



Raymond A. Mason School of Business

WILLIAM & MARY

LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS PODCAST

EPISODE 54: BOB WILLIAMS – PILLARS OF LEADERSHIP

Ken White

From the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. This is Leadership & Business. The weekly 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. Leadership. For some professionals, that's the goal to serve as a leader who makes an impact on the world, the organization, its people, and its customers. Well, a couple of weeks ago, a number of leaders and aspiring leaders graduated from the Flex MBA program at William & Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of Business. Bob Williams, a clinical lecturer at the school, was asked to speak to the graduates at the diploma ceremony. His comments resonated with those in attendance, and afterward, many of those individuals encouraged us to invite Bob to be on the podcast to share with you what he shared with the new graduates. Williams brings a wealth of experience to the Mason School. A graduate of the Wharton School's MBA program, he spent the bulk of his career with DuPont serving in a number of roles, including Vice President for Marketing and Communications. He teaches leadership and other classes at the Mason School and at the school's Center for Corporate Education. Here's our conversation on leadership with Bob Williams.

Ken White

Bob, thank you for taking the time to join us. We're asking you at the at the probably the worst time of the school year, right? Classes just began, and a exciting time of the year, though.

Bob Williams

It is very exciting it's great to see the students come back. It really enlivens the building and really gives the faculty some really meaningful work to do to spend some time with these folks, which is what we're all about.

Ken White

Yeah, it sure does. And actually, right before the students arrive, there was a ceremony for the graduates in the Flex MBA program, which is a working professionals program and you

talked to that group, and you shared some thoughts, and after that, after you did that a number of people said boy you've got to ask Bob to be on the podcast to share that with our listeners, and you had a few points that you shared about success and about leadership. And so that's why we're here to ask you to share those with us today, and one of the first you shared with the group was principled achievement. Can you tell us about that?

Bob Williams

Yeah, I spent some time thinking about preparation for what I wanted to say to the students in the Flex program. And Larry Pulley, our dean, spends a great deal of time emphasizing those two words in commencement addresses to our full-time and to our undergraduates that are graduating, and I thought that'd be very appropriate to share with the flex students because I'm not sure that the ones that we were talking to that particular day when I was speaking at heard it. So I thought I would make some sense, and the power of it, I thought, was that the two words at least get they're like thought starters. They get you going into other words and other questions. So they're like catalysts. They make you think about other things because you take those two words apart, and it makes you ask questions. And so what I shared with the students was some of those questions included things like what do you believe. What do you believe about other people? Do you think they're basically good? Do you think they have some bad tendencies, and if so, whatever you think will really make a big difference in terms of how you behave with them and how they behave with you? Another one might be what principles do you really live by. I mean, what makes your attitudes develop, which will change your behavior? So you need to spend some time on that. What do I want to be remembered for was the third one? You work hard, spend a great deal of your time every day at work influencing the actions of other people. When you step back at the end of the day or at the end of your work life, what do you really want to be remembered for? We don't spend a time on those kinds of questions.

Ken White

Sure.

Bob Williams

How will the decisions that I make as a leader in a business impact other people and, most importantly, if you think about the last one? Are those decisions that I'm making because some of them can be very difficult? Some of them are really rewarding, but the difficult ones that you have to ask is, am I being fair? And so it all started with principled achievement.

Ken White

Right.

Bob Williams

And so you start taking those things apart, and that's really raising a lot of other issues.

Ken White

In your interaction with executives and leaders, are they thinking about leading a life of principled achievement? Is it in the back of their mind? Where is it in your interactions?

Bob Williams

Well, I would sure hope they are. I mean, in my experience, the answer's yes. But you know what makes it really, I think, relevant today is you can't pick up the Wall Street Journal and not see somebody that got sideways with the regulatory authorities or who tried to cut corners in their product or in their relationships with Wall Street. It becomes an ethical issue. So I think principled achievement lives. It's never going to go away. People that are leaders have a great deal of power. How they exercise that should be with the highest ethical standards, not just because it's right but because it'll keep you out of a world of hurt.

Ken White

Yeah.

Bob Williams

You know, I actually, Ken, I think about the Olympics that just played out here in Ryan Lochte, the swimmer.

Ken White

Right.

Bob Williams

Second only in capability and talent to Michael Phelps.

Ken White

Incredible.

Bob Williams

Here's a guy that had all the package. I mean, he was a good-looking guy, an accomplished athlete, personable, and with one ethical misstep, it all blew up. He did not live principled achievement. He did not think before he acted.

Ken White

Right.

Bob Williams

All those questions make you think before you act, and that's the power of it, I think.

Ken White

Excellent. Yeah. And it really resonated. You could see as you were talking to the to the group they were nodding. They were actually whispering to one another from time to time. So it's certainly a topic that was resonating. You talked about leadership in general, and you gave some guidance in terms of leadership and how to approach that because people with MBAs will lead if they're not already leading.

Bob Williams

Yeah, I think that's true. I mean, we're actually teaching them that at this school. I mean, one of the powerful things I think that we accomplish that you hear from students that come back to us after they're out in the world of work is, boy, there were times when I thought this leadership thing was a little soft. I was really interested in the quantitative analysis of everything, and I was really taught well about that at school. But when you touched on subjects that were seemingly soft, like leadership issues, I wasn't sure they were relevant. Boy, they're relevant. Interpersonal skills count. Communication skills count. Sensitivity counts.

Ken White

When you talked about leadership, you shared a story about Elvis Presley, of all people.

Bob Williams

Yeah, that was really had an effect on me. I'm a fan obviously of his music and sometimes not necessarily of him, but my wife and I toured Graceland, and as we walked around and as you go on this tour at Graceland, you inevitably walked by his office and what caught my eye was a plaque. It was actually a framed ad that was on his wall in his office, and it was called the penalty of leadership. Now I couldn't read it on the tour. So I went home, and I googled it, and I shared it with the students.

Ken White

And this is a newspaper or magazine ad?

Bob Williams

It's an ad for Cadillac motor cars is considered by many in the marketing business that it probably one of the best pieces of copy ever written, but it's all about the penalty of leadership and the fact that you get all these trappings that go along with leadership all the splendor and all the perks, but there are times when you're very isolated especially if you're trying to change things because people just by their nature resist getting out of that

comfort zone. You know what? It reminds me of what I was doing my classes. I can close my eyes after about three sessions in my classes and tell you who's sitting where. They all return to the same seat. And it's they don't want to move out of that comfort zone. Well, Presley, I think, identified that this ad had a great impact on him because he was a change agent.

Ken White

Right.

Bob Williams

You know he was the devil to a lot of people that he had those swinging hips and the ducktail and the peg pants, and by golly, he's leading our kids to hell.

Ken White

That's right.

Bob Williams

And yet what he accomplished is obviously in the history of what's happened to music and musicology.

Ken White

And he knew it. He saw himself as a leader, and interesting that he finds an ad for a car and likes the way it talks about leadership.

Bob Williams

Yeah, and here's one of the things I shared with the students, and it's just an excerpt. Quote long after greater good work has been done, those who are disappointed or envious continue to cry out that it can't be done. The old world continues to protest or continued to protest when Fulton could never build a steamboat. While the new world flocked to the river banks to see his boat steam by the leader is assailed because he is a leader, and the effort to equal him or her is merely added proof of that leadership close quote. Change isn't easy. Leaders have to make decisions. Decisions are choices. It's not unanimity. The result is going to be that you're going to have to persevere. You're going to have to have the grit that Angela Duckworth talks about in her latest book. That's one of the key characteristics of great leaders is they persevere and have grit, and so I shared that with the students.

Ken White

We'll continue our discussion on leadership with Bob Williams in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the College of William

& Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of Business. The Center for Corporate Education can help you get to the next level with its certificate in business management program coming up in late October. It's a five-day program for the professional who lacks an MBA, has been out of the classroom for some time, or wants to improve on a critical business and leadership skills. Each day is devoted to one topic, including communication, leadership, strategy, managerial accounting, and organizational effectiveness. For more information on the certificate in business management program, visit our website at wmleadership.com. Now back to our conversation with Bob Williams on leadership.

Ken White

Tough gig. I mean, there is a lot of responsibility, and it's not always fun. Why do people pursue it, and why are some so good at it in your experience?

Bob Williams

I think there's a couple reasons, some of which are wrong. One of them that I don't think is necessarily the right reason is money. I mean, they're going after the salary, and they're going after the power in the position, and sometimes they, and that's nice but they sometimes forget that there's a great deal of responsibility that goes along with that. They're responsible for other people's lives. They're responsible for taking companies into the future, which means that's the unknowable. The thing that I think leaders have to have is an overriding drive if they want those positions is they have to get a kick out of watching people develop under them because, whether they like it or not, they are identified as role models. That comes with a great deal of responsibility. What you're driving in the MBA program is really important when you say own it. You talk about appearance, that that's really a part of it. You talk about three other things which you're more familiar with.

Ken White

Initiative.

Bob Williams

Initiative.

Ken White

Substance. Communication.

Bob Williams

Those are all important.

Ken White

Very much so.

Bob Williams

And you know what. You can't go to a balance sheet or income statement, or cash flow statement and find those. But when you're in a leadership position, everybody that reports to you knows how to do all those things. What they look to you for is ethics. They want to follow you into the future, and you're their role model on how you get there. But it isn't easy. You have to make some decisions sometimes that aren't so good. It's a penalty of leadership.

Ken White

You told a story about a speech you had heard years ago about balance in terms of life and leadership. Can you share that with us?

Bob Williams

Yeah. And I really don't remember where I heard it, but I do remember who said it was the CEO of Coca-Cola at the time that was giving a commencement address. And it really rang true with me, so I shared that with the Flex MBAs. His comment was that you should think of life as having to juggle five balls and those five balls have names. One is work. One is family. One is health. A fourth is friends. And the fifth is spirit. And the point that I thought was really telling that he made was, you know, you should think of work as being a rubber ball. If you dropped something at work, i.e., something doesn't go exactly right. It bounces, but if you drop things like family, health, friends, and spirit, then what you really have are balls that are made of glass there. And when they drop, they are marked in some way or, worse yet, shattered. You don't put them back together, so it kind of helps you with your priorities. If you think about the five balls and what's important, which I think we probably, regardless of what level you are in a business, you need to revisit that. Why am I doing what I'm doing, and am I doing the most important things, and when things go bad, what's rubber and what's glass?

Ken White

Right. And what's interesting is that's not new. I mean, you had heard that years ago, and yet we're talking so much about work-life balance now. It's not new. It's just a different term.

Bob Williams

No, and it's getting more intense because a lot of families, both parents, work. It's really incredibly important. I think that we refocus on why we do what we do, and those five balls help you do that.

Ken White

And in your talk, you finally wound up with and summarize with seven principles, and you said you know, consider these, think about these. It'll help you stay on the right path. What were some of those?

Bob Williams

Well, the thing that got me about the seven principles is that they integrate principled achievement, and they make the five balls work. So they are kind of like a recipe that causes them all to come together as ingredients. And the principles I talked about these. One, don't take for granted those people and things that are closest to your heart. Without them, life loses a lot of meaning. Second, don't spend all your time living in the past or even in the future, for that matter. The past is done, and the future is really unknowable full of assumptions. Live in the present you'll enjoy every day. Third, don't give up while you still have something to give. Nothing's really over until you stop trying. And I talked about taking reasonable risks. The idea that risk that isn't crazy but reasonable is really what helps make you brave and courageous because it pushes your envelope a little bit. You're going to places where there is risk and uncertainty, but it doesn't frighten you. I talked about knowledge being weightless has some to do with, I guess, adult education and continuing to add to your inventory of learning because knowledge is weightless. It's easy to carry, and I made the point never stop learning because it is easy to carry and it just makes you better.

Ken White

Yeah, and it's so much easier to learn today.

Bob Williams

Oh yeah.

Ken White

Books on tape, podcasts, web.

Bob Williams

Yeah, everything's changing. I mean, nothing lasts very long. So you better stay current, or you're gonna be in a world of hurt.

Ken White

Yeah, and enjoy staying current.

Bob Williams

Yeah, exactly. Have a good time with it. I made two other points. You shouldn't use time carelessly. Time is finite. We all have 24/7. I often tell my students you know if you if your idle is Bill Gates or Warren Buffet. Think about it this way how do they use their 24/7 relative to the way you use it? Because they've got that same resource no more or no less, but the thing that you really want to focus on as students is don't waste your time. And then I quoted Steve Jobs in the address, and I said quote live every day as if it was your last because one of these days you know you're gonna be right close quote.

Ken White

That's right.

Bob Williams

And then, finally, it was about worry because people are worrying about a lot of things, and the comment I made in closing this portion of what I had to say to them was worry is like a rocking chair, really. It gives you something to do, but it really doesn't do anything in terms of moving it forward. So if you use those principles and combine them with principled achievement and the five balls, you least have a recipe or a roadmap for how you can make all this stuff work.

Ken White

That's our conversation with Bob Williams, and that's our podcast for this week. Leadership & Business is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the College of William & Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of Business. The Center for Corporate Education can help you, and your organization get to the next level with a business and leadership development program that specifically fits your needs. If you're interested in learning more about the opportunities at the Center for Corporate Education for you or your organization, visit our website at wmleadership.com. Thanks to our guest this week Bob Williams and thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White. Until next time have a safe, happy, and productive week.