
EPISODE 240: DAVID BRASHEAR – THE ‘ART’ OF BUSINESS

David Brashear

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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. The Muscarelle Museum of Art at William & Mary has been in the spotlight lately, generating media coverage by the Wall Street Journal and others, thanks to its current exhibition, Michelangelo, the Genesis of the Sistine. The exhibition, that runs through June first, displays Michelangelo's early drawings of the famous frescoes of the Sistine Chapel. Organizations like the Muscarelle are part museum, part art gallery, and part business. David Brashear is the director of the Muscarelle Museum. After earning his MBA from Harvard Business School, he worked in the private sector as an entrepreneur, division manager, and consultant, and he uses his business experience to lead the museum. He joins us on the podcast today to talk about the Michelangelo Exhibition, leadership, and the business of museums. Here's our conversation with David Brashear.

Ken White

Well, David, thanks so very much for joining us today. It's a busy time of the year for you.

David Brashear

It's a busy time, Ken. Thanks for having me.

Ken White

Yeah, it's great to have you here. I'm so interested in what we're going to talk about. But before we get into leading a museum and the business that you're in, let's talk about the exhibition you have going right now. It's really getting a lot of attention.

David Brashear

We have a remarkable exhibition. It's been many years in the making, and it's entitled Michelangelo: The Genesis of the Sistine. What we're doing in this exhibition, along with the partners that have helped us to bring this to the public, is presenting Michelangelo's early work as he began to think about what he wanted to do in the frescoes in the Sistine Chapel. On the ceiling, on the end wall, the altar his giant fresco, The Last Judgment, all of those works. Great partnerships. We worked with a few leading Italian institutions, Caciboniradi, the Uffizi Museum, and the Musée Reale in Torino; I think very notably, we worked with the Vatican Museums, and our partnership with the Vatican Museums allowed us to have access to the highest resolution digital images of all aspects of the Sistine Chapel. We've connected these very early drawings, these monochromatic drawings by Michelangelo, incredibly important, to the end product through the display of immensely large images spread throughout the exhibition. It's been received really well. We had beautiful and very supportive review in the Wall Street Journal in late March, and that's helped to drive a lot of attendance to the exhibition.

Ken White

When people are leaving, what are they saying?

David Brashear

Many people are saying they understand the Sistine Chapel better now than after they visited the actual Sistine Chapel.

Ken White

That makes sense, right? Because this was his work prior, too.

David Brashear

Well, and what we're able to do in the exhibition and that you aren't able to do when you're in the actual Sistine Chapel is zero in on specific items and let the visitor investigate. When you're in the Sistine Chapel, you're there with hundreds, maybe even thousands of people. You're being ushered through fairly quickly. You don't have a great angle on what's going on, particularly on the ceiling. So you're straining your neck, you're looking back. But here in this exhibition, we give it to you on the walls. We let you make the connection. We let you walk up and do a deep dive into what's up there on the ceiling. People have really responded not only to the drawings by Michelangelo, the incredible master but also to these large-scale images we have spread throughout the exhibition.

Ken White

Everyone I've talked to, students, faculty, staff, visitors are all just in awe of it. It's terrific. Goes till June 1?

David Brashear

Goes till June first.

Ken White

You're the director of the museum. What does the director do? What's your role?

David Brashear

The director's role at a museum is just like the chief executive officer of any for-profit enterprise. We're essentially at a museum running a business. In order to execute that business on a day-to-day basis, you're obviously incurring expenses, and you need to figure out the way that you're going to meet those expenses with revenue streams. You have all of the worries and concerns that a CEO would typically have, but at the end of the day, you're concerned about not losing money, about being an ongoing and sustainable operation. There's a lot of creativity that gets brought to the fore. You want to have an amazing team working for you across the spectrum. Many of the departments you have in a museum are similar to the departments you would have in a for-profit enterprise.

Ken White

Your experience in business, is there something or some particular time that you look back and say, wow, I'm so glad I did that because I'm using it every day in my role?

David Brashear

Well, in business, one of the things you're concerned about on a day-to-day basis is the numbers, understanding the numbers. I think one of the most important things that people need to understand if they're entering into the nonprofit world or if they're entering into the museum world, perhaps in a leadership role, is that you need to understand the numbers. I preach this to our student interns who think they might want to have a career in the arts later on. I always encourage them, take an accounting course, make sure you understand how a business looks at numbers, make sure you understand the impact of certain numerical scenarios as you're working through business problems or organizational problems in an operation. So many students are reluctant to take an accounting course. It's essentially basic math. I mean, you'd look at students who go to some of the best colleges and universities. Many of them have taken advanced math in high school, maybe even AP Calc, and they get to college, and they're worried about taking accounting. Accounting is third-grade math. It's just making things balance out. But that balancing out and working through those numbers allows you to have insights and understanding into how your operation, your organization is

progressing. I'm always a big proponent of understanding the numbers. Of course, as a business person, I was doing that from day one.

Ken White

Accounting the language of business, as they say, right?

David Brashear

The language of business.

Ken White

Yeah. You talked about employees and staff. Am I correct in assuming that volunteers that's different from what you did in business? How do you approach that?

David Brashear

Well, one of the things you want to do in a nonprofit organization, especially one that is so people-intensive, like a museum, is make sure you have the human resources arrayed that are able to meet the demands of the visiting public. The fact of the matter is, it would be hard for most museums to afford the amount of staff that are needed to make a day go well in a museum. Of course, you have your paid personnel, and you have arranged them in a variety of departments, but you really want to engage with volunteers who can help to make each day more smooth. One of the things that we've done, we just recently reopened our museum after a pretty substantial expansion project. We almost quadrupled the size of the museum. What that means is a lot more public spaces for people to enjoy, but we didn't necessarily have a quadrupling of our budget in order to get all of that done. What we did, I had a manager who was responsible partly for building a volunteer corps. We didn't need that volunteer corps as much in our old museum. But in this new museum, we knew it was going to be a critical part of our success. She went out about 10 months ago and began soliciting for volunteers to come in, learn about the new museum that was about to reopen, get trained in a variety of roles. What we've been able to do is stand up a really robust volunteer operation to stand alongside our paid staff in greeting customers every day and completing the kinds of transactions and monitoring and customer service that you want in any business in order to be successful.

Ken White

The Muscarelle Museum is on the campus of William & Mary. That's not all museums, of course, are tied to a university. What does that mean in your role that you're a part of a university?

David Brashear

Well, I think it means a number of really interesting things. For me personally, at one moment in time, I thought my interest was going to be in leading a large civic art museum. But what I've come to understand, and I came to understand this fairly early on in this role, was that running an art museum on a university campus is like running a business unit in a large multifaceted corporation. What that means is I have an incredibly large number of peers across the organization who I can go to, who I can converse with, who I can share problems with and work out solutions based on our shared experiences. If you're the leader of a civic art museum, you're the king or queen of that mountain, and almost everybody in the building reports up to you. But when you're the director of an art museum on a university campus, you have a lot of peers across the operation, and that sharing really becomes valuable. I think one of the other things that's really interesting is this opportunity to develop programs in partnership with faculty and even students in the museum space. One of the things I think we do brilliantly at the Muscarelle, and I'm sure many university art museums do, is help to train students on what it's like to work in the art world. Every semester, we have between 15 and 25 student interns working with us in our various departments, working in collections management, working in marketing, working in events. This semester, we even have someone working in our finance operation. These students are gaining real-life experience on what it is like to be in an art museum environment, in a nonprofit environment. So many of these kids go off and have careers in the arts. It's really fascinating to watch. We hate to lose them. We typically fall in love with these students. They're such amazing people. Then, after two or three or four years, they're gone.

Ken White

We'll continue our discussion with David Brashear 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, many people look to the rankings, among other things, for guidance. While the William & Mary MBA program is ranked among the best in the world, the Financial Times includes William & Mary's full-time MBA program in its global top 100. Fortune ranks the executive MBA program in its top 20, and US News & World Report lists the online MBA program in its top 20. If you're thinking about pursuing an MBA, check out all the indicators of quality, like a 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 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 David Brashear.

Ken White

You're an artist. You're a photographer. How does that affect the way you approach your work?

David Brashear

I think what's interesting about being an artist and working in the art space is that you do have maybe a third dimension of understanding of what it takes to create an important work of art. I think in photography, it's all about the composition and seeing in places that maybe the average person isn't seeing, and unlocking angles that maybe the average person isn't quite able to unlock. Some people can hit a baseball 450 feet. Other people can have a really great angle and view on a composition. We all have our special skills. I think being an artist and also leading an art organization, I think, helps me at least a little bit understand what's inside an artist's mind. As we begin down a path of planning for an exhibition, sometimes just putting yourself in the mind of the artist helps you think about how that exhibition might best be presented to the visiting public.

Ken White

Was there a point in your career where you said, I want to lead. I want to be a CEO or something like that?

David Brashear

I think there was a point in my childhood where I thought I wanted to lead. I'm one of those classic people who thinks they're going to be the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court or something like that when you're in sixth grade. I always thought I wanted to be a lawyer and potentially go into politics. Then, honestly, I went to Penn undergrad. After about one year of that grueling exercise, I thought, there's no way I can do this for seven straight years. I thought about things differently. I've always been enamored of business. I was reading the stock pages in the newspaper when I was a kid, and not surprisingly, ended up in the business world, had a great first job, went off and got an MBA from Harvard, had a great experience there, and spent many years in the business world, first as a consultant with a really awesome, unique firm. I was then a venture capitalist. After that, I ran a business at Fannie Mae. After quitting Fannie Mae, I went off to start my own business, which I ran for about 18 years in commercial real estate investing and development. That's the job that I had right before I became director of the Muscarelle Museum.

Ken White

What do you like about your role?

David Brashear

Gosh, I love every part of my role. I've had a lot of good jobs in my life, and I've liked a lot of those jobs. I'm not sure I ever loved any of those jobs. I love this job. This job brings together all aspects of me. I'm very interested in interacting with people, and so I'm constantly interacting with visitors, donors, friends of the museum, colleagues across the university, political officials, public officials. That part of the job is really interesting

to me. I love charting a vision and getting people to work within that vision, and that's what you get to do as the leader of any organization. Then, thinking creatively about how we make the experience in the museum the best that it can possibly be is really enjoyable for me. I'm really interested in architecture. I've obviously had a long experience in real estate. I got to lead the development of our museum expansion, working with the architects, and we hired world-renowned architects from Caesar Pelley's firm, Pelley Clark & Partners in New Haven, Connecticut. For me, that was an amazing experience. Just the whole job has been a wonderful, wonderful gift to my life.

Ken White

When you look back at the leaders who led you, what were some of the lessons you learned from them? You said I'm going to do that when I'm there.

David Brashear

I think one of the biggest things you have to remember as a leader, and maybe one of the things I learned early on, was making sure it's not always about you. You have to bring along a team, and it has to be about we. Let's get this done together. It's not about individual actors. There's no success in me. There's a lot of success in we. I've held that as something very firm and central to everything I've done in my business career.

Ken White

If you were to talk to students or a young professional who thinks they would like to follow your path, what advice would you give them if they're early career professionals?

David Brashear

One thing that I have to say, quite frankly, is that there are not a lot of directorships at museums around the country or around the world. In many respects, and this is true in so many industries, there's luck in how your career develops and unfolds. I was fortunate enough, very late in my career, after having worked as a volunteer at this museum for many, many years and knowing deeply many of the senior administrators here at William & Mary, I was very fortunate to be asked at a critical moment in time if I was interested in being the interim director of the museum. I was interested. I was about to pivot from what I had been doing previously, so I was interested. Then that, of course, turned into a non-interim position, a more permanent position. I think you just have to be open. You have to try things in your life. If you don't like what you're doing, think about what you want to do next. The next thing you do doesn't necessarily have to be the perfect match. It just might be something different than you're doing right now. You have to shop around. Some people find the job they love right out of college or right out of high school, and they do that for the rest of their lives. Other people, it takes a little bit longer. For me, it took a long time to find the job that I truly loved.

Ken White

That's our conversation with David Brashear, 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, David Brashear, 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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