

EPISODE 251: COLBY LOUCKS – PASSION, LEADERSHIP & WILDLIFE

Female Voice

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Ken White

Welcome to Leadership & Business, the podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world. Sharing strategies, information, and insight that help you become a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host, Ken White. Thanks for listening. According to a number of sources, the average business professional spends just under five years with an employer before they move on to another organization. Colby Loucks has been with the same employer his entire career. For 29 years, he's worked for the World Wildlife Fund. He started as a college intern. Now, he's Vice President and Deputy for Wildlife. The World Wildlife Fund works to build a world where people and nature thrive, and Loucks has been all over the world working on a variety of interesting projects to reach that goal. He visited William & Mary as a guest of the Institute for Integrative Conservation. Afterwards, he joined us to discuss leadership, the benefits of loving your work, and staying with one employer for the long term. Here's our conversation with Colby Loucks.

Ken White

Well, Colby, thanks for coming and joining us. It's great to have you here. Welcome back to campus.

Colby Loucks

Thank you. It's great to be here. It's great to be back on campus.

Ken White

You met with students yesterday, and I got the opportunity to sit in a little bit of that. What was your day like? What were they like?

Colby Loucks

I had a chance to talk to students about my career at WWF and try to reflect on some of the things I've learned. What I found was students have some great questions, very insightful questions. It was just fun to be back around in the environments of a college or university again.

Ken White

Yeah, always fun. I thought the same. The hour that I sat in their questions were absolutely fantastic. Before we get into what you do in your role and the actual organization, you've been there for 29 years.

Colby Loucks

I've been at World Wildlife Fund for 29 years as of last week.

Ken White

Wow. You interned there?

Colby Loucks

I started out as a six-week internship. I had no plans to stay. It was just a way to get more experience and a little money until I figured out what the next I was going to do.

Ken White

Obviously, something good is happening to keep you there.

Colby Loucks

Yeah. I was able to grow my career from an intern to my present-day position over these 29 years. WWF, the World Wildlife Fund, enabled me to move from intern to a program officer, which is like the next rung up to senior program officer. I was able to do more and more things, more and more experiences, and so I never left.

Ken White

Yeah. There's got to be something special about the culture. If it's a bad culture, you're long gone. Yeah.

Colby Loucks

No, I think I spent some time reflecting on that. I think some of the things I've noticed is having good bosses really is important. If you have working with someone that enables you and empowers you to grow, you like your job, I think, a lot more. I was able to grow from just being maybe, let's say, grunt and just doing the hard work to boss thing. Okay, we're going to give you a project. You see if you can run with this little project. And I did that. And they're like, Okay, good. We're going to give you a bigger project and a bigger

project. In other words, we're going to see if you can manage people. Each time I was given a chance to, I think, grow, try new skills, just grow personally, as well as expand my remit within WWF. I think I've succeeded, so it's great, but the culture is good. I think it's a mission-driven organization. We try to conserve the wildlife in their habitats. We have a lot of passionate people at WWF.

Ken White

What's the advantage of being in an organization for that long?

Colby Loucks

I guess it's fun because you know the people, you know how to get things done, I guess I would say, is I know the structures. At this point, I know a lot of the people who are maybe in the decision-making positions are my friends, or I've been working with them 5, 10, 15 more years. I know how to maneuver within the organization to get things done. I know who to talk to when I need to help someone else. This analogy is not great, but I know how to avoid the landmines, I guess, and maneuver. I think that is a benefit. Then it's also just trying to see a new generation coming up and seeing how you can support them. I think culture in my organization is never stagnant. It's always dynamic, it's always moving. But for me, it's fun to also see that, those interplay of generations.

Ken White

What's a disadvantage of being with the same organization for that long?

Colby Loucks

I think a disadvantage for me is seeing some of my colleagues and friends move. They have just different experiences. I do think that maybe I haven't been able. I guess I could have maybe advanced my career a little bit faster or quicker. You can pop from one to another. There's also disadvantages of that jumping across organizations. But I think in the spirit of trying to understand and learn more about yourself and how other places work, I don't have that. I have this one. I acknowledge it's very atypical to do that, especially in today's age, I think. I have kids in college, and I'm like, Oh, you should definitely do this and try different things and move or move and move. They're like, Dad, you've never moved. Sometimes I get that return.

Ken White

Yeah, not necessarily practicing what you're doing.

Colby Loucks

Exactly.

Ken White

Yeah. You mentioned passion, and you mentioned it yesterday in the talk. I often ask our guests, How critical is passion in your role in terms of success and happiness? How much do you have to love the work, and how much do you love it?

Colby Loucks

Yeah. World Wildlife Fund, Mission Driven. I think a lot of people that work there are very passionate about our calls, about what we're trying to do. I am passionate. I feel like if you can align your passion to what you're doing 8, 10 hours a day or whatever, then you're hopefully in a good place. For me, that's critical. I want to be able to enjoy going to work. It's not every day. No job is perfect, but I enjoy the people I work with. I enjoy the calls and what I'm trying to do. That makes it a lot easier to spend 8 hours a day on doing what we're doing. I'm a big believer of find that passion and then try to align your passion with what you're doing and getting paid to do.

Ken White

Yeah, which is usually the answer, but some have actually said it's not that important, but most of our guests say, yes, passion is really key. When you meet somebody and they say, What is the World Wildlife Fund? How do you explain it to them?

Colby Loucks

I think we're an organization that tries to conserve nature as well as advance the conservation for both people and nature. It's a very complex topic. There's a lot of competing voices. There's a lot of competing agendas around the world. Nature provides a lot for us, whether it's pollination of many of the things we eat for free, ecosystem services to places where you can go and just go out for a hike. I live in Virginia, go out for a hike in the Shenandoah. That's just ways to recharge. I think nature gives us a lot. For us and for the World Wildlife Fund, we're trying to find those places where we can conserve nature and all the things it gives humanity.

Ken White

And your role, Vice President and Deputy for Wildlife, what does that entail?

Colby Loucks

WWF has a lot of different things we do. The World Wildlife Fund has a wildlife Department. I help run that Department. We also have a Department that's related to a forest, fresh water, and other ways of delivering on our mission. I help and find ways that we can conserve the wildlife, which is one of the, I think, mission-critical for the World Wildlife Fund. It's fund around the world. I mean, whether it's from helping to conserve polar bears in the communities in Alaska to the same communities and forests in the Amazon. It always is something different every week and some interesting I get to learn, which is also great for me.

Ken White

In your role now, do you still travel?

Colby Loucks

I travel some. I am now in more of a management role. I've moved from when I first started my career as an intern and beginning to running projects, I would often be the person out in the field doing the dirty work, which is what I wanted. I think a lot of people get into, at least, conservation or environmental sciences to be in the field and be out there in nature. It certainly was that. Maybe it's typical, but now I'm the person behind the persons doing these amazing jobs. I'm supporting them in different ways, whether it's from fundraising and things like that. That said, I need to get out into the field to reinvigorate my soul at some level. I get out to some of our project sites around the world just to see what we're doing. You can also learn a lot more once you're on the ground, more than 100 Zoom calls or something like that.

Ken White

I would think that would make you a much better leader, knowing what your team is up to.

Colby Loucks

Absolutely. You can see all the challenges and problems and things, and the way there's solutions. I found myself with this one guy I work with. He's an engineer, and I'm a scientist. He talks about stuff I don't really 100% know, but he's so good in the field at problem-solving in the field. I would never know that because one, he wouldn't say it, or two, it would be hard to explain it. But we need to do XYZ things, so I figured out how to do this. I would just see him problem-solving in the field. It's just so amazing. You don't get that unless you're just standing beside him, figuring out, watching him, problem-solving. We do a lot of technology, and there's tech breaks, and he just comes up with such innovative solutions on the fly, and you don't get that at home.

Ken White

We'll continue our discussion with Colby Loucks in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business. When it comes to choosing an MBA program, there's much to consider: the curriculum, fit, cost, quality, and the time it takes to earn your MBA. One major component is the learning environment. For that, the William & Mary MBA program cannot be beat. For the fourth year in a row, Bloomberg Business Week has ranked the William & Mary MBA program number one in America for learning. The faculty are simply outstanding, and the students support one another inside and outside the classroom. If you're thinking about pursuing an MBA, choose a program in which you learn, one that transforms you and takes you to the next level and beyond. Check out the MBA program at William & Mary at wm.edu. Now back to our conversation with Colby Loucks.

Ken White

What do you like about leadership?

Colby Loucks

It's interesting. Now, in this more management leadership role, when I first started my career, I was all about me. How can I celebrate me and allow myself to grow and get promoted, et cetera? But I've had a change in my mental mindset to about the we. How to get from me to we. When I see we, I feel like leadership is I get a charge out of seeing people that I work with or people work for me succeed and do amazing things. I'm indirectly in there, so I'm helping support them. Maybe I'm shooting them from bureaucracy or whatever, but enabling, just kicking them this way or that way, and helping them achieve things. I get now a real job satisfaction when I see our team do amazing things, succeed. That's why I like the leadership and being there.

Ken White

Did you think you would lead when you first started out in your career?

Colby Loucks

No way. I guess I'm a leader, but I'm hesitant to say I'm a leader. But when I started, I definitely I could barely publicly speak or write, maybe. I was a scientist. I was really good at math and graphs and all that. But I think I grew in that way as well.

Ken White

That's an interesting what you said earlier about going from the me to the we. Was there a point that you remember that happening? Was it gradual?

Colby Loucks

No, it was about 10 years ago. I was given a huge project to run, a multimillion-dollar project. Up to that point, I've been running a lot of my own projects, and basically, I needed to work with others, and I was the person. WWF, to their credit, took a gamble, I think, on me because I never run such a big project, such a high-profile project, many different moving pieces. I never done that. At that point, I realized I need to empower all these other folks to do this stuff. It's not me. I have a different role here. It took a while, to be honest, but that was definitely a pivot.

Ken White

Yeah, interesting. You said the word project a few times. Give us an example of something you or your team might be working on or have worked on?

Colby Loucks

Yeah. Let's see here. One of the things we do is, well, we're working on something. I'll say something now. It's interesting is we do a lot of technology, trying to leverage technology for conservation, for biodiversity monitoring. One of the projects we're kicking around now is trying to put out audio recorders in the field to hear things. Now, this is not new. What we're trying to innovate on and do new is having real-time through triangulation of audio to be able to track the one project we hope to get going and finish or do next year is Langurs in Vietnam's forest. A lot of the stuff you have is measuring stuff on the ground, a camera trap, but all the stuff in the trees is not really known. If we can put out these audio recorders and catch the movement and then be able to use AI to say this is Bob, the Langur, and we can just track Bob as he moved from tree tree to tree, and it maybe crosses rivers and stuff. We think that'd be pretty cool because then you start having real-time monitoring without collaring, without touching it of the wildlife in the trees and stuff like that, which is not done. Those are the projects. Those are the innovations that I'm excited about that we're working on.

Ken White

Obviously, people are interested in what you do. Companies are, too. What can a company do? Because I know many employees would like to support. What can a company do to work with you or support what you do?

Colby Loucks

Yeah, WWF has a very robust engagement with companies through a lot of different ways where we work with them on supply chain, maybe greening their supply chains, or meeting different targets or metrics they set themselves through their commitments to climate change or whatever. Then we also work with them on employee giving. I think WWF is a way that you can engage, and we can talk about whether we're helping with mangroves or we're trying to restore forests. I think we're very good at being very clear about what an employee giving might do through some company, and how we can just show that very clearly. There's philanthropy. Philanthropic is another way we work, which is also nice. We work with companies in many different ways.

Ken White

You and I were talking before we recorded about the great logo. Man, it's something you just immediately know it's got to be one of the most recognizable. That's got to be fun to have that a logo attached to what you do.

Colby Loucks

It does open doors for sure. WWF has a very powerful logo and probably one of the most, I think, top 10 recognized logos in the world. It does open doors and allows some opportunities that might not exist if we weren't well known and respected through the world and for what we're trying to do. I think, honestly, conserving wildlife is a lot of.

Who doesn't like to conserve wildlife? I guess maybe my challenging question because I think our mission and the habitat that wildlife wants and needs, and honestly, what humanity wants and needs is a pretty position that many people can get behind.

Ken White

That's our conversation with Colby Loucks, and that's it for this episode of Leadership & Business. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business, home of the MBA program offered in four formats: the full-time, the part-time, the online, and the executive MBA. Check out the William & Mary MBA program at wm.edu. Thanks to our guest, Colby Loucks, and thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White, wishing you a safe, happy, and productive week ahead.

Female Voice

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