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WILLIAM & MARY

LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS PODCAST

EPISODE 128: SARAH LEVITT – YOUR BEST YEAR EVER

Ken White

From 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. A New Year, a fresh start for many professionals it signals a new beginning, such as seeking a new job or promotion. For others, it's a time to set goals. Goals that can make the upcoming year your best year ever. Sarah Levitt is a leadership coach. She works with CEOs and executives of Fortune 1000 companies and senior leadership teams. In addition, through her making magnificence project, she's met with top leaders to capture their leadership and success journeys. She joins us on the podcast today to share with us what she shares with senior leaders. The importance of presence, influence, authenticity, and how to make the year ahead a great one. Here's our conversation with leadership coach Sarah Levitt.

Ken White

Well Sarah, thank you very much for joining us. First of all, Happy New Year.

Sarah Levitt

Happy New Year to you and thank you for having me.

Ken White

Oh, it's our pleasure. It's 2020. That isn't that hard to. That's hard to get in my mind, 2020.

Sarah Levitt

The beginning of a whole new decade.

Ken White

How about it. Yeah yeah.

Sarah Levitt

That's crazy.

Ken White

So you know this is the time of the year where a lot of people take a look whether they're aspiring leaders, they are leaders and say you know this is the year. I want it to be the best year ever. How with your clients, how do you help them make that happen?

Sarah Levitt

The first thing that we look at is what the best actually means. So most of my. And that's, and that's an important distinction. So most of my clients are either CEOs or senior executives who are running companies. And so best is important to define. What does that mean? Are they up-leveling to an elevated role, and what does performance in that role mean? If they're a CEO, typically best means growth as it does for any anybody. Both for the organization and for themselves.

Ken White

I see.

Sarah Levitt

So you know in an ideal world a CEO grows with their organization.

Ken White

Mmm-hmm.

Sarah Levitt

So the first thing is determine what is best and then how can we accelerate their trajectory to get there. What do they have? What can we leverage? And then really it's a matter of what external resource if they want to use one, is best suited for that.

Ken White

How do we determine those goals, I guess?

Sarah Levitt

Yeah. That's a great question. The bottom line is they're always related to growth. This is the business world.

Ken White

Right.

Sarah Levitt

And in some way it's going to come down to growth and leadership is directly tied to that. You know we want to have the right person leading with the right vision and focus. We want to have the right team in place, right people in the right roles and all the oars have to be in the water. I mean, it's an overused metaphor, but really, people have to be rowing in the same direction, trusting of one another, and able to execute.

Ken White

So what's the best way for the leader to know that everybody is in the boat rowing at the same time?

Sarah Levitt

Rowing in the same direction. So I'm gonna turn that around. Most often, they know when they're not.

Ken White

Got it.

Sarah Levitt

Because again, getting back to growth, two things are typically not happening or not happening well, and that's projects aren't being delivered on time. So it's time and budget right. So projects aren't being delivered on time. Deadlines aren't able to be met in a timely manner. And there might be budgetary overflow.

Ken White

So then if we're gonna reach out this is gonna be the best year ever the first thing we do then is really look at performance and

Sarah Levitt

Absolutely.

Ken White

Ultimately the bottom line and growth.

Sarah Levitt

Yes. So what do we want? Right. What do we? How's everything going kind of a check-in. What do we want to move the needle on? For the individual leader. This is key for the individual leader and for the organization. So what are the business outcomes that we're looking to drive? And that's typically again not to be repetitive here. It's going to be

related to growth. So capturing more market share, getting there first, beating the competition, etc.

Ken White

As working with leaders, what are some of the more personal areas that a client or a professional might be focused on in the year ahead?

Sarah Levitt

Yeah.

Ken White

To improve.

Sarah Levitt

Yeah, absolutely. And I would say you know one of the things I discovered when I was interviewing leaders of all domains for the making magnificence project, which became magnificent leadership. One of the things I noticed that was a consistent theme, no matter the leader, no matter the domain they were leading in was this ongoing quest for self-mastery. So leaders really who are already performing well and those are the folks I work with. They're always looking to kind of take their success and the success of those around them to the next level. That is both external, as we've been talking about. Internally, it can be, and presence is so often used, but executive presence matters in a sense that a leader needs to be able to use their talents and gifts and abilities in a way that is focused pointed in the right direction in a confident and comfortable manner. So that there is resonance with whomever, it is they're interacting with. Sometimes we hear that described as authentic.

Ken White

Mmm-hmm, right.

Sarah Levitt

So that's one domain that is what I might think of as internal. Another is the capacity, and this is really key as people move up inside organizations. Influence becomes more and more critical because to get key stakeholder buy-in across multiple different audiences is a necessity for advancing initiatives.

Ken White

Mmm-hmm.

Sarah Levitt

And so what I think of as influence is when I'm speaking to clients you know who are the three to five people that you need to be visible to? How do you need to be visible to them and align with them to get their buy-in? So those are kind of what I think of as the internal, but the comfort and confidence is key and then influence.

Ken White

Yeah, executive presence is such an interesting arena because we're all different.

Sarah Levitt

We are all different.

Ken White

And I think we define it differently based on the person

Sarah Levitt

Yes.

Ken White

And then the audience is different. Everybody you're dealing with is so different.

Sarah Levitt

Yes.

Ken White

And to ask the way I think of it is someone with presence is a great communicator meaning they know how to communicate to the various audiences. They know how to shift those gears. How important is that for the leader?

Sarah Levitt

It's essential, right. So that's what I think of as that. That's where presence and influence come together. So a leader's ability to be comfortable and confident in themselves across multiple audiences.

Ken White

Mmm-hmm.

Sarah Levitt

So that means being able to present well to the board. Being able to speak to shareholders. Being able to rally their team, for example. Have great relationships with their colleagues.

Ken White

Mmm-hmm.

Sarah Levitt

Those are all to your point, Ken. Multiple different audiences and a leader needs to be able to relate successfully with each of those.

Ken White

And we tend to think of those qualities that they go along with someone who's outgoing. But that's not always the case.

Sarah Levitt

Absolutely yeah. So what we're looking for is the ability to your point. To communicate and when I think of as really resonate and connect with whomever, a leader is in front of, and that does not necessarily mean someone who is super outgoing. It means being able to tap into, to your point a few minutes ago, what their talents and gifts are and what might make them different but be centered and grounded in those.

Ken White

We hear so much about authenticity.

Sarah Levitt

We do.

Ken White

Yeah. How do you define that?

Sarah Levitt

I think it is a leader anyone's ability to make external what their talents and gifts are in a way that relates to people. So a lack of artifice and being able to relate to someone wherever they are whether that and a great leader, a great CEO is able to walk the halls, I'm always talking to my clients about this, walk the halls relate to folks at any level of the organization as well as the boardroom.

Ken White

Pretty amazing what you find out in the hallway, isn't it.

Sarah Levitt

It is very and that channel going back to what you said a few minutes ago you know when I'm working with an executive in an organization one of the lines of communication that I look at and look for is there a flow of information from the front lines to the executives. Not just from the executives to the front lines.

Ken White

We'll continue our discussion with Sarah Levitt in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at William & Mary's 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 for two consecutive years. To learn more, visit our website at wmladership.com. Now back to our conversation with leadership coach Sarah Levitt.

Ken White

Do you see where the CEO maybe came up through a certain division was great in that particular area? Maybe 10 years ago they still feel they know what like the back of their hand but boy things have certainly changed.

Sarah Levitt

That can be the case. I often see actually this is an interesting kind of twist, so I often see that when an executive rises through the ranks inside an organization, there's a shift into leadership that has to happen that is internal to them. Because, at times, they are leading their peers.

Ken White

Yes.

Sarah Levitt

And it can be difficult for the leader to assume that mantle of leadership which is part of executive presence. You know it's assuming that mantle of leadership, and it can be difficult for the peers. It's also critical going back to communication that leader be able to elicit dissenting opinion. And sometimes we see this showed up in my interviews for the making magnificence project. Sometimes we see when a leader rises from within. The people around that person are not as comfortable speaking truth.

Ken White

And some of those are friends.

Sarah Levitt

Absolutely.

Ken White

Yeah. Is it lonely at the top? Is that is that true, in your experience?

Sarah Levitt

It really is. So it is you know, like authenticity and executive presence, we hear about these phrases because they are true. Because they're true for the experience. And lonely in the sense that you know a CEO or a senior executive is often dealing with highly confidential information. They have to put on a brave face when things may not be going all that well. And there are very few people that they can share the information with and get trusted input from. So that's often the role that someone like myself fulfills.

Ken White

So what we've been talking a little bit about executive presence. But you also mentioned influence

Sarah Levitt

Yes.

Ken White

How critical that is. And you said those through find those three to five people. Could they be peers?

Sarah Levitt

Absolutely. So those folks are key what I think of his key stakeholders so they can be peers their folks that you need buy-in from to advance your initiatives and the initiatives that are going to matter the most and where you add the greatest value.

Ken White

So new year moving forward, taking all this into account when should someone say to themselves maybe I should have a coach? When is the time for that?

Sarah Levitt

Yeah, that's a great question. So when I think of the folks that I work with who are already doing super well and are again kind of on this quest for continued growth and self-mastery, they are often swimming in the waters of having outside resources. So, however, having said that most often a trigger for me being asked or invited in to work with someone is that they are preparing for, they've been slated for succession, or they have just landed in a new elevated role, and frankly, they're drinking from a firehose. So that's a good trigger. Geez, I am ready to be promoted, or I've been slated for succession. That's a great trigger.

Ken White

And my leadership coach will help me deal with this?

Sarah Levitt

Yes.

Ken White

So what are some of the things?

Sarah Levitt

Yes, so two of the things we've already been talking about right kind of executive presence.

Ken White

Right.

Sarah Levitt

And assuming the mantle of leadership being confident in one's abilities. Right. And we've talked about influence as well. There's also what I call controlled delegation, so the ability to offload in a way that is effective for the leader the person being delegated to the team member being delegated to and to the initiative, and that's a tricky process but one that has to happen.

Ken White

Right.

Sarah Levitt

And then building what I call a self-correcting team which also has to happen and that is I used to say can but a team needed to be high performing. And I've changed my thinking

on that. A team really needs to be self-correcting. And by that, I mean it can essentially function without the leader.

Ken White

Interesting.

Sarah Levitt

Yeah, that has to be able to happen, or that has to happen for the leader to do what they need to do strategically, which brings me to the last domain, which is having a strategic focus. So oftentimes we hear that you know when a leader gets into an elevated role they kind of have to change what they're doing that what got them there won't get. That's absolutely the case.

Ken White

Yeah.

Sarah Levitt

And part of that is having a strategic focus. So someone might be used to being on the front lines and being the go-to person at 2 o'clock in the morning and getting the call and being the person who fixes it and puts out the fire. And that is no longer their role oftentimes, but they have what I call kind of the knee jerk yes reaction to yes I'm there. Let me put out the fire as opposed to finding and creating a deputy or a series of deputies who can do that for them.

Ken White

So we've made our minds up for this year, we are going to step up, we do step up, we get a bigger role, and become a leader. Is there, we often see, especially in print the term imposter syndrome.

Sarah Levitt

Mmm-hmm.

Ken White

Is that real? Can people run into that?

Sarah Levitt

Yes.

Ken White

And what can they do about it?

Sarah Levitt

It's very real. And I think it probably is you know I can't say for certain, but I think it's probably very real among people who are high achieving for the very reason that I put myself in that category for the very reason that we all want to do well. I've had clients many clients who have imposter syndrome. And frankly, when I work with them, we just set it aside, and we focus on what are the goals and what are the things we need to do to get you there and that success even incremental this those steps toward success begin to build that confidence.

Ken White

Yeah.

Sarah Levitt

Yeah.

Ken White

Getting back to the coach. What's the relationship like. How does a leader and executive work with a coach?

Sarah Levitt

Yeah, that's a great question. So the first thing is in the selection process, and I think of myself as coaching is one tool that I use, but I think of myself more as kind of a trusted and strategic guide to those people in the C suite to help them achieve and accelerate their objectives. So the first issue is how to select someone how to select that person that you want to partner with.

Ken White

Mmm-hmm.

Sarah Levitt

And I tell anyone who is considering working with me or anyone else that the first criteria is that whomever they work with should really feel like a fit in their gut.

Ken White

Mmm-hmm.

Sarah Levitt

And by that I mean not that they're going to be your best friend which is different.

Ken White

Yeah.

Sarah Levitt

But like yeah, that's the person I want in my corner because, without that fundamental trust and foundation, the coach the executive coach can't speak truth which is which has to happen and, more importantly, the person being coached won't really receive it. So the first thing is yes, that's the person I want in my corner, and then I think the second thing to look at is does this person work in the arena in which I either am or am going. And can they show results so you know the waters I swim in are the C suite and for senior executives, they want to know that I've worked in that arena?

Ken White

Mmm-hmm.

Sarah Levitt

Right and can demonstrate results. So I think those two criteria are. I mean, there are others, but I think those two are critically important.

Ken White

And I assume like all coaches you may say some things the client doesn't want to hear.

Sarah Levitt

Yeah, I mean, that's a great point, yes. And I think I also say this as well. There is a real art to showing where someone may be getting in their own way to their own detriment.

Ken White

Mmm-hmm.

Sarah Levitt

And I always tell clients I'm not here to cram anything down your throat. If you can get to where you want to go with the way you're doing things. Fantastic.

Ken White

Right.

Sarah Levitt

You know there is no standard here to which we are aspiring, but if you think you can't or if you can't continue to just do things the way you've been doing them, then let's talk.

Ken White

For those who are aspiring leaders. They don't have the ability to have a coach they want to have a great year ahead. How do they improve? How did they get sort of the help that they ordinarily don't have at their disposal?

Sarah Levitt

Yeah. So that's so I often and always recommend mentors for anybody. So whether that's a senior executive and you'll find that many many most senior executives have mentors along the way have had them. So that's the first thing is to find a mentor. I would say that can be someone inside the organization or outside the organization. But having someone who has experience again in the domain in which this person is in my world that's business experience is helpful.

Ken White

That's our conversation with Sarah Levitt. 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. Ranked number one in the nation by Bloomberg Businessweek. To learn more, visit our website at wmleadership.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, Sarah Levitt, and thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White wishing you a safe, happy, and productive week and, of course, from all of us here at William & Mary. Happy New Year.