
EPISODE 210: LYN MCDERMID – THE ‘STATE’ OF LEADERSHIP

Lyn McDermid

We used to look for. We have a vulnerability. We have to fix that, and nobody will get to us. These bad guys are getting much more sophisticated. They're being paid to do what they do, so it's a business for them.

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 the 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. Imagine leading and revamping your organization's cybersecurity system. For Lyn McDermid, that organization is the Commonwealth of Virginia, the 11th most populated state in the US. McDermid is Virginia's Secretary of Administration. She was appointed to the position by Governor Glenn Youngkin in January of 2022. She oversees five state agencies and leads Virginia's efforts in cybersecurity, IT, elections, human resources, and other important areas. Before making the move to state government, she was a successful IT professional and leader. She was CIO at the Federal Reserve System and held similar roles in private and public companies. She joins us on the podcast to discuss leading in state government, how states manage cybersecurity, and where technology may take us in the future. Here's our conversation with Lyn McDermid.

Ken White

Well, Lyn, thank you very much for being with us. It's great to have you here.

Lyn McDermid

Well, thank you so much for inviting me.

Ken White

And you've had a chance to interact with some students. How'd that go?

Lyn McDermid

I did. I interacted with an undergraduate group of students and then just met with some amazing women who are in the MBA program. So, I learn as much from them as they do from me. For sure.

Ken White

Amen. Yeah. They're my students, I can tell you. It's why you can't wait to get to work when your feet hit the floor every day.

Lyn McDermid

Right, good for you.

Ken White

What an amazing experience it is. And you're right. You had mentioned to the undergrad class they're the future leaders. I feel pretty good when I look at that group.

Lyn McDermid

I agree with you. They're very intelligent, very eager, and ready to go to work.

Ken White

So your career is so very interesting. Public, private, the Fed, and now a state government leader. What are the differences that you've seen working in business and now in your current role?

Lyn McDermid

There's a lot of differences, but a lot of similarities when you look at the differences between private sector. So I think my career was private sector, retired from that, then quasi-government, which the Fed is still a government agency, although independent, and then Virginia state government. Each of those is a little bit unique. State government, I think one of the big differences is the time you have to get things done. In private sector, you have very strong goals, you have a mission, and you have time to build on that. In state government, the term of the governor is short. The General Assembly changes a lot. The whole funding apparatus is very different and on a less long-term basis. And I think that is a real challenge for big projects or big initiatives that take a little bit more time to get done.

Ken White

Did you have much experience in government before?

Lyn McDermid

Zero experience in government.

Ken White

Yeah.

Lyn McDermid

When I interviewed with the governor, I said, I vote, and he laughed. So that was my experience, really.

Ken White

But he's a business guy. You're from business. I would assume there's a common language there.

Lyn McDermid

There's a common language, and I think it helps a lot. And he's hired people from business and people from politics. I think he has an idea of what he wants to get done, and we're just trying to get it done as quickly as we can. We're halfway through the administration, and it's just hard to believe.

Ken White

Yeah. How can that be? Time really does fly.

Lyn McDermid

It really does.

Ken White

Yeah. That's a great point you made earlier. Yeah. You oversee a number of areas, IT being one of them, which changes so incredibly rapidly. And you talked a little bit to the undergrads about change. How do you approach change and, embrace change, and think about it?

Lyn McDermid

I think that you have to look at change as inevitable but also as an opportunity. Everything changes the world changes. And I think as long as we're looking at it through that positive lens of how can we take advantage of this pivot point in either business or even in your own life, how do you take advantage of that? How do you guide it in a way that the outcomes are the things that you're looking for? Or even more importantly, if you're a business person that the business is looking for, if everything stayed the same, you're really backing up because everybody else is moving along at a faster pace. So you have to keep changing.

Ken White

Cybersecurity is one of your top priorities. Same with the governor?

Lyn McDermid

Absolutely.

Ken White

Yeah. Can you tell us a little bit about that? I don't know that the average person thinks much about state government and cyber. What is it you think about what keeps you up at night?

Lyn McDermid

There's two things that we think about. One is maintaining services. And I was surprised even to myself, Ken, the state has 100 different agencies. Probably half of them are very different businesses, from running hospitals to getting your driver's license and everything in between. Sustaining those services in a reliable and safe way is the most important job of the state. And cybersecurity underlays all of that, whether it's protecting private information. I mean, we are stewards of citizen's private information, ensuring that those services are reliable and fast. Looking at data in a way that we make decisions. Cybersecurity of our data and ransomware is something that we're all worried about is available so that we're making good decisions for the citizens of Virginia. So, cyber is ubiquitous in just about everything we do. And the threats are getting exponentially more complex. We used to look for we have a vulnerability. We have to fix that, and nobody will get to us. These bad guys are getting much more sophisticated. They're being paid to do what they do, so it's a business for them. And so we have to be constantly vigilant, on alert, have the right tools. Because a lot of what's evolved in the cyber world are new, very good tools for how do we deal with it, have the right people. So recruiting it's an area of shortage. There's thousands, if not more, cyber jobs out there to be filled. So training people and getting the right tools, I think, is most important.

Ken White

Some of our listeners may be listening on election day. Leading up to election day, what are some of the things you think about from a technology standpoint and an IT standpoint?

Lyn McDermid

I think it's important in Virginia to understand that we still have paper ballots. So everybody fills out a paper ballot that goes into a machine, and then that machine actually counts it and sends it on to the system. So we always have that backup. It's not that machines run our elections. That's really important. What we're looking for is making sure that every eligible voter has an opportunity to vote. So a lot of it happens locally in the precincts, in the voting places. Our registrars are angels and saints on election day and work very hard, and we all ought to be very appreciative of that. But the back-end systems are all just crunching the numbers, crunching the numbers. And we have tested every system, we have tested every machine. We have cyber people on

alert. We have had a blackout period. So, no changes have been made in a certain amount of time. Because if you know IT, it's usually a change is what causes a little blip. So I am confident that we're prepared.

Ken White

AI. What kind of a role? I'm asking literally every guest on the podcast, right? It's all we're talking about, pretty much. But what kind of a role is that playing in your job?

Lyn McDermid

We're just beginning to think about it, to be honest. And there's two kinds of AI. As you know, there's older kinds of AI that we've been using forever. I mean, we've been doing data analytics and synthesizing data for ten years. What we're really focused on now is generative AI, the type of AI that actually writes the code and what are the models that are being used for that. So our governor just put out an executive director that he wants us to pilot generative AI. He wants it to look at all aspects. He's formed an advisory committee of AI specialists externally, and we really want to learn more about it before we let the horse out of the barn.

Ken White

We'll continue our discussion with Lyn McDermid in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business. This year, the Financial Times, Bloomberg Businessweek, Princeton Review, and US News and 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 outstanding 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. Check out the MBA program at William & Mary at wm.edu. Now, back to our conversation with Lyn McDermid, Secretary of Administration for the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Ken White

Your background is heavy IT, but you're a leader. Is that something you set out to do way back when?

Lyn McDermid

No, I think it's something you learn, and it's something that you learn even when you're not a leader. I look at everybody as a leader. I think that wherever you are in an organization, you have the opportunity to lead and develop good leadership skills. And if opportunities arise where you can take that to the next level of your career, so be it. But you learn by doing. You learn by studying people and understanding that to lead people, you have to get to know them. You have to understand kind of how to motivate them, how to reward them, how to incent them. It really is a wonderful part of a career, is to be

able to recognize others for doing good work, coaching, mentoring, setting clear goals and objectives. So we all do that, and it's just taking it to another level.

Ken White

And I'm guessing by that answer, not to put words in your mouth, but probably leading not that different in your current role versus roles you've had in the past.

Lyn McDermid

Not at all. Not at all. I think the processes are different. The requirements might be different, but the people are the same.

Ken White

Technology has changed so much in your career. Is there one particular area you look back on and say, wow, boy, do I remember that? Or, that was a big moment for me for others. Was there a certain time period or certain event?

Lyn McDermid

This is kind of techy, but I think virtualization. And when we started going to the cloud. More infrastructure, it's huge. I mean, we used to build these monolithic data centers, have these huge fill-up, the whole data center with mainframes. They were slow. As soon as we learned how to kind of minimize the back end, virtualize, create cloud-like environments. And now, of course, we have wonderful opportunities in the cloud. It opened the door for all kinds of innovation on the front end. We're building applications differently, allowing those applications to run very fast. The whole data aspect of IT evolved out of that. So I thought that was, in my mind anyway, a game changer?

Ken White

Yeah. You have your MBA. How's that helped you?

Lyn McDermid

I think it helped me understand that there are hundreds, if not thousands, of aspect of managing. And the MBA, to me, was for me an opportunity to learn things that I hadn't been exposed to. You're learning HR management, finance management, conflict management, all kinds of different aspects of leadership and business, and running a business that you just don't have the opportunity to see it in the scale that you do with your MBA, but also how it all fits together. And at the end of the day, you're running a business.

Ken White

We don't blink an eye when we see a woman leading an IT team or working in IT. But when you started, that was different.

Lyn McDermid

It was different.

Ken White

What was that experience like for you?

Lyn McDermid

I didn't really know how different it was until I got there. And then, I just tried to work hard, earn respect, be smart, never come to the table without knowing the subject matter. Because I was being viewed through a different lens, we're all different, but I was really different. So I just realized that in order for me to keep my seat at the table, I had to know my stuff.

Ken White

What advice do you give to young people coming out of school getting ready to start careers?

Lyn McDermid

Know your stuff. Really keep learning. Don't close the book when you graduate because the world's going to change the way we do things will change. So be curious. I think curiosity is a trait that is undervalued. And then have fun. Don't take things too seriously. If you make a mistake, get up and try again.

Ken White

I've asked this question of a lot of our guests. How important is loving what you do important to your success?

Lyn McDermid

I think it's really important. And it doesn't mean that you love the bits and bytes of it, but you love the environment that you're in. You love the work that you're doing. You love the output and the impact that you're making, whether it's on one life or a lot or on one solving one problem or many. As long as you know that you're accomplishing something, you're doing good work. You can learn kind of the nitty gritty how to do a spreadsheet, but at the end of the day, you have to feel like you're making a difference.

Ken White

You mentioned change. It is changing. Where do you see things moving technologically?

Lyn McDermid

I think we're about to blow it out of the park. I mean, I think AI, generative AI, is going to be a game changer. I think quantum computing is going to be a game-changer. I think

we haven't even begun to tap the wonder of mobility and how we can put applications on a mobile device on a phone. I mean, we've begun to do a lot of work there, but there's a lot more opportunity there. I just think we're at that step change, just like we were getting off the mainframe.

Ken White

Wow.

Lyn McDermid

15 years ago.

Ken White

Yeah. Or, like the introduction of the Internet, some people have said.

Lyn McDermid

Exactly.

Ken White

Yeah. Where does the state fit in?

Lyn McDermid

The state fits in as number one, using it to our advantage so that we can do the work that we have to do as well as we can do it. The other is advocating. Advocating for policies, advocating for funding to actually continue to invest in new technologies or in new ways of doing business or in people's education. I mean, you think about what Virginia state government does: education, workforce, health, and human resources, transportation. I mean, one of the ways we're using AI now is when you get an alert that you have traffic in a certain area, take another route. That's AI. So tons of opportunities in state government.

Ken White

That's our conversation with Lyn McDermid, 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, Lyn McDermid, and thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White, wishing you a safe, happy, and productive week ahead.

Female Voice

We'd like to hear from you regarding the podcast. We invite you to share your ideas, questions, and thoughts with us by emailing us at podcast@wm.edu. Thanks for listening to Leadership & Business.