

# Breaking into Cybersecurity Leadership

## Keyaan Williams

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[00:00:23] **Christophe Foulon:** Welcome to another episode of Breaking into Cybersecurity Leadership. Today we have Kean who will be sharing his experience in cybersecurity law and leadership to provide you with di diverse approach for leadership. Kean, you wanna tell us a little bit more about yourself and your background?

[00:00:47] **Keyaan Williams:** Sure. Since this is a breaking into cybersecurity leadership session, I'll talk about my leadership background. I started in the Army, so there was great leadership training from serving in the US Army Chemical Core when I got [00:01:00] out of the army. I had a great opportunity to work for the US Army Reserve Command, and then after that project ended, I transitioned over to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, also known as the cdc.

[00:01:14] **Keyaan Williams:** While I was at the cdc, I started off in it. An opportunity came up for me to work for the agency Chief Information Security Officer. The CDC is such a large federal agency that they have a senior agency official for information security, and then they have a. Security executive in each one of the departments at the organization.

[00:01:37] **Keyaan Williams:** So I worked for the boss and did compliance and some other things. I was able to move into one of the departments at the CDC as a analyst. Did a good job. It created an opportunity for me eventually to be the director for one of the centers at the cdc, and I've been doing cybersecurity leadership ever since.

[00:01:59] **Christophe Foulon:** [00:02:00] Thank you very much. Keyaan. And as you talk about preparing a role for yourself, why did you want to switch into leadership versus becoming an or staying an individual contributor?

[00:02:14] **Keyaan Williams:** If I'm being honest, I'm a bit of a control freak, and so as an individual contributor, people tell you what to do. You don't have a lot of say in the equation unless you work for a really good organization that has a culture that embraces ideas from staff, and that wasn't the.

[00:02:32] **Keyaan Williams:** Experience that I was in and being in leadership allowed me to apply things that I knew academically, things that I knew from standards and certifications, and do it in a way that I thought was gonna be the best way. and once I had the opportunity, applying things, using the magic eon sauce worked out well.

[00:02:52] **Keyaan Williams:** It produced good outcomes. It allowed me to keep moving up in responsibility in the scope of influence that I had, [00:03:00] and produced a pretty good outcome overall, if I must say.

[00:03:05] **Christophe Foulon:** And potentially some of that magic Keyaan sauces and the critical skills needed for cybersecurity leadership. What would you consider those critical skills to be?

[00:03:15] **Keyaan Williams:** If we are in a room full of people, Say there were a hundred people in the room with the two of us, just so that our statistical analysis is even, and we said, raise your hand if you spend the majority of your time as a security leader focusing on things that have nothing to do with cybersecurity.

[00:03:33] **Keyaan Williams:** A small percent, I would argue less than 20% of the people in the room would focus on management, accounting, project management, program management, strategic planning. People talk about doing those things, but I think what has made me successful is instead of just talking about it, Or instead of doing it periodically, it is a core component of the way that I operate that, the way that I serve other [00:04:00] organizations, because I'm a consultant now, it also influenced the way that I served when I was a full-time employee in charge of large security programs.

[00:04:09] **Keyaan Williams:** And the reason that I say that the reason that it's become a focus is that there's been a long conversation about security people having a seat at the. The CISO should be in the room. The CISO should be at the big kids table, not at the little kids table since Thanksgiving is coming up, but nobody ever really talks about what.

[00:04:31] **Keyaan Williams:** Types of conversations do you need to be equipped to have, if you're sitting at the adults table, there's a reason using Thanksgiving as a theme that children sit at the children's table and the adults sit at the adults table. It's because they're two very different conversations. And what I've discovered in my travel and my journey in my cybersecurity leadership experience is that the people at the business adult table are not very excited about the deep technical [00:05:00] things that many CISOs talk about.

[00:05:02] **Keyaan Williams:** What they really care about is what is the risk that we're exposed to? What is the reward for making different decisions? How do you justify it? What is the budget? How do you quantify the value of decisions that we've made? And it's a very different conversation than talking about threat actors or reverse malware analysis or encryption or anything else because it starts to cause the other people at the table to have their eyes gloss over because it's not what they focus on day to day.

[00:05:32] **Keyaan Williams:** What real business people focus on day to day is advancing the objectives of the organization and returning shareholder value and generating sufficient revenue to support the business and what it wants to accomplish. and it's very difficult without years of practice to integrate deep technical cybersecurity controls or compliance into that conversation in a way that is relevant and appropriate, or even dare I say, [00:06:00] interesting for non-technical business people who are sitting there listening to the conversation.

[00:06:08] **Christophe Foulon:** As we start to talk about some of the core competencies of a cyber leader, how would you rate yourself on your comfort level with delegation on a scale of one to five and why?

[00:06:20] **Keyaan Williams:** I think I'm awesome, so I would rate myself as a five. It would be interesting if you talk to my staff or other people who worked for me how everything rates.

[00:06:31] **Keyaan Williams:** But there is a psychological safety assessment that a friend of mine from ICQ Global has created is scientifically proven. Lots of research went into it, but when we applied that assessment to my organization, we were in the upper right quadrant. And it's not the Gartner upper right quadrant, but it's the psychological safety upper right quadrant.

[00:06:51] **Keyaan Williams:** And so people felt equipped to be successful and they felt like their voices were heard, and I think that is a good. Of being in [00:07:00] a position to facilitate, to coordinate, to delegate, to empower people to do what they're supposed to do. Another good example of that, we onboard a lot of entry level and career transition people within the organization that I am currently running.

[00:07:18] **Keyaan Williams:** And when we onboard people, the expectation is that it's gonna take. About 90 days to learn the company and then another six months to learn how to do their jobs effectively, and then another three months to be able to apply it consistently. And so I give people a full year to get it

together before we start holding a individual that we hired to a very high standard.

[00:07:44] **Keyaan Williams:** But the reason that I'm able to do that is because I delegate to the leaders within the organizational structure. It's a very collaborative environment where people's ideas are heard, and I'm willing to take input. It doesn't always have to come from the top, and there is a ton of communication. [00:08:00] But all of those focus areas create good opportunities for camaraderie, for people to feel like they can ask questions if they don't know the answer.

[00:08:08] **Keyaan Williams:** I don't expect people to be born knowing how to spell cybersecurity or how to do specific attacks, thinking about the 300 that are in the security plus certification. But I do expect people to do a show up prepared, ready to work, willing to learn, and demonstrating the ability to improve over time.

[00:08:29] **Keyaan Williams:** And the same thing that I do with the people that work for me is the way that I communicate with customers, with clients. And when I was running a global security program, it's the way that I interacted with all of the business stakeholders who were my customers when I was a full-time employee.

[00:08:50] **Christophe Foulon:** And you touched on two of the other competencies that we'll discuss, but the first of them being collaboration.

[00:08:56] **Christophe Foulon:** How do you rate yourself on the competency of [00:09:00] collaboration from a scale of one to five and why that's.

[00:09:04] **Keyaan Williams:** I'm always gonna be a five. I, it's not really that I have an inflated sense of myself, but one of the things that people will discover the higher that they go within an organization is that you can only do so much by yourself.

[00:09:16] **Keyaan Williams:** I own and operate a security company, but it has been 20 years since I was a technical security person. So 20 something years ago I was an ISDN switch and bridge operator dealing with cryptographic hardware. Way before it was super easy. Just. Connecting to a Zoom call, we had to go to the COMSEC custodian.

[00:09:36] **Keyaan Williams:** I had to get the security key, call somebody on the phone, authenticate verbally. We punch in a bunch of codes on a kg or a

stew or a ST from the military perspective. That was extremely technical. That was extremely difficult. And so I have the technical chops, but my day to day activity is running the business and making sure that we're on track.

[00:09:59] **Keyaan Williams:** And [00:10:00] I can't be in the technical weeds and have sufficient time to do all the other things I do. There are only 168 hours in a week, and so if I spend all of my time doing somebody else's job, it's not gonna leave enough time for me to do my job. And so it forces a situation where collaboration is a must.

[00:10:19] **Keyaan Williams:** Or I'm not gonna be successful. And so collaboration and delegation in that context then become two things that work together. From my perspective, I delegate things to people, and then we have collaborative huddles to make sure that everybody's on the right track. We measure performance until the outcome is produced.

[00:10:37] **Keyaan Williams:** Imagine if every CSO in every organization operated like that, you have your compliance people, you have your technical controls people, you have the people that do the risk assessment. Equipping and empowering people to be successful, and then having huddles periodically throughout the week to make sure that everybody's on track and then supporting their growth and their excellence.

[00:10:59] **Keyaan Williams:** The [00:11:00] more excellent my team, the less hard that I have to work individually, and so I'm a huge fan of collaboration and working together as a group. Which also makes me a huge fan of delegating as much as reasonably possible to other people so that they can take ownership, so that they can contribute, so they can demonstrate excellence, which allows them to grow and do more and more over time.

[00:11:26] **Christophe Foulon:** And the next competency is communication and how you would rate yourself in communication.

[00:11:32] **Keyaan Williams:** On a scale of one to five in wine, I would rate myself as a six plus. So I set up a five everywhere. But communication is something that I have spent a lot of time and effort mastering over a long period of time.

[00:11:47] **Keyaan Williams:** And when people say communication, they think about the clarity of the communication. Is it direct? Is it formal? Is it right for the audience that you're presenting to? When I think about [00:12:00] communication, I really think. Have I put myself in a position to connect

psychologically and emotionally with a person so that they receive the message that my goal is to deposit within them.

[00:12:14] **Keyaan Williams:** And a couple of the things that help, I've done standup comedy, I've done Toastmasters. I almost became a member. The Association of Professional Speakers. I work with a speaking coach who is helping me to master and make better my keynote presentations. So these are things that I work on regularly and none of that effort.

[00:12:39] **Keyaan Williams:** Is really focused on the content, but it's focused on the, it's focused on the delivery. Is my delivery clear? Am I speaking at the right pace for comedy? Am I pausing long enough for people to laugh and enjoy the funny thing that I said before I go on to the next joke? All of the pacing and all of the dedication and all the [00:13:00] connection with the audience increase the effectiveness of the communication in the situation when you're dealing with different.

[00:13:10] **Christophe Foulon:** How important would you consider it a skill of influence on a future cybersecurity leader in mind?

[00:13:17] **Keyaan Williams:** I think influence is important because security has limited control in an organization. If you look at the organization for Economic Cooperation and development, they have a governance fact book that they put out every two years.

[00:13:32] **Keyaan Williams:** Security is never the number one governance issue in global businesses. If you look at the World Economic Forum, cybersecurity is one of the top five risks year after year. It is never the number one risk. If you talk to a board of directors or if you sit in on a board meeting for a public company, they should talk about cybersecurity.

[00:13:51] **Keyaan Williams:** There's lots of studies that say that they don't spend very much time. But in all of those cases, from all of those perspectives, whether it's in the business or [00:14:00] it's outsiders or it's from a global perspective, security is never the number one issue, which means that as a security leader in an organization, the greatest lever that I have to drive positive impact is to influence other people to care about security as much as.

[00:14:18] **Keyaan Williams:** Now, I might not talk about security using security terms. We've already established that doesn't always produce the best results. But if I can talk about risk and get people to connect with the idea of



risk and how risk is going to have an impact on the goals and the objectives of the business.

[00:14:36] **Keyaan Williams:** And then I talk about controls or countermeasures that we put in place. We're really having a security conversation without ever saying the word security, and I've influenced the people that I'm talking to take seriously the exposure that we have, to consider seriously what we can do about it, and then come to some agreement or consensus through influence, that we're gonna reduce our risk as [00:15:00] much as possible so that the business can do what it was established to.

[00:15:04] **Keyaan Williams:** If we focus on organizational behavior, often influence is more effective than force. And so I am encouraging, I'm compelling, I'm pulling people along instead of trying to push them or force them into something that they don't really want to do. And if we summarized it in TV terms, it's basically just using Jedi minds.

[00:15:24] **Keyaan Williams:** This is the program that you want to support. This is the right investment to produce the best outcomes for the organization. This is the way to satisfy all of your requirements at the lowest possible cost, so that all the money that's left over can be invested in advancing business objectives. But it's just a conversation in making sure that you understand the drivers of the other party.

[00:15:48] **Keyaan Williams:** You get them to understand why you think things are important. You come to a consensus, everybody moves forward together on the same page, going at the same rate of speed.

[00:15:59] **Christophe Foulon:** I'll have to [00:16:00] quote you on the Jedi line tricks there. The next topic, how important would you consider the competency of networking?

[00:16:06] **Christophe Foulon:** And this is networking with people versus computers as a skill for future cybersecurity leaders and why?

[00:16:15] **Keyaan Williams:** So there are two big things that are going on in the marketplace. They have the great resignation, so tons of people have left their jobs and now a second wave is coming that, I didn't make this up, but some expert.

[00:16:29] **Keyaan Williams:** Has called it the great regret. So all these people that left their jobs now regret the decision because the competitive marketplace

is not as awesome as people thought it was. If you add to that, the number of technology and security professionals that are losing their jobs because their companies are cutting head count, it highlights that the relationships that you have are going to be the best asset.

[00:16:55] **Keyaan Williams:** That you have available to open doors and create opportunities for you to be [00:17:00] successful. And so that's looking at it from an outside perspective, but you think about all of the companies who have lost a good security leader or a good security manager. Most successful outcomes are the result of a direct personal referral.

[00:17:16] **Keyaan Williams:** Rather than having somebody apply to a job posting, most companies only resort to a job posting if they've exhausted all of the resources that they have. To secretly say, I need a cso, I need a director of security infrastructure. I need a director of GRC or compliance. The job posting is the last resort when they haven't found anybody.

[00:17:38] **Keyaan Williams:** And so if you can skip all of that, rubbish is the word that I'll use and get to the front of the line because you know a lot of people, because you have relationships, because people know what you're gonna contribute in terms of value and experience, it sets you up to have more opportunities to be in a leadership position [00:18:00] at a good company where they want you.

[00:18:03] **Keyaan Williams:** Compared to being some random stranger off the street that is one of a thousand people who are filling out an application for a job that they couldn't fill using the back channel. If we look internally, networking is just as important. One of the things that I did early in my career that was a mistake was that I only hung out with it and security people.

[00:18:23] **Keyaan Williams:** So we had a great time. We'd go to lunch, we'd go bowling after work. Sometimes we'd go hang out and every other Friday on payday, we'd all go to a restaurant and have a good time. And we never invited business people to those events. And so we were a tight knit, closed exclusive. None of us IT or security people had any power to get anything done.

[00:18:45] **Keyaan Williams:** When we started inviting business people to come join us and we say, Hey, we're gonna go hang out, we'd love for you to join us, we'll get to know each other outside of the business context. The better relationships that we had personally inside the [00:19:00] organization, the easier it was to overcome friction. To overcome challenges to get people to buy into ideas because it's now not a situation where two people who don't know



each other disagree, but it's two people who know each other that are approaching a problem from different perspectives, but because of their personal relationship, they're willing to find the happy middle ground.

[00:19:23] **Keyaan Williams:** And so I think networking inside the company and developing relationships is possibly even more important than the networking that you need to do to get the job to open the door, to get inside of the company. And so once you're inside, the first thing that you wanna start thinking about, Is who are all the key stakeholders?

[00:19:40] **Keyaan Williams:** What are their interests? How do I get to know them? How do I work with them? And doing that when there are no problems creates great relationship capital so that when there is an issue, the issue can easily be overcome because there is a relationship.

[00:19:56] **Christophe Foulon:** We'll circle back to your one year onboarding time [00:20:00] to build that collaboration and build that communication between all the team.

[00:20:06] **Keyaan Williams:** Yeah I actually when this is published officially, I'm gonna make sure all my team members listen to it so they can have another deposit of my insanity and the good times that we like to have, but also just for them to hear the vision that goes behind it. I'm not sure when people join us that they honestly believe that I'm giving.

[00:20:24] **Keyaan Williams:** Six to nine to 12 months to fully get it together. But the people who stick with us and who accept the opportunity to learn and to grow, end up being our best performers. One of my first security jobs, they paid me for 90 days to read, to understand, and to be able to apply this. 800 dash one 16.

[00:20:48] **Keyaan Williams:** I say again, they paid me for 90 days to read one N Standard. And be able to apply it. So I was an expert in the standard. I was able to learn the company as I was reading it, there was not a lot of [00:21:00] pressure and I was extremely successful with a specific project. And so that outcome for myself is what I try to apply to others.

[00:21:09] **Keyaan Williams:** But there were a lot of great relationships that were built along the way cuz I wasn't the only person reading this one document. It was a whole group of us working on mastering one document so that we could talk to a lot of people and. In a practical sense to the needs of the organization and to

[00:21:29] **Christophe Foulon:** Summarize everything that we've talked through thus far, what advice would you give to future cybersecurity leaders looking for this as a career for themselves?

[00:21:42] **Keyaan Williams:** People are gonna disagree with my advice, , and so we'll say that to begin with. But I think the best thing that cybersecurity leaders can do is understand how to run a business or understand how to run a department. Academically, my master's degree is in business, so it's what equips me to hang out [00:22:00] with business people and be comfortable and have interesting conversations and understand what the heck people are talking about.

[00:22:06] **Keyaan Williams:** But imagine if you showed up on day one in a new company. And we're not even talking about your first year, but your first 90 days and in your first 90 days, you come up with all these initiatives. I'm gonna use the cis critical security controls. We're gonna do an assessment. I'm gonna make all these recommendations.

[00:22:24] **Keyaan Williams:** The worst thing that you could possibly do is make recommendations that are not relevant to the business that you serve. And while the critical security controls. Provide an awesome framework. The way that you have to tailor that framework for a manufacturing company is different than the way that you would do it for a hospital is different than you would do it for.

[00:22:45] **Keyaan Williams:** A SaaS company is different than what you would do for a liquid natural gas company. And so you have 50 or 60 defined industries from the Department of Labor in the United States. Which [00:23:00] means that there are 50 or 60 different ways to implement the critical security controls. And so the most important thing that you can do if you wanna be a security leader is understand how businesses operate generally at an academic level, focusing on finance, accounting, project management, and regular business things.

[00:23:19] **Keyaan Williams:** And then once you get hired, mastering all of the nuances. For the industry that your company operates in, is also going to be critical for your ongoing success. Had I stayed at the cdc, I was gonna get a Master's in public health so that I would have a deep understanding of all of the concerns. That public health scientists and epidemiologists cared about because they spend all of this time studying and developing an approach, it would've added significant value if I could understand their approach and then say, this is how security applies to something that you do on a day to day basis.

[00:23:56] **Keyaan Williams:** I rarely see security leaders take the time and the energy [00:24:00] to really understand their business. Even if it's just widgets, in the class that I teach, we talk about widget manufacturing, but widget manufacturing, when you really break it down, goes all the way to the mining process that digs or outta the ground to putting it on a truck, to taking it to a facility, to smelting it down.

[00:24:19] **Keyaan Williams:** To then putting it through a process that stamp out widgets that then go into a box that then have to go through the sales cycle, and then you have customer service and sales, accounts payable and accounts receivable. There are a hundred different things that have nothing to do with security that a security leader needs to understand so that you can reduce risk.

[00:24:42] **Keyaan Williams:** What's the risk of losing materials? What are the safety risks? What are all the things that relate to the mining and getting the materials to the facility? And then you have industrial internet of things on top of industrial control systems and SCADA systems, which is a whole domain of [00:25:00] cybersecurity.

[00:25:01] **Keyaan Williams:** That is often overlooked. And so it's not just my critical security controls that are looking at cyber security in a digital sense on regular desktop computers or servers of the cloud, but it's understanding all security, physical, cyber, physical systems, cyber security systems, IT systems, and everything that allows my widget manufacturing company to operate.

[00:25:27] **Keyaan Williams:** Are things that I need to develop knowledge and skills and awareness about if I'm going to serve that manufacturing company as a security leader.

[00:25:37] **Christophe Foulon:** So just a quick plug. Please tell us about your class and what's the intent behind it.

[00:25:43] **Keyaan Williams:** So once upon a time I worked for EC council and I authored most of the certified Cecil Body of Knowledge.

[00:25:51] **Keyaan Williams:** I continued to teach the course. It's an accredited course, which adds a lot of value, and there are really only about two [00:26:00] dozen accredited cybersecurity certifications. And so the outcome from the course is that people will be a certified chief information security officer. Or they will be a certified information privacy manager because I cover cyber security and privacy management in a consolidated course.

[00:26:17] **Keyaan Williams:** The next session is on the 12th through the 16th of December. We're doing it as a hybrid, so if you're in Atlanta, you can look at me crack jokes in person. If you are elsewhere you can watch it on the video. And then we're doing a Black Friday sale. So there'll be plenty of information if people wanna sign.

[00:26:34] **Keyaan Williams:** Jump into a world class course that is accredited, get a good certification, which then sets everybody up for success in the new year. Perfect.

[00:26:44] **Christophe Foulon:** For those listening, we'll have the links and the details below. Keyaan, thank you very much for sharing your time with us today, sharing your leadership experience and advice.

[00:26:53] **Christophe Foulon:** We'd really do appreciate it..

[00:26:55] **Keyaan Williams:** Thank you. It is a pleasure to be here. I hope people got good insights. [00:27:00] And Chris, if you want to put my contact information in the chat as well, I'm happy to answer any questions that people have as follow ups. Will do.

[00:27:11] **Christophe Foulon:** Thank you all for listening to this episode of Breaking into Cybersecurity Leadership.