



Raymond A. Mason School of Business

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LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS PODCAST

EPISODE 185: DAN WEBBER – HOW ARE YOU INNOVATING?

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. Whatever business or field you're in, standing still is not an option. That's why so many are placing an emphasis on innovation. With that in mind, Tribe Innovation at the William & Mary School of Business recently hosted Innovation at Work, a panel featuring professionals who spoke about innovation and the role it plays in their respective organizations and sectors. One of the panelists joined us afterwards. Dan Webber is with Edelman, the global communications firm that works with businesses and organizations to promote and protect their brands and reputations. Weber is President of Edelman's Washington, DC office. He says in his work innovation is about a long-term trajectory for success. He joins us to share how he and the Edelman organization view and implement innovation. Here's our conversation with Dan Webber.

Ken White

Well, Dan, thanks for joining us. It's nice to see you.

Dan Webber

It's good to see you. Thank you so much for having me here.

Ken White

And I'm glad you made it. It's one of the rainiest days of the year in Williamsburg, Virginia.

Dan Webber

I wouldn't miss it. I wouldn't miss it come hell or high water, as they say.

Ken White

Yeah, thanks. Well, it was so interesting. This panel you just served on, a number of industries represented talking about innovation and how the role it plays in various industries. But to start off, for those who don't know Edelman, and I know many people do, I think that maybe a lot of people think, oh, that's the group that is all about building trust and often meeting with clients when that's in jeopardy. Is that fairly correct?

Dan Webber

To some, yeah. There's a lot of reputation protect, reputation repair. But we started as a consumer marketing, consumer PR shop 70 years ago, and that's still a big chunk of what we do of helping our clients understand who their audiences are, particularly in that case, customers, and making sure that we're building trust around their products and services. And that's a fun world to be in because we have creatives, we have digital experts, we have strategists who are helping our clients think differently amongst the noise that's out there of cutting through that noise to reach customers in a new way. And a lot of it is driven by purpose and their values. And that's what we see a lot in our trust data, is that people want to purchase products from those companies and organizations that they believe in, that their values align with mine. So that's a big chunk of what we do. But yeah, I spend a lot of my time on the corporate reputation piece. And that's a place that is super interesting because it also ties directly into the values and the purpose of the organization. And so we're seeing a lot of that in our trust data.

Ken White

So in the panel, the topic was innovation. When you hear that word, do you think how we think about it at Edelman? Do you think how we think about it with the clients? Where does that land?

Dan Webber

Yes, it's a great question, and particularly in my role at Edelman, where I have the privilege and honor of helping run a team, a pretty large team. There's a big part of innovating in how we show up and what we offer our clients. And it is a constant pursuit because if we're not relevant and we're not bringing something new or interesting or challenging to our client, then they might find that from somebody else. So that is an everyday sprint. And we have to keep our eye focused on what's down the line in a few weeks, months, or even years so that we can be relevant for our clients. But at the end of the day, we have to be super focused on our clients missions. And so when we're working with a client, we're really thinking critically about what's making them tick all the way from their customers and then within their organization, our clients, what are their needs so that we can be helping

them address their challenges. So it's kind of a split. And sometimes, particularly for anyone new into an agency world, it can be challenging because your mission is twofold. It's growing our work, but you can't grow our work without our clients.

Ken White

I think it was you that mentioned on the panel big problems require big solutions, right? And are clients ready for that when you come in?

Dan Webber

Sometimes they are because they're forced to. And I think in the crisis work that I do, a lot of times when I interact with a client in a rapid response environment, they're being forced to look at it differently. Sometimes they are because the environment around them has changed so much. I think we talked on the panel about COVID and everything that happened in those two years, forcing organizations to think differently about how their values need to then come through their employee groups with their clients and customers with their shareholders. And so that can also be a forcing mechanism. But the other side of that, of a long-term innovation that occurs within organizations with their products, that's another place we play. And I think that's something where you need catalysts. You need something to push the envelope. And competitors are a great place to do that, your peers. But it's really fun to be helping write the brief with our clients rather than receiving the brief. And what I mean by that is, hey, here's some things that are changing with your stakeholders. And we think it would be really great if you did X, Y, and Z to partner with them, or there may be strange bedfellows out there that you've never partnered with that you need to partner with. The only time I ever got to meet Dan Edelman, the founder of Edelman, he talked a lot about not just connecting dots but looking for new dots that you don't even know exist. And I thought, man, I was an intern at the time.

Ken White

Yeah, that's cool.

Dan Webber

This is something I want to be part of because it just changes the way you think. And we have a spirit within our organization that is very entrepreneurial, and I've always enjoyed that piece of that.

Ken White

You talked a little bit on the panel about your internship and the way that sort of the mindset you adopted. Can you share that with us?

Dan Webber

Yeah. It was an interesting question about how you learned innovation or how to be innovative. And it's a pretty tricky industry to get into PR and Agency World, Consultancy World. But I learned very quickly early on that one thing that I had to offer at that time was my time. And that's our commodity within consultancy world is time. We based everything off of time. And as a young person in the industry, I did my best to use the time I could because I had a lot more of it than perhaps the senior most managers. And what I learned very quickly early on was if I did the job and I nailed it, that was one thing. But if I learned how to apply it differently for someone who didn't have as much time available to them, that it made me more valuable to them. And I also have seen this in client service left and right. I can deliver something for a client. That's one thing. But if I deliver it and I started to see even if it's a little bit like 5% more, that was a really cool learning for me. And I've used it across my entire career to add 5% more if I can. I've used it with my kids and trying to share a lesson. It was funny. My son Jack and I were we were talking about this. My daughter had a bad grade, and we were talking about trying a little bit more, 5% more. And I didn't think it was one of those dad-daughter, dad-son talks. I didn't think it clicked until we were out driving around, and my son Jack saw something. He looked at me and goes, hey, dad, 5%. And it stuck out to me. And I think that really is something that I learned as an intern of really what motivates people. What are they trying to achieve with their agenda? What's their mission? I need to deliver on that, but can I do a little bit more? And I always went tying back to innovation. A lot of innovation is just iterating and building on top and looking around the corner, looking left and right to see where those dots are that may not have existed before. So yeah, we have a 5% rule, and that was something I learned early on as an intern.

Ken White

As leading a team, and you mentioned you have a fairly sizable team. Where does innovation come into play in terms of your leadership with the team?

Dan Webber

Innovation within the team should play out every day, in my opinion. But it doesn't necessarily always play out in a carefully crafted meeting or here's our innovation session. And what I mean by this is if we are doing what we should be doing, looking around the corners, connecting dots, then we're going to probably fail a lot or have the wrong answer, as one of our panelists says. And we need to be comfortable with that. We need to be able to give each other feedback. We need to be able to bring ourselves, our full selves, into a team environment as a team get the best out of each other. And when we don't actually hit where we wanted to hit, we need to learn from that. And that's where I see most of our innovation is looking at where did we not show up well. How do we build on that when we get questions from clients 2, 3, 4, 5 clients. That now needs to be something that we tuck away, and we start in our notebook that we carry around

everywhere with us. We need to go back to that and start building on that. And so I think that that's a piece where we spend a lot of time. Now we have a value at we have a number of values, but one of our core values is about being constantly curious. And so we have time to dedicate to passion projects outside of the office, whether it be pro bono work and being connected to our communities and the list goes on. And I really like that value because I think innovation starts with curiosity, and it's stuff that you may not even know are lying around where you can just start looking at it and build on it. And that's really what I think we encourage a lot of our team to do. We have 2 hours every day that are dedicated to noninternal admin meetings. It's protected. You can have client meetings during that time. It's called our blue zone. And we started using this during the pandemic to give ourselves a little bit of a break. We have no internal meeting Fridays to focus on client work and other big things that we're trying to tackle. And I think you have to carve out that sort of time, but then you have to look at your normal activities every day and say am I learning from it? Am I building on it? And if you're not, it's where we need to calibrate again and take a look at how can we switch things around.

Ken White

We'll continue our conversation with Dan Webber in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business. The world is changing like we've never seen before. That means change for business and your role in it. You can sit on the sidelines and watch things evolve, or you can be a part of creating the future. If you want the tools and education needed to succeed in the years ahead, we invite you to consider the MBA program at William & Mary. Wherever you happen to be in your career, William & Mary has an MBA program for you. The full-time, the part-time, the online, and the executive MBA all taught by the number one ranked MBA faculty in America. Take charge of your future. Check out the MBA program at William & Mary at wm.edu. Now back to our conversation with Dan Webber.

Ken White

How are you hiring for that individual who does think innovatively is very client-centric?

Dan Webber

That's a tough question because I think a number of years ago, we wanted other agency people. We wanted people who had that, whether it be a PR agency, ad agency, consultancy experience, but we still want that. But we also want to surround ourselves with scientists, with journalists, with pick an expert, a data scientist. We want them as much as we want those with the agency experience. Now, that creates a little bit of a transitional issue because they come in, and they may not understand client service environment, they may not understand how to move in the ways that agencies typically work. So a lot of this is trying to the orientation is particularly important. When we're doing the interviews, we try and dig into some of their experiences to understand when you had that really big

idea, how did you sell it to your bosses, how did you sell it to whatever organization? And then, more importantly, how did you activate it? Because it's one thing to just have big, great ideas and sit around thinking of ideas, but we're in client service, so we always have to convert those ideas into actions. And if it is truly just a consultancy, our clients want to know not just what your advice is but what are the next three steps that you would take. So that's been a challenge for us, but it's been an exciting one because I think as we grow, we're going to have more of those nontraditional quote-unquote, anyone, listening to this with my fingers doing quotes, the nontraditional people into our agency experience.

Ken White

It's diverse, right?

Dan Webber

Yes.

Ken White

Great.

Dan Webber

Yes.

Ken White

More thought, richer experience. One of the panelists talked about how companies have chief innovation officers. Would you prefer the chief innovation officer or a team of a number of people who think like a chief innovation officer?

Dan Webber

I liked that comment because I think the spirit of that question was, who owns innovation? I think.

Ken White

I do too.

Dan Webber

And I think you need to have someone who does own it in the sense of a very deliberate strategy and can have the room of thought and focus to be able to build a scaffolding and a process that allows an organization to innovate. But I think innovation comes with the team. And that's one of my biggest honors and privilege in my position is I get to be part of a team, but part of my job is to find the best in our team members. And that's where the juiciest, the most beautiful ideas and concepts come from the team. And it can still be

pretty, I think, a very straight line kind of thing where I do it on my own, and then I hand it to somebody else. Kind of a thing that still happens, right? And I see a lot of that. This is as far as I've been able to take it, but that still requires a team sort of environment where you are vulnerable enough and connected enough and trust your team members around you to take it to the next step without discounting anything that you did. That's a great part of being in an agency. We are a matrix organization. We have people all around the world. The most powerful thing we have at our fingertips is each other and the tools in our toolbox at that. And I think that's where you see great innovation is when you can get the best out of each of those team members, building on their strengths, compensating for areas where they're not as strong. And it's great to see that. And it can blow you away because that could come from an intern, which I was, or that can come from the person who has trained their entire career to be able, for that moment, to be the person who can bring the idea to concept, to application, to something that's award-winning or maybe even changing a full industry.

Ken White

Well, we talk a lot about the role of failure and innovation, but the stakes are high for you and your clients. So I mean, failure, it sounds great, right? But it's pretty tough. How do you approach failure?

Dan Webber

Yeah, I've heard a lot of people say fail fast.

Ken White

Right.

Dan Webber

A lot of that comes to just resilience and confidence. Confidence in yourself that that failure is not going to define you as a person. And if you can get over that, and it's like what I do in the crisis world, a lot of what clients and human beings, they get stuck with, even accepting that there is a problem or accepting that you may have screwed up, it's your fault. You got to get to acceptance as fast as you can and then be able to, in a constructive way, look at the issues and break it down into something that you can learn from. Yes, we charge by the hour. And so, yeah, if we spend too much time dwelling on it. It's going to cost us that time that is so precious. Look at it, understand it, memorialize it, and then calibrate again so that you can move to the next thing fast. Fail fast, I think, is an important concept. But one of the panelists talked about there's no wrong answers. Or I think he talked about there are wrong answers. It's not about failing. There are wrong answers. And that you just need to build and learn how you got to that wrong answer so that you can get to the right answer going forward. And I loved that. I think that's a lot of what we need to do and what we try to do within Edelman.

Ken White

One of the questions was, from a student perspective, how can a student become a good innovator? And you had some advice of things to do.

Dan Webber

Yeah, I was trying to break it down into those traits or whatever. When I think of innovation, and I think of resilience and confidence. So confidence you can't be resilient unless you have some confidence. So or a couple of things that came to mind for me on this was the importance of doing something that makes you feel uncomfortable. And in an academic world, yeah, maybe classes, but I would say stretch as far as you can take an improv class.

Ken White

Yeah.

Dan Webber

And we've had improv theater groups come to our office a number of times, and it's fantastic because it just forces you to do something different and to look at things there. And the beauty of it on top of it is that you have to build off of somebody else. It's not you alone. You could be doing stand-up comedy by yourself, and that would make you uncomfortable. But improv requires you to be watching somebody else, not just thinking on your own, and then to react. And through that process of building with your team members, you build confidence, and you're also resilient. But there's structure in there too. And so there's an incredible learning moment. I hate improv. It freaks me out. But I think I would say to students, do that. I also said to students I think they need to do things that help them understand people, sociology, psychology, whatever. Because so much of what we're trying to do in innovation is about helping people and helping trigger the motivations that people have, and that's a lot of what we do in client service, of course, is trying to understand audiences and what they need, what they want, what they desire, and then helping our clients deliver on that from obviously a product or service and how they deliver that.

Ken White

We want so much out of our employees today. Right. They have to be able to communicate. They have to be able to write. They have to be able to build good relationships. Where does innovation fall on that in terms of how good does a person have to be in order to be successful in your field?

Dan Webber

One of our fastest growing groups is our Employee Experience Team, helping provide counsel to clients to understand how one of their most important stakeholder groups, their employees or associates, can connect to the mission the values of the organization. And that is so paramount. And I think in the last two or three years, we've learned a really important lesson around how employees need to evolve. And they also are one of your most important stakeholder groups. And that's exciting because your employees are the ones who want to be with you. They want to grow with you. They're the heartbeat of your organization. And so, if you ignore them in your innovation process, you're ignoring an incredible group who has an amazing amount of investment in you. So it could be your employee resource groups that you have that you're creating. Communities that have certain passion areas or certain experiences. They need to be included in this. Are you asking questions from your frontline employees about how they're interacting with customers or their clients? If you're not using that feedback as precious. Data, inputs, whatever, it's very difficult to just have a room where you can quote-unquote innovate. So I think it has to be an integral part. And so our Employee Experience Group does a lot of pulse surveys to understand what our employees thinking. How do you use that information to inform your strategy? How do you use that information to evolve and, hopefully, to innovate so that you are on a long-term trajectory for success?

Ken White

That's our conversation with Dan Webber. And that's it for this episode of Leadership & Business. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business, home of the MBA program, offered in four formats the full-time, the part-time, the online, and the executive MBA. If you are ready to take charge of your future, check out the William & Mary MBA program at wm.edu. Thanks to our guest, Dan Webber of Edelman, and thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White, wishing you a safe, happy, and productive week ahead.

Female Speaker

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