



Raymond A. Mason School of Business

WILLIAM & MARY

LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS PODCAST

EPISODE 103: INGA CARBONI – GENDER DYNAMICS IN THE WORKPLACE

Ken White

From the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. This is Leadership & Business. The podcast brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world. We share the strategies, tactics, and information that can make you a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host Ken White. Thanks for listening. Sexual harassment. #metoo. Gender communication in the workplace. However you label it, it's become a topic many companies and organizations have placed on the front burner, especially in the past few months. But of all the work-related issues professionals face, this topic is proving to be challenging. There doesn't seem to be a universal approach to dealing with the issue. Inga Carboni is a Professor of Organizational Behavior at William & Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of Business. Among other things, she helps companies and professionals communicate and interact effectively. She joins us on the podcast today to discuss what professionals can do to move the sexual harassment discussion and issue forward. Here's our conversation with William & Mary Professor Inga Carboni.

Ken White

Inga, thank you for taking the time to join us. It's your second time on the podcast. Great to have you back. Thanks for being here.

Inga Carboni

Thanks. Great to be here. Thanks for asking.

Ken White

So you and I were talking earlier. You've actually had a couple of good group conversations about this topic with graduate students and professionals. What were those conversations like? What were some of the things they talked about, and how people reacted?

Inga Carboni

You know it's really interesting. So I've talked now to, as you said, a couple of groups of people. And the thing that keeps coming up over and over again is how do I deal with

these situations. And I'm hearing this from men, I'm hearing this from women, and there's a lot of confusion about what's expected of me in this situation. I have people who, in examining the exact same situation, have diametrically opposed interpretations of it. So that goes everything from, oh, that is sexual harassment, that guy should be fired, to, you know, stuff like that rolls off. I don't think it's such a big deal. So how do you figure that out? I think it's something that's becoming a real concern.

Ken White

So there's just a huge range of understanding.

Inga Carboni

Yeah. And you know everybody has. So the questions that one group asked me was, how do I deal with it when somebody crosses the line? And we started talking about it, and it became really clear that everybody's line is different. And like I said, something that's incredibly offensive to one person is nothing, and even a sign of you're one of the group for another person. And so the issue becomes how do you express your line. How do you communicate your line in a way that keeps conversation going that doesn't shut things down? And that can be really tricky.

Ken White

And very difficult.

Inga Carboni

Yeah, it can be really difficult.

Ken White

Are you seeing, in general, women saying one thing, men saying another, one generation saying one thing, one generation saying another, or is it actually individual all of these differences?

Inga Carboni

I think it's shaped by so many things. It has to do with how you were raised. You know what part of the country or what part of the world you're from. Sure it has to do with age. It has to do with your experiences. Certainly, somebody who came into the workplace in the 70s has a very different take on what's normal exchange than somebody who came into the workplace just a few years ago. But there's so many dimensions along which people differ that it really ends up being pretty much individual, I would say.

Ken White

Where does power come into play?

Inga Carboni

Oh yeah, power is huge, and power is huge because it silences people. So when you're not in a position of power, it's much harder to speak up because it seems like the consequences are bigger. Am I going to lose my job? Am I going to get a reputation for being difficult? Am I going to be dismissed? Those are very real consequences. And you know we're seeing this explosion with the hashtag me too movement, and people are sort of saying, where did all this come from? Where's this coming from? But there's people out there in the forefront who started it, and that makes a big difference seeing someone else say something and then feeling like, oh, all right, I'm looking at their consequences. Maybe I can say my you know what means matters to me too.

Ken White

Right.

Inga Carboni

So power definitely plays a role in this, you know.

Ken White

You and I interact with many young women about to embark on their careers are still fairly early in their careers. What kind of advice do you have if they experience something? What do they do when they're new to an organization?

Inga Carboni

So one of the things is, first of all, to sort of think about it. We spend a lot of time talking with our students about how to put their ethical values into action, and in a way, this is related to that, so prepare yourself stuff like this is going to happen. Surround yourself with people either in your workplace or in your rest of your network who you can talk to who you can run scenarios through. Who you can talk to about how things might happen? Prepare yourself in ways to talk about this that don't that aren't all or none that don't say I quit or I'm blowing up this company, but that say, listen, this is my line. I don't know if you know this. I want to communicate it to you. I still really want to work with you, but I need you to know this is my line. I mean, there's clearly some things that we've heard in the news, particularly that is way over anybody's line.

Ken White

Right.

Inga Carboni

But a lot of this falls into a gray area. So I would advise people going out into the workplace. Prepare yourself. Think about this how are you going to handle it? Are you the

kind of person who handles things like this with humor? Do you need to step away and then come back? Are you the person who needs to send an email? You know, think this out and think about to your relationship with the people you work with and work for. Argue entering a place where you can talk.

Ken White

Right, and just talk on that point. Talking, have you found that people are willing to talk about this? It seems like, at least from the conversations you've been having, you share with me with people. People are kind of willing to talk about it.

Inga Carboni

Oh, there's another range there too. I mean, some people I talked about this the other night in a class, and there was a large percentage of the room that was I very wary scared even to have a conversation. And I think the fear is that you're going to be accidentally, you know, sexist, or some kind of ist without meaning to you're going to offend somebody without wanting to. And that's another real problem where people get so fearful of it. They back away, and one possible outcome of that is that they back away with working with people who are not exactly like themselves. So yeah, no, I think a lot of people have a difficulty talking about this, and I think it's something that we have to learn how to talk about. Otherwise, nothing's going to change or get better.

Ken White

You work with many organizations and all different types of sectors and fields. How do you? What kind of advice do you have for them in terms of creating inclusivity? Creating that right environment because that's a big hurdle.

Inga Carboni

It's a lot about reaching out, and it's a lot about inviting people in. So making sure that you're hearing from everybody. Don't let some people sort of fall silent and not be okay. Invite them in. Haven't heard from you like to hear your thoughts. I'd like to see what you have to say or your opinion on this matter. So that's a huge part of it. Part of it is role modeling what the behaviors that you want to encourage other people to do so you might express some vulnerabilities to people. You might let them see you have an interaction with somebody where you're in a disagreement, but you resolve it. Don't shut, you know, don't shut down conflict, don't throw it away but use it as leverage and a tool for having productive conversations. So role modeling is important. Reaching out to people is important ensuring participation is important. You know, there's a lot of about being trustworthy and just building those relationships. That's one of the number one things that I teach, and I teach leadership is build relationships with people, get to know them get to know what makes them, what motivates them, how they work, and make it comfortable for them. Make it possible for them to be able to speak because they'll know you're listening.

Ken White

We'll continue our conversation with Professor Inga Carboni in just a minute. Leadership & Business is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the College of William & Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of Business. The Center for Corporate Education is offering business analytics for strategic leaders starting April 18. It's a two-and-a-half-day program for executives, high-potential managers, and business owners who want a greater understanding of business analytics and how analytics can be used to build a data-driven organization. The programs taught by the award-winning faculty who teach in William & Mary's Master of Science and Business Analytics program. To learn more about it, visit wmleadership.com. Now back to our conversation with Professor Inga Carboni.

Ken White

There's so much being debated and talked about so much information about the topic just in the last couple of months. Has this had an effect on the way organizations do train and affect on the way organizations are communicating to their employees about this?

Inga Carboni

I think that they are as confused as the rest of us in how to handle this, in terms of things like the hashtag me too movement. I think there's lots more going on around sexual harassment, lots more training going on around that but around the other more sort of awkward scenarios, the scenarios where someone says something that some people might take the wrong way. But some people don't. And, of course, office romance and how that's handled. You know, someone wants to go out on a date and all that kind of mishmash. I don't think they're handling it very well right now. And they're not sure what to do. And I think the worst thing that could happen is what I have seen happening in some places is that fear kicks in, and people are like, all right. You know what. Let's just avoid any kind of potential litigation. Let's keep everything separate. Let's not talk about this for the possibility of ruffling feathers, and I don't think that's the way forward. So I don't see a lot of organizations really having come up with some answers to this. I'm hoping that that will start to happen.

Ken White

But just based on your experience, just talking about it has really been helpful.

Inga Carboni

Yeah.

Ken White

Sit down and talk in a group.

Inga Carboni

Yeah. You sit down and talk about it. It helps to have a little of training in it.

Ken White

Sure.

Inga Carboni

Or somebody there who can help facilitate a conversation.

Ken White

Absolutely, yeah.

Inga Carboni

Because you know those are going to they're sometimes charged. These are charged topics and learning how to interact with people and to let them have their say and then yet to step in there and share. I see good managers do this all the time and good leaders do this all the time, but it's hard. And yeah, that's just sort of have to step in.

Ken White

I'm interested in your opinion on this. A professional came to me the other day and said that she was going to recommend that her organization have discussions. If you'd like to come, please come make yourself comfortable going to talk. She thought it was the best way to go was to separate the genders in the discussions. What do you think?

Inga Carboni

You know I've got mixed feelings on that. So women definitely have a different experience than men do. And there's a different history there and a different subculture there. So I think it can be very beneficial certainly in the beginning for women to have a place maybe where they feel a little safer to have these discussions, especially women who aren't used to having those kinds of discussions, and men may need something a little bit different in terms of raised awareness of what's going on. But I think at some point, we're gonna have to get men and women talking to each other. Right. That's the whole point. We don't want this to turn into women have to be put in a separate room or something like that. You know, we've got to learn how to work together if we're going to get through this and have a truly diverse workforce. And there's sort of no going back. We have to go forward and do that.

Ken White

But maybe starting off separate, I could see that maybe people will be a little more comfortable in a setting like that. Maybe.

Inga Carboni

I think now, in this highly charged, it might be the way to start. And I just say that because there are so many emotions around this. For men, for women, that maybe that's a safer place to start. And it's probably a little easier, too, for organizations, but it can't stop there. It can't be a segregated thing where it turns into almost more of a support group. Then let's learn how to talk to each other productively.

Ken White

Do you have any advice for women and men today in terms of their the relationships that they have, whether it's a direct report, whether it's managing up, whether it's dealing with colleagues? How do you go into work today and make sure that you're having healthy relationships and getting work done too? Because that's why we're going to work in the first place.

Inga Carboni

Well, I think more and more managers and leaders are understanding that you can't lead without people right. You can't still lead in a vacuum. And the only real way to do that is to find out what is it that you can do and how conversations that you can have to bring people in a certain direction. And there's just no way around it other than getting to know people. And so inquiring and asking questions reaching out, and then as a person entering into the workplace feeling that you have the right to be able to sort of express yourself and bring your real authentic self into the workplace and not feel like you have to conform to a standard that that doesn't fit you. You find the right organization that it's got a good cultural fit for you, and you shouldn't have to feel like you're some kind of outsider looking in. So it has a lot to do with starting those conversations. It's lots of small things. You know, it's not like you should go in there, and here's the five things, and once you do those, you're your team, and your relationships are off to a good start. It's ongoing. It's creating an atmosphere. It's creating a certain culture. It's creating a safe place where you can not only say things like you're crossing the line, but you can also say things like, you know, this might be a crazy idea, but here's what I think we might want to do on this project or you know I might be wrong or maybe we should go about this project a different way. So you're not just bringing sort of the what's going on. You're not just forming those relationships in order to find points of connection for the purpose of people feeling included. I mean, that's definitely one of the benefits. But when you start opening up those channels, and people feel they can bring their real self, then they can also contribute to the work in a fuller, deeper way. They can bring all their experiences into work and use that to fuel the work. And we find that when people can do that. Teams are more productive when you can really leverage diversity in that way in a really inclusionary way. Performance goes up. Productivity goes up. Satisfaction goes up. Organizational performance goes up. So lots of work-related positive work-related outcomes come out of this.

Ken White

That's our conversation with Professor Inga Carboni. And that's our podcast for this week. Leadership & Business is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the College of William & Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of Business. The Center for Corporate Education can help you, and your organization meet and exceed your goals. With business and leadership development programs that fit your needs and get results. If you're interested in learning more, visit our website at wmleadership.com. Also, if you have any feedback or suggestions pertaining to our podcast, we'd love to hear from you. Email us at podcast@wm.edu. Thanks to our guest Inga Carboni. Thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White. Until next time have a safe, happy, and productive week.