

Doug Smith ([00:00](#)):

Hey, leader, and welcome to episode number 340 of the L3 Leadership Podcast, where we are obsessed with helping you grow to your maximum potential and to maximize the impact of your leadership. My name is Doug Smith and I am your host, and today's episode is brought to you by my friends at Beratung Advisors. If you're new to the podcast, welcome. I'm so glad that you're here, and I hope that you'll enjoy our content and become a subscriber. Know that you can also watch all of our episodes over on our YouTube channel, so make sure you're subscribed there as well. And as always, if you've been listening to the podcast for a while and it's impacted your life, it would mean the world to me if you would leave us a rating and review on Apple Podcast or Spotify, or whatever app you listen to podcast through that really does help us to grow our audience and reach more leaders.

Doug Smith ([00:37](#)):

So thank you in advance for that. Well, in today's episode, you're gonna hear one of my favorite conversations I've ever had in my entire life with Mike Sullivan, Coach of the Pittsburgh Penguins. I am a huge hockey fan, huge Penns fan. And to watch that back to back Stanley Cup run, that they had when Mike Sullivan took over was absolutely incredible. And so the fact that I got to sit down with him and talk about leadership and what it took to get there was just one of the highlights of my life. And so, in the interview you're gonna hear Coach Sullivan and I talk about his journey to becoming a head coach, which is crazy. I think it'll greatly encourage you. We'll talk about his favorite leadership principles, what it's like to lead a locker room full of stars, and so much more. So if you're a hockey fan, a sports fan, or just a fan of leadership, which I hope you are, if you're listening to this, you're gonna love this conversation.

Doug Smith ([01:23](#)):

But before we dive into that, just a few announcements. This episode of the L3 Leadership Podcast is sponsored by Beratung Advisors. The financial advisors at Beratung Advisors help educate and empower clients to make informed financial decisions. You can find out how Beratung Advisors can help you develop a customized financial plan for your financial future by visiting their [Beratungadvisors.com](#). That's B E R A T U N G advisors.com. Securities, investments and products and services offered through LPL Financial member Finra, S I P C, Beratung Advisors, LPL Financial and L3 Leadership are separate entities. I also wanna thank our sponsor, Henne Jewelers. There are owned by my friend and mentor, John Henne. My wife Laura and I got our engagement and wedding rings at He Jewelers and we just loved our experience. And not only do they have great jewelry, but they also invest in people. In fact, for every couple that comes in engaged, they give them a book to help them prepare for marriage. And we just love that. So if you were in need of a good jeweler, check out [hennejewelers.com](#). And with all that being said, let's dive right in. Here's my conversation with Pittsburgh Penguin Coach Mike Sullivan.

Doug Smith ([02:26](#)):

Coach, thank you so much for taking a few minutes to do this interview. And I just wanna start off, you've just went back to back Stanley Cups, and I'm just curious, do you have a favorite memory from each and the run that you had?

Mike Sullivan ([02:37](#)):

Well, I think probably the, uh, my favorite recollection of, of both cups is, uh, is when we were, the coaches were standing together on the ice and watching each respective player raise the cup over their heads. Uh, for me, it, it brought back so many, uh, different, uh, memories of defining moments

through the course of the playoffs that, that these, these guys, uh, you know, made such a commitment to for us to win. So, you know, when, when I was standing there watching them, uh, raise the couple over their heads and see the, the emotion on their faces, uh, it's just raw emotion. And, uh, I was, I couldn't be more proud of this group or, or this group of players for, you know, what they've been able to accomplish. And, and I think when it really hit me in both years, uh, when I, when we were all standing on the ice and the coaching staff was kind of, you know, down in the corner, just, uh, just taking it all in.

Doug Smith ([03:32](#)):

Yeah. That's amazing. And thank you from a fan perspective for all the memories you guys gave us. Uh, I am curious, so you spent 11 years in NHL as a player, and obviously you played a lot before that. Now you've been a coach for several years. What do you wish you knew about leadership when you were a player that you now know as a coach? Or what do you wish your players knew about the responsibility that comes with coaching?

Mike Sullivan ([03:51](#)):

Well, I think, you know, leadership, uh, leadership man manifests itself in, in a lot of different ways. And, uh, what I've been able to witness over the last two years watching this group of players come together as a team is that every single player on this team at some point during the course of, of the seasons has been called upon the lead in some way, shape, or form. And I think that's what brings teams together, and that's what makes great teams great. And so some leaders are vocal and, uh, and, and that's how it manifests itself. Other le other leaders lead by example, and they might be quiet leaders. Uh, other leaders are just, uh, situational when, when circumstances arise with some of the challenges that the, that the league presents, uh, and, and players arise in certain situations to help us overcome challenges. And so I, I think when you, when I look back and, and, and reflect on the last two seasons in particular in this particular group of players, and for the most part we've had the same group, uh, for two years in a row, two seasons in a row. It's, uh, that's the biggest thing that jumps out at me. It's not just when people think about, you know, our leadership group, Yes, we have guys that wear letters on their sweaters and, and myself as the head coach take on a leadership role, uh, because of, of my title. But I think what really makes great teams great is when everyone right through the bench, uh, takes on some sort of a leadership role throughout the course of each respective season.

Doug Smith ([05:31](#)):

Yeah. You talked about the different kind of leaders. I'm just curious, how, how would you describe yourself as a leader? How do you lead?

Mike Sullivan ([05:38](#)):

Uh, I think as, as a head coach, you have to lead in a lot of ways. Sometimes, sometimes it's vocal, uh, sometimes it isn't, You know, sometimes, you know, sometimes as a head coach you have to gain control by, by relinquishing control. And so, you know, by empowering others. And, and so, you know, one of the things that I've tried to do here in Pittsburgh with this penguins group, you know, since I became the head coach, was, was to give the players some ownership for what goes on here. You know, we want 'em to have a stake in the game. Uh, I, I think it helps us, uh, with buy in as far as what we're trying to sell as the, as the coaching staff to this group of players. Everything from style of play to how we come to the rink every day and how we behave. So, uh, you know, I I'm a strong believer that, uh, when, when our players have a stake in the game and take ownership, uh, for, for what goes on on a day

to day basis, it certainly helps us, uh, as far as the sell on getting buy in to what we're trying to accomplish here.

Doug Smith ([06:36](#)):

Yeah. I wanna talk a little bit about your journey. It's been a crazy journey it seems like. So you start off as coach in Boston, had a great year, not so great year, got let go, became an assistant coach for many years, then you went to Chicago's Player Development, then you go to the minor leagues and then all of a sudden you get called up again to the pens and win two cups. What, what do you wish people knew about that leadership journey? What are maybe one or two lessons you learned along the way?

Mike Sullivan ([07:00](#)):

Well, I think, you know, the first thing that jumps out at me is that, you know, the coaching profession is hard. And, uh, there are certain things that you can control and there are certain things that you can't. And, uh, it's a learning process. And I think all coaches, uh, go through it. You know, I call it the evolution of a coach. You know, when you're a young coach, you're, you're trying to be diligent and you, you dot every eye and cross every t and you check every box. And, uh, and, and you do everything within your power to try to help your team have success. I think as you evolve as a coach, you start to learn the nuances of, of the profession. And, and I think a lot of it boils down with managing people, how you interact with your players and, uh, and the only way you learn that is through experience.

Mike Sullivan ([07:45](#)):

And so, uh, I think first and foremost, the coaching profession is hard. I have so much respect for all of those coaches that are, that are in it, uh, because you really have to love what you're doing in order to stay in it, because it, it, more often than not, you fail. There's only one coaching staff every year that celebrates <laugh>. And, and the rest of them are, uh, you know, are trying to figure out how do we, how do we get to the top of the mountain? And so, uh, that's just the reality of the business that we chose. Uh, so I think you really have to love what you're doing in order to stay in it. And I think when you look at, uh, my journey to, to being, becoming the head coach of the Pittsburgh Penguins, it's a perfect example. You know, I thought after my experience with Boston and I, I thought it was, it was worthwhile for me to take a step back and be an assistant coach.

Mike Sullivan ([08:33](#)):

I fast tracked to that head coaching position. I was, I was one year removed as a player when I was the head coach of the Boston Bruins. I was 35 years old. Wow. And so I was coaching some players in Boston that I had played with, with the year that I had played for the Bruins. And that's an interesting dynamic. Yeah. And so I, I fast track to that position. And so I thought it made sense for me if I was gonna be in this for the long term, to take a step back, work with someone that's had success, has won a Stanley Cup, has won championships at different levels, and, and, and learn and see how they go about their business every day. How do they interact with the star players? Uh, how do they handle certain situations and challenges that this league presents?

Mike Sullivan ([09:14](#)):

Cause inevitably it's a challenging league. Yeah. You know, there's a, there's, it's a competitive league. There's a lot of bright, smart people in every aspect of this business. And so I thought that was a worthwhile experience for me, and that was why I made the decision to join Torts down in Tampa when I, when I became torts as assistant. And I told torts that when I went down there, my had aspirations to

be a head coach, but I wanted to learn from him and try to help him have success. And so, uh, that, that was my motivation when I, when I chose to, to become an assistant coach. My hope was I didn't have to stay there as long as I did. It was almost a decade. Yeah. Before I had an opportunity to be a head coach again. Uh, but that's the nature of the business.

Mike Sullivan ([09:55](#)):

It's a hard business. There's a lot of really good coaches. There's only a finite amount of positions. And so, uh, you know, it's, it's gonna challenge your resolve and it's gonna, uh, it's gonna challenge, uh, your passion for what you do. Uh, there were some, there were some days when, you know, I would wake up and say, you know, am I ever gonna get another chance? Is this worth it? And so, uh, but, but I, I chose to stick with it because I love the game. I love being on the ice. I love the interaction with the players. I love the sport of hockey. I love, I love everything that comes with it. And so, uh, and part of what comes with it is, is it's gonna knock you down. Yeah. And you're gonna have to be prepared to, you know, get up, dust yourself off and get back in the fight. If, if that's, if that's, this is the profession that you chose, I think you gotta be pre prepared for that type of an experience. And, uh, and so I, you know, I, I can't be more grateful for the opportunity that I've been given here with this, with this Pittsburgh Penguins team. Uh, you know, I I, I took over this team at, at, at a time when they were vulnerable. Uh, but they're really good people and they're really good players and it's a privilege to coach this group.

Doug Smith ([11:05](#)):

Yeah. Walk me through that. So you had a decade of preparation almost before you step in your next head coach role, you get the head coach rule, you walk into a locker room, there's si, Crosby, Malcolm Flurry, Letang. The team wasn't performing up to its potential and you did something right. You, you turned it around, you got buy in. Can you talk about what was it like and what was your strategy going into that locker room? How did you get the buy-in of the team so quickly and turn things around?

Mike Sullivan ([11:29](#)):

Well, I think, you know, when you, when you look at our dressing room, uh, on the outside, it can be an intimidating dressing room to walk into. You know, we have a lot of star power, We have a lot of stature in that room. And so we have a lot of players that have, uh, have a lot of, have accomplished a lot in this game. And so from that standpoint, it can be an intimidating dressing room to walk into. Uh, having said that, my experience over the years of coaching other teams and star players in the league had prepared me for that, for that circum, that very circumstance and that very situation, you know, when I first took the team over, uh, I think, uh, when I, when I think about the mindset that the group was in, uh, they were vulnerable. You know, when whenever there's a coaching change, it's, it's usually because expectations haven't been met.

Mike Sullivan ([12:16](#)):

And so, um, a coach in, in a lot of situations becomes, um, you know, the first decision or the first, the first line of defense. And, and so, um, you know, it's, it's hard to change 20 players. So usually there's a, there's a coaching change when that, when that type of a situation arises in our game. And so I knew they were vulnerable and, uh, and this is a proud group. They're good players, They have a lot of pride, they all want to do well. And, and so, you know, they were overwhelmed by the circumstance. So when I took the team over, I knew one of my first challenges was to try to free them up a little bit and to allow them to play and act on their instincts. They, I had to find a way to get them not so much focused on the situation they're in or the overwhelming circumstance, uh, and more focused on the game itself.

Mike Sullivan ([13:07](#)):

The process. Let's just focus on the process. You know, So our very first meeting when I, when I met with them in the locker room, you know, I looked around the room and I said, When I look around this room, I see a lot of great hockey players that have accomplished a lot in this game. No one has more respect for the players in this room than me. And that, And I said, Our challenge is, is to find a way to become a great team because great players don't win championships in this league. Great teams win championships. And, and that was the very first meeting that I had with them. And then, and then I talked to them about not, not so much listening to what people are saying about us. Cuz at the time, you know, every, you know, there were a lot of critics saying Crosby was on the downside and Malcolm was on the downside.

Mike Sullivan ([13:50](#)):

And you know, this Pittsburgh Penguin's core, their best years were behind them. And that was the, that was the talk going on around the team. And I think our players, they felt it. These guys are human beings. Yeah. You know, they have feelings and, uh, and so I try to shield them from that. And we try to get away from, uh, that, the focus on that and just come into the rink every day and just focus in on hockey. Let's just try to get better every day. Let's come to the rink. Let's have a good attitude, put a smile on your face. We'll celebrate the small successes and we'll try to get better reaching every day. And we will slowly but surely work our way out of it, but it's gonna be a daily endeavor and we're gonna have to rely on one another. And, and that was the first meeting that I had with them. And we slowly but surely crawled our way out of the hole that we were in. And, and I have to tell you, it was, uh, it was a pleasure to watch these guys come together as a group.

Doug Smith ([14:39](#)):

Yeah. So, so you got the respect, you won a cup. As I've watched your leadership from afar, you've had to make some tough decisions, right? Who, who's playing, when to set people, all these different decisions you make. Can you talk about, from a leader's perspective, making the hard decisions, having the hard conversations to bring out the best in your players?

Mike Sullivan ([14:58](#)):

Sure. I, I, I think it's hard to be a head coach in this league. Um, if you are not willing or prepared to make those types of decisions, Uh, cuz that's the responsibility that you're, that you have. And so my approach with this group and some of the difficult decisions that I've made have, have been just based on honesty. And, you know, we sit as a, as a coaching staff and a management team, and we discuss, um, those types of decisions. I rely a lot on our, on the people around me. Uh, I have, you know, I'm very fortunate to be surrounded by, by some really bright hockey people and, and hockey minds and good people that care about our players. And, uh, and these are difficult decisions and they're hard conversations to have when you have to make these types of decisions. And my approach with these guys has always been that I'm trying to make the most informed decision that I can.

Mike Sullivan ([15:52](#)):

We weigh the pros and the cons and, and we try to make the best decision that's in the best interest to helping this hockey team win. And, and usually my conversation with the respective player revolves around something like, you know, I don't expect you to agree with the decision that, that, that I have made or we have made as a coach and staff, My hope is that you'll respect the decision. And I always explain the decision that we make and why we make it. And as I said, these guys are proud guys. They're

competitive guys. They want to play, and they don't always agree with the decision that we make. And I understand that that's part of it. Uh, but certainly I hope they walk away from the conversation respecting the, the decision that we make. And I don't know any other way to do it, but to, to be honest and be respectful with each player.

Doug Smith ([16:37](#)):

Yeah. I love that. Are there any other leadership principles that you consistently live by? Or that you're like, these are the, my main practices as a leader?

Mike Sullivan ([16:45](#)):

Well, I think when I, when I think about, you know, leadership philosophies, um, my, my most important philosophy, revolves around a couple of things, respect, responsibility, and honesty. And, and I think if you're respectful of people around you and, uh, you take responsibility and ownership for what your role and your, and your job is, uh, to help your team win and you're honest with people and straightforward with people, I think you can have the conversations that you need to have. You know, my feeling is, is if you push something under the rug or you don't see things for what they are, um, you know, that there can be a compound effect there before you know it. There's a, there's a lot of stuff under the rug. And that becomes a real difficult problem to challenge to, to solve. So my feeling is, is we take, we take challenges on a daily basis that arise.

Mike Sullivan ([17:37](#)):

We try to solve 'em as best we can, and we try to solve them, uh, around the principles that I identify. We're respectful of our players and our, and the people that we work with. It's my responsibility to help solve these problems. And we try to approach it in an honest fashion. And our hope is, is that, that our players will respect it. And so, um, you know, that, that's really been our mantra here since I, since I took the team over. Uh, I've been fortunate to be surrounded with a group of players that, that have been receptive to the message that we've been preaching since I've been here. And we've had so much fun working with this group of guys.

Doug Smith ([18:12](#)):

That's awesome. And last question, I always like to ask leaders this, if you could go back and have coffee or breakfast with your 20 year old self, what would you tell him or any other young leader at that age?

Mike Sullivan ([18:23](#)):

I would say, uh, I would probably tell my 20 year old self, Don't be so concerned about what other people think to stick to your convictions. Hmm. And, uh, and, and I think when you're, when you're young, uh, you're impressionable and everyone wants to be liked. And so I think sometimes, uh, that can, uh, that can overpower or can, uh, dilute your convictions and where you actually want to go. And so, you know, for me, I think when as I've matured and I look back over the years that I've been a player and a coach, uh, I think I'm more true to myself now than I've ever been. Uh, I'm comfortable in my own skin and how when I get up in the morning and how I approach my job every day, uh, I know when I drive home, uh, from the rink, um, that my intention is always in the right place and trying to help this team win and move forward and in advance, uh, but also be respectful of people along the way. And, and so it, I think when I, when I was a young 20 year old, if I had the benefit of that experience, um, I might have done some things differently along the way.

Doug Smith ([19:35](#)):

Yeah. Hey, thank you so much for your time. Good luck this season,

Mike Sullivan ([19:37](#)):

Coach. Thank you very much. Yeah.

Doug Smith ([19:38](#)):

Well, hey leader, thank you so much for listening to my conversation with Coach Sullivan. I hope you enjoyed it as much as I did. You can find ways to connect with him in links to everything that we discussed in the show notes at l3leadership.org/slash/340. And leaders always, I wanna challenge you that if you wanna attend x your growth this year, then you need to either launch or join an L3 leadership mastermind group. Mastermind groups have been the greatest source of growth in my life over the last seven years. And if you don't know what they are, they're just simply groups of six to 12 leaders that meet together on a consistent basis to do life together, hold each other accountable and to go after their dreams. And so if you're looking for a group like that and interested in learning more, go to l3leadership.org/masterminds and is always, I like to end with a quote and I'll quote John Maxwell, who I heard recently say this.

Doug Smith ([20:20](#)):

He said, he calls this the book ends of his day. He said, When I wake up, I always ask, What can I do today to add value to people? And at the end of my day, right before I go to bed, I ask myself, What did I do today to add value to people? Great questions. Ask yourself, I hope that you'll go and add value to people today and know that Laura and I love you. We believe in you and we say it every episode. But don't quit. Keep leading the world desperately needs your leadership. We'll talk to you next episode.