

EPISODE 237: PHIL WAGNER - POLARIZATION

Phil Wagner

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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. Have you ever avoided interacting with a colleague because the two of you see the world very differently? You know the conversation will be frustrating, so you just go another way. That, in its most basic form, is an example of polarization. We tend to think of polarization in politics, two parties divided and at two distant extremes. But polarization takes place at work. Our guest says it not only affects behavior but it harms innovation, collaboration, and success. Phil Wagner is a professor of organizational behavior at the William & Mary School of Business. He says while we live in divisive times and research indicates it's getting worse, leaders and professionals need to understand polarization and take steps to get people talking. Here's our conversation with Professor Phil Wagner.

Ken White

Well, Phil, thanks so much for being here. It's great to have you on the podcast. Thanks so much.

Phil Wagner

Always great to be here and excited for this conversation, particularly.

Ken White

Yeah, we're going to talk about polarization. How do you define that?

Phil Wagner

There are many different definitions. I think when you think of polarization, first and foremost, you think about a split between different parties, different people, or you think about it as a spectrum, and people flee to as far away from each other as they possibly can. There are two working definitions that I call upon when I think about polarization. The first is attitudinal polarization, and that's not bad. You actually want that. That's like difference based on policy views. We kind of need that. So the goal when we talk about polarization is not to get everybody thinking the same thing, not to even get everybody on the same page. That good inventions, good entrepreneurial ventures, good education happens because we bring different ideas together. So, attitudinal polarization, good thing. And a focus on that can actually increase political activity, get people out to vote, cool. What we often think of, though, is a different type of polarization which is effective polarization, which means it's got an effect on your behavior. So not only do you have that disagreement, this is that partisan spite, and I think that's what really gets the most attention. That's dangerous because it's fundamentally rooted in alienating ourselves from different ideas, different people groups, different cultural groups. And again, our goal is to bring people together towards connection.

Ken White

That effective. Is it worse today than a generation ago, or is it our imagination?

Phil Wagner

This is really hard to measure, but data from a few years ago would suggest, yes, both domestically and globally, people think these are the most divisive times ever. We know that the level of polarization in States has really reached unprecedented heights. One of the cool data points, not cool, one of the interesting data points is you've got about half of Americans in 2022 saying that a civil war in the next century is a possibility. That's wild. That tells us like this is something that people feel deeply. Again, in 2022, major global players also see that polarization. It's not just a United States thing. It's a global thing. It's hard to answer: is it worse than ever? To many people, It certainly feels so.

Ken White

But '22 is the research that you-

Phil Wagner

Yeah, that's the most recent research that I feel comfortable sharing here. A lot has happened since 2022. If I were to give my personal insight, I would imagine those feelings have only ratcheted. Think about what you're feeling. As people, as professionals, we sense it, I sense it more than I do in a normal environment.

Ken White

Why does this interest you? How did you get into this?

Phil Wagner

I started working in the diversity, equity, and inclusion space a long time ago because that's where my values lie. I think, I will say, from 2020 to 2025, there's been a lot of public debate on the value, the role of that, and I really welcome that. I think there's some good opportunity for us to make that work better. It hasn't always been done perfect as we were nearing a political cycle. Those conversations got hotter and hotter and hotter and hotter. My field, my background is in communication. Communicators love to debate. I'm sitting back and just watching the temperature rise and rise and rise and thinking, gosh, we do not know how to deliberate in good faith. This is not that difficult. I love to debate. I love to get all the data points on the table. Tell me your well-founded theories of how the world should work. They might differ from mine, and yet we don't seem to have an everyday understanding that we can disagree fundamentally and we can also work together. We can be in community with each other. There are extremes, so please don't exaggerate that. There are some safety considerations, psychological safety considerations, where we're not always designed to be in community with all people. But by and large, I think we alienate people that we could develop deep, rich, productive relationships with just because they disagree with us. To me, that's fundamentally an inclusion issue. So, it just seems like a logical progression.

Ken White

And a communication issue.

Phil Wagner

Absolutely a communication. Actually, I think the cure to this really all comes back to communication, but we can get there.

Ken White

Give us an example of when you think of polarization. Is it an organizational setting that you're thinking of? Is it personal? When you teach it and share it, is there something that comes to mind?

Phil Wagner

Yeah, I think it manifests in many different ways. The best way to think about it is in an individual way because we understand those feelings. If you have navigated the last few years in the States. You've felt it. You've probably had to push back some of the feelings you've had that might alienate people from a certain political party or a certain social background, a certain ideology. So we know and understand it individually. But that certainly impacts organizations. Because who walks in and clocks in 9 to 5 in organizations? People with their potentially polarizing viewpoints. You can't just assume

that people walk in 9 to 5 and forget about politics, forget about the world, forget about the complexity of that world. And so if you're not careful as an organization, you've got a context that is ripe for disruption because you're bringing multiple people to the table, and you haven't brokered a communication environment that is safe or productive for them to actually collaborate and get along. So, it absolutely becomes an organizational issue. And then, if you go broader, organizations also dabble in this space, too.

Organizations draw party lines. They put out messages that are political in some ways. Sometimes that works well. I'm thinking like Nike, Colin Kaepernick, you could argue Chick-fil-A has put out political messaging, and they've remained largely unscathed. Then, sometimes, you have companies that dabble in that space, and it doesn't work well. I'm thinking Target. I'm thinking Anheuser-Busch. There's no real recipe for how to engage in political speak as an organization and have it work well for you, I think the public ultimately decides. So what I focus on is, can we control our own reactions, our own viewpoints, our own communication styles individually, with the hope that that will then funnel up?

Ken White

Just one more thing for the leader to do, right?

Phil Wagner

Yeah, one more thing. One more thing. But it's a function of emotional intelligence, too. So if you are an emotionally intelligent leader, this should be part of your operating platform anyways, I would hope.

Ken White

You should sense it.

Phil Wagner

I would think so. I think so.

Ken White

So if it's, let's say we're at work, there is this issue that is causing polarization, what does the leader do or is it the individual? What are the fixes?

Phil Wagner

We always want policies, we want procedures, we want protective measures. Those are good. You can have those. In 2025, organizations should probably be thinking about the free speech climate and psychological safety and have procedures to navigate the complexity there. But I think it's just much more helpful if we take it on as an individual responsibility. You have a responsibility as a leader to explore other perspectives that are not your own. At the end of the day, those perspectives are data points. Now, tell me

any entrepreneur, any leader that's like, whoa, I'm fearful of data. Please, dear God, no more data. No, you want to know everything possible so you can think about having impact, connecting with others. So whatever persuasive appeal you have, new product, whatever, will actually work well for you. And so, individually, when you take that on yourself, it drives your action steps. And I think that probably leads us into a conversation on what the solution to polarization is. Okay, well, polarization is bad. Cool, buddy. But what do I actually do? I think there's a lot of misguided information about how to address polarization. For instance, if you just do a Google search, you're going to find so much that says, Dude, just be empathetic. Have empathy. Find empathy. See the value in other people. Empathy is a good thing. Please don't get me wrong. Again, going back to emotional intelligence. I was recently lecturing on Goldman and emotional intelligence, and that framework. Empathy is a part of that. But we have made empathy this cure-all in a way that it was never designed to be. There's actually some really interesting research that shows that empathy can reinforce polarization because a lot of what we think about empathy is so shallow. It's like cognitive empathy. I understand the emotion that you're feeling. I can put a label on that. Okay, cool. Congratulations. So can most children, right? If we go a little bit deeper, I can start to feel what you're feeling, but that still doesn't drive action. I need something to drive action because that's how we bridge these divides. I've been following the work of Charles Duhigg. I'm not sure if you're familiar with him. He's just a great scholar, public thought leader. He's done a lot of really interesting work. His most recent work has really rocked my world. I've been in communications forever. And there's, of course, this non-academic guy comes and puts out a book. It's called Super Communicators. It's really, really good. And he gets to this problem of polarization there, and he frames the cure. I really like this. It's just connection, right? It's not just empathy. It's not just I understand, but I've got to go out of my way to foster a connection with you. That seems like, okay, that's a tall order. What the heck do I do? The thrust of his work is get curious. Just get curious and start asking questions about people who are not like you, about policies that don't fall in line with your viewpoint. If you can endow that type of thinking, remember when you lead a wonderfully rich life because you're constantly learning, you're constantly gleaning new insights, again, new data points. If you can quiet your needs or your gut inclinations and just seek out the perspectives of others, you start to build relationships. I don't really like the framing of, well, all of my... I have so many friends who are XYZ, some identity characteristic, but you can tell a lot about a person by the company that they keep. And so a good leader steps back and says, wait a minute. Do all of these people that I'm surrounding, do they look like me? Do they talk like me? Do they act like me? Do they vote like me? And if your answer is yes, no shame because that's natural. But that's not good. You can have wonderfully fulfilling relationships where you shape and sharpen each other if you just take the time to seek those out. Connection is really key. I'll share one more. I was in a public space with a colleague recently. I won't name this colleague, but suffice it to say, we see the world. I mean, we could not see the world through different lenses. We are so, so different. We know this about each other. We've talked about this. We have mutual respect for each other, but it's like, why do you believe what

you believe? What is wrong with you? But we were in a public space together, and you know what that conversation was about? Our kids. We were talking about our kids and what our kids are doing. Then we were sharing a mutual complaint about some operational things. You know why? Because we have to ask questions and to see each other as full, well-rounded, complicated, multi-dimensional people. Not by how we vote, not by how we see the world, but as people. We've got a shared common task. We care about student success. We're on the same page in that regard. We've had to get to know each other to work well together. And what happens? Polarization becomes a lot more difficult.

Ken White

We'll continue our discussion with Professor Phil Wagner in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business. Once again, the William & Mary MBA program has been recognized as one of the best in the world. The Financial Times recently released its global top 100 MBA programs, and the William & Mary MBA program is on the list. If you're thinking about pursuing an MBA, consider one that has world-class faculty, unparalleled student support, and a brand that's highly respected, the William & Mary MBA. Reach out to our admissions team to learn which of our four MBA programs best fits you: the full-time, the part-time, the online, and the executive MBA. Check out the MBA program at William & Mary at wm.edu. Now, back to our conversation with Phil Wagner.

Ken White

What about the manager who's got a team, and it's just not clicking? In this regard, what advice do you have?

Phil Wagner

I have such anxiety of how we continue to push away the soft skills because it's just go, go, go. There's so many things. I got to care about AI and cybersecurity and blah, blah, blah. So, what do I shove off the radar? All the people stuff. I don't have time for that. I really worry about that. You should worry about that in any context, but you should really worry about that today. So please hear me again. Don't over-exaggerate this. There are some industry spaces where the touchy-feely is going to show up in different ways. If you're at the shipyard, if you're in the military, you've got tasks. I understand that. But I do worry if, as a leader or manager, you are not thinking, how am I brokering a communication environment where my people can get to know the other people that they're interacting with? That they can actually ideate together; they can let those walls start to fall. That's going to look different in the nonprofit space, then the corporate space, then the military space. So again, you got to apply that where it counts for you. But are you giving your folks time to be people with each other? And also, are you leading by example? Your folks are watching you. So they're watching the people you interact with, the people that you hire, the people who are in that C-Suite with you? Do

they look like you, talk like you? Are you pushing back? Are you deliberating in good faith? Leading by example, I think, is key as well.

Ken White

Yeah. I mean, you think people have so much to do, managers, and leaders so much to do. Getting people together to go out and go axe throwing is not at the top of the list, truly speaking.

Phil Wagner

Absolutely. But are you incentivizing your people to just go, go, go, nonstop and not even creating an opportunity for them to collaborate on a project? That can be bringing people together. I mean, while I would love if everybody went axe throwing, and I think we should do that, can you? That doesn't have to be what it is. It doesn't have to be a brown bag. Nobody has to take a company picnic. It's just getting together on a common task and not putting people in their silos. I mean, that's the thrust of inner group contact theory. That's a seminal theory that says it's really hard to hate people if you put them on a common task under the best of conditions and say, all right, go. The workplace can do that. For as much as polarization is a huge issue that we've got to combat from a political lens, from an individual lens, I think it's the organization is the perfect space for us to address that because we bring people in from all walks of life. We give them that common task. That is the best of conditions. If we're careful, that can actually lead to productive outcomes that can help address this polarization issue.

Ken White

Interesting. Where do you go from here? You've really gotten into this. You're given a lot of talks. You're finishing it. What's next extension? Do you have any idea?

Phil Wagner

I think for right now, it's just sitting in the complexity of the world every single day. I mean, the pace of change is just... I mean, I think to many people, it's bewildering. If you're an educator, you're like, oh, my gosh, this is so exciting. I don't know where to begin, and I don't know where this goes. I don't see polarization going away anytime soon. It's getting worse. I think it's only going to get worse because we're incentivized to retreat to our own ideological echo chambers. It really takes people who are intellectually brave and confident to recognize this doesn't require me to change how I think necessarily. I don't have to put my values aside, but I've got to take that step and model this to show connection can happen across lines of difference. In fact, some of the best connection can happen across lines of difference. We see this in the Supreme Court. You remember R.B.G. and Justice Scalia? Were like best of friends, right? You can do that, too. You can do that, too.

Ken White

As you are interacting with people, with executives, with teams, with students, and audiences, what are some of the questions you get? What are some of the hangups that people have or questions?

Phil Wagner

Yeah, I think the first step is, how do I actually do it? Okay, so I hear you. Polarization, bad. Empathy is not enough. Connection is good. What does that actually look like? Duhigg talks about this in his book. Oh, gosh, I don't want to botch it. But the way he talks about it is so fascinating because there's a research imperative here. He cites two studies. I'll try to recount them here in his work. He first takes his readers into the context of investment banking, really known for being touchy-feely, as you can imagine, investment banking. He looks at this case study where these investment bankers were in this high-pressure firm, and researchers step back to look at what the decision-making process was like. They found that decisions weren't being made because the temperature was so high. In those meeting spaces where stuff needed to get done, people were pulling out. There was a lot of disagreements. There was like, screaming matches. You've been in those high-stress corporate context. You know those if you're listening, right? The researchers wanted to say, okay, well, under what conditions might we get past some of that? Let's give them a common task. Here's my common task. I just want you to put what you want on the table. As we enter into this meeting, scribe down what your goal is for this meeting. What they found is, guess what? People still yelled, people still disagreed, but when they clarified, I want to be heard. I just want to come in and just have my emotions recognized, or I'm tired of talking about feelings. I want to get something done, or when they clarified the intentionality behind that message, it led to more productive outcomes. I think the key here is know what you're after in any context of connection. He follows up with a different study to look at how that actually manifests. He shows it's from the Max Planck Institute, I believe, in Germany. He studied people who were in an orchestra playing their instruments together and found that when guitarists would play their own piece, their brains were firing in all sorts of different ways. When they moved into a duet, they were on that common task; their brain waves they synced up, and then they went back together when they played individually. So again, reinforcing that common task. Then, he takes it one step further. I love this research. I think it's really interesting. He cites a study where researchers put everyday people like you and me in a movie theater and have them watch clips where there's no context, movies they don't know turns the sound off, there's no subtitles. So think like foreign film you've never seen, no subtitle. You have no idea what's going on. They study the brain waves of those participants, and of course, nobody knew what was going on. Then they put them in small groups, and they have them discuss together, and they come back, and they found that as those groups rewatch those films, guess what happened? Their brain patterns synced up. They were more in line with each other. And originally, those researchers presumed that was because there was one person in that

small group that was really good at saying, all right, Ken. Let me tell you what happened. When he did this X, Y, Z, and that's what this means, and everybody was like, but then when they watched, that's not what happened. They found that groups who had what Duhigg calls these high centrality members, which means I'm going to lean into this communication context and I'm going to ask a heck of a lot of questions. The more questions that were asked designed to pull out why people thought this, those experiences, those perspectives, that led to greater cohesion in the group. To me, the answer of how do I actually practice connection is number one: I clarify what I'm after. Two, I recognize that a common task can do a lot. And three, I just get curious. I ask questions. I think that's so powerful. We're at a liberal arts school. Isn't that the thrust of what we do here? Just get curious. Curiosity is not a bad thing. I couple that with our better arguments framework, too. Principle number one is just take winning off the table. And I know that's really hard for leaders to hear. I got to get the deal. I got to get it. The deadline. Yeah, but in the I'm trying to see for your interpersonal relationships; not everything is a battle. So maybe, just maybe, take winning off the table and try to foster or broker an environment where you can actually find some connections to see where it gets you. Try it out as a case study. It's a wonderfully fulfilling life. If you ask me, you test it out and see.

Ken White

That's our conversation with Phil Wagner, 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, Professor Phil Wagner, 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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