

A Conversation with Chris Denninger RIT Director of Public Safety

Facilitated by Luke Auburn

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Luke Auburn: You're listening to the RIT professional development podcast series. I'm your host Luke Auburn. Our guest today is Chris Denninger, RIT's director of public safety. He began his more than thirty-five year career at the university on patrol and was eventually promoted to director of public safety in 2007. In 2003 Chris earned his master's degree in human resources development from RIT and we're going to talk with him a little bit about his path and advice for people seeking to develop their own careers. Chris, thank you for joining us today.

Chris Denninger: Thanks for the invite, Luke. I really appreciate it.

Luke Auburn: So looking back on your career, did you have any idea where it was going to lead you? Did you always hope to lead this department or is that something that kind of evolved with time?

Chris Denninger: Yeah. I think it evolved. I mean when I was first hired at RIT I was twenty-three. So I thought it was a great opportunity when I started here. I had just finished my associate's degree. I was engaged to be married. So a lot of things were happening at that point in life. Right? So you fast forward a year, year and a half, down the road. And one of our directors at the time was really good about telling people when they did a good job engaging staff, saying, "Hey, you know what? I think you have a lot of potential." You know, that kind of engagement that kind of, you know, pumping up the team. So at that point in time I was a big sponge. Right? So I was like, "Oh, good. That's good to know." You think about it. You feel good about it. And it just kind of makes you want to be better even as a -- you know, a first level employee working the overnight shift.

Luke Auburn: That's interesting. So you talked a little bit about your mentors. Who was your mentor or who have been your mentors along the way?

Chris Denninger: Yeah. I'm glad you asked because the very first one was a woman by the name of Leslie Scoville. She was a director at the time. I can remember making a small mistake. I was the officer in charge on the overnight shift. Something got overlooked. And, you know, I had to meet with her, but I

was very honest with her about how the mistake was made. I fell on my sword. But at the end of the day, you know, she brought up the conversation at a future manager's meeting saying that she really appreciated the honesty, being forthright, not making excuses. So that kind of, you know -- She used my error as a, you know, jumping off point to use with other managers to say, "You know what? Yeah, a mistake was made, but I appreciate this type of candor, honesty." So that again is motivational.

Luke Auburn: And it sounds like she created a safe environment where you could fall down and she'd help pick you back up and then learn from mistakes?

Chris Denninger: Well, yeah. I mean everybody makes mistakes. I mean you don't want to see a repeat pattern, I'm sure from her point of view, but you know they say motivation is intrinsic and I really believe that it is even from a career perspective. But, you know, that type of engagement is certainly helpful.

Luke Auburn: So fast forward to now and you're the director. As a leader of your department, how do you find new opportunities for your staff to learn and grow and challenge themselves?

Chris Denninger: Well, first of all, we're blessed here with a strong, strong team which I think sometimes makes it even harder. But I think you have to walk the walk. Right? So if you and I worked together, Luke, and you know I was constantly talking about your career and how important it is to, you know, do X, Y and Z, but if you forced me to look in a mirror and I didn't do that, as a leader then you'd probably wonder, "Well, what's Chris talking about? You know, he's telling me how important it is." So I thought it was important to always for me personally look in the mirror from a career perspective, academically, saying, "Okay. You know what? I always see changes in the organization. Where am I at today? Where do I want to be down the road?" Because when you look at an organization you see changes. Right? Not only internally in our department, but on the landscape, this university, as a whole. So you look at those changes and look at the promotions and -- Or even people that have left university to other opportunities. And say, "Okay. Where am I at? Where do I need to be, you know, three years down the road, five years down the road? And am I there?" And obviously, you know, the answer hopefully for most people will be, "No." A lot of people, hey, they come here with bachelors and masters and continue training, but that's what I looked at. And then it made it easier to have conversations with other people here in our department. You know, we have a home grown program here. It's called Senior Master. It was part of my thesis and master's program here at the HR development program. And what that does, people that want to work harder and be promoted, earn some more money, and yet earn, you know, credit during courses in professional development, it's really cool because they'll gravitate. They'll perk right up to the top. Everyone in the organization knows about the program, but others will, you know, set up the one on one with me. And I consider myself like the dean of the program. I know deans here at the university probably wouldn't like me to say this, but they meet with me one on one. They develop their own career path for two promotions. And I think once they get in to that other future

they start to look -- They're future minded, I guess is what I want to say, because I want to say, "Okay. Great." You know? "I'm working toward my bachelors. I'm working on a certification." I see the landscape relative to what's happened in the last five years and what might happen in the next five years. And there's promotional opportunities. I think the last six or seven promotions within the organization, those staff were in the senior master program, but they did it themselves. You know, they weren't handpicked by me. Even the promotions. They weren't handpicked by me. They had to earn everything soup to nuts. So that's really cool, I think. And then engaging staff is also important because not everybody is eligible for the senior master. Right? We've got some high flying managers here in our shop. They have credentials. They're self-starters. My job is to stay out of their way, but you still have to be future minded. You just can't -- Even the self-starters have to look toward the future. So we've got, including myself, four people that are in various certification programs. But I think that really it's a snowball effect. Right? So Rod Lezette is in a certification program. So he talks to people in the organization. Lynn Daley just finished her certification to be an emergency manager. And now I'm in one as well for a threat assessment. I'm going to be a threat assessment professional. And our investigator, lead investigator, he's engaging now in a certification program. So it kind of just snowballs. People see the value. Right? So it's just not me asking you, Luke, right, as a manager to do something. They see the value. They see it not only here, but they see it outside of RIT as well. Right? I mean I look at it as some would leave our operation whether internally or externally of RIT to get in to a program or a profession that was outside of public safety. To me, that's a win-win. There is succession planning here. So hopefully someone internal will move in to that position. That person really improved themselves to the point where another employer outside the organization thought they were a value added. So it's win-win. But I think the key is for me as manager to engage people. To engage the staff. What makes them flow?

Luke Auburn: So it sounds like you lead by example, you put the structure in place, and then it's on them to kind of pick and choose their own path.

Chris Denninger: Well, yeah. I mean you'd like it to be that way. I'm sure if we were -- If we weren't in education, if we were, I don't know, maybe NSA or IBM or something where you actually -- Or not -- An accounting firm where you absolutely needed to complete certain coursework, right, over a period of time to re-up certifications and to stay on your game in that vein that you were in, sure. But my job is, you know, I have to think individually for myself, for staff, but also organizationally. When I leave here, when I retire, I want to leave the organization in the best possible position it can be in with our human resources. Right? They're A number 1. It's not the equipment we have. It's not the cars we drive. It's not the computer they use. It's our people. And we're blessed here with our team. They're top notch.

Luke Auburn: You talked a little bit about the degree that you pursued in 2003. You went back for your master's degree and what was the force that kind of drove you to pursue that degree and how did you identify that program that best fit your needs?

Chris Denninger: I identified a program I thought I could complete in a reasonable time. At that particular time the CAST program had a program where you could take four courses in a summer. So when I was looking at the HR development program I was like, "Holy cow. I can take, you know, two courses in June, two courses in August. There's 16 credits." So again I was in my early forties. Yes. A late bloomer. But still, you know, it's -- Once you get the bug and get the taste for education, you just want to -- You just want to keep it going. So that's why I picked HRD was because, number one, the time frame, but secondly I thought I had a relatively good knack for engaging and working with our staff. Because I just saw the value of it. My -- Our supervisors, managers here, think it's kind of corny, but I work for them. See, when you have a mentality of, "I work for all of the staff here, all of the officers, all the supervisors, all the managers," that really changes your perspective on leadership because you're going to want to do anything you can to help someone. And I mean in a -- You know, obviously with the highest ethics, but still they don't work for me. I work for them. And that really changes the whole context of leadership.

Luke Auburn: That's a great perspective to have. And finally what advice would you give to someone who is just starting to think about their own career development, whether they're within your department or someone else at RIT or beyond?

Chris Denninger: You just never know when an opportunity is going to knock. What I've seen over thirty-five years are some people who have come to me, you know, looking at an opportunity whether inside an organization or outside and say, "Hey, you know, what do you think? You think I have a shot? Do you think?" And when you really sit down and review the resume with them or see where they want to go, you know, sometimes you feel a little frustrated because they didn't -- The last three years, the last five years, they didn't show that interest or have an interest to continue their -- you know, to sharpen their skill set. So if you can look in the mirror and say, "Okay. If a position of interest comes to me two years out, three years out, how do I stand?" Right? Because it just comes down to competition and having that skill set and the professional certification or -- and the experience all combined. You really have to look at it that way. So I've just seen way too many disappointments where someone had the desire, but you know desire alone doesn't get you that next promotion. So work on it now, you know. Join professional organizations, network, whenever you can locally, continue with your education. I'm fifty-eight. I'm still engaged. I'm still engaged in the certification because you just don't know where it's going to take you down the road. And that's the exciting part. It gets you out of a funk that you might think you're in and really keeps you engaged.

Luke Auburn: Chris, it's been a pleasure. Thank you very much for your time. That concludes this edition of the RIT Professional Development Podcast series. For more information on how you can develop your career, visit RIT.edu/cpd.

Chris Denninger: Thanks, Luke. Really appreciate it.

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Luke Auburn: Thanks, Chris.

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