

EPISODE 231: CARLY FIORINA – THE CHARACTERISTICS OF LEADERS

Carly Fiorina

You don't build resilience until you decide what other people think about me is not who I am. It's just what other people think about me. Who I am is what I get done, who I surround myself with, who's on my team.

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. Twenty-five years ago, she made history when she became the first woman to be named CEO of a top company. Carly Fiorina became CEO of Hewlett-Packard in 1999. During her tenure as chair and CEO, HP became the largest technology company in the world as cash flow, revenue, and profit all grew. Well, since that time, she's been working as a consultant and leadership coach in the government and private sectors. She's written three books on leadership, and she serves on the boards at James Madison University and the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. She recently visited the William & Mary School of Business to talk with students and guests. Then, she joined us to discuss leadership and the qualities and characteristics of high-quality leaders. Here's our conversation with Carly Fiorina.

Ken White

Carly, thanks so very much for being here at the business school, but also for talking to our students and our community a few minutes ago. How did you think that experience was?

Carly Fiorina

Now, first, it was a great privilege to do it, and there were such great questions. The students were obviously very engaged, which was wonderful to see. I hope one of the

messages they took away was that they are capable of leadership. Now they have to choose.

Ken White

It's so interesting because you did mention that you said leadership is a choice. What do you mean by that?

Carly Fiorina

First, being a leader is a human capability. We all have it. I think people get mixed up by the word leader. They think, oh, it's somebody who's famous or who's rich or who has a big title or a jet or something. And leadership is not about those things. Leaders work with others to change things for the better and produce results. That's what a leader does. And anyone is capable of that. I am proof positive of that because I was not destined for a position of leadership, but I learned how to lead along the way. And we can find so many examples of unlikely leaders throughout our nation's history who we now say, of course, they were a leader, but at the time they started, no one thought they would succeed.

Ken White

You talked about certain characteristics of high-quality leaders with the students and the group in there. I'd like to go through it and have you explain again to our audience what you meant by that. The first one you said, one of the characteristics of a high-quality leader is courage. Can you talk about that?

Carly Fiorina

So one of the realities of us as people is that we say we want change, but we don't really like it. Everyone talks about, Oh, this should be different. This should be better. We complain about things a lot, but change is actually very hard. And even when we are sitting in a circumstance that we don't particularly like, we tend to get more afraid of what it will take to change it than we are uncomfortable with the present circumstance. It's just part of human nature. For a leader to lead, for a leader to change things, they have to rattle people's cages. They have to change the status quo, challenge the status quo, and people resist, people push back. And when people resist and push back, they criticize the leader. That's what happens. And so what I tell all leaders is criticism is the price. You're going to get criticized. You just have to accept that. And I know that criticism is hard, especially now, because there's so many avenues where people are criticized, and it feels so mean and so omnipresent. But it's true. If you want to change things for the better, if you want to produce results which haven't been produced before, if you want to lead, you will be criticized. Deal with it.

Ken White

How did you learn? How did you learn to deal with criticism?

Carly Fiorina

A lot of practice.

Ken White

Yeah.

Carly Fiorina

A lot of practice. Because when you're different, it's different. For whatever, I was different because I was a woman. But whenever you're different, any leader is criticized, particularly when you look different than people expect. And so I had a lot of practice getting criticized. But I also always had allies with me who also believed the problem needed to be solved, the change needed to happen. So when you have allies who are with you, you're not taking it all alone. That's why a leader never operates alone because you don't ever accomplish anything alone.

Ken White

You brought up character. Can you tell us about that?

Carly Fiorina

It's an old-fashioned word, but I think character is having the stamina to keep going when the going gets tough, and the going always gets tough. Everything worth doing turns out to be harder than we think it's going to be. That's just the way it is. Your students know showing up at William & Mary turned out to be harder than they thought it was going to be. And so you have to have the stamina, the character, the strength, the conviction to keep going. The other thing that I think is true about character is how you do things matters as much as what you do. Because if a leader wants to keep changing things, how they get it done, how they interact with other people, how they recruit other people, that matters as much as anything else. So if, as a leader, for example, you take credit for everything, that how isn't going to work very well. If you give credit to others, you're going to get more done over the long run. How you give credit is as important as getting something done.

Ken White

When you're talking about character in terms of stamina, grit, and resilience, is that in it's the same ballpark?

Carly Fiorina

Yes. Resilience is the ability to not be defeated by a mistake, by a problem, by a criticism, to be able to learn the lesson. I have told organizations my whole career people say, oh, we're going to make a mistake. I said, yup, because change requires risk-taking. Risk-taking means mistake-making. Yes, we will make mistakes. The key is we can't make the

same mistake twice. When we make a mistake, we acknowledge it. We're not leveled by it. We acknowledge it, we learn from it, we get up, and we move on.

Ken White

Yeah, fail fast, right? Yeah. Humility is one of the characteristics of leaders you shared. What do you mean by that?

Carly Fiorina

Humility is not a lack of self-confidence. A leader has to be self-confident. I know I can make a difference. I know what my strengths are. I know I can rally others to my cause. But humility is the knowledge that I need others as well. I can't do it by myself. I'm not always the smartest person in the room. I don't have every answer. I am going to make a mistake. All of those recognitions all of those humilities make a leader more effective, not less effective. Because if you know you're going to make a mistake, you seek out advice. If you know you're going to make a mistake, you're not leveled by it. You pick up and go on. If you know you don't have every answer, you ask other people for their points of view. And guess what? When you ask people for their points of view, they tend to buy in to what you're doing a whole lot more than if you never asked them at all.

Ken White

That's self-confidence. Is that for you and your career? Did that take time to build that?

Carly Fiorina

Yes. But what I learned about myself, and I think it's how I have become resilient, is I learned that I cared more about working with other people and getting something done than I cared about what other people thought about me. I do think you don't build resilience until you decide what other people think about me is not who I am. It's just what other people think about me. Who I am is what I get done, who I surround myself with, who's on my team.

Ken White

Excellent. Empathy is one of the characteristics you shared.

Carly Fiorina

So empathy to me means the ability to withhold judgment and see what someone really can offer. Everyone can offer something. We tend to judge people very quickly based on what? Based on their appearance, based on their political affiliation, based on their education degree, based on where they come from, based on a whole bunch of things. The second we judge someone, we shut off our ability to learn what they're capable of. And that's fatal in a leader because leaders need to find capacity all around them. And sometimes you don't get to choose who's around you. And yet, you have to find capacity

in them, and you have to unlock that capacity to help solve a problem and move forward. So empathy helps you do that because you suspend judgment and you say, okay, let me see who you really are. Let me hear what you really think. Let me incorporate your potential into the problem I'm trying to solve.

Ken White

That takes patience.

Carly Fiorina

Yes, it does. It takes patience. Our age does not reward patience. We feel like we have to be in a hurry all the time, and we don't have to be in a hurry all the time. We sometimes need to be patient and thoughtful and careful.

Ken White

I think that was one of the questions that you shared that, and it was something I think a few of us looked at each other thinking, She's so right. I don't know how much we thought about that, but people expect it so quickly. How do you pull back and say, fast is not the goal here?

Carly Fiorina

Well, that's an example of when you need courage and character because people always want everything yesterday. Some things are, a timely decision is better than a decision that's perfect but comes too late. On the other hand, the wrong decision too soon can be fatal. It does take courage and character to say, I need to wait. I need more information. I need to consult with others. Actually, we don't need to make this decision today.

Ken White

We'll continue our discussion with Carly Fiorina in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business. The Financial Times, Bloomberg Business Week, Princeton Review, and US News & World Report have all named the William & Mary MBA program one of the best in the US and the world. 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 Carly Fiorina.

Ken White

Where does communication come in that? If you're leading a large organization, it's easy to say that to maybe the C-suite or the inner circle. How do you get that word out to everybody to say, I'm trying to be strategic here.

Carly Fiorina

A leader has to communicate prolifically. A leader has to communicate all the time. The good news is that technology allows a leader to communicate far more ubiquitously and effectively. But for example, when I was running a vast global corporation, we didn't have all the same communication tools that we have today. I made it a regular practice to travel around the world to meet with people at all levels in the organization. I had a global quarterly broadcast every quarter. I talk to every single employee because communication keeps people aligned. It keeps people up to date about what's going on. It builds trust. It builds teamwork. Leaders have to communicate and not just to the people who report to them but to everyone who matters in order to achieve the mission, which usually is everybody.

Ken White

Collaboration, one of your characteristics.

Carly Fiorina

Again, collaboration comes from the recognition that nothing gets done if you're acting all by yourself. I mean, you can go off in your room and post and like and do all that, but you're not actually getting anything done. You have to work with other people to accomplish an objective. And so leaders need to learn how to collaborate effectively. And that means assembling a team with different skills and strengths. It means creating environments where people listen to each other. It means creating teams where the tough questions can get asked and where mistakes can be learned from, acknowledged, and learned from. So collaboration is a skill, but it can be learned. But it starts with a recognition that I need other people, and I need what other people bring to the table.

Ken White

Do you think leadership has changed over time? We've had some guests on the podcast saying that since the pandemic, wow, a leader has to be different. They have to be very empathetic versus years ago. True?

Carly Fiorina

I think the context of leadership has changed. I think the tools are different now. I think the culture, the ethos is different and changes over time. But I think the fundamentals of leadership have never changed. You can go back. I was a philosophy major in college and a history major, and I went back all the way to the Greeks. All the fundamental leadership characteristics, they were the same then as they are now, but the context is different.

Ken White

Interesting. The final characteristic you mentioned was the leader has to see possibilities, and the people they hire have to see possibilities. Can you talk about that?

Carly Fiorina

Changing things, solving a problem that's festered for a long time takes imagination. That's another word for seeing possibilities. If you don't think it's possible, you're never going to get it done. On the one hand, a leader needs to be clear-eyed and realistic. How bad is the situation? What do I really have to work with? But if you don't have the imagination, the optimism to say, you know what? We can change this. I can find the people here who have the capacity working with me and others to change it. Nothing ever gets better.

Ken White

You mentioned change quite often, and you shared a great story about termites. Can you share that with our audience?

Carly Fiorina

Yes. When I was 15 and living in West Africa, I saw a termite hill for the first time, these gigantic mounds of dirt. My Ghanaian friend was telling me about the life of a termite, and they pushed dirt every day along the same path, return along the same path every night, day in, day out the same path, pushing their dirt. I remember him saying to me, people can be a lot like termites. It is true. We can get our heads down, we can push our dirt, we can get in our path, in our lane, in the space we're comfortable in, and we can just keep going. The problem is when you just keep going, pushing your dirt, what happens? Nothing changes, and actually, you don't grow.

Ken White

What do you like about leadership?

Carly Fiorina

Everything. By the way, leadership is incredibly difficult. I like to say to people, working with other people is both the joy of leadership and the hardest thing about leadership. And that's true. It's two sides of the same coin. Working with other people is incredibly difficult because we're all different. On the other hand, for me, there is a look that people get in their eye when they've done something they didn't think they could do when they've solved a problem they didn't think could be solved. And for me, that look, and it's the same. That look is the same everywhere in the world. That look is fuel. When I see that look, it's like, give me more of this.

Ken White

That's our conversation with Carly Fiorina, 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, Carly Fiorina, 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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