



Raymond A. Mason School of Business

WILLIAM & MARY

LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS PODCAST

EPISODE 200: ANNAMARIA DESALVA – PRINCIPLED ACHIEVEMENT

AnnaMaria DeSalva

If you want to go fast and you want to have a big impact, and you want to do well, and you want to have alignment and support, it's so much easier if your currency is trust and if that's supported by ethical behavior and a standard for ethics.

Female Speaker

From William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. This is Leadership & Business, produced by the William & Mary School of Business and its MBA program. Offered in four formats the full-time, the part-time, the online, and the executive MBA. For more information, visit wm.edu.

Ken White

Welcome to Leadership & Business, the podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world. Sharing strategies, information, and insight that help you become a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host, Ken White. Thanks for listening. Succeeding and doing so in the right manner. That's leading a life of principled achievement. The William & Mary School of Business defines the Principled Achievement leader as one who values people, diversity of thought, empathy, humility, and success. This leader listens and inspires. To recognize this type of outstanding leader, the business school created the Principled Achievement Award. It's based on four pillars. Serving as a role model for principled leadership, promoting diversity of thought, demonstrating ethical, compassionate behavior, and embracing the tenets of the William & Mary Honor Code. Last month, the 2023 Principled Achievement Award was presented to AnnaMaria DeSalva, chair and CEO of Hill+Knowlton Strategies, one of the world's leading global communication companies. Before the award ceremony in Washington, DC, DeSalva sat down with us to discuss her thoughts on leading a life of principled achievement. Here's our conversation with AnnaMaria DeSalva.

Ken White

Anna Maria, it is so nice to see you. Thanks for sharing your time and being on the podcast.

AnnaMaria DeSalva

It's my pleasure, Ken. Thank you for inviting me.

Ken White

We have a big night coming up as we record. We'll talk about that in a little bit. But yeah, so very excited to see you. And, of course, with my background, I just love what you do. I'm so interested in your field. How did you get into strategic communication, public relations?

AnnaMaria DeSalva

Thank you. At William & Mary, I was really compelled by two fields. One was English and English Literature, and the other was business. And it was my special riddle as a college student how I was going to reconcile those interests. And I managed to do that. I had a lot of confidence and faith that I could do that. And, of course, William & Mary is a great environment for combining disciplines and taking an interdisciplinary approach to the world. But really, it was my mother who was a little bit ahead of her time. She had had an interesting international career before she married and had children. And she put it in my head, she said, you know, AnnaMaria, I think you would be good at public relations. And I was like, what's public relations? Because at the time, this was quite some time ago, obviously, it wasn't much of an academic field of study. So she tried to explain it to me, and I guess she explained it well enough that it made me curious. And I got myself an internship between my junior and senior years at Ogilvy, the extraordinary legacy company that it is, and still a creative force and company I know very well now as a client and as a colleague. But they hired me as an intern. I was 20 years old, and they gave me the most extraordinary experience, and they sponsored me. They saw what I could do, and they gave me lots and lots of opportunities as an intern. And then they hired me right out of school, and I got the bug, and I thought maybe I would go to graduate school. But actually, I was so engrossed in what I was doing that I just wanted to keep going. So I was, you know, to answer your question, I was blending my interests at William & Mary. I had a little help from my mother, and then I happened to find myself just the right internship, and then I was off and running.

Ken White

Yeah, moms play an important role.

AnnaMaria DeSalva

Yeah, absolutely.

Ken White

So how did you make the shift from public relations professional to a leader

AnnaMaria DeSalva

Great question. You're a communicator and a management professor, so you will really understand and appreciate this. In my career, one of the things that was so compelling and so exciting was understanding the role of communication in business transformation. And because I spent actually decades in healthcare, in healthcare, there's a lot of stakeholder pain, and those companies have come to understand early how important communication was. And so communication had the proverbial seat at the table decades ago. Communication was well-funded decades ago, and smart, accomplished, driven people would go into communications in healthcare because they could have a big impact and they could learn a lot about science and medicine and business and finance and communication. And so I really think that as I began to do really difficult work in healthcare around transformation, I was at Pfizer when we acquired Wyeth, and that was the biggest still, I think, the biggest biopharmaceutical merger in history. And we were having to reinvent the innovation model at Pfizer. And it was like the communications Olympics. I was full on all the time for years at a time. And I was involved in every aspect of integrating the companies, planning the innovation model, making the hard decisions, communicating to stakeholders, making sure employees were informed and, engaged and confident. And then, it started to get interesting because we started to move into adjacent disciplines like public affairs or government relations and public policy. And we started to think about new ways to partner with the public sector to bring drugs to market. So it was very rich. And someone at Pfizer at that time, I remember, said to me, you know, you're like a business person with a communications competency. And that was true, I think, of many of us in the field. But it was an interesting inflection point for that person because they started to see a communicator as not someone who was performing a function but someone who was solving business problems. And so that made it really interesting to me to start to move into bigger roles.

Ken White

Was there anyone you tried to emulate? Anyone, you kept your eyes on in terms of leaders?

AnnaMaria DeSalva

Well, when I left Pfizer, and I crossed over into industrials, and I went to DuPont, I ended up working. I didn't know this would happen, but I ended up working for a CEO who came off of our board to run the company as CEO. And that's Ed Breen. And Ed is well known for being a transformational CEO and a serial value creator and someone who saved Tyco from the depths of despair and bankruptcy, or near bankruptcy, I should say, the risk of that, and transformed Tyco over the course of a decade and then really has played an outsized role at DuPont over the last seven or eight years. And so, really understanding what it means to think about sustainable value creation and all the choices and the types of decisions that go into thinking about long-term value creation was just a tremendous

opportunity for me to kind of ride shotgun with him. As his chief communicator, also going through the biggest industrial merger in history, the merger of DuPont and Dow, the combination of those portfolios, and the subsequent breakup into three new publicly traded companies, once again, I was, like, in the crosshairs of a fairly extraordinary experience. I really learned a lot working with Ed, and I think he gave me the awareness and the confidence that there was more I could do in terms of leading businesses. And then shortly thereafter, I got the call from WPP to see if I wanted to be the next CEO of Hill+Knowlton.

Ken White

That had to be a pretty big call.

AnnaMaria DeSalva

Yeah, right. It was a big call. Yeah, it was amazing.

Ken White

And before that, how would people have labeled you as a communicator? Some people have an area of expertise. Some are generalists. What was your bread and butter, so to speak?

AnnaMaria DeSalva

I think I was a strategist. I think I was someone who could really look at the context and really understand what outcomes we were driving towards and what problems we had to solve for and was very kind of open-minded and agnostic about ways to get there and would take a lot of inputs from people inside and outside the company and synthesize approaches and test approaches that had a high probability of being successful. So I think that's probably how I was seen.

Ken White

Growing up. Would your friends and family be surprised? What could they have predicted? What you do now, and where you ended up?

AnnaMaria DeSalva

What a great question. Probably most of them no. And maybe a couple of them, yes. And in fact, I was just corresponding today with a friend of mine from middle school or high school who's here in D.C., and she's had a big career in government, and she now leads the McCain Institute for Character Driven Leadership. And she was a big Department of Defense official on the Obama administration. She had a huge career in diplomacy and international relations. And when we were kids, we used to talk about what we wanted to be when we grew up. And she said that she was going to be a career diplomat, and I said I

was either going to be an advertising or a chief marketing officer. And every once in a while, I think about that and how close to the mark we both came. So maybe she would. I don't know about everybody else.

Ken White

Amazing when you make that choice so young. That's what you're looking at from that age. So it kind of comes naturally. Yeah, right?

AnnaMaria DeSalva

Totally.

Ken White

Well, we're meeting today, we're in Northern Virginia for the Principled Achievement Award ceremony, and you are our recipient. We're so very excited about that. When you hear principled achievement, just those two words, what comes to mind for you?

AnnaMaria DeSalva

What comes to mind for me is sustainable leadership and sustainable outcomes, and sustainable value creation. Because to me, the combination of principles and the type of behavior that creates trust and supports trust and that lifts that elevates and lifts others and elevates talent and converts risk to opportunity, that type of leadership and that type of achievement is what makes real progress possible, durable, meaningful, important progress in the world. So to me, it coheres when you think about people who have outsized impact, impact, many of them, hopefully, most of them, are principled leaders, and they've delivered that impact through, whether by design or not, but through principled achievement. So I think it's an extraordinary strategic platform for the business school at William & Mary. I think it aligns directly with the character of the university and the purpose and the heritage of the university. And I am humbled and honored and have a bit of disbelief that you chose me this year, and I'm very grateful.

Ken White

We'll continue our discussion with AnnaMaria DeSalva in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business. This year, the Financial Times, Princeton Review, U.S. News and World Report, and CEO magazine have all named the William & Mary MBA program one of the best in the U.S. and the world. If you're thinking about pursuing an MBA, consider one that has outstanding faculty, excellent student support, and a brand that's highly respected, the William & Mary MBA. Reach out to our admissions team to learn which of our four MBA programs best fits you the full-time, the part-time, the online, or the executive. Check out the MBA program at William & Mary at wm.edu. Now back to our conversation with AnnaMaria DeSalva.

Ken White

You know, the principal achievement award is built on four specific pillars. One is embracing the tenets of the William & Mary honor code. What does that mean to you as a graduate?

AnnaMaria DeSalva

Well, when you really look at the honor code, what it tells you is that there is an expectation of behavior that does instill trust and that it's sort of a high-trust environment that the founders wanted to create and that we uphold at William & Mary now, high trust environment. And what are the benefits of a high-trust environment? High trust environment? Trust is kind of a currency. It allows you to innovate. It allows you to take risk. It allows you not to get bogged down in bureaucracy. It allows you not to get bogged down in regulation. A high-trust environment unlocks a lot of possibility and opportunity. And so if we teach our students to adhere to a code or to a set of principles that helps them trust each other and helps them learn and understand what it means to be trustworthy, then they are. And that becomes really fundamental to who they are as people and as leaders in the wider world. That has a multiplier effect, and I think that's one of the reasons why we're able to have such an impact.

Ken White

Second pillar is serving as a role model for principled achievement. Is that something you think about?

AnnaMaria DeSalva

I'll be honest with you. I don't think that actively about being a role model. I try to live up to my own personal code and to the values that I have about what I'm doing with my life and how I'm doing it. And if that means that I become a role model, then great. But I think, like most of us, I'm always focused on what I can improve. When I do that examination of self, I always see a lot of room for improvement. Right. So I'm not thinking too much about being a role model. I'm thinking about how I can be a better human being and a more effective leader. And I always see a distance to travel still.

Ken White

That's great.

AnnaMaria DeSalva

100% true.

Ken White

I think most people we would consider successful think that way. Right. That's what drives people. Promoting diversity of thought. How important is that in your role?

AnnaMaria DeSalva

Extremely important. And as you know, as CEO of Hill+Knowlton. Hill+Knowlton is an almost 100-year-old strategic communications consultancy. It was one of the originators of the category. So the whole exercise of helping companies or other types of organizations connect to their stakeholders effectively, by definition, that entire endeavor has to reflect a diversity of perspectives. Like, if we don't have a diversity of perspectives, we can't produce the product, and we can't succeed. And especially in today's world, it's so multistakeholder. There's such a richness and layers and layers of stakeholder needs and expectations. And so we have to have a very diverse workforce at Hill+Knowlton. And we as leaders have to set a tone that we want lots of diversity, cognitive diversity, diversity of thought, diversity of action, diversity of background, diversity of beliefs. And by the way, I mean, we it's urgent for our business, and we still don't always hit the mark. You know, we have to work as hard as everybody else to ensure that we are as diverse as we need to be.

Ken White

Final pillar is demonstrating ethical, compassionate behavior. Tough to do when there's a lot going on and goals to be met. Do you think much about that?

AnnaMaria DeSalva

Yeah, here's the thing about ethics. It does go back to trust. It does go back to the point I made earlier, that if you want to go fast and you want to have a big impact, and you want to do well, and you want to have alignment and support, it's so much easier if your currency is trust and if that's supported by ethical behavior and a standard for ethics. And with respect to compassion, to me, that links very much to talent. And I'm in a talent business, and talent is people are our product in my business. And so you're always scouting talent, sourcing talent, mining the talent, elevating the talent. And there's a commercial reason to do that, but it's an incredibly human endeavor. And really what you're doing is you're putting your arms around people, and you're putting your arms around their abilities and their limitations and their blind spots and their towering strengths, and you're saying, you know what? I love all of it, and I'm going to help all of it, and together we're going to be bigger and better than we could be individually. So I think I benefited from compassionate people who are very compassionate with me and very generous leaders. And also, I think communicators have to be compassionate. I think one of the great communicators, Mike McCurry, who was actually President Clinton's press secretary for a time. And I remember working with Mike on a few things, and Mike saying, talking to me about how great communicators are compassionate, that they have compassion for their audiences, and they want their audiences to understand and both

tonally and in terms of what they say and how they say it, that if they're guided by that compassion, they are so much more successful. So, anyway, perhaps I digress, but same zip code.

Ken White

They're other-centric, right? Yeah, very much so. The award is principled achievement. Achievement is part of it, not just principled. What drives you? What gets you fired up and going?

AnnaMaria DeSalva

Wow, well, I want to make a difference. I want to have lived a life that, you know, where I delivered, you know, and I delivered, and I helped get important things done, and I left everything on the field like, that's the life I want to live. And, you know, so that does for me, that translates a little bit to definitely to a sense of achievement and wanting to get big things done and to help transform the things that need to be transformed. And I suppose sometimes that also comes across as like having points on the board or having a competitive spirit. I compete with myself. That was something that my friends used to say to me quite a bit when I was younger. They would say, you know, AnnaMaria. You don't really compete with other people. You compete with yourself. And that is really true. And by the way, I think that's a William & Mary trait. But equally, I like to win, and I think there's really nothing wrong with that. I know that we don't like people to over-index into a fixation on winning, but I like to perform, and hopefully, that shows up in our results.

Ken White

That's our conversation with AnnaMaria de Salva. And that's it for this episode of Leadership & Business. By the way, today's episode is our 200th in the Leadership & Business podcast series launched back in 2015. Each month, we post two episodes that feature conversations with CEOs, leaders, and subject matter experts. As we celebrate episode 200, we'd like to thank all of our terrific guests who have been kind enough to share their time and expertise with us. Also, a big thank you to Victoria Trujillo at the Raymond A. Mason School of Business, to our editor Ben Lawrence, and our colleagues at Freedom Podcasting. Most importantly, thanks to you for listening and for sharing your comments and suggestions with us. I'm Ken White, wishing you a safe, happy, and productive week ahead.

Female Voice

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 for listening to Leadership & Business.