



People Who Help People

A chat with psychologist Duncan Hulsey

By LEE HURLEY Photo by BRIT HUCKABAY

Growing up in Mountain Brook, Duncan Hulsey decided to take the road less traveled. This decision was motivated by his grandfather, an intelligent and thoughtful psychiatrist with a great sense of humor. “He was an important mentor to me,” says Hulsey.

So Hulsey left Mountain Brook in 1988 for New England College in Henniker, New Hampshire. He earned a BA in Psychology and followed it with a Ph.D. in Counseling Psychology from the University of Memphis. Heading back to Birmingham in 2000, he started with Hillcrest Behavioral Health, serving as the Clinical Director of Psychology in the adolescent psychiatric facility. Not long after, Hulsey discovered business-oriented psychology. He realized he had found his best of both worlds by getting to counsel and use therapy while also helping businesses and business leaders achieve their personal and professional goals. With that in mind, Hulsey went to work for the Blankenship and Seay Consulting Group in 2001, where he worked his way up to partner and co-owner of the firm. His areas of practice include pre-employment selection, career assessment, executive coaching, succession planning, and leadership development. Hulsey works with a wide range of industries from manufacturing to financial services.

Duncan and his wife, Kelly, a landscape designer, have two children, Lily, 19, and Duncan, 17. Outside of work, he mentors men at Brother Bryan, travels annually to Bolivia with his family to help in an orphanage and serves or has served with several other church and civic activities. He also plays a mean banjo in the church band at the Advent.

PORTICO: What are some of the common leadership mistakes you see? **DUNCAN**

HULSEY: Avoiding conflict, which often creates more conflict.

By failing to address bad behavior or be honest with people, issues linger and people don’t grow or learn.

Are leaders under more stress today than, say, 20 years ago? There are different stressors; In larger companies, leaders may have to address social and political issues that can create conflict among their employees and negative publicity. Finding qualified people has become harder. There is also a greater willingness for younger employees to move around and switch jobs.

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How has COVID affected the workplace? Employees value autonomy, and working from home satisfied some of that need. Giving employees options in terms of when and where they get work done is essentially a “free benefit.” Also, business travel stopped for a period, and some of that will continue to be replaced by video communication like Zoom and Microsoft Teams.

What makes an effective leader? Most good leaders I’ve worked with can make hard decisions relatively quickly, while still being sensitive to people. They also ask good questions and rely on the experts around them.

What are some things executives ask for help on? Managing relationships is one. Another is succession planning; preparing the next generation of leaders. We will work with an entire company to improve the culture, evaluating individuals and teams, and providing coaching and feedback. We address each person first and then bring together the various departments for training sessions.

What is career coaching? We evaluate personality, interests, and values and make recommendations about career options. Having a good understanding of various business environments helps us to match the person with the right career path. We work with high school seniors and adults of all ages.

What is the strategic leadership program? We bring together leaders from different companies across the country to discuss common challenges and teach leadership skills. It’s an interactive seminar, which our participants really enjoy.

Can we apply at home what we learn at work? Yes. We teach listening techniques, which can also improve your marriage. We also talk about limiting your advice giving, which can be useful with your spouse or kids. **P**