

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Smart Women, Smart Power
“Mental Health and National Security”

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FEATURING

Amy Gilliland

President, General Dynamics Information Technology

CSIS EXPERTS

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*Transcript By
Rev Transcript
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Kathleen
McInnis: This is Smart Women, Smart Power, a podcast that features conversations with some of the world's most powerful women.

Amy Gilliland: It isn't a conversation about which side of the aisle you sit on. It is a conversation about how you are feeling in a particular environment, or how we--

Kathleen
McInnis: process

Amy Gilliland: --can create

Kathleen
McInnis: Right.

Amy Gilliland: How you're processing it...

Kathleen
McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>

Amy Gilliland: ...and what you need from your employer to create an environment where you feel heard and safe.

Kathleen
McInnis: We feature thought leaders at all career levels, where we explore, among other things, the many contributions that women make to the fields of international business, national security, foreign policy, and international development. Does having women in positions of power influence the outcomes of decisions in these fields? Why or why not? Join me, Dr. Kathleen McInnis, director of the Smart Women, Smart Power Initiative at the Center for Strategic and International Studies for these incredible conversations.

Before we get started, please note this episode contains subject matter relating to mental health and the topic of suicide. Listener discretion is advised.

We are so delighted today to welcome Amy Gilliland onto the Smart Women, Smart Power podcast. Amy is the president of General Dynamics Information Technology, which is a business unit of the General Dynamics Corporation. Amy has more than 25 years of public sector experience, including service in the U.S. Navy, and nearly two decades in leadership positions across General Dynamics.

So, Amy, welcome! To get us started, you've been committed to national security throughout your career - I'd love to start by learning more about what brought you into this sector, this wacky world of natsec.

Amy Gilliland: Well, great. First of all, thank you for having me, and love this podcast. So I'm super pleased to be a part of it this week.

I grew up with the service all around me. So my great-grandfather, I lived with him growing up, and he served in the U.S. Navy. He immigrated to the U.S. and served in the U.S. Navy, and so, so proud to be a part of this country and just imbued in me this sense of responsibility and to whom much is given, much is expected. So service was part of my life. And then my mom, single parent, raising us. She worked as a civil servant in the Army for almost 40 years.

Kathleen
McInnis: Oh wow.

Amy Gilliland: So, grew up driving back and forth to an Army base in Maryland. And so it was all around me. And I went to the Naval Academy on a field trip when I was in kindergarten and was in awe of what that meant. And so I set that as a personal goal and ended up having the opportunity to do so.

Kathleen
McInnis: You joined the Navy, but you knew from early on that that's the direction you wanted to go?

Amy Gilliland: I knew that I wanted to serve my country.

Kathleen
McInnis: Yes.

Amy Gilliland: I knew that I needed to serve my country. That was important to me...

Kathleen
McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>

Amy Gilliland: ...and it was an experience I wanted to have. And yeah, I set it as a goal. And lo and behold, as a freshman in college, I found myself as a plebe at the Naval Academy. And it was a really, really great experience.

Kathleen
McInnis: I live in Annapolis. So, you know--

Amy Gilliland: Okay!

Kathleen
McInnis: ...massive shout out to Annapolis and the Naval Academy. It's an incredible institution.

Amy Gilliland: It really is. The leadership lessons that you learn there, the academics are phenomenal...

Kathleen
McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>

Amy Gilliland: ...but the leaders that you're exposed to, what you learn about yourself...

Kathleen
McInnis: Yeah.

Amy Gilliland: ...and leading others has had a phenomenal impact on me personally. It has been a big part of who I am today.

Kathleen
McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. Well, and then the gender composition at the Naval Academy has changed so much. I mean attending the academy and then watching that community grow, what have your observations been on the gender dynamics at the academy?

Amy Gilliland: So my class was probably, I think we graduated around 10 or 12% women from the class. And today I think the classes are more at 25%.

Kathleen
McInnis: Yeah.

Amy Gilliland: So they really have increased and I think that's terrific.

Kathleen
McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>

Amy Gilliland: And I think the representation has been a focus for the Navy and making sure that those that are in the service -- everyone that are- that is coming up -- can see themselves in, you know, positions of leadership. And that has improved. And I think that's great and a tremendous accolade for the Navy and in getting those numbers out there.

Kathleen
McInnis: Yeah. And my understanding is that the women's networks, both alumni and on the Academy grounds itself, those have been getting more tight over time, you know, and just a very supportive group amongst each other.

Amy Gilliland: I do think so. Absolutely. I think in addition to the networks, it's really getting women into those leadership positions. I think that is one of the strongest recruiting tools you can have. And, certainly, the Navy and the services writ large have done that. That is an important factor as well.

Kathleen
McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative> So the Navy just celebrated its birthday.

Amy Gilliland: They did. Yes. Happy birthday!

Kathleen
McInnis: Happy birthday, Navy! On October 13th. How did beginning your career in the Navy shape how you lead today?

Amy Gilliland: So I started my career in the Navy on a guided missile destroyer.

Kathleen
McInnis: Oh, really?

Amy Gilliland: On the deck plates of it. I was a young junior officer, and I was in charge of the damage control division. And you might ask what I knew about damage control, not a lot.

Kathleen
McInnis: <laugh>.

Amy Gilliland: And it was such an exciting and challenging place to be as a 20-something leading 20-somethings...

Kathleen
McInnis: Right.

Amy Gilliland: ...who are coming from all different walks of life, in a mission on the ship that is not often appreciated until you need it.

Kathleen
McInnis: Right. And when you-- when you need it..

Amy Gilliland: When you need it--

Kathleen
McInnis: ..you really need it.

Amy Gilliland: You need it. I mean, just as an example, for instance, I was on Arleigh Burke class destroyer, similar to the Cole. And the Cole was bombed in the Yemen Harbor. And it is often said that it is the damage control efforts of that crew that saved that ship from sinking to the bottom of the Yemen Harbor.

Kathleen
McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

Amy Gilliland: And so it is a really important mission.

Kathleen
McInnis: Yeah.

Amy Gilliland: But not a particularly glorious one. And I learned a lot about myself and a lot about collaboration, a lot about empathy, teamwork, those sorts of things. And you know, it's in somewhat challenging situations that you find yourself and it really has a strong imprint. And I have carried that forward into my post-Navy career. Absolutely. For sure.

Kathleen
McInnis: Yeah. Well, and I guess that's a great segue into the decision that we want to talk about today.

Amy Gilliland: Yes.

Kathleen
McInnis: The decision is about your initiating a mental health awareness campaign within General Dynamics IT.

Amy Gilliland: Yes.

Kathleen
McInnis: First, could you talk us through what was the moment that you realized you needed to do this?

Amy Gilliland: Yeah. So there is a strong parallel to your point. When you're on a ship, it is about readiness.

Kathleen
McInnis: Sure.

Amy Gilliland: You need to be ready.

Kathleen
McInnis: Yep.

Amy Gilliland: And ready for whatever happens. You have all sorts of different things that you might do. And in a business you have to be ready to serve your customers.

Kathleen
McInnis: Right.

Amy Gilliland: And so this story is about readiness: readiness to serve the mission, readiness to have people in a state of mind that they can deliver for our customers.

Kathleen
McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

Amy Gilliland: And our mission is national security.

Kathleen
McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

Amy Gilliland: And so you asked me why I launched this mental health initiative, and I got a call from one of my leaders that one of our employees committed suicide. And this was in August, September timeframe of 2021.

Kathleen
McInnis: Okay.

Amy Gilliland: So we were just really coming out of the darkness of the pandemic. Vaccines were out there and as a leader, and in conjunction with my leadership team, starting in April of that year -- April of 2021 -- when vaccines were really rolling out, started to see what a social psychologist, Adam Grant, has referred to as languishing.

Kathleen
McInnis: Yes.

Amy Gilliland: Yes. This notion that --

Kathleen
McInnis: When I read that I was like, "Oh, I you see," right?

Amy Gilliland: I feel that, I feel that! As leaders, we are feeling that, but you could see that on the faces of employees when you're out visiting work sites. You could see it on customers' faces.

Kathleen
McInnis: Yeah.

Amy Gilliland: People were struggling. They're happy to have vaccines, but it's still really hard. We're all wearing masks. Things aren't back to normal. Everybody has gone through something difficult, whether that be economic or financial or loss in the family or whatever. And so it started to experience things outside of work also. And I had experienced in some of my close personal circles, suicides.

Kathleen
McInnis: Oh.

Amy Gilliland: And then at work, and it became clear that this was something societal that was happening. This is bigger than GDIT, this is a societal issue.

And as an employer, I felt very much a responsibility to be part of the safety net.

Kathleen
McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

Amy Gilliland: And at the same time we're sending our kids back to school...

Kathleen
McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>

Amy Gilliland: ...and they're experiencing or starting to showcase some of the challenges that they've had from living this awkward, hybrid life for a long time. So--

Kathleen
McInnis: Actually having to talk to people in person...

Amy Gilliland: Yes. Exactly.

Kathleen
McInnis: ...like an actual human being, my God.

Amy Gilliland: Exactly. So it's not just a business issue and it's not just a community issue, it's a family issue also.

Kathleen
McInnis: Well, for our audience, want to take a step back and just reflect on mental health in the national security community has until fairly recently been like the third rail, right? You can't have a mental health issue and have a security clearance, or that used to be the case. I don't think it's quite the case anymore, but there's still that stigma or perception.

How did you walk your customers through this? That's an incredible tight rope, I imagine, that you'd have to walk.

Amy Gilliland: So it's interesting, even when I started to raise it. So we were very deliberate.

Kathleen
McInnis: Yeah.

Amy Gilliland: We made this decision, we're going to do this. This isn't a "Amy sends an email campaign and it's all going to get better." This had to be much more comprehensive than that. And we were deliberate about how the message got out as well because of 28,000 employees...

Kathleen
McInnis: We made this decision, we're going to do this. This isn't a "Amy sends an email campaign and it's all going to get better." This had to be much more comprehensive than that. And we were deliberate about how the message got out as well because of 28,000 employees...

Amy Gilliland: 14, 15, 16,000 of them have clearances.

Kathleen
McInnis: Yeah.

Amy Gilliland: And we knew that that stigma existed. And so it was important that we had the customer on board. It was important that we got the facts out there and it was important that they heard the facts from leaders.

Kathleen
McInnis: Yeah.

Amy Gilliland: And so it's interesting, we started internally, at getting this message out and having our leaders talk about what the facts are. So we went to get the facts...

Kathleen
McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>

Amy Gilliland: ...and the facts are absolutely that our customers, and those that grant security clearances, want employees and contractors that support them to be healthy - physically and mentally.

Kathleen
McInnis: Yeah.

Amy Gilliland: And that this "clearance legend." Which is what I'll call it that..

Kathleen
McInnis: Yeah, sure. It's a myth.

Amy Gilliland: ...can't have a clearance and have challenges, was just that: a myth. And so we started to spread the facts, and you know, we worked with INSA. I'm sure you're probably familiar with INSA. It is the Intelligence National Security Alliance or partnership. But it is basically a network of intelligence security professionals that get together. And they hosted us for a podcast where we brought the people that are adjudicating security clearances in, and we asked them the questions and said, "There's a myth that, you know, if I have a security clearance, I can't also be seeing somebody about mental health issues that I might have." And we debunked all of the legends that were out there and just put the facts on the table.

Kathleen
McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

Amy Gilliland: And we had been experimenting with that inside of the company to get those facts out there.

Kathleen
McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

Amy Gilliland: Now, in addition to, or maybe as part of this population of employees, I have 25 to 30% of my employee base that are veterans.

Kathleen
McInnis: Yeah.

Amy Gilliland: And so the case for suicide in veterans, the statistics are much more severe than the broader population, even with respect to suicide. So suicide rates are going up, and veterans are already elevated. And so we started inside the company, in addition to talking to it at a leadership level. We put talking points out there. We talked about it in a very engaging and approachable way.

Kathleen
McInnis: Yeah. What do you mean by that?

Amy Gilliland: So we have actually, we've been practicing with communication through Covid just in general.

Kathleen
McInnis: Sure.

Amy Gilliland: What kinds of methods do people-- do they like to receive an email?

Kathleen
McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>

Amy Gilliland: Do they want hear a podcast? Do they want a video? And having been experiencing with how people like to receive. And so we had a very clever campaign, designed by one of my communication, high potential employees, called, "How are you, really?"

Kathleen
McInnis: Okay.

Amy Gilliland: So the first step in doing this was asking a question that we all ask each other all the time.

Kathleen
McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>

Amy Gilliland: Somebody that brought me into the studio today, you asked him how he was and he said, "Well, I'm fine. But nobody would listen if it was otherwise."

Kathleen
McInnis: Right.

Amy Gilliland: Yeah. And that is what, "How are you, really?" is getting at. You ask the question and you stick around to actually care about the answer. So that was the first thing.

Kathleen
McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>

Amy Gilliland: We used heart emojis. So this is something that we use in various parts of our lives that we all see and understand, and if you had one heart, you're not having a great day.

Kathleen
McInnis: Yeah.

Amy Gilliland: If you have four hearts, you're okay. And so we talked about it in terms that people could understand.

Kathleen
McInnis: Yeah.

Amy Gilliland: And that made it accessible to employees and maybe even to their families.

Kathleen
McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>

Amy Gilliland: Or to partners that we work with.

Kathleen
McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>

Amy Gilliland: And the materials were all written in that fashion. And by the way, they're posted on our website, we made them accessible. Because the point here isn't that GDIT is having this campaign, necessarily. This is a campaign that we have to, I believe, engage in as a community. And it's not something that we're going to solve overnight. Covid took a long time. We're still in the throes of what it is, and the mental health issues that were existent before Covid and that were exacerbated during Covid are going to take us some time to work through on the other side.

Kathleen
McInnis: Yeah.

Amy Gilliland: And so the other part of that, which I was thinking of earlier, was building communities.

Kathleen
McInnis: Yeah.

Amy Gilliland: So we have employee resource groups.

Kathleen
McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

Amy Gilliland: And the thought there is that this is also a very personal issue. So if we could get over the stigma of, okay, I have a national security clearance and can I even have challenges? How can I find an audience where I feel comfortable maybe talking about that?

Kathleen
McInnis: Right. Right.

Amy Gilliland: For instance, our veterans, we have an employee resource group called "Honor." These are-- whoever can come, allies can come, people that aren't veterans to listen. But we have done several episodes on suicide, and we have brought veteran groups that are experienced in dealing with perhaps veterans writ large, but also maybe unique experiences that veterans share that..

Kathleen
McInnis: Sure.

Amy Gilliland: ...may lead to some of the challenges that they had. And we had open dialogues on suicide, and they have been very well attended. So the

level of interest in those, they're anonymous, so people don't have to share whom they are or when, when they're asking a question. But just trying to get the resources out there, trying to make a large company feel small.

Kathleen
McInnis: That is no small accomplishment. Right. Taking a big company and creating these spaces where people can feel heard...

Amy Gilliland: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>

Kathleen
McInnis: ...and respected. And so I guess, what's your sort of secret sauce? <laugh>?

Amy Gilliland: I'm not-- I think we're still developing the secret sauce.

Kathleen
McInnis: Sure.

Amy Gilliland: But it's interesting. We had ERGs, we were just coming together as a company. So GDIT in 2017 was a four and a half billion dollar company with about 20,000 employees. And General Dynamics made an acquisition of another IT services company called CSRA and the two came together in April of 2018.

So they were also a four and a half billion dollar company with 20,000 employees. So knitting together this new company of tens of thousands employees. Right.

Kathleen
McInnis: Yeah.

Amy Gilliland: We were 40,000 at our largest, and we've done some divestitures since then. And ERGs were a tool that we were bringing to try and "Hey, how can we integrate these two companies together?" But really it was Covid that launched the success of ERGs because...

Kathleen
McInnis: Really?

Amy Gilliland: ...this was a time when people were panging for community in a way that they hadn't before. And I can tell you the moment that I saw it really launch for us. And that was in the aftermath of George Floyd.

Kathleen
McInnis: Yeah.

Amy Gilliland: And we had employees for the first time coming to the company and they were hurting. And they wanted to have discussions. And they

wanted to be in a place where they understood what does their company stand for?

What are our policies? And yes, we had been working on diversity and inclusion. It was a purposeful statement from me and my leadership team that as we built this company, we wanted to be an inclusive place where voices were heard. But this was our employee resource group coming to us and saying, "Okay, how does this work in the aftermath of these kinds of events?" We had some really hard and difficult conversations. I put a video out and I think that was the birth of these ERGs.

Kathleen
McInnis: Yeah.

Amy Gilliland: Created an expectation from my leadership team that we show up and listen in these events when we can, and where we can. And we really started paving the way for these community groups in our business.

Kathleen
McInnis: That's such an interesting moment, and such an interesting question, because the national security community is non-partisan.

Amy Gilliland: Yes.

Kathleen
McInnis: Generally, right?

But situations like the George Floyd protests, and so many other things that we're seeing in society right now, employees are demanding responses. How do you philosophically approach that balance or that tension between nonpartisanship and employee support?

Amy Gilliland: You're right. It is a very treacherous line and I approach it from the mission. Our job is to serve our customers and to have our employees focused on doing their jobs.

Kathleen
McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

Amy Gilliland: And so to the extent that we can bring resources to bear that help employees have conversations, it isn't a conversation about which side of the aisle you sit on. It is a conversation about how you are feeling in a particular environment or how we--

Kathleen
McInnis: How you're processing it.

Amy Gilliland: -- can create --

Kathleen
McInnis: Right.

Amy Gilliland: How you're processing it...

Kathleen
McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>

Amy Gilliland: ...and what you need from your employer to create an environment where you feel heard and safe.

Kathleen
McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

Amy Gilliland: And so, it is always through the lens of how can we deliver on the mission? And what do we need to bring to bear? And how can we have conversations that are respectful but honest?

Kathleen
McInnis: Well, and that's a great segue into another thread that we wanted to pull on today, which is the importance of having your full, empowered, included person as an employee. And as part of these conversations, you can't do this national security work unless you are actually empowered. And you can't do things like innovation.

Amy Gilliland: Yes.

Kathleen
McInnis: But you can't-- people can't bring their best selves to their decisions or their work unless they're able to be their authentic selves. And so how are you seeing that dynamic play out in General Dynamics IT?

Amy Gilliland: It's a really exciting frontier for us. And so these employee resource groups have been a huge part of the journey. But you know, you're right. For us, innovation is about bringing the best that technology has to bear. Commercial technology companies leveraging what's out there, leveraging all of the perspectives and experiences that our employees have, and then the decades of customer service and sort of bringing that all together.

Kathleen
McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

Amy Gilliland: And so what we want to have in that ideal situation is the greatest number of perspectives. And so, for us, right. It is about attracting that kind of talent to the company and really creating, even if you want to go so far back as creating a broader pool of talent and getting engaged in our communities from an early, early educational environment perspective, attracting that talent to the company. And then once you have those perspectives -- all of them -- and really creating an experience where they are heard and are a part of it so that we can retain the talent.

Like let me give you an example of that, right, to make it more tangible. So we serve the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, also known as NGA, sorry for the acronym, but everybody in natsec, I think you called it likes a good, you know, shortcut or an acronym.

But we work with NGA on all of their technology. So everything from the computer that you work at your desk, to their cloud, and data analytics, and artificial intelligence, just one, huge contract there.

Kathleen
McInnis: Small, small portfolio.

Amy Gilliland: Small portfolio, yes.

Kathleen
McInnis: And the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency has built a new western headquarters. They have one here in Fort Belvoir and they have one that they're building in St. Louis. And it is in a portion of the city. And so we've been serving NGA for many, many years. Decades in fact. And so as they were building this out, part of the relationship there is community partnership.

Amy Gilliland: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>

Kathleen
McInnis: So we are going into the schools and serving The Little Bit Foundation, which does coding in addition to food security and those sorts of things. Teaching kids code from a young age. We've established an internship with NGA out there.

We have established a relationship with a organization called "Rung for Women," where a lot of single parent households are women who are raising children by themselves. You're helping to help them pull themselves up on the ladder and get involved in such an important mission as the National Geospatial-Intelligence mission. So, how can we pull from the community into the environment? Right. And one of the ways that you do that is through making what you do understandable and accessible.

Amy Gilliland: We have a DeepSky lab there. And that DeepSky lab looks to bring academics, and schools, and the government, and commercial technology companies, and GDIT together...

Kathleen
McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>

Amy Gilliland: ...so that we can experiment in what they call a low-code environment.

Kathleen
McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

Amy Gilliland: So without security clearances, right. How can we develop there, and then take that technology, move it into a classified environment? And so that is a way where you're trying to build that national security is cool and we do fun things in national security.

And let me teach you this from an early age and let me bring in lots of diverse perspectives and showcase that what we do is really fun. And it has DeepSky. I was talking to somebody, the other day, who said an employee from a different company actually, and she said, "Oh, I heard about DeepSky." And I said, "Yes, that is exactly the point of DeepSky." We want to get lots of perspectives at the table.

Kathleen
McInnis: So community building is a key strategy for empowering your individuals, empowering your employees, and allowing them to bring their authentic selves to the table. We're the Smart Women, Smart Power podcast.

Amy Gilliland: Yes.

Kathleen
McInnis: And so we're trying to understand the extent to which gender plays a role or impacts decisions or their outcomes. And so reflecting on these decisions that you have illuminated for us today, do you think that you're being a woman has had an impact on these decisions or its outcomes? If so, why? And if not, why not?

Amy Gilliland: I think it's not that simple.

Kathleen
McInnis: Sure.

Amy Gilliland: Because yes, I'm a woman and I have that perspective. And do I have unique experiences as a woman that might inform my decisionmaking? Yes. But I'm a veteran.

Kathleen
McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>

Amy Gilliland: And I'm a mother.

Kathleen
McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>

Amy Gilliland: And I'm a career government service employee. I've-- the military, and then national security, and I was the head of human resources, and I'm the president of a company and I'm all these other things. And so I'm a huge advocate for encouraging my employees to have lots of different career experiences. And so I think it is the genesis and combination of all of those experiences. Going back to the beginning of our conversation, being on the deck plates of a guided missile destroyer, on deployment and the empathy and the understanding that came from there. So there are a lot of things that influenced that decision. And being a woman was certainly one of them, but not the only one. <laugh>.

Kathleen
McInnis: We are many things of which gender is apart.

Amy Gilliland: Yes.

Kathleen
McInnis: Awesome.

Amy Gilliland: It's not binary.

Kathleen
McInnis: Yeah. Fair enough. Thank you so much, Amy, for your time today. We really appreciate you sharing, like, your insights and the incredible work you've been doing at General Dynamics IT.

Amy Gilliland: I love the discussion today. It's fun. And this is a great podcast. So again, thanks for letting me be a part of it.

Kathleen
McInnis: Absolutely. Thank you.

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