



Raymond A. Mason School of Business

WILLIAM & MARY

LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS PODCAST

EPISODE 149: CARA SIMPSON & VICKI HARRINGTON – HELPING OTHERS THROUGH COVID

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 help make you a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host, Ken White. Thanks for listening. When the pandemic first took over the United States last March, two William & Mary MBA students decided to use their talents to help others. Cara Simpson and Vicki Harrington quickly founded the CrimDell Small Business Network, named after a popular landmark on the William & Mary campus. They formed a partnership with the Hampton Roads Small Business Development Center, then began offering free strategic business advising to small businesses in the greater Williamsburg area affected by the pandemic. Over 60 classmates joined in to serve as business analysts, professors, and leadership coaches at William & Mary's Business School stepped up. The school's Graduate Career Management Center got involved. In less than a year, the organization has spent over fifteen hundred hours helping 50 small businesses navigate the pandemic. Most of the businesses are women, veterans, or disability-owned enterprises. Simpson and Harrington join us today to talk about the success of the CrimDell Small Business Network, the lessons they've learned, and how utilizing your strengths can help others. Here's our conversation with Cara Simpson and Vicki Harrington.

Ken White

Vicky, Cara, thanks for sharing your time and your story with us. Welcome. It's nice to have you here.

Cara Simpson

Thank you, Dean White. Thanks for inviting us.

Ken White

I'm trying to think full-time MBA students. How many have we had on the podcast series? Not many. So you're in an elite group, so. Yeah. So thanks for being here. I have to ask you this question because I've told so many people this story. I don't know if you

remember. And that's my question. Do you remember when COVID first hit and we started to have meetings with the classes and we met with your class? And after a couple of basic questions, when do you think class will return to normal? You know, basic questions Vicki, you said what can we do as a class, as an MBA program, and as a business school to help others? Do you remember that?

Vicki Harrington

I do. And what's funny is I think the behind-the-scenes is a lot funnier than you realize because Cara and I had already started talking about ways to help. And Cara is the one that prompted me to ask that question.

Cara Simpson

I was driving. I was driving in my car, so I wasn't able to unmute.

Vicki Harrington

So it's funny. It's funny that you bring it up. You bring it up a lot. I'm glad you do it. I think it's it speaks to hopefully what a lot of us in the class were thinking.

Ken White

Absolutely. But it set the tone.

Vicki Harrington

It was Cara and I that did that from the beginning.

Ken White

But it set a tone. I think in the early days, early March, all of us humankind was saying, oh, no, what am I going to do? How is it going to affect me? I think that's a natural response. And so to hear that that early was really amazing. So how did you come up with the idea?

Cara Simpson

Well, I think we just looked at what we could do, and we looked at where we were poised as business students. And I remember talking to Vicki over WhatsApp one night, and we were both talking about our internships. We were thinking about how does this affect us? But thinking about, okay, well, we know this is also affecting small businesses. And so I think that's what made CrimDell work so well was the idea that we had this mutually beneficial relationship and we saw that there was something there, I made this really rudimentary infographic in PowerPoint, that basically it was a picture and had William & Mary community on one side and it had greater Williamsburg community on the other. And I put a bunch of circles in the middle of like EPs, government, MBA students, and drew some arrows back and forth. And this was the basically the proposal document. We

were like. We know that we have something here. We know that we have skills that other people could use.

Ken White

Yeah. And so then from there, where did you go? I mean, because it's a funded organization. It has really grown. Where did you go from the beginning and from that original document?

Cara Simpson

The first person we texted was Nancy Turner, the EP.

Ken White

An executive partner, which is the organization here at the business school of some active, some semi-retired, and retired executives who are absolutely fantastic. So you reached out to them.

Cara Simpson

And Nancy has been a huge advocate for Vicki and I as well as other students since we've gotten here. And so she actually introduced us to a bigger group of people in the William & Mary community, including Rachel Frazier, Graham Henshaw, Julie Summ's. There is a bunch of people at this meeting, and it was a zoom called mostly designed around these MBA students have an idea. And we didn't know that we were being put sort of in the center of attention like this, but we were ready. So we basically

Vicki Harrington

And it was interesting, too, because, you know, we had this idea in what we thought was a silo of saying we want to help. We don't know-how. Who can we go to? Someone, you know, executive partner. And she was like, oh, these conversations are already happening all over William & Mary. People are already trying to figure out how to help. Let me put you in touch with them. And so, you know, we had Cara's beautiful sketch of, hey, students need internships, businesses need help pivoting and reimagining. And really, we just kept knocking on virtual zoom doors until we didn't hear the word no.

Cara Simpson

And people were really excited about it really quickly. I think

Ken White

Yeah.

Cara Simpson

it was. I think it made easy sense to people, even though we didn't have a really clear vision of exactly how we were going to do what we wanted to do. And the more we pushed, the more conversations we had, the more barriers did come up in front of us. People were asking us, well, did you consider liability? Did you consider how you're going to get a hold of people? All of these things and our answers are basically, no, but we can now.

Ken White

Yeah.

Vicki Harrington

Thanks for bringing that to our attention.

Ken White

No kidding.

Vicki Harrington

Now we will accomplish it now.

Ken White

Yeah.

Vicki Harrington

Now we will do it.

Ken White

So how did you get other students on board quickly?

Vicki Harrington

We tried to get them involved pretty early on, really in the beginning. And to this day, we consider ourselves a very flat organization. We've had over our lifetime sixty students involved. Currently, we sit around thirty-five, and it's this idea that you know how you can help best. We want to bring a culture and a community together of show me what you've got, you know, and what can you bring to the table for CrimDell.

Cara Simpson

And early on, before we were called, CrimDell. Students were texting us left and right. They're like we hear you've got something going. There's a buzz. We didn't even know we didn't intend for there to be a buzz right away. And it was really overwhelming because I

remember having this feeling of I don't totally understand what this looks like yet. How can I bring in a team of people to help when I'm just

Vicki Harrington

We're still figuring it out. But then we realized we're only two people. Let's open a door and see what happens. And I think that's something that we've been. I would say, very successful with, is listening to others and bringing other people's ideas in.

Ken White

It sounds like you were sort of, you know, building the plane while you were flying it, so to speak. Right.

Vicki Harrington

We see that all the time, we're building the car as you drive it over the bridge.

Ken White

Yeah. So how did you come to the how did you come to everybody's hearts and minds were in the right place. Let's use our expertise to help others. How did you actually kind of focus in on what are we going to do and who are we going to do?

Cara Simpson

Well, I think a bit of a chance introduction Rachel Fraizer from the from Launchpad. She introduced us to Jim Carroll at the Hampton Roads Small Business Development Center. And he in our first meeting, he told us that he's willing to meet with us every Friday, 1:00. And at first, we didn't really understand what it was he was looking to do, but he did counsel small businesses, and he saw what we were able to offer. And it was really key timing because this was right before the first round of PPP. The funding was released to the public.

Ken White

Hmm-mmm.

Cara Simpson

Of course, the payroll protection funds as part of the Cares Act. So they knew at the SPDC that they were about to be overwhelmed with requests from the small business community. So he gave us an opportunity. He helped us find that first bit of funding that allowed us to pay students for this work. And we thought that was something really important and we really excited about.

Ken White

So, yes. So then, yeah, you had payroll, and you had some money in the bank. So the checks didn't bounce, so to speak. Right. And then what were you offering businesses at that time?

Vicki Harrington

So and it's similar to our model today. We act as SPDC counselors. So SPDC, like Cara mentioned, is the Small Business Development Center. It's an organization funded through the Small Business Administration as well as local entities in the community. And their whole mission is to provide free counseling to businesses. So what we do is we kind of do a little bit more in-depth than the usual business counseling that SPDC does. We take teams of two students and set them up with a business, and they have to define a project scope, something that's, you know, bite-size, something that they can chew on. And over the course of a roughly 20 hours or three weeks, depending on the project, they meet with local experts. They, you know, do a lot of fact-finding, get things from the business, and present actionable recommendations at the end.

Cara Simpson

And this was inspired a lot by the corporate field consultancy class that is offered here at the School of Business.

Ken White

Hmm-mmm.

Cara Simpson

And we actually had a conversation with Terry Shannon, who's in charge of the CFC class at the very beginning, because we recognize the parallels between what they offer as a seven-week course and what we wanted to be able to turn out at a faster rate, not for corporate clients, but for small businesses here in Williamsburg.

Ken White

Right.

Cara Simpson

So we had his help in terms of design and guidance. We also reached out to Dawn Edmiston, and she helped us a lot with creating an organizational structure that allowed us to function more efficiently as a student organization. And that's where we went from. Vicki and Cara trying to figure this out to Vicki and Cara, co-founders and managing directors.

Ken White

And Dawn Edmiston, one of our marketing professors here at the business school.

Vicki Harrington

It took a village of business school.

Ken White

It sure did. It was so interesting to see the documents and more names and more names and more expertise.

Ken White

We'll continue our discussion with Cara Simpson and Vicki Harrington of the CrimDell Small Business Network in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business. You know, the post COVID world will require new skills and new approaches. And those skills and approaches are taught in the William & Mary MBA program. We offer four different MBA formats, including the full-time, the part-time, the online, and the executive, all taught by our top-ranked MBA faculty. The William & Mary MBA will prepare you to succeed and lead in our new world. Check out the MBA programs at William & Mary. Now back to our conversation with William & Mary MBA students Cara Simpson and Vicky Harrington, the founders of the Criminal Small Business Network.

Ken White

One thing comes to mind how do businesses react when you say we have a couple of fairly young MBAs who are going to help you in something you may have worked on for 40 years? What was the reaction?

Vicki Harrington

It's such a great question because it's something that I think we stress so much to our students. Our students have just as much to learn from the business as the business owner may be able to learn from the student. So our business owners, like you said, a lot of them have been in the field for 10, 20, 30, 50 years.

Ken White

Yeah.

Vicki Harrington

And they are an expertize at whatever they do best, and no one has an expertize at everything. Right. And so, you know, business students, we're young, we're hungry. We're trying to prove ourselves, and we need practice. So it's this amazing opportunity to take

what we're learning in the classroom and actually translate it into a hands-on experience that really, honestly helps the business owner just think a little bit differently. Right. It's that second eye.

Cara Simpson

We look at the counseling. We offer, as, you know, some form of catharsis for these people that are spending all of their time just totally in tunnel vision, looking at their problems really close up. And so we're offering this opportunity for a different perspective. And even and if we're able to make sure that students are coming at this, not as I'm going to tell you what to do and how to run your business, I'm going to instead share with you my skills and my background and see what would work to make your life better.

Ken White

Yeah.

Vicki Harrington

And all of our first meetings, we have a little presentation. We have students run through, and on one side, huge, it's just as at CrimDell we work with you, and it's not for you. It's not beneath you. It's with you.

Ken White

What are some of the success stories when you look back?

Cara Simpson

Oh, so I think one of the earlier clients, maybe, maybe halfway through, I think it was really interesting talking to the business analyst, the student. This is what we call the one they're working with the business, the business analyst. We were talking with them, and they were almost finishing a project with someone in early child care. And they were talking about how they were just so excited about how incredibly complicated working in this industry is and how she's explaining to us. Do you realize how they are on razor-thin margins, and now their capacity is cut in half, and they have to do this in their prices? And it is a complicated business problem. And it's something where, you know, to someone day to day, you don't think about these like strategic business challenges that people are facing. So that's a success in terms of our side feeling like we're opening up people in our organization, their eyes, to the business problems going around. Also, we've got some really great testimonials on the other side, and those are always really great to read. I don't think we've gotten one negative feedback yet.

Vicki Harrington

Yeah. And I mean, we are constantly trying to narrow our scope, but reality is we'll do any kind of project that's brought to us, and we like that. We consider ourselves generalists. We've done cash flow projections. We've done pricing strategies. We've done social media marketing plans. Gosh, we've done we do a lot of IT counseling. That was a big thing, especially in the beginning, businesses needing to get online. And so, you know, it's the site, it's two students being able to take that time and say, no, let's compare websites. You know, let's and not only let's compare websites because that's kind of functions in a vacuum. Let's put it on your cash flow statement. Let's see what it's going to cost you per month.

Ken White

Nice.

Vicki Harrington

Let's see. You know what that looks like.

Ken White

Yeah. Before we started to record, you mentioned use your skillset. Vicki, tell me a little more about that. What did you mean when you say that.

Vicki Harrington

Yeah. So everyone has something to bring to the table, right. Everyone, you know, has innately what they think they're good at, what they want to do. And it's this idea that you know, especially in times of uncertainty and crisis, it's the best thing you can do is kind of look within and say, what can I offer? What can I do? So, you know, as business students can't go and administer vaccines, we can't give PPP to folks in need, but we can provide the skill set that we have to help in the crisis that's happening with small businesses.

Cara Simpson

And that's, I think, how as a society we achieve maximum potential rate, everybody contributing what they are best suited to contribute. So I think that was the attitude we started with. And actually, during our orientation, you had an alumni from some year, and I don't remember his name, but I remember that he was talking about how success happens, where preparation meets opportunity. I don't know that student's name, but I remember listening that and thinking like that's a bit cliché, but it stuck in my head so well, and I think about it all the time to that, okay, this is really like what am I prepared for right now? And if I'm not totally prepared, and I have this opportunity. What can I do to get prepared as fast as possible?

Vicki Harrington

Yeah.

Ken White

So what's up moving forward? What are you hoping to do? You two will graduate not too far away. That's coming up pretty quickly here in May. Yeah. So what are you hoping takes place moving forward?

Vicki Harrington

So we just hired 14 new business analysts from our first-year class, so.

Cara Simpson

And one undergrad.

Vicki Harrington

And one undergrad.

Ken White

Nice.

Vicki Harrington

We do like to include some all-star undergrads in our cohort. Everything moving forward for Cara and I has been related to how do we continue to sustain this program.

Cara Simpson

And these conversations they started in August when the school was coming back. We are recognizing this is our second year. Everything we need to do needs to be based around a succession plan.

Vicki Harrington

Because we think, you know, born out of crisis, but something that continually will contribute to the community. So we are currently looking for a replacement managing director. We're currently trying to get funding in line. You know, there's a lot of moving parts.

Cara Simpson

Our board of directors already has to first-year students on it. And they've already given their word that they want to keep doing this into next year. So we know we've got at least a couple of leaders on board and ready to go. And we are still in communication regularly with Jim Carroll with our SPDC partners. We have a dedicated advisor, Tim Ryan. We've

been forming more connections at the business school in terms of oversight to Professor Wagner, Phil Wagner. He's actually taken on a little bit more responsibility.

Vicki Harrington

He's our faculty advisor.

Cara Simpson

Yes. Yeah. So he's talking to us about what he can do to make sure this keeps going.

Ken White

Yeah.

Cara Simpson

A lot of pieces.

Vicki Harrington

We try and weave ourselves in ways that make sure we stay around even when we're gone.

Ken White

The crisis or not. It sounds like your goal is to be there for small businesses in the region who could use some expertise they may not have.

Vicki Harrington

Yeah, and it's I think it's a model that really does work for both sides. You know, it's I I myself was doing applications and interviews last semester, and I had to continually remind myself to talk less about CrimDell because

Ken White

On your job interviews, you mean.

Vicki Harrington

Yeah, because I had so I was like, well, this one time, you know, planning this meeting. And I had so much expertise coming from working with small businesses. So, you know, it really, really helped students in the job market to say, no, let me tell you about the time. And I did this.

Cara Simpson

And also, I mean, the idea didn't come out of nowhere even before COVID, Vicky, and I were planning an event as MBAA club leads, and we attended the Williamsburg Economic Development Luncheon to try to meet some small business owners to talk about potential for them to get more interaction with the business school. And we were meeting people from Williamsburg local government, and they were so excited to have William & Mary MBA students at the luncheon, they were telling us to come back again to invite friends. Yes, they'd love to do more. And so we saw that there was this desire from the community to increase interaction with us. And this desire won't go away

Vicki Harrington

Yeah.

Cara Simpson

once COVID is over.

Vicki Harrington

or and once we're gone. Yeah.

Ken White

And that's our conversation with Cara Simpson and Vicki Harrington, and that's it for this episode of Leadership & Business. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business. Organizations and businesses are seeking professionals to lead in our post COVID world. Professionals who think strategically, communicate effectively, and manage ambiguity. You'll learn those skills and more in the William & Mary MBA program offered in four formats the full-time, the part-time, the online, and the executive. Check out the William & Mary MBA program to learn more. Finally, 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 to our guests Cara Simpson and Vicki Harrington. And thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White. Wishing you a safe, happy, and productive week ahead.