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LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS PODCAST

EPISODE 152: TIM MURRAY – LEADING IN A POST-COVID WORLD

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. Well, since last March, businesses, organizations, and professionals worldwide have made continuous changes in order to compete in the environment caused by COVID-19. Well, many important elements of business and leadership were put on the back burner this past year in some organizations. Training and professional development, performance evaluations, coaching, and other programs were among those often pushed aside as organizations dealt with new hurdles and opportunities. Well, as we get closer to what will hopefully be the end of this chapter, it's time to think about the post-pandemic world and what it means for your organization and for you as a leader. Tim Murray has some thoughts on the subject. After a successful tenure as CEO of Aluminium Bahrain, also known as Alba. Murray has been focused on leadership after the pandemic. He says some aspects will be different in the post-COVID world, and some will remain the same. Whatever happens, he says, it's important to think about it now. Here's our conversation with the former CEO of Aluminium Bahrain, Tim Murray.

Ken White

Well, Tim, thanks for joining us. Nice to see you. Welcome back to William & Mary.

Tim Murray

Yeah, it's nice to be back after all this time, and we're in the virtual world. It was nice. You said would you be okay with coming down to Miller Hall to do it in person? And I said more than happy to come down and get out of my house and engaged.

Ken White

As long as we're socially distanced.

Tim Murray

As long as we're distanced and, yeah, safe. But yeah, it's great to be here. And actually, it felt good to walk in the building. It's been a while since I walked in here.

Ken White

It's nice to have you.

Tim Murray

10 minutes from here.

Ken White

It is so fun to see students in the halls again. Yeah, it's absolutely wonderful. You're in a unique position. You had such an interesting, wonderful position in Bahrain for a number of years. What was it like as you were finishing? What were some of the things say in the last year you were trying to kind of nail down?

Tim Murray

Yes. I mean, as you know, I mean, I was in Bahrain for 12 years, so I finished as the CEO of Aluminium Bahrain, which is the largest smelter in the world outside of China, to produce one point five million tons, roughly three billion dollars a year in annual turnover they're about 12 percent of the GDP of the country. It's a big, big, you know, you've been there.

Ken White

I've been there. It's huge.

Tim Murray

It's like a little city. And, you know, so my contract, I ended up staying a few years longer. My wife and kids came back to the U.S. for high school. And then we had the big line six project. It was a three billion dollar CapEx project that took roughly four years. So I kind of stayed commuted, if you can believe, commuting back and forth from the Middle East for a few years. But, yeah, the last year it was tough. I mean, last year, it was bittersweet. When I left, I mean, is a great place to live: great people, many friends, family. We had great success in many things on safety. The line six, it was hard to leave. And when we finished basically, my contract finished lined up with the finish of the project. So we finished the project in July of 2019 August. I came home. I took a few months off, and then I set up this consulting company, which is we'll talk about this year in the book I wrote. But, you know, it was an interesting transition out because it was planned. And then my deputy CEO at the time he took over, he was, you know, trained. He was under me, you know, coached by me. He's actually one of the chapters in the book. He became the

CEO that he's done very well. And I think we've actually had a very good transition, which is something that usually doesn't happen

Ken White

Yeah.

Tim Murray

in the corporate world.

Ken White

Right.

Tim Murray

So so, again, I think there's many lessons in terms of, you know, I ultimately wrote this book, which we'll talk about, but it was tough. It was a tough transition to kind of let it go. And when you live for 12 years outside the country, to reintegrate yourself back in is very different. You know, I was gone for twelve years and to come back and then, you know, you're at the neighborhood parties or doing this, and you start, you know, I don't know these people. And my wife knew people I didn't know.

Ken White

Yeah.

Tim Murray

And so but it was, you know, I'm glad I came back. I am back for a little, you know, eighteen months now and, you know, reintegrated

Ken White

Right.

Tim Murray

and reenergized to get out of the house and do stuff once the world opens up. But it was a great, great experience. I have no regrets about it.

Ken White

And so one of the things you did was you wrote a book, and you call it Words of Wisdom. And these are things that you've shared when you were at in Bahrain at Alba. But also, you're looking at it more as these are some lessons for the post COVID world.

Tim Murray

That's correct. So so the book I'm a big reader, as you know,

Ken White

Right.

Tim Murray

I've given you many books like people books, and many people ask me, when are you going to write your own book? And so with when I came back, actually it was on my list to do. The COVID actually greatly accelerated that because obviously, we were trapped in the house with not a whole lot to do. So I said, okay, well, I can take this one, let's work on this. So it took me probably about six, seven months. I started it in February of twenty twenty. Obviously, the COVID accelerated all that. I self-published it. I published it through a company called iUniverse. So I wrote the book. I had to get an editor. I worked with a graphic designer on the cover, but I'd say seven months it was actually in one respect. It was easier than I thought. Writing it was harder than I thought. But yeah, I wanted to share these words of wisdom. These Wows, as I call them, as you recall in Bahrain, my P.R. department created these little bookmarks, and they would take some of my sayings like you never get a second chance for first impression. The best communication is direct communication. Perception is reality. So what I did is I took I have twelve short stories. I have a wow. Then I have a story that's actually linked to it. And then the end of each chapter, there's three or four takeaways. So it's very practical advice. And I believe if you look at the stories and kind of the messages, they really do spin what's going on in one, surviving through COVID and then emerging from COVID. I talk a lot about communication. I talk a lot about preparation. I talk about what makes you successful at one level is not what makes you successful at the next. I have one that's called tomorrow be different than today. So we think about COVID. Let's go back a year ago when it started; nobody thought it could happen. Okay, now I think we have the reverse. We are going to emerge. And I think I actually I think the world is going to boom to much more of a degree than we're talking about now because we're in the negative zone on everything. So so, yeah, I think there's many lessons in there about coaching, training, feedback, all these things I think are even more critical now as we kind of you know, you think about it for a year, we haven't done a lot of things we would do. Think of performance review, think of giving feedback, think of training, you know, all that's been okay, maybe we're doing Zoom to a degree, but it's not the same. So so I think there's a lot of lessons in the post COVID world that can be applied.

Ken White

Let's talk about some of them. One of your chapters, Chapter five tomorrow, will be different than today. You just mentioned that. What do you what's the point of that? What are you trying to what lesson are you trying to teach us?

Tim Murray

Well, one, the lesson is how quickly things can change in the world and be flipped upside down. So, again, when you look at COVID last year, I remember I was traveling. It was the last time I was on a plane in February of 2020, and we had the China virus. And there was one case in the U.S., and nobody was worried about it, and the stock market was booming. And then okay, in two months after that, we shut the world down, and all that happened. So, you know, things can change on a dime to a very drastic degree. I recently gave a presentation actually to a university about leading through adversity. And I actually gave a slide about the last pandemic we had, which was in 1918. So it was the Spanish flu. And if we look back at that, 50 million people died. This was 1918. World War One had just ended. So the world was in bad, bad, bad shape. And so you think about that, and then you think, what happened after that? Then we had the roaring 20s. We had ten years of pretty good boom. Also, we had a bang at the end with the stock market. But so how things can shift. And I think where we are today; we have to get out of this negative mindset. And all that's happened and whatever has happened has happened. We got to focus on the reopening, be positive. The vaccines are here. They are going to roll out faster. I think I think we will get back to normal quicker than people are talking about today. You know, and I think I think everybody's ready. Everybody's got COVID fatigue, Zoom fatigue. We were talking about it before we started the show. We want to get out. I mean, I was happy to come down to Miller Hall and do this face to face versus a Zoom. So I think, you know, we as people, we okay, we've proven a lot. We can do a lot with this, you know, virtual Zoom reality, many good things. But we can't take away that personal element of communication and training and meeting people and relationships and networking. So so, again, you know, tomorrow will be different than today. So I'm optimistic. I think within two, three months we're going to see a very different world. I think we're going to see people on planes again, going traveling again, doing things again. And I think, you know, we will have a boom in terms of good things. And I think we have to be positive and embrace and get ready. Get ready to run.

Ken White

We'll continue our discussion with Tim Murray, former CEO of Alba and author of Words of Wisdom, in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary's School of Business. The post COVID world will require new skills and new approaches. 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 Tim Murray.

Ken White

What I liked in the book is, is, yes, positive mindset, but you were right up front and said there were some issues you ran into like we all do in our careers that really knocked you out. I mean, you know, that messes you up mentally. Maybe you can't sleep. How do you how did you deal with those kinds of issues where? Wow. I can't even think straight.

Tim Murray

Yeah, I mean, I would my biggest when you say that; what pops to my mind is the safety issues. So Alba, when I took over as CEO, we were having bad safety performance. We were having fatalities in the plant. We had it. Was it five fatalities in less than three years? So I remember two months before I became CEO, we had another fatality. And this was actually one of the main reasons the former CEO was removed, and I was put in. And so you think about, you know, you go to bed at night, you put your phone down in your saying a prayer that you don't get a call in the middle of the night. I mean, it's a tough, tough thing. So but how do you be positive there? I mean, here you are, the leader. You know, things aren't going well. You have a fatality. You're trying to drive a message. You, as the leader, you have to be positive. And if you look at COVID, it's the same thing. As tough as it is and is probably worn out as you all are, you have to be positive. You're the leader. If you're positive, your people will be positive. And even when you're dealing with those tough issues or those negative issues, and you're stressed, you as the leader have to absorb it. You have to, I say, almost be like a shock absorber. You got to take that negative energy and spin it in a positive way. You got to get people thinking positive. And again, as we emerge from the COVID, I think that's one of the things we got to really focus on and not complain about or go look back. And I say, you know, in the book I talk about a story, don't cry over the spilled milk. What's done is done. And so you got to look forward and as tough as it is. You know, the leaders today, we've all had a tough time. You got to move forward and be positive for your people as hard as that is.

Ken White

One of your chapters is what makes you successful at one level is not necessarily what makes you successful at the next. How does that tie into where we're headed?

Tim Murray

So this one this is one I learned early in my career. And in the book, I talk more about how you go from the role of a doer. So you're an individual contributor to a manager role. And we were talking about this earlier. When you get promoted, okay, normally we promote somebody for doing a good job in their existing job. We say he's a great engineer, he's a great accountant, he's a great technical person. And then we make him a manager or she a manager. And now you're a manager. And it's a totally different skill set. And, you know, engineers, I like to pick on engineers, but when you take an engineer, usually a good engineer is somebody who is very detailed, micromanages, follows up. Okay, as a

manager, maybe that's not the best thing. So so that you have to think differently. So, you know, you as leaders, when you're promoting, people really look at the position and say, this is what I want for the position, not necessarily the person that's there. And I'm a big believer from promoting from within, don't get me wrong, but this is a big one. So if we look in the COVID situation, okay, what made us successful prior to COVID is not what's going to make us successful post COVID. Talk about Zoom, okay, as much as we're all probably sick about talking about Zoom. I think we can use Zoom in a lot of different ways. We talk about business travel and conferencing, and networking. We've proven a lot of what we did was probably wasted time and money. So and I think as we emerge from the COVID, you know, there was winners and losers during the COVID. There'll be winners and losers post COVID. So again, what made us successful and got us through all the COVID things is not necessarily what's going to make us successful after. So just think differently don't get stuck in that kind of fixed mindset of, you know, this is how I've always done it. I'm going to always be successful. And we look today in terms of technology and all the stuff that Google and Amazon and Zoom face, but all these things that have emerged as a result of the COVID. Use them, leverage them. But I think it'll be different than what you did previously.

Ken White

When I saw the name of this chapter, I immediately just jumped off the page. Never hire or promote someone you're not willing to terminate later.

Tim Murray

Yeah, this is probably the harshest story in the book. It's a lesson I learned in my actually my first job. I was working for a small family-owned business. And the gentleman who ran it, he was the owner slash president, and his CFO was his sister-in-law. And it was very small family business. So so you can imagine the dynamics there. The gentleman who was the owner president, he was a very dynamic sales guy. Talker wants to close deals, wants to keep the customer happy. Of course, the CFO was very tough on the credit and payment terms, and so they were constantly clashing. So, you know, I finished my job. I was there two years. He was gracious enough to invite me into his office. Give me a kind of an exit interview. Hey, we appreciate what you did. And he said to me right at the end, he said, listen, he said, you know, when you become a boss, you know, never put somebody in there that you can't terminate. And he said, look at this mess I have with my CFO. It's my sister-in-law. I can't get rid of her family dynamics. I should I never put her in there. And so when you're hiring or promoting somebody, really think about that. You know, if you have to terminate them later, are you going be able to do it? Because in the business world and wherever we are, you know, it's friends, it's family there with you for many years. And in the book, I talk about a gentleman who was a former executive of mine. He was promoted up the ranks with me. He was my right-hand man that we started having some performance issues, some ego issues, and ultimately, you know, he left on an

early retirement package, but it was one where it was not an easy thing to do. And he was close to me. And, you know, but business is business. And when people aren't performing, you have to deal with it, because if you don't deal with it, my view, it's like a cancer. You know, people see that you don't deal with a performance issue or a poor performer. They'll say, oh well, look, he gets a he's coming in late every day, or she did this, and they get away with this. It's a very hard thing. So you have to step up and make those decisions. But so when you're back to the, wow, you know, when you are going to promote somebody or hire somebody, and it's a friend or a relative or stuff like that. All right. Put yourself in the shoes that say, listen, if I have to get rid of them later, am I going to do it? Because if you're not, then don't put them in there because and it does happen, and it's a particularly family-owned businesses. It's a very, very, very common thing.

Ken White

Yeah, great. Great advice. You always liked coaching. That's an important piece of your leadership. And you talk, and you talk about coaching in the book. How do you see coaching now in the middle of COVID or hopefully toward the end of it, right?

Tim Murray

Yeah.

Ken White

And then in the post COVID world.

Tim Murray

Yeah. So I'm a big believer in coaching. So I grew up a sports guy. I played baseball all the way through university. I was always playing sports, and there was always a coach. And I say coaching is a gift that must be returned. So I think anybody who coaches you. One, you should thank them because they're not getting paid extra to do it. Usually, it's a lot more work. A lot of people don't want to do it. So if you're fortunate enough to have a coach, a mentor, it's a big, big thing in your career. So, so, yeah, I'm a big believer. So at Alba, I did a lot of coaching. The story I have in the book actually is about the current CEO of Alba. His name is Ali Al Baqali. So he was under me, and he was my deputy CEO, and as part of me leaving, there was a planned transition. Ali was a lifelong Alba guy, very smart guy, very clever guy. And so as we planned out the path of me finishing the project, leaving. You know, he was identified as my successor. He was deputy CEO for the last two years. And then he moved into that role. But we spent a lot of time coaching him because he was at that time, he was before the deputy, he was CFO. And so he transitioned into a few different roles there. Back to what makes you successful at one level is not what makes you successful at the next. You know, we had to groom him. We had to go over all these things and train these things. And so when you go from CFO to deputy CEO to CEO, they're all different roles. So I think so it's very important. But it was a proper transition. Ali

is doing a great job today. Alba's running well. The safety is running well. The production is running well. And it's a nice story because today, in most corporations, you don't see plan transitions. Usually, it's bang the CEO's gone the next day he was terminated by the board. Stock price goes down twenty percent.

Ken White

Right.

Tim Murray

Usually, it's a it's an ugly story. But but but to spin it on the COVID, you know, if we look over the time of the COVID, we've probably had a big lack of coaching or feedback. I mean, think of the basic things of a performance review or a quarterly review, and okay, maybe we're doing them via Zoom to some degree, but it's not the same.

Ken White

Right.

Tim Murray

And you think about training sessions. Are we still doing training sessions? Okay, maybe to some level, but you know, you would think about pre COVID you're constantly training session. You're going here, you're flying here, you're doing this. So I think we've got a big, you know, pent-up demand probably for coaching, feedback, training. So so as you emerge as a leader, really look at that. Because training, my experience with training is really something that motivates people and coaching. If you read all the big surveys, there was a survey in The Wall Street Journal a few months ago, and it talked about what's the most important thing to people, you know, and it's not pay, it's not benefits, it's not bonuses. It's coaching and development. You know you look at pay, bonuses wherever you go. That's going to be generally within the market.

Ken White

Right.

Tim Murray

It's not going to be drastically different. But why people leave? They don't feel they're appreciated. They're not feeling that they're developed. They don't have opportunities to move up within the company. So they leave. And again, today, I think you're going to see that. I mean, this is you want to keep your good people because the good people can always go. I mean, and so I think spending that time on coaching, development, and training and it's a tough one because training it's an easy thing to cut. And my view is, once you cut it, then the next year when we roll up the budget and the bean counters say,

well, we cut it last year, why do we need to put it back in this year and then it goes away forever? So my advice is, don't cut training. It's the worst thing. It sends a bad message to your people. They say, oh, look, they're cutting training. They don't care about us. And again, once you cut it, it's very hard to put it back in. So so as we emerge from the COVID pandemic and people are able to communicate and travel and do those things. Do stuff on the training, do some workshops, do some off-sites. I think people are dying for this. And this is a good way to motivate your team, you know, build that momentum back forward and get people moving in the right direction because everybody is COVID fatigued. So so to do training and development and workshops and feedback and coaching, I think people are really wanting it. I think so. I think it's a big, big thing that can differentiate you.

Ken White

And learn all these lessons that we've been taught throughout this and apply them as we move forward, and maybe good things will happen.

Tim Murray

Absolutely. Absolutely.

Ken White

That's our conversation with the former CEO of Alba, Tim Murray, and that's it for this episode of Leadership & Business. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business. Companies, organizations, and businesses are seeking professionals who can lead in the 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 programs 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 guest Tim Murray and thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White. Wishing you a safe, happy, and productive week ahead.