
EPISODE 238: MICHAEL MEDLINE – PRINCIPLED ACHIEVEMENT 2025

Michael Medline

We see it in the headlines where companies or leaders took a shortcut and didn't do it the right way and what ends up happening there. And so I'd rather lose while doing it the right way than win doing it the wrong way.

Female Voice

From William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. This is Leadership & Business, produced by the William & Mary School of Business and its MBA program. Offered in four formats: the full-time, the part-time, the online, and executive MBA. For more information, visit wm.edu.

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. Every spring, the MBA program at the William & Mary School of Business presents the Principled Achievement Award to a leader who best embraces and demonstrates the tenets of Principled Achievement. Previous winners include the head coach of the Buffalo Bills, Sean McDermott, and AnnaMaria DeSalva, global chairman of Burson, the Global Communication Company. The Principled Achievement Award winner is a leader who values people, diversity of thought, empathy, humility, integrity, and success. This year's winner is Michael Medline, CEO of Empire Company and Sobeys Inc, Canada's second largest retailer, whose key businesses include Sobeys, Safeway, IGA, and others. Medline joins us to discuss principled achievement, leadership, and how doing things the right way is the only way. Here's our conversation with the winner of the 2025 Principled Achievement Award, Michael Medline.

Ken White

Michael, welcome. It's great to have you back on campus, and congratulations on winning the Principled Achievement Award.

Michael Medline

No, thanks. It's great to be at the Mason School business. It's one of my favorite places in the world.

Ken White

We like having you. The ceremony Saturday night was a lot of fun. For us, those of us who attended, what was it like for you?

Michael Medline

It was fantastic to see all the enthusiasm from alumni for the school. I'm joining the board of the foundation soon, so I met a lot of the trustees, and that was really good. They're so enthusiastic about the school more than any other board I've ever seen. That really got me going. It was just great to see everyone.

Ken White

Yeah, the board is absolutely incredible. Yeah, it was such a terrific night. You'll be interacting with some students today?

Michael Medline

Yeah, I've already met with some undergraduate students this morning, and then I got some other classes to attend later.

Ken White

Excellent. Is that fun for you?

Michael Medline

Really fun. To see how much smarter the students are than I was when I was in school is really exciting. But I really like interacting and hearing the questions. I think the questions from students are often better than any board or any investor can ask you.

Ken White

Well, speaking of school, what was your experience like here as an MBA? When you look back, what are some things you remember?

Michael Medline

I only remember good things. I came here not knowing the school very well, never having lived down in Virginia before, and I was welcomed with open arms. I loved the professors here. That's what makes this school so much better than every other school is the interaction with the professors. It was good back then, and it's great now. Then the students. I learned a lot from my fellow students and lessons that I carry with me to this day.

Ken White

Now, you were on the podcast, actually, just about three years ago, and we talked about early on your role as CEO. But in terms of your career, you've spent quite a bit in retail.

Michael Medline

Yeah, I never thought I'd be a retailer. I'm a retailer by accident. I was a lawyer, then I went into at Pepsi, and I was in pulp and paper and found a good job in retail, not expecting that I'd be there a quarter of a century. And it's a great place. So I think of myself just as a business person, but others would now regard me as a retailer.

Ken White

And you're obviously a leader. Was there a time in your career where you said, I want to lead or I'm ready to lead?

Michael Medline

Yeah, probably way too early. Probably day one, I thought I could do better than others, and I was wrong. I learned so much at this school, then I had good experiences. I didn't realize at the time how important experience is. Seeing things 100 times rather than one or two times, and going through cycles, and seeing how things get done, and also see the challenges that leaders have to go through. As soon as I went into the business world, I wanted to head up a publicly traded company, and fortunately, I've gotten to do that twice. It's an honor, but it's also a responsibility. But I couldn't have done it younger. I wasn't good enough.

Ken White

Was there anyone you emulated? Anyone in particular?

Michael Medline

Yeah. I mean, there's a couple of people that I look up to. My dad was a big force in my life, and in retrospect, even bigger now, and he's still working. It was that work ethic and that way he dealt with people and his very modest style of dealing with people that I always looked up to and tried to emulate. Then I just got out of a class where I said, one of the most important things is in your late 20s, mid to late 20s, to have a great mentor. I had a great mentor in a CEO named Ron Oberlander, who was very tough on me. I think being a mentor is not just hearing you vent, but it's also telling you when to smarten up. I think that having role models and mentors, especially ones that aren't formally given to you, is very important to your career.

Ken White

What did your dad do?

Michael Medline

My dad's a doctor, but he also was a doctor, but he also was a doctor businessman, and opened private laboratories and still works in a private laboratory today. Gets up at 4:00 in the morning, and heads out and does work, and he's done his work before most people get out of bed.

Ken White

That work ethic is bound to rub off, right?

Michael Medline

Yeah, I can't live up to that, but he's a good role model.

Ken White

Well, let's talk about the Principled Achievement Award. I mean, this is really extremely special. It was a award created just a few years ago. Some of the folks who have received the award before you do absolutely amazing things. And there are pillars within the award that define the award. And one of them is embracing diversity of thought. In other words, having people at the table with you who may not necessarily agree. How do you approach that?

Michael Medline

I think it's absolutely necessary to have success. About 10 days a year, I wish everyone thought like I did. It was really easy, and there's no friction, and everyone got along and agreed. But that's not the way to have success. So 355 days a year, I embrace diversity of thought. And that's difficult because executives can be prima donas and they have very strong views. But I want people who are very different from me, who have different experiences, who can bring more to the table. My COO is a fantastic operator, better than I'll ever be. And then we have other great people around the table, a great CHRO. All these leaders challenge each other, and there's a friction. And that friction creates better decision making at the end of the day. But as the CEO, sometimes it can be you got to referee a little bit.

Ken White

Right. Another pillar is empathy. You hear so much about that word and leadership, especially post-pandemic. Where does that apply to you?

Michael Medline

That's a difficult word for me because people mean it in so many different ways. We have 128,000 teammates or employees in our company. If I were to feel empathy on every day for everyone, it's impossible for me to do, but also would probably... I wouldn't be able to do it. What does empathy mean to me? It means that the people working with me on the team know that I have their best interests at heart, know that I always have their back, know that I always fight for them, and that I appreciate what they're going through. So they know that I care for them. And then I took over a very struggling company. And when you're a part of a struggling company, it's like a sports team that's lost 10, 12 games in a row. It's not fun. And so I wanted to make it fun and make them winners again. And now they feel great to be part of a winning team. But there are instances where you have to show personal empathy. Because of all the news about

inflation in grocery stores, we had a number of incidents in our stores where the frontline people were verbally and even physically assaulted. And every time I found out about these instances, especially if they were really nasty ones, I would call the person and have a chat to make sure they were okay. Because that's hard. When you're on the front line, it's really hard. You're interacting with customers, a vast majority of them are amazing people, but it's tough, and that people take it out on people in the store if they're not happy. So that's where I think you really have to show the empathy for the people on front lines.

Ken White

How do you communicate with 120,000 people?

Michael Medline

You've got to really think it through, right? Because they're all teammates. They all make the thing go. In fact, they make it go more than I do. I'm not in the store interacting and stocking the shelves. But we have various methods of doing so. But it's not just me, right? I count on us to be able to roll out messaging across the company. So all the leaders are communicators. All the leaders have to lead. And then everyone who works in the stores, which is most of our people have a store manager who is their leader and does an amazing job and knows what they need. And when I go through stores, which I do often, and I would like to do even more, I see these leaders in the store and their connection with their teammates. And that's what really gets me excited, that the culture that we've created and the values that we have go all the way down, because there's no way I can communicate all the time with people. I count on others to be leaders.

Ken White

Integrity is one the pillars. Do you think much about it? Is it automatic? How do you approach it?

Michael Medline

I think all the time about it because I am so competitive and I want to win, but I also want to do it the right way. I have to always emphasize that because I always tell our people, we get the results and to achieve. But I always, always say, you've got to do it with value, and you've got to do it the right way and never take a shortcut. We've seen so many times in businesses where you see it in the headlines, where companies or leaders took a shortcut and didn't do it the right way and what ends up happening there. And so I'd rather lose while doing it the right way than when doing it the wrong way.

Ken White

Does the competitor in you, does that make your job fun?

Michael Medline

Yeah. Because you have some big competitors. We have two big grocery competitors in Canada. We have Walmart and Costco as well, and then other competitors. And I found that if you really... Our largest competitor, our people get really rallied by wanting to beat them. Sometimes we beat them, sometimes they beat us. But I really enjoyed sports growing up. And I see a lot of analogies between coaching a team and leading a company that you want to win. You want to have better results than your competitors. That's the whole game. And over long, long time, the stock price is the best arbiter of that. It takes into account all of your leadership abilities, all of your values and your culture and your decision-making strategy, your operational tactics. In any given day, your stock goes up and down. But in the long term, it's a pretty good arbiter.

Ken White

We'll continue our discussion with Michael Medline 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 Michael Medline.

Ken White

It's interesting the number of CEOs and leaders we've had on the podcast and how so many of them either played sports growing up or it was such an important part of who they are, that whole competition piece. If someone were to ask you to define yourself as a leader, how would you do that?

Michael Medline

I think very results-oriented, that competitiveness. But also, I think I've gotten better and better at it, but I really believe in delegation and that giving people their chance to shine or sometimes fail, but not to micromanage people. I'm very clear on what I expect from the leaders, and then they go and do it. I think that the really good leaders appreciate not having me hang over their shoulder all the time, but I will. I always reserve the right to make some comments and talk, and we meet every week. Some of them I with every day or talk to all the time wherever I am. But I really think that, especially when you have such a big company, you've got to count on other people. And they're the real winners. They're the real leaders in the company, and I'm just lucky to work with them.

Ken White

So you just mentioned you're interacting all day long. How do you learn to become a high-quality active listener?

Michael Medline

Yeah, that's hard because a lot of business people think they have all the answers. But what I've learned over time is that my teammates, the teammates in the store, too, when I go through the store and they say things about the company, I'm listening, and especially when I'm in the stores and in our huge distribution centers. You can really pick up where you're doing things right and where you're doing things wrong from people who are interacting with customers or who have a really important job of supplying goods to the customer. But I think I can do a better job of listening than I do. But one thing I've started to incorporate is I try not to talk too early in a conversation. More on topic, because if I do, it influences the conversation too much. I like to hang back now and hear what everyone else says, and then I learn a lot more. I think that's something I'm trying to do more on boards that I'm on or at the company. You don't always have to be the first to speak, and you're not always right.

Ken White

The grocery sector, the business, if several people who had your job, your industry gets together, what's the hot topic today? What's everybody talking about?

Michael Medline

It's been a tough four or five years. We've gone through COVID, we had high inflation, we had higher interest rates. So it's been a very tough time to get along. Outside of the United States, a Canadian company like ours we're concerned about the talk about terrorists, not so much how it will influence our business because we're not influenced very much by it, but how it will influence other businesses and the economies. And I think a lot of people right now are thinking about the macroeconomic environment and how that's going to impact them. The nice thing about the grocery business is people need to eat, and we do our best to supply that need. It's always a good business. It's just a matter of how good it can be. Then we're always competitive, and it's incredibly competitive market where we compete against the best in the world, including Walmart and Costco.

Ken White

Artificial intelligence, playing with that, thinking of where it might fit?

Michael Medline

Yeah, we are. I don't think we'll be the leader on it. We've been a leader on many technologies, but I think in terms of AI, we are starting now because I think we have to do it in some areas to be able to understand how it works. But I do think that if you try

to do everything homegrown, it will be like saying when spreadsheets came out, you had to invent your own spreadsheet. I think there's going to be all sorts of solutions that we can borrow or partner or buy instead of trying to reinvent the wheel. Our biggest opportunity is making decisions on what products to have in our store. It's not on the cost side. Costs are big in the grocery industry, but it's really such a big... We have \$31 billion in sales a year Canadian. It's a big industry and little changes you can make in terms of pricing or what products you carry or where you put them in the store. That's where we're seeing the biggest payoff from AI.

Ken White

How about pickup delivery? I mean, who knew a generation ago? You didn't have to go into the store. You got to be kidding, right? How is that affecting the business?

Michael Medline

Yeah, it's starting to affect the business a lot. Canada is a really slow adopter on grocery e-commerce, not on e-commerce, not on digital adoption. In fact, we're ahead of the curve, but on grocery, we're behind. And so it's not as big a deal as it is in the UK or the US, for instance. But we have all sorts of solutions for it because it's going to get bigger and bigger as the demographics get better. So we partner with a British company called Ocado, and we have an incredible online presence through what we call Voila. But it needs scale. We don't have the scale enough yet, so we're not making money on it yet, but it's getting better and better every single year. We just did a deal with Instacart and Uber Eats, and that's really good. We're trying to appeal to all segments. If you want to go in the store, and I think that's one of the reasons that e-commerce and grocery hasn't taken off as much. A lot of grocery options and good grocery options in Canada. But we're starting to see adoption and penetration pick up, so we got all sorts of solutions for that.

Ken White

What's the experience like in your stores? Is it different from brand to brand, store to store?

Michael Medline

Yeah, it is. We have a lot of banners, and some days you go, wow, it would be great to be Walmart and have fewer banners. But I think it allows us to compete in a different way. And so in different regions, we have different banners because we acquired them. And so we have many banners, and it makes for a complex operating environment, but better for the customer because different customers can make their choice and shop different banners with us in most provinces.

Ken White

I always find it somewhat fascinating people just really grab on to their grocery store. It's important to them, that brand and that experience.

Michael Medline

There's nothing like it. I was in hard goods, I was in soft goods, and people are coming into your stores four times a year, five times. If they come six, that's a great customer. Now you've got your best customers coming in twice a week, and they're judging you every single time. There's a loyalty built in, and there's an expectation built in. Even when we move things around the store, well, when you go into a grocery store and things have moved around, you do not like it right at first. Even though we've done all the AI we can do, and we have great merchants who make those decisions, we know it'll work out in the end. But the people in the store, they get a lot of questions when they can't find where the yogurt is or where the bacon is.

Ken White

Yeah, it is. It's one of the most fascinating sectors I see in terms of brand loyalty and experience loyalty. So just back quickly to the Principal Achievement Award and your leadership, what advice would you have? You shared some of that about being young and jumping too quickly, but what advice would you have for aspiring leaders as they're hoping, someday I think I can lead?

Michael Medline

I think that you have to... Not every place you're going to work, not every company or firm or organization you're going to work is going to be a perfect fit for you. My big advice that I give my own children, and I give students if I talk to them, I try not to give too much advice because you got to live your own life, is enjoy the job you're in. Don't always be looking for the next job. I think that took me too long to realize. But also, if you're at a company that's not looking after your career and isn't treating you fairly, in the right way, leave and go find somewhere that you'll have a great career. I've seen that so often where people leave and they were struggling somewhere, they weren't happy, and they go somewhere and they're so happy. That's the advice I like to give, which is... I don't like companies where they go, you're in charge of your own career. But your first, your second, you're a person of the company. How can you be in charge of your own career? The company has a responsibility to give you the chances, to give you a chance to have a great career and get all the opportunities you can. Then you got to make the most of them. That's up to you. But that's really important to me, enjoy, because if you're always looking for the next job or you're not happy in the current job, you're not successful.

Ken White

That's our conversation with Michael Medline, 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, Michael Medline, 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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