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LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS PODCAST

EPISODE 154: MICAH WEST – THE CLASS OF 2021

Ken White

From William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, this is Leadership & Business, the podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world. We share the strategies, tactics, and information that help make you a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host, Ken White. Thanks for listening. It's graduation season. And if there's a class that deserves to be celebrated, it's the class of 2021. This group experienced higher education like no one before them. Most of these new grads began school before the pandemic when college campuses operated mostly in a face-to-face environment. Then the pandemic forced schools to quickly shift to virtual learning and, eventually, for some schools, a mix of virtual and in-person instruction. Things were different on campuses, and for many students, things were challenging. The class of 20 21 was forced to be flexible and resilient. Micah West is a member of the MBA class of 2021 at William & Mary. A BYU graduate, he entered the MBA program after working in digital marketing and e-commerce for organizations like eBay, Overstock.com, and Dress Barn. In addition to being a full-time grad student, he's a husband and father of four school-aged daughters. He joins us today to talk about the class of 2021, its experiences, and the lessons it'll take away from attending school during a pandemic. Here's our conversation with Micah West.

Ken White

Well, Micah, thanks very much for sharing your time. First of all, are you done? Are you officially done now?

Micah West

Today is the last day I've got one more final.

Ken White

So I can't congratulate you just quite yet.

Micah West

Yeah, yeah.

Ken White

Well, I will. I will say congratulations. That's really exciting. Graduation's coming up. Will you participate.

Micah West

Yeah. Absolutely. Yeah.

Ken White

Wonderful. Wonderful. So you came to business school after a good, good career. You had some great jobs, and back in August of nineteen, you decided to pursue your MBA. What were you thinking it would be like because it wasn't exactly what you thought it would be, but what were you hoping to experience?

Micah West

Yeah, I was really hoping to come in and network with incredible individuals and, you know, come out the other side with a bit of a career change, honestly. And, you know, to the, for the most part, that's what's happened. I mean, there's been some really amazing people in the program that I've met, and I'm looking forward to continuing those relationships postgraduation.

Ken White

A lot of people in your who were pursuing MBAs, undergraduates not right now, are saying, I didn't sign up for this. You know, this was really different. What were some of the unexpected things that that you experienced?

Micah West

Well, COVID was huge, right? I think for everyone, you know, you come into a full-time in-person MBA program, and then COVID hits and, you know, everybody's trying to adjust and well, you know, we went to this complete remote schooling for a while and then we kind of switched to hybrid. But I mean, you just come in and roll with the punches, really. But I mean, the class the professors were incredible. They adjusted well, you know, and you still felt like you got the learnings out of the program, which is, you know, what you came here for in the first place.

Ken White

That transition was pretty quick. I mean, for all of us, of course, all industries. And one day, we're all together. The next day we're not, and here we had a little bit of a break because of

spring break. And then suddenly, you were in Zoom world. What was it like to learn that way?

Micah West

You know, it was interesting. I think, to start with, you're fine, right? I mean, you jump in, and it's the same concentration levels if you were in class. I think the things that you miss ultimately are just the small conversations that you get to have before class and after class, the conversations, you know, the small talk that you'd have with the professors. So it's more of a formal situation, at least it was in the beginning. And then I think we all learned to relax a little bit and, you know, take it in stride and have fun. But, yeah, it was challenging, I think, in the beginning, but still good.

Ken White

Then after a set period of time, William & Mary's MBA program was able to go hybrid, as we call it. You could go to class in person, or you could stay on Zoom. You elected to stay on Zoom.

Micah West

I did.

Ken White

Yeah. Why did you make that choice?

Micah West

You know, I was by that time I had acclimated to online, and I thought to myself, you know, I don't have to come and pay for parking, and you know, I can still get the same education, you know, online as I can kind of in person. I've built decent relationships already, kind of having that in-person experience at the beginning of class. And, you know, I figured out a way by that time to, you know, still not work. And so I was like, hey, we're golden. You know, we can. I can do this from home and still get all the benefits, which was great.

Ken White

What were classroom discussions like?

Micah West

It's always interesting on Zoom because you've got, you know, just the reality of it. You've got people that are really engaged and some that are not. And so, you know, it's the people that are engaged make the experience worth it, you know, and, you know, you try to be one of those people so that the that experience for everyone is really good. But I mean, we had amazing discussions. Ron Hess, I remember, you know, joking with us and

just really diving into subjects and doing learnings that you didn't think you were going to be able to have that first semester during, you know, during the Zoom calls. And man, it was just it was great. Kudos to the professors for making that shift so quickly.

Ken White

And Ron Hess is a marketing professor here at William & Mary. So you're listening to your professor. But I've seen in a number of calls. Students will start talking to each other on the chat function.

Micah West

Absolutely.

Ken White

How do you manage both of those?

Micah West

Yeah, no, I think it's great. I mean, there's always the in student to student banter going on behind the scenes.

Ken White

Right.

Micah West

So I've got one of my buddies, Dan Kelly. He you know, we're that's kind of the whole class. We're listening to Professor, and we're making comments.

Ken White

Right.

Micah West

You know, in the back row, as it were.

Ken White

And what was interesting is a lot of faculty initially were very worried about that. I remember all of us getting together. Do we turn chat off? Do we leave it on and found leaving it on was great. I mean, students really enjoyed this. And it wasn't like they were talking about what's on ESPN.com.

Micah West

Exactly.

Ken White

These were really good conversations.

Micah West

Yeah, no.

Ken White

Yeah.

Micah West

Yeah, you're having these conversations, I think, about the topics in class and, you know, there's some other joking stuff

Ken White

Sure.

Micah West

going on, of course. But, you know, it just made the environment fun, and it kept it real still. Which was nice.

Ken White

What about team assignments? Because an MBA is so much teamwork. How is that in a remote setting?

Micah West

It was it was great. I mean, given Google Docs and given, you know, one drive, Microsoft one drive, I mean, you were able to go in. You know, the nice thing, I think one of the learnings for me coming out of this is just remote team management. Right. And you get in, and it's like, okay, I've done this enough times now where I know that we've got to on this document that we're working on this for this assignment. We've got to make sure that all everybody's clear on, like, what their part is when things are due. And so it's like you almost write this mini agenda for workplan almost on the top of your document. Right.

Ken White

Yeah.

Micah West

So that everybody's clear on what and then everybody can go back to that because you have these conversations on Zoom and you forget things, obviously, because you've got so much going on. Sure. So anyway, it's just been great. I mean, the I think that aspect has been good, especially going into the workforce. I'm going to GSK.

Ken White

Right.

Micah West

We're all remote still. So, I mean, you still have this remote work environment that we've been prepped for, which has been great. Yeah.

Ken White

So do you think the work world and the education world will embrace some of the remote functions that we experienced this year when things are, quote, back to normal?

Micah West

Yeah, I mean, you've got Google, you've got Facebook. I mean, there's a bunch of different companies, even some of the management consulting firms or, you know, a lot of them are remote or going to this hybrid workforce. GSK was a part-time remote. They were a 3-2 before. And so the switch to full remote wasn't that big of a deal. And I'm assuming they'll get back to kind of a three-two. But yeah, I mean, it's I can totally see that shifting.

Ken White

We'll continue our discussion with Micah West of the class of 2021 in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business. The post COVID world will require new skills and new approaches. Those skills and approaches are taught in the William & Mary MBA program. We offer four different formats in the MBA, including the full-time, the part-time, the online, and the executive, all taught by our top-ranked MBA faculty. The William & Mary MBA will prepare you to succeed and lead in our new world. Check out the MBA program at William & Mary. Now back to our conversation with Micah West from the class of 2021.

Ken White

And the job is a huge aspect of the MBA, and normally you meet with recruiters face to face, there are career fairs, people come here. That was all turned upside down. Where did you intern?

Micah West
GSK.

Ken White

And then how did you get the internship? How did you manage that in this in this different way?

Micah West

Yeah. So luckily we I went to National Black before COVID.

Ken White

The National Black MBA Career Fair, which is this huge career fair for MBA students all across the country.

Micah West

Correct.

Ken White

Yeah.

Micah West

And it was the last. It's a two-day fair for those who don't know.

Ken White

Yeah.

Micah West

And I, you know, I went in talking to kind of my core, wanting to talk to all the core people that I was interested in interning with. And I'm walking out at four o'clock. The conference ends at four o'clock. I'm walking out at like four o five the last day.

Ken White

Wow.

Micah West

And GSK is like I'm walking past their booth. And they just happened to catch my eye. And I'm like, you know, I haven't talked with them, and I don't really know who they are.

Ken White

Yeah.

Micah West

And so I went and spoke with them, and I was like, this is exactly what I've been looking for. And they loved my resumé. And so it was like this match made in heaven. But I it was just happenstance on the very last day, the final hour, which was just, you know, you just go and go and go for two days. And

Ken White

Yeah.

Micah West

it was great. I did go to National Black remotely the second time.

Ken White

Right.

Micah West

And I'll tell you, the experience was not good.

Ken White

Right, it couldn't be the same. I mean, that is such a phenomenal event where we take all of our full-time MBA students every year. Chicago, I think it is next year. And there are hundreds and hundreds of fantastic companies. They're looking for MBAs. It is just the quintessential speed dating.

Micah West

It is. It's fantastic. Yeah. So I mean for people that I would suggest if you're a full-time MBA student, like go

Ken White

Oh yeah.

Micah West

go in person. Like, the opportunities are incredible there.

Ken White

So what was your internship? Was it mostly remote?

Micah West

It was mostly remote. Yeah, it was all remote. In fact, they before COVID, they flew us up for a weekend, and we were able to kind of meet the teams and meet our fellow interns. And then everything switched because of COVID, and we were remote for the summer, and it was still great, you know, it was still fantastic.

Ken White

What will you be doing?

Micah West

Brand management.

Ken White

Great.

Micah West

So I just got my brand assignment yesterday, actually.

Ken White

Yeah. Excellent. Excellent. So you, like many MBA students, have a family?

Micah West

I do.

Ken White

And you have children who are in school. What was that like managing? I can't imagine our children are grown, and we were even talking about it recently as one graduated from college. What would it have been like that when, wow, what was that like?

Micah West

The first month was fascinating. So I four daughters, a set of twins that are in first grade. I've got a second-grader and a fourth-grader. So all in all, in elementary school, luckily, three of the girls are extremely studious. And I've got one that, you know, needs a little bit of handholding—our sports girl. But yeah, it was interesting. They you know, they were my wife was working, and so they were doing remote school on Zoom, and I was on remote school. And so I literally had to go back and forth between their classes and my classes for a good couple of weeks, month. And it was pretty stressful for the first month. But, you know, after that, my wife was able to transition a little bit, and she took over the day-to-day, and it got better, which was great. But yeah, it was a little hairy there for about a month.

Ken White

Yeah, I'm sure one of the things that I think was unexpected or at least people didn't think about, but many experienced was simply the bandwidth at home. Everybody needed Internet. Did you have any problems?

Micah West

Yeah, all five of us were on computers. So, you know, it's, and we had a we ran into a couple of challenges, but luckily there was enough. The girls had like set times, and we had set times. And so we were able to mitigate that, you know, for the most part. But yeah, there were definitely some bandwidth challenges.

Ken White

You know you seemed to have weathered the storm, so to speak, quite well. You know, there are a lot of people in school, whether undergrad, MBA, Ph.D. programs had a rough, rough time. It was just very difficult. What would you do? Did any classmates come your way and say, I'm struggling here? And if so, what kind of advice were you able to share with them?

Micah West

You know, you could just tell that people were, you know, we're having some challenges and, you know, especially with internships and other things. And, you know, we had a lot of internship, I wouldn't say a lot, but they're a fair percentage of internships that dropped out. People had internships, and then, you know, companies had to pull back because of COVID. And, you know, I just remember reaching out to everyone on my LinkedIn network that I possibly could to say, hey, what is your company doing? I spent hours, like, just trying to do. Because you like you feel so bad like you've got these just really incredible people in your program, and you want to help them, and it turned out great. I mean, it ended up working out for everybody that I know of.

Ken White

Yeah.

Micah West

But, you know, it's just. Yeah, I mean, you band together as part of that network and, you know, try to help each other and, you know, try to have each other's backs as much as possible.

Ken White

I mean, this has to be the most resilient class ever in the history of education. I mean, you guys have really been through it. So there have been some definitely some highs and lows

and some challenges. Does it bring teams together at the end? For the most part, we are helping each other and those instances.

Micah West

Yeah, I think you have to. I mean, you know, you've always got the people that just give their 120 percent. And then, you know, every once in a while, you get somebody who doesn't, and the rest of the team bands together. And that's what I mean. You get it done. It's like what you have to do. It's like, you know, if you're in a job and, you know, you work with those teammates that are just stellar, and you get it done.

Ken White

Are there lessons that you and your classmates will take away from your experience? Because it was rather unique.

Micah West

I think some of the biggest lessons for me were just around the remote work managing teams remotely. And I think just taking a step back and recognizing that you know, everybody's kind of going through something different, and you have to give people a little bit of space to be able to kind of work through things on their own. And just, you know, you'd be a you just support people as much as you can and meet them where they are. You know, I think those are some of the bigger takeaways for me.

Ken White

Which is good advice in any environment, whether you're in school or at work, too. Yeah. So graduation's in a couple of weeks you'll be there. I'm sure it'll be a great day for you.

Micah West

It will be, yeah. Hopefully have the family there, and we're waiting on one ticket, but we'll get there.

Ken White

Yeah. And we're praying for 70 degrees and sunny skies.

Micah West

That's right, exactly.

Ken White

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