PODCAST: Captain 'Sully' Sullenberger On How To Thrive Under Extreme Pressure

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On January 15th, 2009 Captain Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger led a crew that crash landed in the icy Hudson River an Airbus A320. A bird strike shortly after takeoff from LaGuardia had crippled both engines of US Airways Flight 1549. Sully had seconds to react—could he to return to LaGuardia in time or did he need to land some where else? He realized quickly the only option was a dramatic water landing in the Hudson.

Captain Sully joined me on The Forbes Interview podcast to talk about how he saved Flight 1549, how to thrive under pressure in business and life, how to build a team that manages risk, his world after the crash landing, and the future of transportation and self-driving cars.

Some highlights:

Captain Sullenberger on how to manage risk:

We have to have situational awareness--we have to be able to create a mental model of our reality. We have to be good risk mangers, be mindful, we have to understand our process so we can sensitize ourselves to risk. Bad outcomes are rarely the a result of a single failure but are instead the end result of a chain of events, and when we sensitize ourselves to risk and are able to identify it proactively we can break the chain and have a good outcome.

How Sully's dramatic Hudson landing was a product of more than 40 years of diligent training and curiosity:

By the time I was five years old the die was cast. I knew was going to be a pilot and I'd spend my life flying airplanes. I was fortunate enough to be able to do it. My grades were good enough, my eyesight was good enough, I had opportunities I got to take advantage of at every juncture. I learned to fly at 16, got my private license at 17, and my commercial license at 18. By 20 I was a flight instructor in airplanes and gliders. It's fueled my life all the way because I was curious. I'd eat, breath, drink, and sleep flying. I couldn't get enough of it. I wanted to be the most complete pilot and eventually captain and person I could be.

Sully on how training, team work, and changes in behavior made air travel the safest
We didn't know or understand what we do now. We didn't know that human skills a apart from technical skills. In the bad old days a pilot might be arrogant, autocratic, and didn't listen to others. He didn't see the need for a team building approach and the accident rate reflected that. Back in the early 1960s there was a fatal airline accident every few weeks. It was something that would be unimaginable today.