Episode 149: Keith Leavitt

# KL: Katie Linder

# Keith: Keith Leavitt

# KL: You’re listening to “Research in Action”: episode one hundred and forty-nine.

# [intro music]

# Segment 1:

**KL**: Welcome to “Research in Action,” a weekly podcast about topics and issues related to research in higher education featuring experts across a range of disciplines. I’m your host, Dr. Katie Linder, research director at Oregon State University Ecampus, a national leader in online education. Along with every episode, we post show notes with links to resources mentioned in the episode, a full transcript, and an instructor guide for incorporating the episode into your courses. Visit our website at ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast to find all of these resources.

On this episode, I'm joined by Dr. Keith Leavitt, an associate professor in the College of Business and the Betty S. Henry Edmondson faculty scholar in ethics at Oregon State University. His research interests include behavioral ethics, identity and situated judgment, and research methods. His work has been featured in over 200 major media outlets and prominently on the front of his mother's refrigerator. In his spare time he enjoys mountain biking, fly fishing, skiing, the occasional existential crisis, and trying to sneak inappropriately placed messages into his faculty profile.

Keith, thanks so much for joining me in the studio today.

**Keith:** Yeah! Thanks for having me, Katie. I've been looking forward to doing this for a bit.

**KL:** So I think it's going to be fun to dive into some of your research, it's – interesting, and you've gotten some nice media response to it as well. First though, I wanted to give a little bit of ground work for our listeners about your research on behavioral ethics, can you share a little bit about that work? And what do you mean by behavioral ethics? What are you looking at there?

**Keith:** Sure. So if you were to sort of try to break ethics or business ethics down into sort of two parts, the first would be coming from a philosophy background. So moral philosophy - in other words, how do we decide what's right or wrong? So if we get in deep, deep questions about how do we decide normatively what we should value, where the lines between right and wrong are to be crossed -that's completely not what I do. In fact, philosophers have been at that for a couple thousand years and we still don't have any consistent answers, so the good news is they'll be in business for a while (Okay). What I do is a little bit more simple, I guess in a way, where we can look at those things that we all agree on are really problem behaviors in business - and it's basically lying, cheating, and stealing, right? Things that either harm the organization internally or those things where companies do things that they put some bad stuff out into the world, and we're talking about things like fraud. And so behavioral ethics is using behavioral science – psychology, a little bit of sociology, definitely organizational behavior, and trying to predict under what conditions we're going to see the sorts of problem behaviors. And I say under what conditions, because most of the research shows that kind of counter to our intuition, where we'd like to believe there's really good people in the world and bad people in the world, individual differences - personality, character -they don't really explain the lion's share of the variance, and when we see malfeasance go on an organization's. So it's really about focusing on the conditions under which were likely to see bad behavior emerge.

Now within that broader area, there's kind of two historic approaches to thinking about behavioral ethics. The first is kind of an economic minded approach, which would suggest that when people really see an incentive that looks attractive enough and the risk of getting caught is low enough, that we engage in self-interested behavior. It turns out that money is a pretty good incentive and it does motivate people, and within the field of accounting there's a lot of research on the idea of the fraud triangle about when we sort of see those sorts of things happen, but it's not a very satisfying explanation for a lot of our daily behavior. Coming out of social psychology, the second explanation is sort of this idea of like a self-regulatory failure, right? So most of us want to do the right thing, we want to feel like we're good people and see ourselves as good people, we receive social, sort of, rewards for being good people, but sometimes things break down, right? Somehow in the information processing, we just sort of miss that there's an ethical issue even at stake, or we're tired and depleted, or we’re angry, and so we start seeing bad behavior creep out under those conditions. Now with looking at those two bodies of research, there's a lot that that's useful, and I think they're both actually right, but my research has been kind of opening up a third area which is really about social motives for ethical and unethical behavior, and the idea being that organizations in particular have strong norms for behavior, and we get a lot of meaning and a lot of sort of self-knowledge out of knowing who were supposed to be. And so a lot of my research is really focused on the idea of how those identities we value and the meaning we confer interacting with others in the workplace, may motivate those types of behaviors that we don't want to see. The example I've been using a lot lately is Elizabeth Holmes, who is the founder of Theranos. Theranos is a company that just in September basically folded for good. Elizabeth Holmes - if I were to put money on it, is probably going to jail sometime the next year for misleading investors, as well as having faked their blood testing technology. But if you really want to understand Elizabeth Holmes, I don't think the greed explanation works. She lived this very sort of Spartan lifestyle, was not somebody who is lavish in anything she did - just didn't seem particularly motivated by the money side of things. Also, I don't think it was a self-regulatory failure, because we saw these lies and these problems go on for years, and years, and years. If we want to understand Elizabeth Holmes, she had this childhood dream to change the world, she started grooming herself to be an entrepreneur, you know, at the same time she's sort of failed out of Stanford at 18 or 19, she wore the black turtlenecks like Steve Jobs. She just really viewed herself as a successful tech entrepreneur. Two problems – one, she's in the wrong industry, because technology - it's very common to have that minimum viable product, kind of push it, get investors excited, try to kind of borrow from the future a little bit and keep things moving along. When you're talking about health care or people's well-being, that's the exact wrong sort of model to be employing. And the other thing is I think she just wasn't set up to be able to fail. I think all of our identity and everything she was, was wrapped up in this one little idea. And so if we see what really maybe went wrong at that company, it's not one of these stories about greed driving malfeasance, it was just simply somebody couldn't let go of the sort of self-image of themselves, and I find that actually pretty compelling and interesting.

**KL:** I agree, that is really compelling and interesting! I'm curious when you're thinking about these kinds of cases that you're looking at, and I'm sure there are many that you can draw from, what are the kinds of research questions that you're asking, and are you asking those questions and then trying to go out and kind of find case study examples? Are the questions arising as you're looking out in the world and seeing these things happen?

**Keith:** Yeah. Most of what I do, the induction may come from those case studies or seeing those things, but a lot of my research is empirical, and some of it experimental, some of it experiments within the field. So, for example, I've got a paper - one of my favorite projects I worked on was with people who have competing occupational identities. So you're getting pulled in two directions at once, and how does that affect, you know, sort of your - your view of ethical issues? So we took Army medics - if you think about it, you're on the one hand a soldier you kill people and break things, and on the other hand you have this medical identity that’s sort of restorative and you've got this obligation to humanity. And we found that even when you outside of conscious awareness prime people with one of those identities versus the other, their willingness to put a price tag on innocent human life actually shifted as a function of that. Same thing with engineers who were also managers - we found their willingness to endorse corrupt practices, which would definitely go against the professional inclinations and the professional society membership rules and norms for engineers - once they had their manager hat on, suddenly those things started to look more acceptable. So I tend to be a little bit phenomenological. I look at something I find to be an interesting context and kind of go from there. Relatedly, I've done a lot of work on why people lie - and just the sort of silly little socially motivated lies like, “Don't worry. I'm sure you'll be fine for tenure” when you know your colleague is circling the drain, or the sorts of things we do that on the small level may not seem like much for their social graces, but we do them to maintain social relationships and our own social standing, and in the aggregate and organizations could actually become quite dangerous. So I tend to see examples of something out there in the world or from reading and go, “Wow. I find that kind of interesting, and it doesn't really fit the narrative or the data we already have or the theories on our field” and go from there. Uh similarly I've got a project that we just wrapped up. It’s in press with the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology with some great colleagues in a couple different schools, but we were looking at the literature and it suggested all these great things that come out of people having a high moral identity at work. And moral identity is basically the idea that central to your sense of self or how you view the world, is the idea that first and foremost, you know, “I need to behave in this morally cogent manner.” Uh - and the literature suggests that all these great things that come out of it, and we stopped and thought about it, and sometimes people who are highly ethical in the workplace aren't necessarily all that well liked. And so we started sort of unpacking that and thinking about it, and what we found is that people who are really high on that trait tend to get rated as very humorless by their colleagues, and therefore even though their well-trusted, they're also seen as less socially likeable because they're simply not funny. So we followed that up with a series of lab experiments, where outside of conscious awareness we primed people with morality by having them do word fines or other things that would activate that sort of sense of moral self. We then had them caption pictures - we gave them pictures and said, “Come up with the funniest caption you can” and those in the experimental condition - when we had others, including comedians rate how funny the captions were, people get less funny when morality is sort of at the forefront. So usually for me and a lot of the research I've done, it’s seeing something in the world, seeing a failure of our current literature to explain it well, and then kind of playing around with the ideas from there.

**KL:** So I'm really curious, and you've mentioned this in at least one of your studies that you just described - these seem like pretty complex environments where you're trying to control certain kinds of variables. How are you going about that in terms of trying to really target what are the things that are influencing each other when it could be so many different things, especially in a work environment?

**Keith:** Yeah, and that's sort of the trick, I guess - or what’s fun about organizational behavior as a field. On the one hand, you can do survey research – uh and there are control variables obviously we try to take into account, but you're never going to be able to perfectly sort of explain in a causal way what's going on. So we tend to use kind of a mixed methods approach, where you'll have some field research like that that’s survey based and correlational, and then you run some experiments as well to try to get under the hood and sort of see what the mechanisms are, and it lacks that kind of generalizability or that sort of, you know - it doesn't feel real. But at the same time if you can triangulate on a phenomenon and say “Hey in the lab, we created an artificial environment in this definitely has an effect, and then you go into the field and test it, and find it at least correlationally it holds up, then you start to be able to kind of get a sense of what's actually going on. When you're studying human behavior though, the reality is the environment is always interacting with the individual, right? Person times environment is behavior, and we're not always good about doing all of it. But the good news is, it will give me something to do for the next 30 or so years until I retire -not going to be done anytime soon.

**KL:** Well, it's really interesting work. I'm very excited to dig in a little bit further with some of your more specific studies on researching employee sex lives. So we'll be back in a moment.

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# Segment 2:

**KL:** Keith, some of your recent research that has gotten a little bit of media attention is the research you’re doing on employee sex lives, and I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about that research and what led to your interest in that area.

**Keith:** Yeah sure. It's uh - it's kind of a weird topic for a management or a business scholar, but it came about just from talking with a couple friends - one of whom, Chris Barnes, from the University of Washington, who I used to work with West Point, does a lot of research on sleep and human sustainability spilling over into work. And we've talked about the research that's out there now on mindfulness meditation, and stress management, and all these other things that are really about how human beings aren't necessarily a good fit for the way we try to work now, right? Getting people to work long hours, and always be plugged in - that these things work against sort of who we are. And we sort of had a conversation one day about kind of an abusive co-worker that we had at West Point while we were there. He wasn't our boss, but somebody we worked with - and somebody made the joke about, “Well I guess I know what's not going on at home” right? Made kind of a comment about that that was sort of crude and everybody sort of laughed, and then my friend and I said to each other, “Well wait a minute. There is actually literature out there on the physiology of this, and the dopamine effects, and other things that go on. Maybe somebody needs to study this.” and it took us about five years to get around to actually doing it, but we said, “Why not? Life’s short.” There's a kind of glaring hole in the literature here, probably for propriety reasons, that nobody in management has really looked at this topic about how taking care of that part of our lives, right? We're sexual animals, we're primates - how that might actually spill over and affect our work lives. So that started kind of a weird little side path of research for me.

**KL:** Okay. So tell us a little bit more about how you have designed this research and how you're collecting data for it.

**Keith:** Yeah. So what we've done so far has been what are called ‘experience sampling methodology studies.’ And what an experience sampling methodology is, is basically you're following people over the course of several weeks. If you think about it in a typical cross-sectional survey, you're really capturing differences, maybe state differences, maybe trait differences between two people. The idea of experience sampling is you ping people at multiple times during the day, with short surveys over the course of several weeks, and you can model those changes or that variation within individuals, where people sort of serve as their own control group. And so in the first study - the one that's already published in the Journal of Management, we were simply looking at how the presence or absence of the physiological sort of consequences of sex would spill over into people's moods at work the following day, and from there what the consequences for the workplace might be. We followed only married couples just to make sure that we weren't dealing with extra emotions or to make sure we were dealing with likely consensual relationships, and it was simple as “did this happen or not?” you know, the night before. And what we found, not surprising from the research out there that already exists in the physiological psychology literature, because of dopamine boosts presumably and oxytocin, the next morning after sex people were in a better mood. But where it got interesting is we found that at the end of the day, as a function of that extra boost in mood or the variance due to that, people were more engaged at work and also rated their job is more satisfying, so they mislabeled that additional sort of positive effect as something that was really about their job. But we also found that when people left work with strains - work to family strains, feeling like they were bringing work home with them, that impeded their sex lives which then keeps them from doing as well the next day. So the takeaway was sort of the idea that managers just need to give more employees space and not be texting them, emailing them at eight or nine o'clock at night with work tasks, otherwise, there could be real consequences not only for people's marriages or relationships presumably, but that it actually comes back to haunt them at work.

**KL:** Okay. This is really interesting, and I can see why there is some interesting media attention to this as well, because if it's a gap, you know, that people aren't really looking at for a range of reasons. Can you tell us a little bit more about the media response to this work? I know that we get these daily email updates here at OSU about all the times that people are mentioned in the media, and I definitely saw your name coming up more than once of people who were picking this up and really looking at it.

**Keith:** Yeah, the funny thing is, and you know, obviously sex sells, but that thing got way more attention than we expected. I was looking the other day, there's a source called Altmetric that tracks the media attention of published research, and out of something like eleven million studies that they've tracked to date, it’s still sitting around number a thousand for most media attention ever. I mean, if you consider the actual important work out there on climate change and things like this, they get cited off, and it was just sort of an interesting and pleasant surprise to see it show up. But I think it drew - brought attention that showed up in places like Forbes, and in the business press, and some of the science press, and then I think every men's and women's health magazine and things like that as well. So it kind of got picked up broadly and it was fun, but yeah. That's not necessarily the - it's interesting. It took up a lot more time than expected to do the media stuff on that, so it was it was fun and I guess all press is good press, but we also sort of got worn out on that one.

**KL:** Yeah. Well, and that's actually my next question is what does - what kind of time does it entail? What are you being asked to do when you’re having that kind of media response and attention to your work? Tell us a little bit about kind of the behind-the-scenes of that.

**Keith:** Yeah. So the good news is, OSU is very good about helping put out press releases - is part of the reason why that went so well and sort of getting on the messaging. Um a lot of the outlets wanted to do interviews, and so for example, Wall Street Journal's media MarketWatch, rather -spent some time doing an interview with them, and some radio, and some international TV stuff, and things along those lines. The bigger issue is if somebody’s sending you clarifying questions, I always made sure that I stayed on top of that, otherwise, you can think about a topic that's - I thought was relatively benign in how we approached it, and you can think about all the sort of side tangent sort of weird ways they could have taken it. So it just took a lot of time to make sure when people would email me about it or what have you, that they were sort of staying on message so that it didn't turn into sort of just a joke or things like this - was the big thing with that one.

**KL:** Mhm, Absolutely. So I'm curious, what is next for you with this work and does the media attention in any way impact the directions that you take it in terms of thinking about, you know, answering questions that may have risen based on people's interest in this or otherwise?

**Keith:** Yeah, we have a couple of follow-up projects. The one that's probably most likely to show up sometime in the near future - we already presented at a conference, was with my colleague, Lingtao Yu, who's at University of British Columbia, where we were looking at what happens with your supervisor at home. and similar sort of methodology, but we found out that when supervisors are not engaging in sex with their spouse, the next morning they report less self-control resources or less ability to sort of maintain themselves in stable ways. And their subordinates who did not know what the research was about or what their supervisors were answering on, reported more daily abusive supervisory behaviors when the boss was not having sex at home. And sort of interestingly, we found that effect was even stronger for extroverted supervisors as opposed to introverted ones, in part just because they're more likely to be socially expressive, so tamping that down mattered even more for them. This isn't an area I think I'm going to stick with for a long period of time, it was sort of a fun thing to do with a different group of colleagues, and we had a good time doing it. But it's one of those things where I think we open it up, maybe other people are working in that area now, and it's probably time to move on.

**KL:** Mhm. So I'm really interested – a lot of your work has been collaborative; you co-publish with various people on these different studies. How are you working to develop these co-authoring relationships? And you'd mention, you know, this was like a buddy of yours, you kind of came up with this question and decided to pursue it, but do you have specific kind of techniques or strategies as you're reaching out for these collaborative relationships?

**Keith:** Yeah. You know, I don't know that I specifically ever had a strategy, but I've kind of realized in retrospect that it's acted almost as if I had one. For starters, I think relative to other academics unfairly extroverted, which is to say I'm just introverted as opposed to deeply introverted. You know, I go to parties and I stare at other people's shoes instead of my own, so I think that probably helps a bit. The other thing is I just really enjoy the collaborative process, and when I approach a project, I don't think in terms of, “Oh, who's the big name I can have on this paper?” but I think in terms of, you know, “Who would get excited about this idea as well, and do they have a skill set that would be complementary to my own for working on that project? And typically what I do - I've noticed a lot of people tend to really guard their ideas and they don't want to talk about sort of new things, because they're afraid they'll get scooped or somebody will steal their idea. I tend to audition my new ideas before I get started, so if I'm at a conference I'll throw out something wacky, “Hey, I'm thinking about doing research on this topic, or what have you” to somebody I would want to work with, and if I see them get excited about it then I can say to them, “Yeah, I haven't actually done anything yet on this, if you're interested” has been kind of a common tactic. So I tend to audition I guess my colleagues, and I tend to pick people who - I think about it in terms of almost like being in a committed relationship - that from the time you start something till the time it's out the door, you could be working with this person for three or four years. And so if it isn't somebody that I'd want to fly out to go visit and hang out with, or somebody who I'm just going to really enjoy the process with for a long period of time, I don't work with them. So I tend to look for people who are motivated and will have the right skill sets, but I look more for people whose company I'm going to enjoy, and who are going to keep me, you know, excited and motivated when reviewers are beating us up or other - other obstacles pop up.

**KL:** Yeah. I love that. I'm also curious if you have strategies or suggestions for people who are juggling multiple co-author relationships, because I'm sure you're working on multiple studies at the same time, they may not all be with the same people. How are you kind of keeping those communication lines and project management pieces all, you know - plates all spinning in the air at the same time?

**Keith:** I'm probably medium good at it, and I've disappointed some co-authors on occasion, but I typically have a rule where if I'm working with more advanced people and some of my other projects have junior people, I tell them I've got to prioritize the people who still have the tenure gun held to their head, and so I will try to prioritize those things where I’m more needed. I also am pretty good about saying, “Here's what I want my role in a project to be, here's where I think I can contribute” and making sure that I'm protective of my time, as opposed to getting pulled into parts of something that - that don't need me. I also just tend to check in with my co-authors a lot, and I think that helps - just trying to be responsive. And finally, not having unrealistic time frames. I think the longer, you know, you're at this, you start to get the idea that you're not going to finish a project in six months that you're starting tomorrow. There will always be contingencies and hang-ups, and so I think just being realistic about timeframe and making sure that when I start something the other people involved know how much I do or don't have on my plate at any given time, because there's some projects that will take years and years. I have one now that we're, you know, three or four years in, and the end is not in sight, and I have others that I sort of fast track depending, you know, a different sort of set of factors - depending on the co-authors, how timely it is, how straightforward it is. And so I think just communicating with people and making sure there aren't any unmet expectations or hurt feelings is probably the biggest thing.

**KL:** That's really good advice. We're going to take another brief break, when we come back we'll hear a little bit more from Keith. Back in a moment.

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# Segment 3:

**KL:** Keith, I find your work just totally fascinating, and I'm curious, what are you working on now? What are kind of the things that are keeping you up at night that are starting to seed your next projects?

**Keith:** Yeah. Thanks, Katie! Right now I'm actually in some ways moving out of the behavioral ethics space. It's getting really crowded with some very smart, talented junior people, and I don't want to try to keep up, and something I've just been thinking about more broadly lately and doing a lot of reading on is the changing nature of work as a function of automation. What I mean by automation is simply just algorithms and other things that on the surface can increase our work efficiency or make organizations run better, but also really run the risk of changing the way we work, or even greatly disrupting labor markets, or people's ability to find work. Something that a lot of people aren't aware of in the U.S. – going back about 25 years, the way that we have tracked unemployment rates only includes people that are actively looking for work. And currently there's 12 million Men in the US - this is men only between 25 and 55 in their Prime working years, who are not actively looking for work. And if you look at what happens the people in those situations, they're not generally great life outcomes for people. some of the - the arguments that are out there for policy these days would suggest that - okay, if we're going to move towards potentially having even 30% unemployment as organizations become more efficient, we need to start thinking in terms of guaranteed minimum income or how we support people, and I think that economically those sorts of arguments make sense, but on the other hand, I think work does a lot for people other than just provide for their economic needs. It gives them something to do with their time, it gives them a sense of purpose, a sense of competence, and sense of ways to relate to other people. And so a lot of what I'm trying to work on now, or get moving in the direction of, is really the idea of focusing on this changing nature of work and what it's going to mean at the work group organizational, and even the individual level. and if you think about it, if technology is going to take over a lot of rule based work, what does that mean in terms of how do we build discretion back into jobs, what does it mean for how we have to continue to train and learn throughout our careers, what does it mean in terms of skill sets of the people who are going to be best at adapting to those sorts of situations? And really trying to figure out what the nature of work is going to be, not just the fact that it could be going away, but how do we even go about doing work in a time where it's going to be constantly changing and where robots are kind of constantly encroaching on our turf.

**KL:** Okay, so not to go kind of too deep with you here on this Keith, but one of the questions this raises for me is the nature of work, but also the nature of being human. Because if we're having robots kind of take over some of this stuff, and we have to decide what necessitates human to human interaction, or human interaction at all with some of these work components, those are really fundamental questions.

**Keith:** They are, and it turns out that the automation is increasingly, you know, there's - things will pop up where we can laugh and say, “Ha, Look, you know, robots aren't as good at doing some of these creative tasks and other things as we are,” but increasingly we're finding algorithms can be pretty good at a lot of things, and I think it's potentially diminishing if you think about it in terms of what does it mean to be human if an algorithm can achieve as well as you can or better. Now one argument I think they could be made against that is these algorithms tend to be good at very specific tasks, a robot's been able to beat humans at chess for a while, but the portfolio of who we are and the things we do, especially in the surface of other people, I think is where we're still going to be able to find meeting. So not being narrow, is going to be one piece of it. I think creative work - we're going to have the edge at least for a while. And then also those things that really require deep human interaction. So I think there's still going to be I guess a used in a need for us but figuring out how that fits in an economy is really going to be the trick.

**KL:** So I'm really curious what your ideas are about how this will impact things like education, and in particular higher education. This is the context we’re, you know, in our daily lives. How does this change how we train people for future jobs and careers?

**Keith:** I think people are going - and fortunately generationally, I think people are getting better at it anyway, but I think we need to be better at being self-learners. I think people need to get past the idea that university is something you do for four years and then go off. I think we're going to see more people needing to make return visits to re-educate. But the irony is when we think about organizations, you know, getting lean, or more efficient, or quote un-quote right-sizing, meaning they're getting rid of a bunch of people, our first instinct is to double down and work harder at what we're already doing. I don't know a lot of people who have the bandwidth to say, “Oh, I'm just going to go ahead and take three online courses to refresh my skill set or learn something new,” other than just maybe to get the qualification on paper. And I think to have the time to really deeply learn and play with ideas, we need to come up with a system where people are going to be able to sort of have employment sabbaticals and take time to be able to retool themselves. I think they also have to be comfortable with being able to do that.

I think it's also going to have to change how we think about credentialing. I was reading something the other day that was looking at how companies are increasingly doing HR searches, and they're finding that instead of having the title of research scientist or data scientist, maybe we know that this person has a math background and those skills would poured over well enough. So we're also going to have to get more comfortable with the idea of how do we consider somebody sufficiently credential to do work and move to something that's maybe a little bit more flexible too.

**KL:** Mhm. Well, and I think, you know - I've been reading recently about this idea of career pivots, especially for folks who are millennials and how they need to translate certain kinds of skills into other areas and, there's even a book called *Pivot* that kind of helps you figure this out - we can link to it in the show notes, but I'm wondering at the individual level, as you mentioned, this really impacting people. What are the kinds of skills that people are going to need in order to kind of translate their own kind of skills and abilities into a range of different contexts?

**Keith:** I think people are really - to begin with, are going to have a lot of resilience. And that's something that, you know - I think there's a lot of evidence out there that we're getting worse at, especially in the U.S. Most of us are getting more contingent on our self-esteem and a little bit more vulnerable to sort of insults, I guess, to our - to our sense of pride and self. So I think we're going to need resilience, I think we're going to need to be able to tolerate ambiguity well. I think also though, to put it on the individual, probably has some limitations as well. Again, you know, we know that the way the economy has shifted, and - and really there's not been a growth on the labor side in terms of income, people don't have the savings to be able to have the luxury just to say, “I need six months to go retool myself and retool, you know, how I'm doing things.” So I think systems and structures need to change as well, but I do think people just need to be resilient and adaptable in their sense of self, right? And that kind of, I guess, get pigeonholed into a particular identity or viewing their work a certain way.

**KL:** So the identity question is one that also kind of immediately gets raised for me, because I think so many people identify with their work and this is a huge core part of their identity, and if, you know, jobs are taken over by robots as we may be seeing happen and we have significant amounts of unemployment, what does that do to people's morale, people's sense of self? Is that something that you're kind of interested in exploring as well?

**Keith:** Yeah, very much. There's a there's a great quote by Voltaire that says “Work saves a man three great evils: boredom, vice and need.” And obviously we can get around the need piece, and there's been economic arguments for how we might do that, but the boredom piece, or the lack of meaning, I guess, would be another way to interpret it, and also the idle hands piece, or things that actually concern me a bit. And so I think people are going to have to maybe find ways to find meaning outside of the core parts of their job. Maybe we move towards a model where people are doing more volunteer work and count that as being meaningful work, maybe child rearing is something we start rewarding in ways that we haven't historically, finding other activities and hobbies. I think, you know, having - not having such a narrow sense of self ultimately is probably pretty good for people. I think work is important and people need to find meaning in it, but they also need to have something else as well. So I think that's going to add to the resilience piece a bit, is to have other outlets for - for investing their identity in.

**KL:** So I can see so many different directions this work could take. When you're thinking about research design and how to start exploring this, what are some ideas that you have of how to tackle these questions?

**Keith:** Yeah. So right now my colleague and I are kind of trying to go down this road. We're really starting out with conceptual work to begin with, and we're lucky that in order field our top - I don't know if this says good things or bad things about my field, but our highest impact journal is actually a conceptual theoretical journal. And so we're starting out with kind of trying to look at the lay of the land, and what theories are really most important for thinking about this, and what problems really fit well in our field versus when are we, you know, starting to move into economics or areas that aren't our area. but for now, starting with conceptual work, and then I will be looking - I know fortunately the College of Business has some partnerships that may be useful for being able to try to collaborate with organizations, and look at what are people's fears around this, how do we just watch those fears and keep people checked in to the work that they're doing, who ends up being more comfortable with changes in technology and automation? And so it'll start out I think with some induction and trying to kind of figure out the lay of the land, and then from their kind of moving into more specific research questions. This is very - this is very nascent for me right now.

**KL:** Yeah. Well, I'm curious if you can talk a little bit more about this idea of conceptual work, because I think, especially for more junior scholars who have kind of a set idea of what a paper looks like, you know, you have a study, and you have your methodology, and you have your results, and you just you discuss them, and you have conclusions - conceptual work isn't necessarily laid out that way. Can you talk a little bit about how you approach that in even, I mean, some of the logistics of writing it up?

**Keith:** Mhm, Yeah. Conceptual work -I think what you have to be good at is thinking in terms of thought experiments, right? And so you have to start out with some sort of counterfactual and say “What is really not explained well in my literature?” or “What's an interesting problem that - I looked at the tools that are already there, and there's just nothing that works well for sort of trying to explain this.” So for example, I published a conceptual piece with Anthony Klotz here at OSU and another colleague earlier this year on what motivates non-star performers. So those people, we -there's a lot of energy focused out there on the stars and you know how to people who are really top performers identify with their work, and we really wanted to look at for those people who are just sort of role, non-core players - what keeps them checked in and motivated, and under what conditions do they really identify with doing the work that isn't glamorous? And we came to this by simply looking at the fact that there was all this research out there and star performers and saying, “Well, none of this would explain myself or Joe average performer out there in the world.” And so I think with conceptual work, you have to start by doing that and then you have to stop and say, “Okay. what are at least the foundations for building role tools for exploring that sort of stuff?” and from there you just have to be really curious and go play I think, and then from there you also have to be willing to - once you've got this big landscape, you've got to start being disciplined and kind of cording things off and saying, “Okay, you know, I'm trying to do kind of too much here.” So I think I think that sort of most important step at that point is being able to say to yourself, you know, “What are the limits of the boundaries of what we're trying to do?” and recognize that you're not going to cure cancer in one paper.

**KL:** Mhm. Mhm. Fascinating. Keith, I want to thank you so much for coming into the studio today and sharing your work. This has been such an interesting conversation. I appreciate your time!

**Keith:** Yeah, thanks for having me, Katie! It was a lot of fun!

**KL:** Thanks also to our listeners for joining us for this week's episode of “Research in Action.” I'm Katie Linder, and we'll be back next week with a new episode.

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