

Interview with the Author: Mark Christiani, Influence Without Rank: Leadership, Culture, and Readiness in Tactical Human Performance

By Mark Christiani with Jillian Emma Hatcher and Jeremy Carter | https://doi.org/10.65832/mc175rbn

Disclaimer: The views in this article represent Mark Christiani's perspectives and do not reflect those of O2X Human Performance or the National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA).

Introduction

Mark Christiani is dedicated to developing the tactical professional (e.g., individuals serving in military, law enforcement, firefighter), tactical human performance support team, and area of tactical strength and conditioning (S&C) as a profession. He is a Registered Strength and Conditioning Coach (RSCC) with the National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA), holds the NSCA's Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist (CSCS) certification, and has over ten years of experience in coaching various athletic and tactical populations. Mark is an active member of the NSCA who is currently serving on the NSCA's Florida State Board of Advisors, and he was instrumental in developing the NSCA's Tactical Human Performance Mentorship Network Professional Development Group.

Mark holds a bachelor of science degree in Kinesiology and Health from Iowa State University and a master of science degree in Sports Medicine from Georgia Southern University. From 2013 to 2018, Mark was in the United States Army, serving with 1st Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment as a special operator, deploying to various combat zones. Mark has served as a Holistic Health and Fitness (H2F) contracted brigade lead strength and conditioning (S&C) coach for the 44th Medical Brigade, adjunct exercise science lecturer at Georgia Southern University, assistant S&C coach at Savannah State University, a football S&C intern at the University of South Carolina, and a human performance specialist at MetLife.

Currently, Mark serves as an O2X Human Performance Integration Manager. As part of the O2X team, he built the first Army Reserve human performance program in the Tampa Bay and Orlando regions in Florida, which encompass over 5,000 Army Reserve Soldiers from seventy different units. Furthermore, Mark has presented at various NSCA events, including the 2025 Tactical Strength and Conditioning Clinic. He has written for various organizations and been a guest on several S&C and fitness podcasts. In September 2026, Mark published his book, *Influence Without Rank: Leadership, Culture, and Readiness in Tactical Human Performance*. In this article, we ask Mark about some of the topics that he discusses in his book.

What made you want to write your recent book?

I wanted to write this book because I kept seeing good human performance professionals struggle for reasons that had little to do with their technical knowledge. They understood programming, physiology, recovery, and injury reduction, but many had never been taught how to enter an organization, earn trust, work through resistance, or influence people when they did not have formal authority. In tactical settings, those skills often determine whether a technically sound program is used or ignored.

My own perspective came from seeing human performance from several sides. I experienced an established system as a US Army Ranger, worked inside collegiate S&C programs, led coaches within the Army's H2F program, and later helped build support for Army Reserve units that had no previous human performance structure. Those experiences taught me that a program does not become part of an organization because it looks good on paper. It becomes part of the organization when people trust the professionals who are delivering it and see that the program helps them perform their mission. I wrote *Influence Without Rank* to give coaches and other human performance professionals a practical framework for that work. I wanted to address the aspects of leadership, relationship, communication, and daily behaviors that help good ideas take hold and continue after the person who introduced them is gone.



Pictured above is Coach Christiani (right) and James Leath after completing the West Palm Beach 9/11 Stair Climb.

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The S&C community emphasizes the science of training (i.e., repetitions, exercise technique, exercise selection, rest intervals, intensity, periodization, etc.), much more than the art of training. However, centric to your book is the insight that leadership is critical to eliciting human performance.

Why is leadership important for human performance professionals, especially in the tactical community, for eliciting performance?

The science of training gives us the base for making good decisions, but leadership determines whether those decisions ever reach the people who need them. A coach can write an excellent program with the right exercises, volume, intensity, and progression, yet it has little value if the athlete does not trust the coach, the leader does not provide effective access, or the organization does not see how the program supports the mission. Human performance is delivered through people, so technical knowledge and leadership cannot be separated.

This reality is especially true in tactical organizations. Human performance professionals often lead without rank or command authority. We cannot order a Service member, firefighter, police officer, or special operator to trust us. We earn the opportunity to influence behavior through our reputation, our consistency, and the way that we treat people. Showing up prepared, following through, listening before prescribing, protecting someone's dignity, and adapting when the situation changes are leadership behaviors. They create the conditions in which coaching can work.

Leadership also helps a specialist understand that the best individual answer may not be the best organizational answer at that moment. Tactical professionals operate within missions, schedules, traditions, and chains of command. A coach must be able to explain why a recommendation matters and to find a practical way to move the organization forward. The goal is not just to prove that our method is correct; the goal is to improve readiness. When we build trust and connect our expertise to the mission, people are more willing to tell us what is really happening, then commit to the process. That point is where the science begins to produce results.

How does pressure reveal leadership? What advice do you have about leadership under pressure?

Pressure tends to remove the version of ourselves that we present when everything is easy. It exposes our habits, priorities, and level of preparation. A leader may talk about trust, communication, and taking care of people, but the real test comes when time is short, the plan is failing, or the consequences feel high. Under those conditions, people notice whether or not the leader becomes reactive, blames others, hides information, or remains steady enough to help the team make the next good decision.

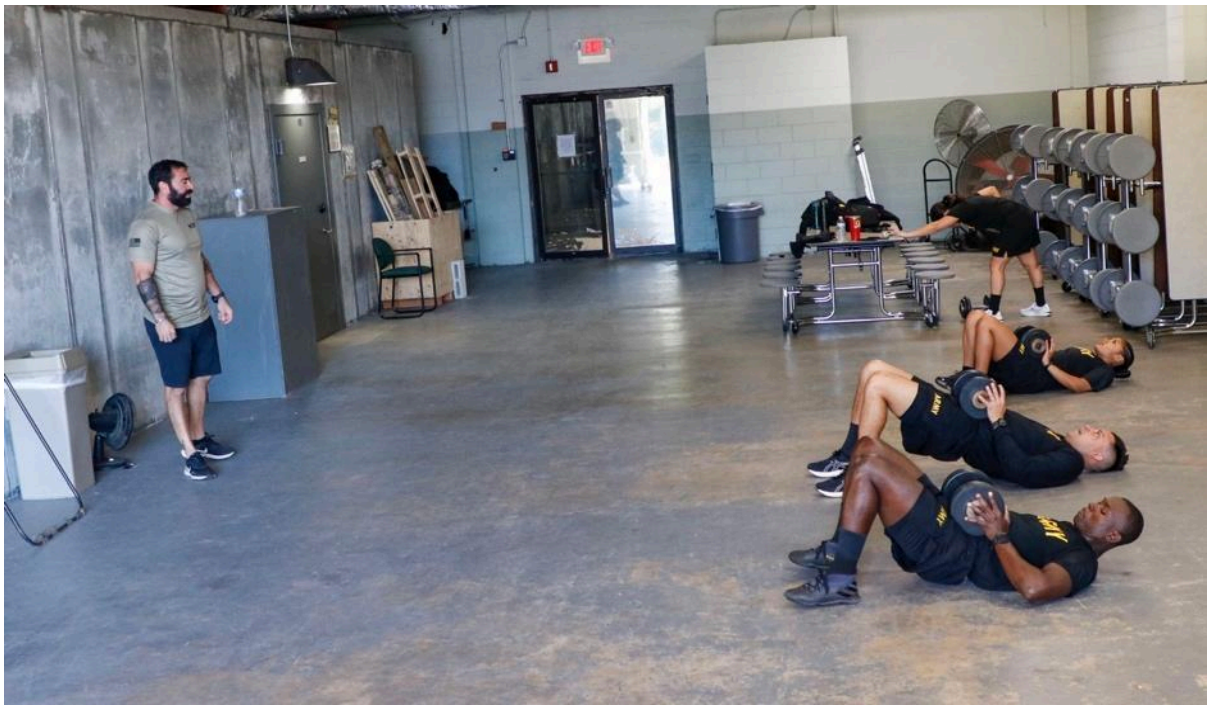
My advice is to build the habits that you want to rely on before the pressure arrives. Know the mission, clarify who owns each decision, communicate early, and make it safe for people to report problems before they become emergencies. When pressure rises, slow yourself down enough to understand what is actually happening. This principle does not mean moving slowly when action is required. It means avoiding the impulse to confuse immediate movement with effective action. State what you know, admit what you do not know, establish the priority, and give people clear direction. Protect their dignity, especially when correcting a mistake in front of others.

Afterward, review the decision honestly. A leader should be willing to say what went well, what did not, and what must change before the next event. Pressure will reveal weaknesses in communication and preparation, but that revealment is useful if the leader does not become defensive. The goal is not to appear unaffected; the goal is to provide enough clarity and stability that the team can continue to perform.

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To hear more from Coach Christiani, the reader can hear him speak with Coach Nick O'Brien on *The Strength Game Podcast*, episode 179, which can be found on The Strength Game website, YouTube, Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and iHeart Radio.



Shown above is Coach Christiani Leading a physical training session for an Army Reserve Unit.

What do you believe is one of the most powerful things a leader can say?

One of the most powerful things a leader can say is, "I missed that. Here is how I am correcting it." This phrase matters because it combines ownership with action. It does not hide the mistake, shift responsibility, or ask the team to pretend that nothing happened. It acknowledges the gap and makes the next step visible. It shows that accountability applies to the leader as much as it applies to everyone else.

An accurate admission from a leader does not weaken the standard. It demonstrates it. People do not expect leaders to be perfect, but they pay close attention to what happens when a leader falls short. When the leader responds without excuses and follows through on the correction, people become more willing to raise concerns, share bad news early, and admit their own mistakes. In human performance, we work with complex people in changing environments, so we will not get every decision right. We may misread a unit, prescribe too much, communicate poorly, or push an idea before we have earned enough trust. Ownership allows the relationship to recover and gives the team a useful example of the honesty and self-awareness we ask from others.

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You spent your enlistment serving with the 1st Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, the United States Army's premier light infantry, where you conducted multiple Special Operation Forces (SOF) missions and deployed to combat. You also spent time being an S&C coach in Division 1 athletics. Both organizations had established human performance programs. However, when you joined the first wave of the Army's large-scale H2F rollout at Fort Bragg, you had to help build a human performance program. What are the first

steps a human performance professional can and should take to start building a program from scratch?

My first step would be to resist the urge to try to prove value by immediately launching a large program. When I joined the early Army H2F rollout at Fort Bragg, I believed that my experience as a Ranger and a collegiate S&C coach had prepared me. I eventually realized that experience inside two established human performance programs was different from helping build one in an organization that did not yet understand what a strength coach could contribute. I first needed to understand the unit's mission, calendar, leadership priorities, resources, fitness gaps, and previous experiences with human performance. This step requires listening to leaders and Service members, observing training, and asking where the organization already feels friction.

From there, identify the people who can provide access and the people whose informal influence shapes participation. Learn their language and connect the program to problems that they already want to solve. Start with a few services that are visible, useful, and realistic. Unit consultation, run clinics, or modifications for Service members in pain can establish credibility faster than an elaborate plan that the unit cannot execute. Follow up on every commitment. Early trust grows when people see that you do what you said that you would do.

At the same time, build simple systems for communication, scheduling, referrals, documentation, and outcome tracking. Measure what leaders value but remember to include stories and feedback that show how the service affects real people. Finally, design for continuity. A program should not depend on one charismatic coach or one supportive commander. Create repeatable processes, develop relationships across levels, and teach unit leaders enough to carry good practices forward. The early objective is to earn the next opportunity. Consistent small wins create the access and trust required to build something larger.

What happens when we treat urgency as permission to skip understanding?

We often act quickly on the wrong problem. In tactical settings, urgency is real. Leaders have limited time, missions change, and performance problems can carry serious consequences. But urgency can also create pressure to arrive with an answer before we understand the problem. When this bypassing of clarification happens, it can lead to programs that look decisive but do not fit the organization. At best, the programs are ignored. At worst, they create more friction, increase risk, and damage trust in the entire human performance team.

Understanding does not require months of analysis before doing anything. It requires enough discipline to ask a few essential questions: What outcome matters? What is already being done? Who is affected? What barriers are people facing? What does success look like here? We can often take a useful first step while continuing to learn, but we should be clear that it is a first step rather than pretending that we have solved the whole problem. People can tell when a professional is listening and when that person is simply waiting to deliver a predetermined solution.

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What do you mean when you say, "Audit what has become normal?"

Every organization develops routines that eventually stop being questioned. Some of those habits support performance. Others continue because they are familiar, because no one wants to challenge them, or because the cost has become so common that people no longer notice it. To audit what has become

normal means deliberately examining those accepted practices and asking whether they still serve the mission.

In human performance, auditing what has become normal might mean reviewing a training practice that repeatedly produces avoidable injuries, a schedule that makes support inaccessible, or a culture in which people hide pain because asking for help is treated as weakness. It can also involve smaller behaviors: missed follow-ups, sarcasm toward someone who asks a basic question, or meetings in which disciplines share updates but never coordinate care. Repetition can make each of those behaviors feel normal even when they undermine readiness. An audit should begin with observation and questions rather than accusation. Ask why the practice exists, what problem it was meant to solve, who benefits from it, and what outcomes it produces now. Culture changes when people are willing to notice the gap between what the organization says it values and what its daily behavior actually rewards.

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What do you mean when you say, "Win the person, not the argument?"

Being correct is not the same as being influential. Human performance professionals can have strong evidence and sound recommendations and still lose the opportunity to help because of how they deliver the message. If we embarrass someone, dismiss their experience, or make the conversation about proving our expertise, we may win the argument in that moment and lose the relationship that would have allowed change to occur.

Winning the person means treating trust, dignity, and shared purpose as part of the solution. Start by understanding why the other person holds a position. A leader may be protecting training time, a Service member may have had a poor experience with a previous coach, or another professional may see a risk that we have missed. Listening does not require us to abandon the standard. It gives us the information needed to explain the recommendation in a way that connects what matters to the ones we are serving. Questions, private correction, and practical options usually create more movement than a public display of who knows more.

This approach is especially important when we lead without formal authority. We cannot force someone to value our expertise, but we can show that we respect their role and care about the same mission. Sometimes the right outcome is a smaller first step that builds the relationship and creates evidence for the next conversation. Importantly, it is not about avoiding conflict; it is instead about choosing an approach that keeps influence available. The long-term measure is whether the person becomes more willing to communicate and make a better decision the next time.

"Winning the person means treating trust, dignity, and shared purpose as part of the solution."



Shown above is Coach Christiani with the 143rd ESC out of Orlando Florida

You state that "presence proves intent." What do you mean by this phrase?

People judge our priorities partly by where we choose to spend our time. In tactical organizations, saying that we support the mission is easy. Being present when the work is inconvenient shows that the statement is real. Presence means going to the training area, attending the meeting, observing the job, and being available when the people we serve are actually working to increase their readiness. It allows us to understand their environment and shows that we are willing to meet them there.

One of the clearest examples for me was when a coaching staff that I led supported a unit conducting the Norwegian Foot March (18.64 miles with a 24.25 pound ruck) at midnight. We were not required to be there. We showed up, helped care for feet, provided simple endurance fuel, and encouraged Soldiers as they worked through the event. That night built more trust than another presentation about our capabilities could have built. The Soldiers saw that the staff wanted to share part of their experience and help when it mattered.

Presence also improves the quality and validity of our recommendations. When we observe the mission, we see constraints that do not appear on a spreadsheet or calendar. We learn the language, pace, equipment, and small barriers that shape behavior. Presence should have a purpose; simply occupying space is not integration. We still have to listen, contribute, and follow through. Over time, consistent presence communicates commitment. It proves that the program exists for the organization and its people, rather than asking the organization to rearrange itself around the program.

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What is the "walk test"?

The walk test is an informal measure of integration that I learned from my former boss, Drew Hammond. When you walk across the area where the unit works, what happens? Do people wave, use your name, stop to talk, ask a question, or tell you about a problem? Do leaders introduce you as part of the team? Those small interactions are signals that people know who you are, understand why you are there, and feel comfortable approaching you.

It is not a formal metric and should not replace participation data, outcomes, or feedback. It is a practical check on integration that those numbers may miss. A coach can report a high number of sessions while still being viewed as an outsider. Conversely, a brief conversation during the walk may lead someone to mention pain, poor sleep, or a training concern early enough for the team to help. This form of access and insight is typically built through reputation and rapport long before the conversation occurs.

If no one acknowledges the specialist, I would not assume that the organization is the problem. I would examine whether we are visible, approachable, consistent, and useful. Are we spending time where people work? Do we follow up? Have we learned names? Do our schedules create access? The goal is not popularity; rather, the goal is enough trust that communication happens before a small issue becomes a larger problem.

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Why does an organization need high standards and high support? What happens when the two are not linked?

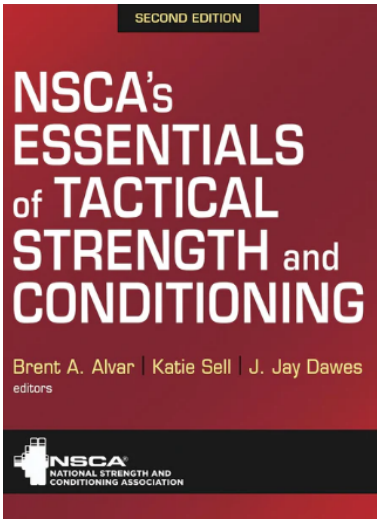
High standards tell people what the mission requires. High support gives them a realistic path to meet those requirements. An organization needs both because accountability without

resources, coaching, time, and honest feedback eventually becomes punishment. People may comply when they are watched, but they also learn to hide injuries, avoid difficult conversations, and protect themselves from failure. The standard may remain on paper while actual performance declines.

High support without high standards creates a different problem. People may feel cared for, but expectations become unclear and improvement becomes optional. A human performance program should help people succeed while remaining honest about what their role demands. Support can include individualized coaching, education, rehabilitation, modifications, access to specialists, better scheduling, or a clear progression back to the required level. It does not mean removing every difficult requirement.

The connection between standards and support also builds trust. When leaders raise an expectation, people look for evidence that the organization is equally committed to helping them reach it. If a unit expects higher fitness, it should provide appropriate training, and qualified coaching to prepare and then achieve it. If a coach expects and desires consistent participation, the coach must be prepared, accessible, and responsive. Standards define the destination, while support helps people close the gap between their current capacity and the destination. When the two are linked, accountability feels credible, because the organization is sharing responsibility for the outcome.

"The connection between standards and support also builds trust. When leaders raise an expectation, people look for evidence that the organization is equally committed to helping them reach it."



Pictured is *NSCA's Essentials of Tactical Strength and Conditioning*, Second Edition, edited by Brent A. Alvar, Katie Sell, and J. Jay Dawes.

What is the difference between a multidisciplinary team and an interdependent team? How can one create an interdependent team?

A multidisciplinary team can consist of several excellent professionals who work near one another but still operate in separate lanes. The strength coach writes the program, the athletic trainer manages the injury, the dietitian discusses nutrition, and the mental performance professional addresses mindset. Each person may do good work, but the athlete is responsible for connecting the recommendations. Information is shared occasionally, and success is often measured within each discipline rather than against a common readiness outcome.

An interdependent team recognizes that one discipline's decisions affect the work of every other discipline. The professionals maintain their scope and expertise, but they plan, communicate, and solve problems together. For example, an athletic trainer's return-to-duty plan affects training volume; the strength coach's observations may identify a nutrition or recovery concern; and the mental performance professional may help the athlete manage fear or confidence during the return. No single specialist owns the entire answer.

Creating that kind of team requires role clarity, shared goals, and repeatable communication. The group should agree on what readiness means for the population, establish referral and handoff processes, and create regular opportunities to review cases or organizational trends. Specialists need enough understanding of one another's work to recognize when a referral is needed, without

practicing outside their scope. Leaders also must reward collaboration rather than protection of perceived "territory." Interdependence grows when people share information early, ask for another discipline's perspective, and give credit across the team. The athlete should experience one coordinated system instead of several separate services.

What do you mean when you say "communication creates culture?"

What leaders repeatedly talk about becomes important. What they ignore becomes optional. What they punish becomes hidden. Communication tells people what matters, what is safe to discuss, and which behaviors the organization rewards. A leader can say that readiness and early reporting are priorities, but if someone is embarrassed for admitting pain or fatigue, the response communicates a stronger message than the policy. People learn the real culture by watching what happens after they speak. Communication also includes what is left unsaid. When expectations are vague, decisions are not explained, or feedback disappears, people fill the gaps with assumptions. People should know what is expected, why it matters, who owns the next action, and whether the issue was resolved.

Human performance professionals contribute to culture every time that they teach, correct, listen, refer, or follow up. Our tone matters. Our responsiveness matters. Our body language matters. The way that each human performance discipline speaks about one another matters. Communication creates culture because it turns stated values into daily experience. When the message and the behavior match over time, people begin to trust that the standard is real.

"People should know what is expected, why it matters, who owns the next action, and whether the issue was resolved."

Why should tactical human performance professionals build for the least convenient day?

Tactical professionals do not perform only when the schedule, equipment, sleep, and staffing are ideal. Their least convenient day may include a night shift, travel, an unexpected mission, limited facilities, family stress, or accumulated fatigue. If a human performance program works only during a perfect training week, it will fail when the organization needs it most. Building for the least convenient day means designing options that can survive real conditions. Training should have clear priorities, simple modifications, and useful versions for different amounts of time and equipment. Education should be available in formats that reach people who cannot attend a scheduled class. Coaches should create touchpoints across the year so that readiness does not depend on a traditional season or one uninterrupted plan.

This approach also requires learning which constraints are truly unavoidable and which barriers the program can remove. We can adjust delivery without lowering the standard. The aim is consistent progress and access under imperfect conditions. A resilient program is one that people can still use when life becomes complicated, because those are often the days when good guidance has the greatest value.

You state that mentorship is not the same as advice. You are heavily involved in the NSCA's Tactical Human Performance Mentorship Network Professional Development Group. What should the reader know about this mentorship program provided by the NSCA?

Advice can be useful, but it is usually a recommendation given at one point in time. Mentorship is a relationship built through context, follow-up, reflection, and accountability. The mentor is not there to create a copy of

themselves, provide every answer, or use the mentee's passion and effort to assist in their own career development. A mentor learns what the mentee is trying to accomplish, helps identify gaps, asks questions, and stays involved long enough to see how decisions work in practice.

The NSCA Tactical Human Performance Mentorship Network was created to make that kind of relationship more accessible to professionals who want to enter or grow within the tactical field. Through the NSCA's Tactical Strength and Conditioning Professional Development Group, we connect mentees with experienced practitioners from military, firefighting, law enforcement, and related human performance settings. The network has grown to more than eighty volunteer mentors and has produced over 100 reported mentor-mentee pairings. That response shows both the demand for guidance and the willingness of experienced professionals to help the next generation.

We encourage each pair to begin with a needs analysis and clear expectations. The mentee should identify goals, questions, and the kind of support that would be most useful. The mentor should be honest about their experience, availability, and boundaries. A successful relationship may address career preparation, professional development, networking, technical growth, or the realities of working inside a tactical organization. It is not a guaranteed job placement service. Its value comes from consistent engagement and the chance to learn from someone who understands the field through the perspective of years of experience. The strongest pairings are active on both sides: mentors provide perspective and access, while mentees prepare, follow through, and take ownership of their development.

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Become a mentor or a mentee in the National Strength and Conditioning Association's Tactical Professional Development Group, the reader can follow the above QR Codes.



Shown above is Coach Christiani demonstrating the trap bar deadlift during an AFT familiarization session.