



Raymond A. Mason School of Business

WILLIAM & MARY

LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS PODCAST

EPISODE 117: ANN BENJAMIN – PASSION, ADVOCACY AND INITIATIVE

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 can make you a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host Ken White. Thanks for listening. As members of the Class of 2019 from colleges and universities across the world make the transition from student to professional. Many of them have questions about job, career, and success, and Benjamin has some answers. Benjamin is a private investor and philanthropist. She spent 34 years in the investment management business. She was a keynote speaker at the 2019 Women's Stock Pitch and Leadership Summit, an event that brings some of the world's best undergraduate students to William & Mary for a weekend. After speaking to the attendees, she sat down with us and shared her three-step formula for success passion, advocacy, and initiative. Here's our conversation with Ann Benjamin.

Ken White

Well, Ann, thank you for taking the time. Welcome back to William & Mary.

Ann Benjamin

Thank you, Ken. It's a pleasure to be here.

Ken White

And you've been here a couple times. You were here for the McLaughlin Forum and now today for the women's event, and you just spoke. We just took you right from the stage here into our studio. How was the experience of talking to that roomful of unbelievably high potential young people?

Ann Benjamin

It was absolutely wonderful. Just the whole day has been remarkable. The women's presentations, preparation, the ideas I am just absolutely amazed, and as I said in my speech that if I would have had this pool of talent to recruit from, I would have been just on heaven. It would have made my life so much easier. It was so difficult to recruit women

from day one and through my entire career, and to have this right in front of me and right in front of a lot of people that are recruiting is just absolutely remarkable.

Ken White

When you look at this group, and this is a high potential group that we just had, these are teams from the best universities in the world and so forth. But how would you compare that group to the young women you hung around within school and the people you knew back then when you were starting your career.

Ann Benjamin

Oh, it is night and day. There's no question about it. I talked to many of the professionals from William & Mary. I don't think we could have gotten up there and to do that. We didn't have the presentation skills, the coaching that these women have had, and it's just absolutely amazing what they could do. And so it's very, very unlike what went on back in the early 80s.

Ken White

Yeah.

Ann Benjamin

When we were women were far and few between. But we did not have that type of training.

Ken White

Right.

Ann Benjamin

Or their ability to analyze financial statements is also amazing to me because, again in recruiting, individuals, particularly women throughout my career, very few people understand modeling particularly an undergrad. So to see this and to see the quality, just amazing.

Ken White

That's great.

Ann Benjamin

Yeah.

Ken White

And you were the lunchtime keynote, and you shared your comments and you specifically in talking about success and evolving. You talked about passion, advocacy, and initiative, and I thought let's talk about that. So when you're talking about passion, what are you sharing?

Ann Benjamin

So when you talk about passion, at least for me, passion it's necessary for success. And a person with passion it gives you the energy and the motivation, and the burning desire to succeed. And that's what I attribute my success to because if I didn't have that passion, I wouldn't have been able to stay with it for so long. Through good times and bad and especially during the bad times. You need to be passionate about what you're doing. Otherwise, you'll never get through those tough times.

Ken White

So it's a passion about the job. Passion about the organization or passion about just professionalism as an umbrella?

Ann Benjamin

For me, it was passion about investing.

Ken White

Got it.

Ann Benjamin

And about being successful in investing. And that really gave me the desire to build a business, put in the long hours necessary. And so and it's also a passion about your clients because your clients will pick up on it, and if you're not passionate, they're gonna think you're not interested in what you're doing, or you're not going to be able to deliver the best returns possible. So when you have passion, not only do your clients see that, but your employees see it as well. And when your employees see it, you bring the same level of enthusiasm to your organization. So it's really somewhat of a comprehensive model in the sense that your passionate about what you do, how you do it your clients, and then that filters down to your organization.

Ken White

It reminds me, in the higher ed space, when they when students are asked what makes a really great classroom teacher or professor, it's obviously knowledge about the field. And second is we want them to just love it. We want to see the passion because then the students feel it. And so it's serious it's not something that is that has to be taken lightly.

And in terms of a goal, it is a question I've asked a lot of our guests on the podcast is how is important. How important is passion to your success? And I'm often surprised by people who say yeah I don't the business doesn't matter that much to me. It's just getting it done right that drives them. But in your case, investing was a thing that really got you going.

Ann Benjamin

It was absolutely, and I learned my passion for investing early on in life from being around my brothers. They started an LBO firm back in the early 80s, and they were passionate about what they were doing, and it was a new thing at the time believe it or not. But it was amazing to see what how you could buy a company and transform it. And that to me was just so exciting. And then, from there, I went on to work in public markets, and it was the learning every single day, every minute of the day. You're learning it's the people. It's the thrill of having that investment and making it and see it work out.

Ken White

Some people don't have not found their passion. Right, and which is I think for someone like you or me would be horrible because I love what I do. You love what you've done. Any advice for someone that may be earlier in their career or mid-career that when they do wake up, they're not that fired up about what they have to do every day?

Ann Benjamin

I think if you're not fired up about what you do, just step back and take a look. And if you had the passion initially and all of a sudden, you feel you don't have the passion reassess. Okay, if you still love the business, but your passion has sort of diminished, and you reassess sometimes your passion can get reignited. But if you feel that you don't love what you're doing anymore. Then it is definitely time to make some changes in your personal life and in your career.

Ken White

We'll continue our discussion with Ann Benjamin in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at William & Mary's School of Business. In order to retain top employees, the best companies and organizations invest in their people by offering high-quality professional development programs, and some of those top companies and organizations turn to William & Mary and our Center for Corporate Education for their needs. The Center for Corporate Education offers professional development programs for all levels of employees, from executives to managers to emerging leaders to new hires. The programs are taught by William & Mary's MBA faculty. The faculty ranked number one in the nation by Bloomberg Businessweek. To learn more, visit our website at wmleadership.com. Now back to our conversation with Ann Benjamin.

Ken White

So passion number one, your second point was advocacy. Can you share us share more on that?

Ann Benjamin

Yes, advocacy it's important to not only advocate for yourself throughout your career, but initially, you need to find people that will advocate for you. So as a young person starting out, you don't really have a very loud voice.

Ken White

Right.

Ann Benjamin

In an organization, so seek senior people or mentors who will advocate for you, who will speak that to your ability to take on new responsibilities, or to possibly take a new job. So that's really critical when you're seeking advocates initially, and then as you go on, you have to advocate for yourself. Nobody else can do that but you. And when you advocate for yourself, it can be as simple as asking questions, or speaking up when somebody asks you, or speaking up and giving an opinion when you see an opportunity. But in order to do that you need to be well-prepared and ask very well thought out questions.

Ken White

Tough for an introvert, especially going to find someone to advocate for you. How does a young professional do that?

Ann Benjamin

You need to step out of your comfort zone, which is hard for young professionals, and it's hard for all professionals. So to step out of your comfort zone and just simply ask someone if they would be your mentor or ask for advice, don't wait until your performance review. But by simply asking people, you'll find out how willing people are to help you along in your career. As an introvert, I can speak from experience. It is not easy, but if you do it, you'll go a long way to achieving your success.

Ken White

What was your experience like when you sought to find that advocate for you? How did you do that, and how did that relationship go?

Ann Benjamin

Well, when I sought an advocate, it was difficult because there were so few women.

Ken White

Right.

Ann Benjamin

So it had to be a male

Ken White

Yeah.

Ann Benjamin

At that time. And so what I did was I realized that my presentation skills were not up to par, and I was lacking confidence. And when you're in a male-dominated world that makes it very difficult.

Ken White

Yeah.

Ann Benjamin

So I asked my company for additional training so I could get better at my presentation skills and I would be able to make the next step to presenting companies to our board. So what would happen is I would write the 15-page report to be a great idea and handed off to one of my bosses, and they would make the presentation. Well, I knew that I'm not going to get much further in life unless I learn how to do that. So I would practice my presentation skills generally at home, at night, in front of the mirror until I could build my confidence and be able to make those presentations.

Ken White

Yeah, but it definitely is getting out of the comfort zone whether you're asking someone to advocate for you or you're going to try to do that for yourself.

Ann Benjamin

Absolutely.

Ken White

And knowing students some of them that's such so tough to cross that line and to do that.

Ann Benjamin

It is it's very painful in the short term, but in the long term, it will go a long way to helping you achieve what you want.

Ken White

Your third point was initiative. Can you share that with us?

Ann Benjamin

When you take initiative just like I did when I went to my company and asked for additional training. It's important that you take initiative not only for self-improvement and to develop your skills. Ask yourself where do you want to be in five years, in one year, and five years and what skills do you need to get there. And then take the initiative to work with your boss or your mentor to develop a plan to be able to get your skills up to a level where you they need to be. And so you can achieve what you want in one year or five years.

Ken White

What we're hearing a lot today is that the managers are working so hard they're not always able to spend the time necessary with the people who report to them. So that the employee does take the initiative does try to get more out of the manager, the managers just swamped. And we're seeing this a lot, managers are frustrated. How do I do this? They're asking how do I take care of this whole team. Any advice for managers who seem to have I've got all of these people I just don't seem to have the time for the feeding and caring of my team, so to speak.

Ann Benjamin

Sure, that makes it very difficult, especially in this day and age with so many new sources and so much technology and finding time for your team is very difficult but is very, very important. And if you don't have the time, perhaps you can go to your H.R. department and ask them. Do they have other counselors that they can maybe allocate to you to work with your team? Because building your team, if you can't build your team, ultimately, you're not going to make much progress for yourself or ask your company to seek outside help for developing an individual skills. Just so, they can be an active actively participate in the building the team.

Ken White

Passion you said when you have it, others see it, and it rubs off on clients on teammates and on the bottom line. Quite frankly, does initiative have that same ripple effect?

Ann Benjamin

It does. You really need to take the initiative for yourself. And again, all three of these concepts are intertwined. Initiative, take the initiative, to plan your career because no one else is going to do that but you. And if you take some time and again figure out what it is you want to do and what skills you need to get there, then you will have an easier time of

achieving what you want to achieve. I always tell individuals to be think of themselves as a CEO of a company, but the company is you. So what do you have to do to what's your marketing strategy? What's your what product are you offering? Are you a marketing person? Are you an investment person? And how do you present those skills to an employer or your boss to be able to continue your career path?

Ken White

If you had one sort of sentence or a summary that you shared with the group today or you're sharing with young professionals in terms of passion, advocacy, or initiative, or anything. In general, what is it you like to share with people who are about to either early in their career or who are you know just kind of getting started?

Ann Benjamin

I think out one of the things you need to remember is you have to have passion for what you're doing. Seek advocates and advocate for yourself and take the initiative for self-improvement and plan your career. Then that way, without a doubt, you'll be successful in your endeavors.

Ken White

That's our conversation with Ann Benjamin, and that's our podcast for this week. Leadership & Business is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the William & Mary School of Business. The Center for Corporate Education can help you, and your organization get to the next level. With business and leadership development programs taught by the William & Mary MBA faculty. The faculty ranked number one in the nation by Bloomberg Businessweek. If you're interested in learning more, visit our website at wmleadership.com. Finally, we'd love to hear from you regarding the podcasts. We invite you to share your ideas, questions, and thoughts with us by emailing us at podcast@wm.edu. Thanks to our guest Ann Benjamin and thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White. Till next time have a safe, happy, and productive week.