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LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS PODCAST

EPISODE 127: NEAL BATRA – OTHER-CENTRIC COMMUNICATION

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. With communication going for you. Anything is possible without it, nothing is possible. No matter how talented and ambitious you may be. Well, that passage comes from "Positioning," the classic marketing book. And while it's been decades since the book was first published, those words about the importance of communication are more relevant than ever. Neal Batra is a consultant with Deloitte. He's a principal in Deloitte's life sciences and health care practice. Much of his work as a consultant revolves around effective communication. During a recent visit to William & Mary, Batra talked with MBA students about communication and how to become an outstanding other-centric communicator. Afterwards, he sat down with us. Here's our conversation with Neal Batra.

Ken White

Neal, thanks for taking the time to be with us. Yeah, we're great to have you here. It was fun to sit in earlier this morning; you spoke to first-year MBAs. And it was fun to sit in on there, and we're going to talk today on the podcast much about what you spoke about in class, and that is communication. But before we do consulting, what's your world like what do you do?

Neal Batra

You know it's a large industry in lots of sort of cuts and takes around what we do. But I think the at the heart of it we're solving urging client problems and the reality is that they tend to be complex in nature because frankly if they were straightforward and relatively easy, they would do themselves right. Organizations are talented, and they've got lots of good people, so consulting from our perspective and my perspective, in particular, is I need to come in, and I need to break the problem down in a different way. I need to reframe the narrative in a different way. But there's likely to be real work to be done for you to see it differently. And I think that's the heart of it. I think it's what's so interesting about it for me is that there's real progress being made. You feel like you're sort of

addressing a challenge and a need. So it's nice going to work every day and feeling needed, I guess.

Ken White

So every time I've worked with consultants, my teammates and I say they're bringing a fresh set of eyes. That's what you're doing.

Neal Batra

Yeah. That's what you're doing, and you're, and you're using the experiences you have from your previous life in your previous roads to apply that, to see it potentially differently. And so it's an interesting career in the sense that every minute you stay in it, you're more valuable than the minute previous.

Ken White

Absolutely.

Neal Batra

Because you've had a different experience, you've had another conversation you've seen it different, or you've seen a different problem, you know. And as the world evolves and changes and as that speed sort of accelerates what's wonderful is that you know these consulting organizations are oriented and designed to adopt and bring in that new thinking and new tech. And we become in many ways a filter back to the marketplace and to our clients on how to apply it.

Ken White

What skills does a good consultant have or should have?

Neal Batra

Yeah. You know you gotta listen. You got to listen. You got you know I think that's a critical element here. I think content competency is critical. I think you need to know what you're talking about, and you know you can define your expertise and your space as narrowly as broadly as you like, but obviously, you need to be credible in that space. And then, communication skills. Right. So I think it's content it's listening, and I think that ultimately is being able to translate those insights and that work in a compelling way that motivates action. And the challenge so often is that organizations may have an analysis, but they don't actually know how to act on it, or it may have unaddressed concerns or risks or challenges that a very good technical analysis may have addressed. But you may not have touched on the emotional elements that gets people to actually act differently. And so there's a you know I don't wanna get too dramatic here, but there's a psychological element here which is it's not just the technical answer. Oftentimes it's the human answer,

and it's the emotional answer, and the people answer, coupled with the technical answer that actually gets you over the line.

Ken White

You said something today, and it was couched in consulting, but when I think of literally every career and every sector, it resonates there, and you said communication is the secret sauce. You know why?

Neal Batra

Secret sauce in the sense that ideas are what move everything, and you can have the most technically efficient analysis, as I said. But if you can't actually communicate it, bring it to life, and motivate folks to do something different, you know what are we doing here. And progress isn't made. So you know if you look at pretty much every great leader and every great change you've had a narrative and a story that folks have sort of grabbed onto and that's moved, people. And so communication is a secret sauce because to say simply that the steak could be great, but if it doesn't sizzle, no one's buying it.

Ken White

Right.

Neal Batra

So the sizzle matters.

Ken White

You talked about the three foundations of communication in class today storyline, the slides, and the delivery, and I thought this is so transferable for literally everyone listening so that we'd walk through that. You talk about the storyline when you is this. Is this where you start in terms of communication with the client?

Neal Batra

You know I think the storyline in many cases so direct answer direct directly. I think the answer is no on that I think the storyline is where you start to get your own thoughts in order. And so as I approach a challenge and a question and an issue, the storyline is how I begin to make sure that I'm breaking this problem down accordingly. I know what is a data point versus an interim summary versus the sort of macro organizing thought. And as I work that storyline, as I work that narrative, I think my communication narrative comes into light and comes into focus. And oftentimes those are those become similar things as you sort of iterate on them, but sometimes they're different the analysis may be one thing, but the way you tell that story may be radically different depending on the audience in the situation.

Ken White

And that was my next question where does the. So it's about you to get you situated that how does the audience come into that?

Neal Batra

Yeah. And then I think that's the nature of what's being asked because there have been instances where you know we'll be asked to come in and speak with an executive or two and we're working for a very narrow audience with a very specific ask. And the way you engage in this story you engage on in those really intimate settings may be less formal, perhaps more casual in nature, more stick and move in terms of bouncing around. You can have an unstructured conversation between two people that's easy, but there are other instances where I may be advising a full team of 10 15 20 execs. And then you need a little bit more structure to engage on that because I need to make sure that as I'm walking a broader group through a set of ideas, is it resonating is that landing. Do I have vehicles for them to actually ask questions back or challenge ideas and helpful of you know appropriate way? So I may communicate differently there.

Ken White

Sure.

Neal Batra

And versus you know a large conference you know I'm a I'm speaking at a conference in a couple weeks. The Financial Times conference in New York, and you know that's an example where I'm going to be in front of a large room. And so how do I tailor my message to my narrative there. We need to probably tailor in a more rolled up simplified way so I can actually project a set of you know maybe complex ideas to a large audience.

Ken White

Yeah. So not only audience but you brought up, setting today you were talking about a certain individual in the message and knowing when the question was. How would that play at a conference room table?

Neal Batra

That's right.

Ken White

So even the geography of geography matters.

Neal Batra

Right, you know, and what's interesting is frankly timing matters. So you know the geography matters in the sense of what's the nature of the room and the conversation. Are you in front of the room presenting and standing up? Are you at a table having a dialogue as a peer? You know that that dynamic changes perhaps how you set it up. But frankly, even the context of the folks you're talking to and what they're you know coming out of a room from and walking into your room. And where's their mind wheres their mindset you know I've had clients in the past where I'll start work with them right after potentially an investor call that you know didn't go well. And so they're going to come in, and you know they're going to be awfully anxious, and they're gonna be very near term focused. And so if I'm having a long term conversation with a team they just came off an investor call, I better start that story very different. I'm going to try to reset their aperture to be more broad because I know what they just focused on was part of the next six or 12 months in terms of what they just had a conversation on.

Ken White

When you when you're talking about developing that storyline, you mentioned the executive summary and writing one. What is that, and what role does that play?

Neal Batra

Yeah, you know I think it's the quote-unquote answer. And it's you know a classic sort of structure which is you want to tell folks what you're about to tell them because in many cases there's real urgency with senior executives to sort of understand where are we. What are you telling me? And then, I can probe and dig on the elements that either I don't understand, or I want to learn more about, or I'm challenging. And so I need to actually get them the answer quickly and then you know again it's a conversation, and so I need to be a good participant in that conversation and make sure that I'm sort of honoring what the interested parties interested in. And so I can continue playing out my story, or I can sort of once you know the whole narrative we can probe in particular areas and spend energy there. And so I've had instances with executives we're told all sort of give the exects summary and tell them a quote-unquote answer and a three or four you know supportive points and action items that I think come with and we might spend the next hour on only one element. You know Neal, I buy the top line comment. I buy the three out of the four elements. Tell me more about why you're recommending x. Why do you believe that? What have you learned? Give me some context right, and then we'll engage in a discussion that may be more educational nature or maybe more like I don't know if I can sell that culturally or maybe I don't know technically if my organization can pull that off. So what would we do there?

Ken White

We'll continue our discussion with Neal Batra in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at William & Mary School of Business. If you're looking to raise your game and give your career a boost. The Center for Corporate Education offers non-degree programs that help you become a more effective professional. The programs are taught by William & Mary's MBA faculty. The faculty ranked number one in the nation by Bloomberg Businessweek magazine for two consecutive years. To learn more, visit our website at wmleadership.com. Now back to our conversation with Deloitte's Neal Batra.

Ken White

You mentioned time, and I've had this question asked a lot of me, and my boss will only give me a minute. Or what if the client only gives me 20 no matter I'm prepared for 20? I've got a minute. How do I handle that? Does the summary come into play then?

Neal Batra

That's exactly where the summary comes into play because if you know your cascading points, your organizing conclusion, the sort of next tier down of supporting content, and then the data that sits below that. Look, you should build tell a story in a minute or in an hour depending on how much time you have and how long you want to linger on those points so classic consulting common is this. Tell me how much time I have? And I'll get you an answer and I'll, and you know the way we tell that joke is I'll get you an answer now. The credibility of that answer may be. Give me a week versus a month versus a year. But you know that the narrative is the same. Point is if you give me a minute, I'll get you the story and the answer. It may not be satisfying from a detail perspective, but if all you've got is a minute, I can get the main points you know points across.

Ken White

Yeah.

Neal Batra

Give me five minutes; it'll be that much better.

Ken White

Right. So from storyline, you move the slides, and are you doing most of your communication and presentations quote-unquote still on slides. Powerpoint.

Neal Batra

You know I use the slides to make sure I'm prepared and my team's prepared, and we know what we want to say. So I use as a vehicle to actually work my thinking. And then

depending on the audience, I might use slides, I might use a placemat, which is a single page that I could lay out a couple of slides or a couple of key thoughts and sort of have a single page. There's not a lot of flipping, and that sets up an environment and exchange that's you know more of a dialogue and a more comfortable back and forth dynamic. You know I've done meetings where I'll walk in now you know I'll put on the screen five bullets with each you know three or four words saying we're going talk about five topics and we'll have a whole conversation off the back of that. Again it's situation dependent. And in some cases, it's complexity dependent. All right, if you're dealing with a hypercomplex topic, oftentimes pictures and visuals help move that along.

Ken White

Sure.

Neal Batra

And allow folks to sort of follow the story. It also depends on your audience and how technical they are versus the ability for them to sort of be top-down and broad.

Ken White

In terms of whether or not you present a deck to the client. Do you have a preference?

Neal Batra

No preference for me. You know I think as I said you know we're building the deck because that's that helps us get our thinking square.

Ken White

Yeah.

Neal Batra

And ultimately, when a client's paying for work, they need a deliverable that actually they walk away with.

Ken White

Right.

Neal Batra

So some type of content's gonna be handed over. But I've had you know projects where the final deliverables are a three or four-page Word document just summarizing in a narrative and in a memo type structure. So happy to do that as well you know and again as and as the world gets more technical and more digital and more analytic oriented you know I've seen deliverables recently where we'll hand over models or hand over an app or

other sort of digital products will be the quote-unquote deliverable and answer versus a PowerPoint deck.

Ken White

A question I often get is I have my deliverable, and it's a deck of 50 slides, but you know I presented it I put it together to be projected onto the wall. What do I do if I want them to read it? How do you how do you do that?

Neal Batra

Yeah. So I think you need to write that document a bit differently, right. So the way you project or the way you'll build a PowerPoint presentation to a large audience and have that be more of a presentation you might have more whitespace, fewer words, more bullet oriented something that allows a large room to consume that information and feel like they can follow you versus a sit down read deck you might actually have more content in there. And you may bring more of your main supporting materials into the primary body as opposed to appendix. So I think the way you structure the document is a bit different; you know we mentioned today one of the classes that you know if you're at the C-Suite audience, and you've got more than ten slides you probably doing it wrong.

Ken White

Right.

Neal Batra

Right.

Ken White

For that audience.

Neal Batra

For that audience, right. For that audience for that situation, that's not to say your appendix may not be 50 slides.

Ken White

Yeah.

Neal Batra

Right. But the main thing I'm going to talk to you about are these ten ,and I think I can have the entire conversation on these ten, but I have the backup if I need it. Now you may go a level down in the organization, and frankly, you may have a 30 slide presentation same presentation, but you bring far more content into the body because that audience

requires that level of detail, and they're gonna want to get to that level of specificity. So again, always situation-dependent.

Ken White

And audience-driven.

Neal Batra

And audience-driven.

Ken White

Yeah.

Neal Batra

That's right.

Ken White

And then you finally you talked about delivery and the importance of delivery in the audience and listening and understanding. What are some of the things that you try to focus on when it comes to the delivery piece of it?

Neal Batra

I watch for body language frankly in response quite a bit because what I'm consistent trying to do is I'm trying to engage a change in action. All right, I'm looking for some movement on the back of this work, or the intellectual exercise is fine, but if we don't do things differently than we're all wasting our time. Right. So I'm looking for connection on the ideas, and both the verbals and nonverbals is that tells me something about whether this is actually motivating them to actually move in a new direction. And if we're getting there and if I'm seeing that you know I want to continue that that sort of dynamic and if I'm not seeing that I'm going to switch it up.

Ken White

Right.

Neal Batra

And I'm going to do a sort of rapid assessment of me and my team trying to figure out is the issue with the content, the recommendation, or actually the story and how we're telling it. All right. And you have misses right you have dynamics where you walk in, and you think this is gonna be a high-level conversation and they want three levels of detail down.

Ken White

Mm-hmm.

Neal Batra

That's a different has a different deal, and we didn't necessarily you know that's a four-hour conversation we have 30 minutes. So how do we manage that?

Ken White

Yeah.

Neal Batra

So you know it's a tricky animal to sort of get this dynamic right, and you know you heard today we spent a lot of energy explaining to the room that the dynamics of the meeting and knowing those and being clear on those is critical. Right down to instances where we'll have some of my folks go into a room the night before I take pictures, so we're all crystal clear on how big is the room, where you know what's the shape of the room in terms of how folks are gonna be sitting, where will we be presenting? Will I be able to see the pages that I'm presenting to or do I need to know them cold. All right. That kind of dynamic in that preparation, I think, facilitates a more natural conversation, and you know gets you there.

Ken White

Might be an unfair question there all of this is important. Is there one element that someone who's trying to become a better communicator connect with that audience a little better. Is there one place they should start or one area in which they can focus?

Neal Batra

You know it's interesting. I got this question actually after one of the classes, and I think if I had to give you one thing, I think it's genuine. I think it's a genuine belief in what you're saying because I think people sense when you're putting on a show. I think people sense when you're not genuinely supportive of the recommendations you're making and when you yourself at a personal level are not vested in that. I think that comes across, and so the ability to bring your true self to the conversation, engage in a meaningful way in a way that's really honest about you, I think, is step one.

Ken White

Right.

Neal Batra

Obviously, you want the right answer, and you want to do the work correctly, and those sorts of things, but somebody who does all those things and lacks passion and a genuine sense of self when they bring it tends to fall flat even if everything else is right.

Ken White

And I think that that genuineness leads to likability.

Neal Batra

Yeah.

Ken White

And then you've got a bit of a connection there.

Neal Batra

And then you've got a bit of a connection and look. This is a you know lots of conversations these days around technology and us it removing you know the human to human interaction, but you know I would argue that everything is more human at this point. A lot of the activities that used to pull us away from engaging I would argue you're going to see automation emerge around, and you're gonna get more collaboration of more of humans more people working hard problems. So I actually see it going in a very different way.

Ken White

Right.

Neal Batra

You know you always see those pictures of folks on subway platforms and everyone's heads down looking at their phone and everyone was like tsk tsk tsk. Look at the world, getting more disconnected. But then you see a picture from the 1930s everyone's on the train in their heads buried in newspaper. So like I don't know. I'm not really worried about it.

Ken White

That's our conversation with Neal Batra. 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 offers programs to help you reach your career goals, and the programs are taught by the William & Mary MBA faculty. The faculty ranked number one in the nation by Bloomberg Businessweek. To learn more, visit our website at wmladership.com. Finally, we'd love 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 to our guest this week, Neal Batra. And thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White wishing you a safe, restful, and happy holiday. Take care.