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LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS PODCAST

EPISODE 136: BOB WILLIAMS & BRIAN BAINES – CIVIL UNREST & THE CEO

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. It's been over a week since the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis. Protests and demonstrations have taken place in cities across America. Business leaders and CEOs have responded in different ways. For example, the CEOs of Target, Wal-Mart, Microsoft, Lowes, Apple, and Google were among the first CEOs to speak out following the nationwide civil unrest. Other CEOs have remained silent. How should business leaders and CEOs respond? What roles and responsibilities does the CEO have in this case? Well, we asked two of our colleagues from the William & Mary School of Business to share their expertise. First, Professor Bob Williams. He's a former longtime business leader and executive who now teaches leadership. Second Brian Baines, he's the business school's senior human resources partner, the chief H.R. officer. They join us to share their experience and thoughts regarding the ways CEOs should respond in difficult times. Here's our conversation with Bob Williams and Brian Baines.

Ken White

Bob, Brian, thanks so much for sharing your time. We appreciate you being on the podcast. The first time for Brian but Bob, you've been on before, but thanks. Thanks very much to both of you for sharing your time and expertise with us today.

Brian Baines

Happy to be here.

Bob Williams

Glad to be here.

Ken White

Bob, you spent a number of years in the C Suite, and when you started in business, CEOs weren't really expected to address issues outside of the business. Am I right in that? And has that changed over the past few years?

Bob Williams

Yeah, I think it changed a lot. And I think you've characterized it well. I think the thing that's really been changed now with this advance, which is a blending of technology. You know, when guys like Jobs walked out onto the San Francisco stage, and I think it was 2009 showed that the iPhone really what he was telling is that everybody knows everything at the same time. And that was not characteristic of corporations and regardless of your size prior to that. But now, with the movement of just your thumbs, you blow away any kind of insular material that might protect CEOs or protect senior management people from what is basically the truth of the situation. And that changed the role, the role of the C Suite, I think.

Ken White

Polarizing topics like the one we've been experiencing for the last eight, ten days. Should a CEO step up and say something to customers and employees and the general public, Bob?

Bob Williams

Yeah, I think they're obligated to do that. I think if and of course, I need to be very open about my position on something like that. I say that, but I think there's a lot of good things that are going on, and this is going to continue into this movement of diversity and inclusion. It is dramatic when you look at these crowds, for example, the death of this young man. Watch the MSNBC or FOX or CNN, and you see African-Americans. You see, Asians use the occasion. You see them supporting one another. This is really powerful and very important. And I don't think CEOs can do that because it's a reflection not to comment on that, because it is a reflection of their employee base in many cases. This is really important; we are in a reflection point on this.

Ken White

Brian, as the chief human resource manager. Do you want your CEO to speak up and speak out now?

Brian Baines

Definitely. We have a lot of employees and customers who are interested in knowing where a company stands in support and solidarity with people who are being affected by this. We have black and brown people, as the subject is right now, who are hurting, and

they're not okay. We're going to work every day, and we're keeping on a smile because that's what's expected. But we need to know that our company stands behind us.

Ken White

Is there anything specific other than what you just said that a CEO can be saying right now is something as simple as we are thinking about you, we are behind you. Is that enough?

Brian Baines

Well, I think it needs to be a stronger message. I think that message needs to be it's not tolerated that, you know, we, in effect, are appreciative of the efforts of all people, but are brown people, are black people, those who are being affected at this moment. We stand behind them, and we support their efforts to seek equality and to seek, you know, basic human rights.

Bob Williams

Can I jump in on that?

Ken White

Yeah, please.

Bob Williams

I couldn't agree more with Brian's comment on that. I would add to this, you know, you could write some of the box and some of the reactions that many CEOs now go to the broadcast media with and television media and other forms of communication. I mean, you could write it easily because so many of them have said, you know, this is regrettable, this should not happen, et cetera, et cetera. But I don't think that's enough. I think what the CEOs of the senior management. So these companies have to do is say, look, I'm going to audit my task force. I've got to sit down with my H.R. director. I'm going to find out what our diversity quotient looks like. I'm got to find out how we decide on promoting people. I'm going to look at pay. I'm going to this whole movement, Ken, I think, is overlapping with this whole issue of diversity and inclusion. And CEOs and senior-level people have to stand up and say; I'm taking it further than just telling you. And they're right in saying this. I think you have to show empathy. But they have to go further than that now. People are looking for action. They're not looking for just a gauze to cover something like this. So I think CEOs need to really take a look with their human resource people and say, look, are we living to what the words are here? And if we're not, let's change things.

Ken White

It has been interesting to read through that because some are not saying anything. I'm sorry, Brian. Go ahead. What were you thinking?

Brian Baines

Yeah, I was going to agree with Bob there. You know, they need to look at the dynamics of their organizations and put together teams that are directly responsible for looking at, as Bob mentioned, diversity and inclusion and how the culture affects the people in your organization and start to make changes because, yes, the words are hollow without the action, the words are what are needed upfront. But then we have to effectively put a plan together and do things to make a change.

Ken White

And many of the words are, you know, it's frustrating to read some of them. Some of them are saying nothing. They're just statements. And you feel like saying, oh, you just wanted to be on social media. You just wanted to be included where there's others who are McDonald's, for example, throwing money. They're saying here; we're actually going to take money we're going to work with the NAACP, we're going to make donations here. We're moving things forward. What do you say, Bob, to that CEO who is a little reluctant to say something concrete?

Bob Williams

I think writing checks is good. I think cash is good. It's what the engine is that's going to allow you to make this big change maybe a little faster because you have the resources that you need. But I don't think that's enough either. I think you have to its behavior. We're talking about behavior here. I think that what we're going to have to look at is the culture of these companies. We've done all the right things in quotes. We've done all the right things. But have we actually lived our words? And that's a cultural thing, the way we do things around here if you use that as the definition of a culture is what has to be investigated, audited, looked at and changed if it's necessary to change.

Ken White

Some of those changes take time. And in a social media world, people are looking for quick results. So how do you communicate that Bob, that this is a longer-term strategy as opposed to I can give you something tomorrow?

Bob Williams

That's a key. That's a key point. On the one hand, the thing that social media has done is you can no longer obscure the truth and the reality of what employees are living in. It happens quickly, and it's so transparent. If CEOs and C Suite people want to really make a

difference, they will use that to their advantage. They will use social media and the way they communicate. You use the word community. That is so key. The two words that are important in times like this for businesses, I think are communicate and collaborate. You have got to involve the employees in the changes that you make to make diversity and inclusion work the way they're supposed to work. You have to listen to these people that are in the streets, the people that are in your company. You have to establish two-way communications, which really with this technology is one of the great advantages is that you can have a discussion and not be there, but you can have the discussion. And that's something that's a tool which should be using.

Ken White

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Ken White

Brian, if the CEO comes to your counterpart, the head of H.R., and says this is the message I want to send out to the employees. What don't you want the CEO to say? What is something? Is there anything they should avoid saying at this point in time?

Brian Baines

Yeah, I think so. And actually, the Harvard Business Review published the article, I think it's called U.S. Businesses Must Take Meaningful Action Against Racism. And they actually gave some good topics. But from my personal perspective, depending on who you are as a CEO, avoid saying, you understand because you don't understand. I am a black male, and I don't understand everybody's perspective. Everyone's experiences aren't like mine. And that's not to say that I have a better, you know, perspective than anyone else. That's just to say the things that I have had to go through in life are not as harsh as those that some other people's people have. So it's about letting people know that you hear what they're saying, that you want a better understanding and that you are looking to make a change. CEOs are a large group, and I'm sure many of them communicate with each other. So they have counterparts, and they can reach out to and get some thoughts on how to properly express their feelings. Many of them have communication specialists to help them write information out that will be suitable. But at the same time, they have to make sure that it is coming from the heart, that it's just not words on paper. They have to

put a little bit of their self into the words that they write. But also, at the same time, stay away from things that can be even more polarizing and fan the flames of what's going on right now.

Ken White

With that said, and I'll ask both of you this and kind of put you on the spot. But is there a channel that's more one channel more appropriate than another channel in terms of who should it be? Email to employees. Should it be a video from the CEO to employees? Normally we can walk the halls. We can't do that right now. Mostly speaking, generally speaking. What's a good delivery? What's a good delivery tool or media channel for an important message like this to employees?

Bob Williams

I think it's all of those things. I think senior-level people need to walk around. They need to do what they can in terms of contacting their employees. If that's by video, if that's by email, if that's by giving them a voice on Zoom, they should do it, and they shouldn't do it once and not say, see, I did that. They should do that on a consistent, frequent basis. They should, to Brian's point, form task groups of employees and let their ideas flow to the CEOs and to the C suite and then not let them die. Use those communication vehicles and say to them, look, we heard from this task force. These were follow. These following things are problems. I want to share with you that this idea is not one I totally agree with, but this idea is awesome. This idea is something that we are going to work on. And you keep that dialogue going through all media, not just through a singular media because what we're watching is a lack of communication. I mean, Martin Luther King said it beautifully. And I heard this one of the commentators that was covering the Atlanta gathering's followed a gathering. And it wasn't a riot. It was just a group of people expressing their First Amendment rights. But he's quoted Martin Luther King when he said when you watch something like this or you were involved in something like this, you are watching the unheard finding a voice. And I thought that's just a great capture. And if you're going to answer that voice, you've got to do it through every medium at your disposal.

Brian Baines

Right.

Ken White

Brian, from the H.R. standpoint, what about the channels to reach employees?

Brian Baines

From an H.R. standpoint, you have to understand the demographics of your employees because not everyone is going to receive information the same way. Some people aren't

on email. Some people are text message people. Some people are actual hard copy to the home letter people. So you have to employ those multiple mediums in order to get the message out. And like Bob said, you have to say it more than once. But what's important is that the first time you say it right. Because there are no new take backs. Any apologies you make after the statement that you initially put out are just they fall on deaf ears, people, you lost the confidence of your people once you put out a statement that harms more than helps. And, you know, it's very important that they speak up. CEOs and company heads speak up because what people will tend to do is see the silence as acceptance of what's going on. And that's something that they definitely want to stay away from. Of course, there are people on both sides of the issue. There's always going to be people on both sides of the issue. But you want to take the approach of deciding which side the company is going to be on. Yeah, you may lose some customers or whatever down the way, but take Nike, for example. About a year ago, they put out a statement or rather a ad using Colin Kaepernick that had lots of people upset, burning the Nike products and things like that that they own. But also at the same time, they saw an increase in profits. So for those you lose, you probably will gain more people, or you may gain more people buying multiple products of yours or utilizing your services more often. So, you know, be on the right side of it is what you have to do. And that's the message that I think they have to get out and again through as many different avenues as they can.

Bob Williams

I think to the generations that companies are dealing with now from a recruitment standpoint, of an employee standpoint are different than they were, say, ten years ago, not only because of the fact but because of the way they feel about value. So if you're worried about offending a customer because your communication maybe not what they want to hear, I would say don't let that be a barrier to communicating. I would say, look, people are looking at value and more than just tradeoff between cost and price. They're saying, do I want to do business with this organization because of what it believes? So for a CEO to be put off and fearful that they'll offend somebody that's in their customer base. I think they need to get over that. I think what they need to say, well, what do I stand for? Does it have value? And if it has value, my customers will respect the fact that my company thinks this way. You can see it in the environmental movement. You can see it in sustainability. There are people in this generation, young people that won't do business with people and companies that don't respect the environment that don't respect sustainability. I think the same thing is true about human resources and human relations. People want to be respected. They want to be treated with equity and with fairness. And companies that are very good at communicating that they are doing that and they're serious about making that kind of a thing live are going to benefit from the customer base. They're not going to be threatened by it.

Brian Baines

Yeah, people have to take a tough look at their company if they're not making a statement. I've actually asked people on my personal network to explore new opportunities if their companies are refusing to make a statement and take a stand on this. You know because, again, people who are most affected by this, that is, in essence, saying that, you know, we're not here for you. Whether it's true or not, the lack of a voice from the company is harmful to the populations that work inside that organization.

Bob Williams

Right.

Brian Baines

That may be the next George Floyd or Ahmaud Arbery or Breonna Taylor or one of the many other people who have lost their lives or been harmed through injustice.

Ken White

That's our conversation with Bob Williams and Brian Baines. And that's our podcast for this week. Leadership & Business is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business. If you're thinking about pursuing an MBA, pursue one that offers a transformational experience. Check out the MBA programs at William & Mary, the full time, the flex, the online, and the executive. Finally, we'd love 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 Bob Williams and Brian Baines, and thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White, wishing you a safe, happy, and productive week.