



Raymond A. Mason School of Business

WILLIAM & MARY

LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS PODCAST

EPISODE 121: BETH COMSTOCK – COURAGE, CREATIVITY AND CHANGE

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. According to Forbes, she's one of the World's 100 Most Powerful Women. She's been named to the 100 most influential CMOs list, and she's a member of PR Week's top 20 most influential communicators. She's Beth Comstock, most known for almost three decades at GE, where she served as chief marketing officer and later vice-chair of innovation. Her latest project is her award-winning book, "Imagine It Forward: Courage, Creativity, and the Power of Change. Comstock visited William & Mary in late August, where she was the featured speaker at the school's annual opening convocation. During her visit to campus, she sat down with us to discuss effective communication, leadership, and the power of change. Here's our conversation with Beth Comstock.

Ken White

Beth, thank you so much for taking time to join us. It's absolutely great to have you here.

Beth Comstock

So happy to be here. Thank you.

Ken White

And you'll be speaking later today

Beth Comstock

Right.

Ken White

To the university.

Beth Comstock

The convocation.

Ken White

That's quite an honor.

Beth Comstock

Oh, it is, I'm so delighted I'm thrilled.

Ken White

And I know you as a communicator you always practice you always prepare that's the way to do it. I'm assuming you're really ready. Looking forward to today.

Beth Comstock

I am. I mean, I do practice I'll be practicing right up until the minute I get up there, but there comes a point when you just have to say okay I've done all I can do and you have to just be there and enjoy it.

Ken White

Yeah.

Beth Comstock

And I once I learned through a lot of bad speaking, I used to try to race the clock, and it was more like I was speaking to the clock, not the audience. And just with enough practice, you just try to connect with people there; in this case, it's particularly poignant because I was in the audience once too.

Ken White

Yeah.

Beth Comstock

And so to remember back and say well what would I have wanted to have heard when I was 18 19 20. So I it really resonates with me this time.

Ken White

That's great. And I've been checking the weather; it's going to be a beautiful afternoon.

Beth Comstock

Yeah, I'm looking forward to it.

Ken White

We're gonna have a great day. So when we started the podcast, we already gave you your intro, and we told our listeners about your background, and so forth. So they know who you are and where you're from. When you were growing up, did family and friends, would they have ever seen you doing this having the career you had?

Beth Comstock

No, I my family would they're as surprised as I am that I ended up in business and doing having the longevity I had in big business. I grew up a small-town Virginia girl. I came to William & Mary because I wanted to go to medical school, so I majored in biology. I left here because I thought I wanted to be a science journalist. So I had already deviated, and the quest for journalism is what got me into media. And then that communications marketing and then I got into business so it was a very unexpected path and no one's more surprised than my family my funny you were talking earlier about speaking my dad will sometimes say I can't believe that's you up there talking he's heard me giving speeches, and I'm shy. I'm an introvert, and that's something I've really had to work at. So I think forget what I have done in a career my dad just can't believe I can stand up and talk to groups of people. He just doesn't never thought that would be me.

Ken White

It's always good to impress Mom and Dad.

Beth Comstock

Yeah, exactly.

Ken White

That's always a good thing. So you are known as a high-quality communicator. There are textbooks we use you're in them and videos you've done with G.E. and other jobs you're in there. What's your approach to communication and its importance in someone's career?

Beth Comstock

Well, I've been at it for a while. I spent the early part of my career as a storyteller communicator in some ways I think I have always been that. Part of it is just practice early on in my career I actually went out and found people to give me coaching advice. To help me be a better speaker. To help me get over my fear of speaking my public speaking fear. I mean, I still get it tonight beforehand even though I'm ready I'll have a pit in my stomach. And so you what you have to do is just practice practice like anything practice practice, and you need to get feedback. I'm big on feedback loops, so you need people that say ugh ugh you know you do ugh all the time stop it stop it. You're scratching your elbow every time you say that word why. Like you look dumb.

Ken White

Right.

Beth Comstock

And you have to be willing to fix that.

Ken White

Yeah.

Beth Comstock

So I think it's those two things and the last thing I'd say is communication is the connection. If you're up there to get a grade, you know I you can't get up there and say okay I want them to think I'm better than Oprah. I want to be you know better than Michelle Obama. That's not going to why are you here and why are you here. You have a message you want to make a connection. If you're that sincere and you're that honest, you're going to do well.

Ken White

Throughout your career, you in the things I've seen storytelling is a big piece of communication. How do you approach stories? Why are they a part of when you communicate with people?

Beth Comstock

I'm glad you raised that. I think story is almost everything we tend to think stories what we do at the end. I saw this a lot in business from a communications and from also from a marketing perspective, it's like I've got this great product now get me a story. I've got this great product now go tell people and launch it. Well, know stories; it's your strategy. So to me, I came to realize story is strategy. It's wherever you come from. What problem are you solving? Where are you going? And that works for a person, for a product, for a business. And I often would test my colleagues when they'd come in from a business strategy perspective, and they'd say we have this great idea I'd say okay let's write it up as a story often we'd write it as a press release.

Ken White

Sure.

Beth Comstock

Okay. And if it held up okay, you got something.

Ken White

Yeah.

Beth Comstock

And if not, if you can't tell a story about it. I found this with entrepreneurs. One of the questions I love to ask entrepreneurs is, what's your story. Weirds people out. What do you mean what's my story?

Ken White

Right.

Beth Comstock

What's your story?

Ken White

Yeah.

Beth Comstock

What I'm looking for is what's your passion? Where did you come from? Why did you have this idea? Why should I buy from you? Invest in you. So I think those are the things that story answer for people it's a way to make a connection. We don't remember facts as much as we remember an authentic story.

Ken White

And today we have to be so efficient when we tell stories we don't have a lot of time.

Beth Comstock

Yeah, we don't.

Ken White

So we've got to hook them, you know pretty quickly.

Beth Comstock

Yeah, I think social media is a good training ground for that I often challenge people you know luckily Twitter is going up to two hundred and forty six characters now.

Ken White

Right.

Beth Comstock

So if you can, you know it's just like can you put a headline in a tweet? Can you try to tell your story in as few words as possible there was that I don't know if it's true? Ernest Hemingway supposedly wrote you know six six-word story baby shoes never worn. Right. I think those things are really powerful to get you to focus and be as dramatic and as succinct as possible.

Ken White

Yeah. When we teach it here, we encourage our students to hook them hook that audience as quickly as possible.

Beth Comstock

How do you do that? What's what. How do you do that?

Ken White

Yeah great. That's great. You you've had a phenomenal career at GE, and this is probably a terribly unfair question a highlight that stands out something you're particularly proud of that you've done with the team with the organization.

Beth Comstock

I guess I'd say that answered in two ways one and just I'm particularly proud to have worked with some amazing people. I mean and it's not the big famous CEOs or whatever it was the teams I was part of. And we had a commitment, especially toward the end the teams I worked with in innovation in marketing we had a commitment with each other we said we're gonna do our best work. We don't know how long we're gonna be together. We're gonna take risks. We're gonna try things we're gonna be first at things, and so we were really proud of the work. Did it all work? No. But I wish everyone could have that experience. And my second thing would be I think being part of a cleantech revolution in a very established company we launched what we called eco imagination. It was very forward-thinking at the time. Now not so, but it was unexpected, and it was meaningful, and I'm really proud that we persevered with that.

Ken White

We'll continue our discussion with Beth Comstock 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 is hosting the Certificate in Business Management program from October 21st to the 25th here at William & Mary. The five-day program devotes each day to one important business topic, including communication, managerial accounting, business strategy, operational effectiveness, and leadership. The programs taught by William &

Mary's MBA faculty the faculty ranked number one in the nation by Bloomberg Businessweek. To learn more, visit our website at wmleadership.com. Now back to our conversation with the author of "Imagine It Forward: Courage, Creativity, and the Power of Change," Beth Comstock.

Ken White

Your book. Why did you write it?

Beth Comstock

I wrote it because I. My husband said that he thought I was always going to write one. I wasn't so sure, but I just had a passion to share some experiences. I taught a class at GE at our learning institute, and every month, I'd go, and I love this class. But I always people sort of there was this fear in people afraid to take a risk afraid to try something they wanted to know like where did how did I. What did you do when you encountered this, and I realized that people especially early to middle of their career often the middle of the company a lot of pressure and they need some encouragement they need some permission granting and so to me it was to say hey let me just take everything I learned and try to share with you the failures I could have called it fail forward. But I called it imagine forward because I'm not sure fail forward was a good marketing campaign.

Ken White

Right.

Beth Comstock

But that's what I tried to do to say you know what you kind of blunder your way to success. And let me share with you how I managed that.

Ken White

And you also talk about change.

Beth Comstock

Yeah.

Ken White

In the book, why does it seem that so many people are reluctant to change?

Beth Comstock

Well, one change is just happening so much in every corner. I mean one of the lines I love that in the book that I took from a colleague just this notion that the world will never be slower than it is right now. Right. Like we're sharing this moment, can I. Well,

congratulations. Right. We're sharing this moment of change, and that's daunting. Yet we're adaptation machines we're human we're meant to be adaptable, but we want to control change, and we don't. And so that was another part of writing the book was trying to say you've got to get to see change early you're not going to change often, but you can at least learn about it understand it get good at pattern recognition open yourself up to discover those are the things I feel really proud of. Making part of my career practice if you will.

Ken White

Yeah, I mean, you're talking about your experience you're changing in a huge organization. How do you even get your arms around that and approach? We've got to change the way we're doing business with so many people.

Beth Comstock

Well, what you don't do is you just don't say dictate. We are all going to change, and everybody is gonna do it this way. Those things don't work. You know command and control hierarchy that's going that's gone. What has to happen is people have to see the problem that's trying to be solved. They have to have time to understand it. So I spent a lot of time trying to connect the inside of my company to the outside where the world was changing. Bringing in outsiders what I would call sparks who could spark a different perspective doing things I love called Field Trip Fridays where you go out take an afternoon with a team to go out and find something weird discovers a startup. Go talk to a professor learn things that are different and try to do that together. So I think that's part of what companies need to do is one tell a story. This is why the world is changing and why we're going to be impacted. Our customers are going to be impacted. Now let's figure out what that means for us, and let's give ourselves room to figure it out together.

Ken White

You have five obstacles that you had to overcome when creating change in the book, and I thought I'd mentioned each of the five, and if you could tell us a little, but one was self permission change begins with you. What does that mean?

Beth Comstock

It's just a mindset shift. You know there's always an excuse of why I can't do something my boss won't let me. I don't have enough money. The board will never go for that the list is on, and those may be true. But what I learned and I know from my own experience those are alibis we're afraid. So you just gotta give yourself permission to take a risk on something. Okay, maybe you don't need to pitch the board your idea the first time, but hey go pitch it to someone down the hall.

Ken White

Right.

Beth Comstock

Maybe they'll like it and work with you on it.

Ken White

Discovery, embracing, inquiry, and curiosity.

Beth Comstock

This, to me, is everything. I just I think you have to open up your aperture you have to get out in the world where change is happening to what we talked about, and you're getting good at pattern recognition. The first time you see something, you start to say that's interesting. Second time you ask is that a coincidence and third time I just declare it's a trend. I mean, that's how we got into cleantech when I was at NBC how we saw streaming video before others saw it. These are what companies need to do, and I think individuals need to do. Where's the future going well get out and find things that are kind of weird. Ask yourself what's going on there.

Ken White

And one two three not wait too long.

Beth Comstock

Right. Right. I mean a good exercise is to think back maybe five or 10 years ago to something that seemed crazy that's now commonplace. I mean, this is more than five years. But getting in the car with a stranger.

Ken White

Right. Right.

Beth Comstock

You know it's Uber and Lyft and everything right like at once that seemed really absurd. Now it's commonplace.

Ken White

Yeah.

Beth Comstock

What's happening today that you're like, oh my God, that's so crazy. Blockchain Bitcoin is something that smart people are talking about. There are a lot of these things out there. It's your job. I think to keep pace with change to discover these things.

Ken White

Agitated inquiry facing the tension head-on.

Beth Comstock

Yeah, this is a fancy phrase for conflict. It's the ability to beat up your ideas just because you see something and think you have a better idea doesn't mean it's good. And so it's inviting in people who are going to give you feedback beat up ideas hiring people on your teams for innovation who don't always agree who have different perspectives. So it's about conflict

Ken White

story craft developing a powerful narrative. So the organization understands.

Beth Comstock

Yeah, and I think it's to what we said story is so critical. Where are you going? You can. I once worked with a CEO who said, you know, like why are you here. Because we're gonna get 10 percent growth. And I was like okay. You mean everybody's waking up every day saying let's go get 10 percent growth. No. Why are they here? What is there? And you hear a lot today on purpose. I mean, it's much more narrative. It's much more here's where we're going in the world. Here's the problem we're trying to solve. Here's why we're uniquely qualified. And so I think story is just you remember we talked earlier. You remember stories better than you remember pure facts.

Ken White

And you start the story internally and then go externally? Does that matter?

Beth Comstock

I don't know that it matters, but I think the story has to resonate internally, or it's never going to resonate anywhere. And I learned that from marketing too often people just give me a slogan first off I think slogans are kind of over now anyway because it's so cluttered, but internally it has to resonate and it has to be simple enough that people can repeat it and repeat it and repeat it. And so when customers hear they can say hey, is this really what it's like to work here. Oh my gosh yeah. That's we were all about imagination.

Ken White

Yeah.

Beth Comstock

We're all about speed to delivery, whatever your unique value and purpose is. So people are able to articulate it. Can they tell the story?

Ken White

And we know how powerful and influential employees are now.

Beth Comstock

Yeah.

Ken White

They're out banging the drum customers listen.

Beth Comstock

Yeah. And the opposite. If it's not true they're going to they're gonna rat you out.

Ken White

Creating a new operating system develop leaders who will embrace and inspire the vision.

Beth Comstock

Well, I think this is really just getting to action and that that's a systematic approach and that you've got to create mechanisms for experimentation. You have to fund and protect new ideas and the people who have them. I think this notion of failure is a big concept that we don't talk enough about everybody's like you fail fast fail small like it's really cute it's hard work do you allow time to do that. Feedback loops giving people enough feedback. So there are things you can do at a team level at an organizational level to make sure you can get there faster, and that's mostly what I'm talking about there.

Ken White

If there was one piece of the book that you want, if they could don't, people could only read one section, one area one theme one take away. What is that?

Beth Comstock

It's to make room for discovery. I just think we we're I'm worried about it right now. I'm worried about it in the world. We're in a world of productivity optimization data always more data we have so much going on we can't get through the day. And here I am saying no, but you have to pick your head up and make room to figure out what's next and new. I

argue how can you not because one day it's going to smack you in the face and you're going to be way behind the game. So I really believe you got to open your eyes open your aperture get out see patterns find things that are weird start to embrace that and make it. It can only take 10 percent of your time it does. I guarantee you if you go through your calendar today, you will find at least 10 percent of your time is committed to things you already know how to do in meetings you don't really need to be a part of. You can delegate that to someone else. You're afraid you're gonna miss out a lot of fear-based activity for yourself. Get out figure out where change is happening, and you can get it at least get a competitive edge. I'm absolutely convinced this notion of speed to learning is a create is a competitive advantage for individuals and companies, and you only do that by getting out learning and trying things.

Ken White

That's our conversation with Beth Comstock. 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 is offering the Certificate in Business Management program this fall. It's taught by the William & Mary MBA faculty ranked number one in the nation by Bloomberg Businessweek. For information regarding that and our other programs, this fall visit our website at wmleadership.com. Finally, we'd love to hear from you regarding our 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 Beth Comstock. And thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White. Until next time have a safe, happy, and productive week.