit about yourself and we'll jump into the questions.

[00:00:54] **Steve Zalewski:** After that. Awesome. Chris. Thank you for having me. My last [00:01:00] name is Zalewski, so it looks harder than it is, and then Steve Z for everybody, just to make it simple, but excited to be here. Little bit about me. So been a practitioner for over 15 years in cyber security.

[00:01:15] **Steve Zalewski:** At some major Fortune 500 s most recently was the CISO at Levi Strauss. We make jeans. I'm fortunate now because whenever I go to business meetings I get to wear Levi's jeans cuz it's expected of me. So it was a nice Benny for that. Worked at pg and e, very large gas and electric utility here on the west coast.

[00:01:37] **Steve Zalewski:** Worked at Kaiser, which was a large HMO across the United States. Had the opportunity to learn a lot of the verticals and the first half of my career I built products. I was on the vendor side, building products as an architect and an engineer. With patents. And so my career has been varied and so I was able to, at this point, bend through all the different facets.

[00:01:59] **Steve Zalewski:** And so now I [00:02:00] have all of this experience that when I retired from Levi Strauss, I. Started S3 Consulting. It's just an advisory practice where I can spend my semi-retirement so to speak, in being able to pay back and offer that experience to others in the community through all the different, people in the security village.

[00:02:21] **Christophe Foulon:** So Steve, as you think about your journey, what made you decide to transition between. An individual contributor to becoming a cybersecurity leader.

[00:02:31] **Steve Zalewski:** I will say in my career, I've swapped back and forth between individual contributor and then leader. And it, some of it has to do with me, which was, I wanna understand a problem, I want to go figure it out.

[00:02:46] **Steve Zalewski:** And then once I know what I want to do, then I need to lead a team to do. And so as I was working through my careers in the different facets, that's what you would see me do, and I realized it over time. So when I came into cyber [00:03:00] security first as a senior manager, and then I went into architecture roles and enterprise architecture, and then I went back into management.

[00:03:08] **Steve Zalewski:** And then when I joined Levi's, same thing. I started as the chief security architect went into the Deputy cso, then the CSO role, so that my skill sets as an individual contributor and a manager always stayed fresh. Okay. And my goal was as a manager, I had the respect of the. Okay. And as an when I was an engineer, I understood the role of the managers and so I was always doing it.

[00:03:35] **Steve Zalewski:** But at that point in my career at Levi's, it was like, Look, as an individual contributor, it's interesting to solve hard problems, but as management, especially for cyber security, Cybersecurity was the most challenging job I had in my career, and even to this day, I'm not giving up on it. It's the hardest thing to do, and it takes every skill that you have in order to be able to [00:04:00] defend against the bad guy.

[00:04:01] **Christophe Foulon:** In talking about those skills, what are some of those critical skills that you think are needed for the leadership?

[00:04:08] **Steve Zalewski:** In no particular order. And I, these are one of those you think about it first and foremost, active listening. And you and I were talking about this and since this is among security practitioners, that what I said to you earlier, and I'll say here, which was, Don't be an asshole.

[00:04:24] **Steve Zalewski:** Okay? Listen, more than you talk and actively. because your ultimate responsibility to protect the company and protect the business is to understand the business and understand the people and get in their heads and see it from their perspective. Don't try to make them see your perspective, and I think that is something we have to be very aware of as security practitioner.

[00:04:52] **Steve Zalewski:** It's not alone in security, but I think in security there's clearly some past history where some of the [00:05:00] prior leaders

wanted to tell and not guide. So I say active listening and the role of that, I say empathy. People don't necessarily see security that we do. We see it as it's important and why wouldn't you want.

[00:05:16] **Steve Zalewski:** But the empathy is for many people in the business world, they're there to sell jeans or they're there to provide healthcare, or they're there to deliver electricity and they don't see security the way we do. So the empathy to understand what their jobs are and how they see that role to make it relevant to what they do, they'll make it an imposition on what they do.

[00:05:39] **Steve Zalewski:** Another one in shifting for leadership is crisis manage. And here's what I'll say. When you have the opportunity to run an incident response team in some capacity as a manager, director, or vp, whatever, okay? That's an eye opening experience. to be able to see what's happening and realize you have to make decisions in minutes and [00:06:00] hours.

[00:06:01] **Steve Zalewski:** And most executives make decisions in days, weeks, and. So realize that what you do now in your executive role in cybersecurity is you're actually getting very good at crisis management. You're getting very good at looking at the data, realizing the timeline, and figuring out what the best is that you can do at this point in time, cuz you don't have the luxury of time.

[00:06:24] **Steve Zalewski:** But when you get into crisis, manage with the executive team. Again, you have to listen and be empathetic because you are very good at crisis management and they're not, and you don't wanna lord it over them. You want to lead them through crisis management, realizing that they will respect you, and that's a skill that you have to offer them to earn your seat at the table.

[00:06:47] **Steve Zalewski:** So I say crisis management, realize that you're good at it. Realize it's a skill that you want to give others. But it's not about leading them, it's more about influencing, [00:07:00] and then I'll say written and communication skills. I can't overestimate it that enough. Your ability to tell a story, your ability to communicate that empathy with other people.

[00:07:11] **Steve Zalewski:** Whether it's an executive or it's somebody that works for you or it's somebody in the business or it's a vendor, you've got to be really good at that communication because if you want to be fluffy, if you don't, you know what? What I say is talk less and say more, and that's a skill that you have to work on to be crisp and concise cuz it's a security leader.

[00:07:36] **Steve Zalewski:** That actually is one of your most important things is to be able to communicate to people clearly and concisely on value, which means you have to know it yourself, which leads to written. And what I say is just like teachers say, if you're a teacher, if you write it down, it reinforces what you're doing, the message, the understanding, And so therefore, that [00:08:00] written the ability to tell a story with picture.

[00:08:03] **Steve Zalewski:** Not just read text from a slide. The ability to understand how storytelling is done and the skill sets to do that are critical for you because again, your responsibility is leadership for your organization. Translates to leadership for your company, but leadership for your company is influence. You've got to influence them to do the right thing because the right thing isn't necessarily what you want.

[00:08:30] **Steve Zalewski:** It's one of the best interests of the executive team of the company. So how do you influence that, the right direction? Those are the skill sets that I would suggest.

[00:08:38] **Christophe Foulon:** A great list, and we'll touch on some of them coming up in a couple minutes. But first, when you think about the competency of delegation, how would you personally rate your comfort level on a scale of one to five and why as a leader?

[00:08:52] **Steve Zalewski:** With delegation , I would say early on in my career, I wasn't good at delegating.

[00:08:57] **Steve Zalewski:** Classic mistake. Keep [00:09:00] control because you think it's about control. As you move into management, you learn a little bit about delegation because you feel like you can tell people what to do and you delegate task. But they may not be valuable tasks. It's just you can tell people what to do. And then I say, And then you realize from a leadership perspective, delegation is an empowerment on your team to make them better.

[00:09:25] **Steve Zalewski:** Not a management opportunity for you to shed work. And so I would say delegation for me is almost second nature because from a leadership perspective, what I use with delegation is explain why I'm delegating, and oftentimes in delegating more than they necessarily want because it's a growth opportunity.

[00:09:47] **Steve Zalewski:** My responsibility to you is to let you make mistakes in a safe environ. To make you better, to allow me to do something else cuz you're gonna take my [00:10:00] job. Or up that chain. And so it's the

opportunity to let people enter their uncomfortable zones, right? Discomfort zones, realizing that's my responsibility for career growth or career advancement.

[00:10:13] **Steve Zalewski:** And that sets from a leadership perspective for them and understanding that delegation is a good. Okay. And it may be uncomfortable, but you end up with much more highly empowered teams because you're setting the vision, you're delegating to their responsibility, you're understanding where their strengths and weaknesses are, and are playing to both.

[00:10:35] **Steve Zalewski:** So that's when my evolution of delegation, and it has something to do with what delegation is attempting to accomplish as you move from. Individual contributor to supervisor, to manager, to director, to VP to senior leadership and board,

[00:10:53] **Christophe Foulon:** and potentially another competency that goes along with delegation collaboration.

[00:10:58] **Christophe Foulon:** How would you rate your personal [00:11:00] comfort level with collaboration on a scale of one to five and why?

[00:11:04] **Steve Zalewski:** So here's what I would tell people. Collaboration is a constant experiment. There's there, and what I mean by that is as you learn how to be a leader, collaboration, you have different personalities that you put on for collabo.

[00:11:22] **Steve Zalewski:** Like if you're collaborating with a vendor or you're collaborating with a peer, or you're collaborating with a mentor, or you're collaborating with a board member, that's all collaboration, but your persona, right? The skill sets you use in doing that, collaboration, how you communicate the language that you speak, the objective.

[00:11:43] **Steve Zalewski:** That's where when I tell people is practice on that. Realize that if you've only got one persona and one way to communicate, That is a limiting factor. And so I used to talk about practicing as I was going through my career. [00:12:00] I would put different personas on as a supervisor or manager, and I would ask people if I'm directive versus collaborative, right?

[00:12:08] **Steve Zalewski:** If I'm intuitive versus What do you wanna say? Blue people, data driven, that there's different ways and you have to understand who you are because by testing those types of collaboration skills and

collaboration types, it's allowing you to understand how you grow, plus where are your strengths and weaknesses, right?

[00:12:26] **Steve Zalewski:** And so sometimes I would be, it would be successful, sometimes not, But it taught me who I am and what I'm comfortable with. A leadership style that I can communicate to others. To find that middle ground. And that gets back to don't be an asshole. What you want to be able to do is you're gonna have to adjust just like good leaders that are working with you.

[00:12:47] **Steve Zalewski:** So you're finding that middle ground where you're trying to be as effective you can, and the collaboration style's very different.

[00:12:54] **Christophe Foulon:** And you touched on communication earlier, but what would you rate yourself on a scale of [00:13:00] one to five with regards to communication and why is it important?

[00:13:04] **Steve Zalewski:** So I will rate, based on what people tell me and what people say is, Steve, it's really easy to talk.

[00:13:12] **Steve Zalewski:** You're easy to talk to and you communicate well. Whatever communicate means, meaning. My ability to use the empathy in the other so that I talk to you as a peer or the communication style that we have is one where it feels collaborative that people. Want to have a conversation with me, not just to talk about the weather or kids, but the way that you communicate the ideas or the vision or the leadership or the management.

[00:13:43] **Steve Zalewski:** And so what I would say is I generally get pretty positive feedback, but it's something I've always had to work at because as I work through the ranks, as an a. It's very easy to tell people what to do thinking, Just do it my way. Cause I'm an architect. So [00:14:00] that's laws of physics. And you realize that as a really good architect, it's more about influence.

[00:14:06] **Steve Zalewski:** You want people to see the value of what you do. You want them to align to what you do, but you gotta give them some creative flexibility to do it their. That's true for most people, that they don't want to just be told what they want to do. They want to be part of the solution and your ability to communicate that, your ability to open their eyes to bringing them down that path.

[00:14:28] **Steve Zalewski:** But I would say for people on this call, think about the mentors that you've had. Think about the ones that are using the

phraseology. Am like I am. To feel, make you feel motivated and engaged in learning that they're taking you on the journey of learning, not telling you what to do. And I would say so my collaboration skills over the years have gotten pretty good cuz I don't think I would be here having the conversation I'm having with executive leadership, my boards and [00:15:00] my peers and men, people that I'm mentoring without having realized that my communication skills are a strength.

[00:15:09] **Steve Zalewski:** But it's one you always have to work.

[00:15:11] **Christophe Foulon:** You mentioned the competency of influence earlier. How would you describe that as a critical skill to leadership, to leaders coming up and why?

[00:15:20] **Steve Zalewski:** Influence , I would say to people, for anybody that's married and has kids, okay. Trying to tell your kids what to do as opposed to influencing them to make the right decisions. It's no different for work, okay? Than I say. There are some kids that you can tell 'em the stove is hot 50 times, but eventually you're gonna have, they're just gonna have to touch the stove, and so I can tell you not to.

[00:15:46] **Steve Zalewski:** Or I can influence you realizing you're probably going to do it, but what I can try to do is make it as harmless as possible. . Okay. That is a really good analogy for me because when you talk to influence [00:16:00] like lines of business or you're influencing the executive team, and we're talking about security for.

[00:16:06] **Steve Zalewski:** Okay. What you're really saying is, look, there's risk associated with this, and you may want to touch the stove. You just, you're just bound and determined to do it well. My ability to influence here is to make it as painless as possible. Not to make it painless and not to prevent you from doing it. And so that's where decision making and leadership in a security perspective really is influence because it's almost an indirect decision.

[00:16:38] **Steve Zalewski:** You're sitting with your leadership team, you're sitting with your cio, and you're trying to put cyber security into the context of risk for them to understand whether they want to touch the stove or not. In spite of what you know, and so you're making an indirect influential decision many times.

[00:16:58] **Steve Zalewski:** Now, you talk to your, [00:17:00] not just your leadership team, but talk to your architects, talk to your security engineers,

right? What you're trying to do is heard the cats on one hand, but not let them hurt themselves really on the other and at what point? Do you smack a hand if they go near the stove versus coach them that's going to hurt when you do it, but that's something you want to do.

[00:17:23] **Steve Zalewski:** And so do I get it over with earlier or do I get it over late? It's not a perfect analogy, but I find that to be a very effective way of getting people to understand why influence actually is the most important skill over leadership, especially for cyber. Is being able to understand that, coach it and realize they ultimately own the decision, but you still have to be there to back 'em up, even if the decision isn't the one that you think is optimal.

[00:17:53] **Christophe Foulon:** And another competency that gets brought up a lot when it comes to growing your skills as [00:18:00] a leader is the concept of networking. Why would networking with people be such a critical skill for cybersecurity

[00:18:07] **Christophe Foulon:** leaders?

[00:18:08] **Steve Zalewski:** A lot of engineers are introverts just are right? A lot of people are introvert.

[00:18:12] **Steve Zalewski:** Communication skills is difficult. From a management perspective, they teach you communication skills is mandatory because you're managing people, and so therefore if you can't communicate, it's kinda hard to manage. When you get to leadership, that's when we say communication from a leadership perspective, you have to be able to get better at communicating, and that doesn't mean just talking at people or talking to people.

[00:18:37] **Steve Zalewski:** It's talking with people. I was an introvert. Still am. It takes a lot out of me when I communicate heavily even like this, but it's a learned skill. Now I say, let's talk about this communication skill in the security perspective. Okay? Which was, why is it so critical 10 years ago? I used to have a pretty good idea of what the security community was, [00:19:00] who the key players were, who the key vendors were, what my architecture's gonna be, what my roadmap's gonna be.

[00:19:05] **Steve Zalewski:** Today, there are over 3000 vendors trying to sell me security products. That's not the managed service providers, That's not the resellers, that's not the channels, that's not the consultants, that's not the analyst.

Okay. I no longer am able to understand all the technology, all the fields, all the acronyms that are out.

[00:19:32] **Steve Zalewski:** So communication now is a survival skill for me to be able to work with my peers or work with the VCs or work with others to be able to understand how do I do my job where I'm having to trust a lot of other people in making my decisions. Now, communication is critical because, I talk to it now as [00:20:00] this is a security village, Okay?

[00:20:03] **Steve Zalewski:** We have a shared responsibility to protect the child, which is the business against a common enemy, which is all of our attackers and all of us are village members. Right now, we're not doing so good as villagers supporting each other to protect the. We're competing with each other. Every vendor does everything for everybody, right?

[00:20:26] **Steve Zalewski:** VCs are investing in lots of overlapping companies. Gartner analysts are introducing new terms all the time to try to find room for more companies. So communication for me, like here is let's look and talk to each other and understand by communicating what our shared responsibility is, how do we fit into the village?

[00:20:44] **Steve Zalewski:** What is my. Okay. Am I the auto mechanic? Do I deliver the gas right? Do I build houses where we have to be better at communicating what we do for the village and what we don't do? And start to [00:21:00] understand that as long as we continue to not communicate, stay our own areas. We're doing a disservice.

[00:21:07] **Steve Zalewski:** So these are why I say communication is really critical. Communication styles are critical, but you have to communicate now because the days of being, having the luxury of being able to just pull the tent over your head or whatever and just live your own environment. It's just not practical because the security.

[00:21:27] **Steve Zalewski:** Community. The security field is so big and there's so much money and there's so much change going on that it's just gotten bigger than any one person. So you've got to communicate.

[00:21:38] **Christophe Foulon:** And wrapping up, any final advice that you would share for future cybersecurity leaders?

[00:21:43] **Steve Zalewski:** Yes. Thought about this a bit. Here are a couple things I would. And again, in no particular order, but as I was thinking through

one, learning the business is now just as important as learning the nuts and bolts of security just as important.

[00:21:59] **Steve Zalewski:** Cause [00:22:00] again, communication, influence leadership. Your job now is to try to protect. And what is your role as a security leader in protecting It's changed in the last 10 years. It continues and that means you better know the. I used to tell people when I joined Levi Strauss the first year, I came in thinking, Okay, I'm gonna put a security architecture together, do a roadmap.

[00:22:23] **Steve Zalewski:** I spent the first year just understanding how retail works, how high fashion women selling jeans to women works. What it was that I was trying to protect. There were days I came home and I would talk to my wife or my daughter and I'm like, I learned something about how women think today. Is that really Cause I'm having to put a bubble around the creative process, not change the creative process.

[00:22:48] **Steve Zalewski:** That's an example of why I say so. The better you know the business is, the better you understand what the control friction is you're introducing in the business, and is it worth it? Cause it's a balance now, right? We're [00:23:00] not here to secure the company. We're here to protect the business, and that balance is a transition we all have to make.

[00:23:09] **Steve Zalewski:** So know the business. Second thing I say is know how to speak the language of business as fluently as you speak the language of security. As good as you can talk about identity and access management and MFA and xdr and Sassy, and you pick all the acronyms. We do endpoint protection, malware, fishing. Okay, fishing, that's great.

[00:23:35] **Steve Zalewski:** But when you go to the business and you use those terms, you've lost them. They don't care about security. I used to tell everybody, even now I say, What's the number one metric? That everybody cares about, regardless, that will catch their attention. And people are like how many attacks I stopped or how much money I saved?

[00:23:54] **Steve Zalewski:** The answer is no. The answer is, how is this gonna maximize my bonus? Okay, [00:24:00] if this is gonna give me more money, That's the motivator. So how does security sell more? Jeans used to be my question. Know the business. So these are examples of why I say it, but this is how it's impactful then because now I'm gonna go to the business and go, Look, if you're willing to do this from a security perspective, okay, if I'm gonna do MFA for these cases, because we are seeing these types of attacks, it's costing

this much money that's impacting our bottom line of which we get 15% bonus off of bottom line.

[00:24:32] **Steve Zalewski:** All of a sudden it became very, Okay, so that's speak the business. Risk management is the emerging currency of the cyber leader. So make sure you're able to communicate risk in both business and technical terms, depending upon your audience. And here's what I mean by that. If you report to a cio, how does the executive team manage the cio?

[00:24:53] **Steve Zalewski:** CIO is a cost center. They deliver business applications and business processes to the business to [00:25:00] make money. That's efficiency. Okay? Take 3% away every year, drive more efficiency out of the CIO organization because that's how they measure success. You report to the cio, you as a c. Have to have technical measurement.

[00:25:16] **Steve Zalewski:** So you gotta be able to look at the technical tools. Here's my controls, here's my measurement, here's how I'm being deficient. Does the business care about that? No. The business cares about how am I being attacked? How am I losing money? So the conversation now is, how effective am I as a CSO at protecting the key business processes in the.

[00:25:38] **Steve Zalewski:** What are the key business processes? Is it my e-commerce site? Is my retail supply chain? Okay. Is it my third party, sassy infrastructure. What is it? So you get better at being able to have these different conversations cuz you have different stakeholders and they measure you differently. And that's why it's a risk conversation now, because [00:26:00] I'm really having so much money and so much responsibility.

[00:26:03] **Steve Zalewski:** What risks can I manage and how do I have that convers? And so therefore, that's why I say no business, no technical. It is the conversation of the future. Are you here to secure the company? Are you here to protect the business? Are you here to make money, Sell more jeans? That's a rough three ways of you gotta look at the worlds and understand how to communicate, and then finally realize it can be a thankless job.

[00:26:29] **Steve Zalewski:** And more thankless than not of late with all this going on. So really evaluate your personal success criteria and make sure that the job and your expectations of the job are aligned. Because the CSO role is changing. The CSO responsibilities are changing, and so it's not like being a CPA where you can be certified for cpa.

[00:26:55] **Steve Zalewski:** Everybody knows what they do. It's well defined, you know how to measure. In the security field, [00:27:00] there's lots of evolution here. You're seeing. So therefore you've gotta walk into this eyes open and realize that 24 months from now, you may have very different expectations on the company or the company on you.

[00:27:13] **Steve Zalewski:** So it can be personally rewarding. You are protecting companies, okay? But you have to understand you can be a firefighter and a shepherd at the same. So really go in eyes open, really understand what it is that you want to do. Talk to a lot of people, talk to the senior CSOs as you're now working through that first and second generation of cso because you're gonna have a very different job than I did.

[00:27:38] **Steve Zalewski:** That's what I have to offer.

[00:27:39] **Christophe Foulon:** Steve Z thank you so much for all those interesting insights, and thank you everyone for joining us on another episode of Breaking into Cyber Security Leadership. Have a great day everyone.

[00:27:51] **Steve Zalewski:** Thank you, Chris. Thank you everyone.