Corey Andrew Powell (00:00):

Hey there, listener Corey, Andrew Powell here, and I'm excited to share that Motivational Mondays is now sponsored by Better Help Feeling stressed or anxious. Well, better Help brings you online therapy that's convenient and affordable. NSLS members get 50% off your first month of Better Help when you sign up at betterhelp.com/nsls. Or click the link in the show notes, start your journey to Better Mental Health today.

Corey Andrew Powell (00:37):

Hello everyone, and welcome to another episode of Motivational Mondays. I am Corey Andrew Powell, your host. And today we have the privilege of hosting a true authority in the realm of leadership. Willie Pietersen. As a former CEO of multi-billion dollar businesses and a distinguished professor at Columbia University's graduate School of business, Willie has dedicated his career to understanding what it takes to lead effectively. His insights have shaped organizations like American Express, Johnson & Johnson, ExxonMobil, and even the Girl Scouts of America. Today, he joins us to discuss his upcoming book Leadership: The Inside Story Tested, uh, or Time-Tested Prescriptions for those who seek to lead, it comes out September 24. Uh, I'm happy to have a little advanced copy here. Willie, welcome to Motivational Mondays.

Willie Pietersen (01:25):

Many thanks, Corey. Nice to be with you.

Corey Andrew Powell (01:27):

Thank you, sir. It's so, so great to have you here as well. Of course, we're a leadership podcast, and so we love to talk about leadership and you've got a lot of wonderful insights to share. So I want to just begin with your, your new book, obviously. Um, the book title, as I mentioned is called Leadership:The Inside Story. So what inspired you to write this book and, and what do you hope readers take away from it?

Willie Pietersen (01:48):

Yeah, well, I I I, I've been, as you've just said, I know my life has been a learning laboratory in many ways of effective leadership. Started growing up in South Africa during the apartheid era, uh, seeing, um, all of those issues. And as a young person, you know, you suffer from mental, um, imprinting that whatever is around you and reinforced by the authority figures you believe to be the way the world works. Uh, I grew up in that setting and then gradually as I went through life began to look back on it, left South Africa, began to understand, um, how dysfunctional that system was, and became a great admirer of Nelson Mandela as a towering figure of leadership and as a role model. And I learned a lot from studying his life and thinking about leadership. And, um, as I did that, and I went through my own career 20 years as a CEO as you've mentioned, uh, teaching leadership and strategy now at Columbia Business School for 26 years, having the opportunity to work with a multiple number of corporate executives, consulting to many major corporations has given me a wonderful kaleidoscopic view of leadership ability to study and understand different leadership style successes and failures.

Willie Pietersen (03:20):

And I began to realize that leadership is like any other endeavor. If you want to do it really well, you need to understand what it is. It's not just a random process of exercising power, um, or making great bold decisions on an ad hoc basis. It's a deliberate, intentional philosophy based on a set of principles. Uh, and that's why I call it the inside story. Uh, Marcus Aurelius, the great Roman philosopher and emperor, called this our internal command center. And I began to realize that fundamentally leadership begins with that kind of set of operating principles that we internalize that guide our actions and inspire others. And we need to be very clear about our command center. Now, that's a lifelong learning process. Mm-Hmm, <affirmative>, again, I quote somebody, Voltaire, who said, you've gotta cultivate your own garden. You have to learn as you go and as the environment shifts.

Willie Pietersen (04:30):

But every single successful leader that I've observed has had an internal command center that is understood and acted on with great clarity. Mm-Hmm. So with that kind of understanding that there is a structure, there is a skill, if you like. Uh, and it's a philosophical approach to what it is that you act upon. So it's not just an abstract philosophy. I developed a framework for leaders to think about how they develop their own command center. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. And that F framework has got three domains attached to it, and they're overlapping as a kind of a Venn diagram. Three circles. Yeah. So the first domain is leadership of self. That's where it all begins. That's the threshold requirement. Deep personal knowledge, a clear set of principles that guide our actions and inspire others. Second domain is strategic leadership, the ability to provide a clear direction for the organization you seek to lead, supported by a set of key priorities that unify the organization behind the central idea of success in their particular environment.

Willie Pietersen (05:54):

And the third domain is interpersonal leadership, bringing out the best in others. Hmm. Now these need to be mutually supportive of each other, just like an ecosystem. But it provides a way for us to think about leadership in a systematic way and understand if we want to learn about leadership, that we can go back to this model, the structure, and say, as I develop my own leadership skills in a changing environment and I look at my successes and failures, I can go back to this simple model and say, where do I need to grow most? Where do I need to put the main pressure to succeed even better than I'm doing now? Is it in the domain of personal leadership? Is it in the domain of strategic leadership or is it in interpersonal leadership? Where am I falling short? Where do I need to close gaps to succeed more effectively? So that's, I guess, you know, my starting point is to have a structure for thinking about leadership and to understand that it's not just about power. Leadership is essentially about service, not about power.

Corey Andrew Powell (07:08):

Hmm. That is so wonderful. And, um, I mean, there is so much to unpack there. One of the most important things though, I think, and there's quite a lot there that is important, but you do raise an interesting point that I always stress, and we always must stress with leadership. It's not about being the strong arm in the room or the person who's declaring themselves to be the smartest, or, and many oftentimes that a strong leader realizes that they may not be the smartest person in the room, but they know how to also then invite people who know things that they don't know and to invite them in to help them be stronger. But you talk about the empowerment of others, and so often that part is overlooked leadership. A big part of it is empowering others to actually also lead as well, and to discover their own talent and ability. So do you, do you think that out of those three things you mentioned in the diagram, is there one that you think stands out? 'cause I think that one is one that's most overlooked.

Willie Pietersen (08:09):

Well, it's interesting because it connects very strongly to personal leadership. You know, at the end of the day, if we think about it, leadership is about character and competence. You need to have the competence, the domain understanding and expertise to lead the organization that you, that you're leading. Understand its external environment, understand its people and its challenges, but that alone is not enough. It's character at the end of the day that works together with competence to create the energy that drives an organization. So that comes back to our internal command center, but gives us this kind of, if I call it permission to lead. Now, that's the enabler at the end of the day to unlock the best in others to inspire them. Now again, we need to think about, you know, how does that work? Do we just go along to people and say, I want you to be inspired.

Willie Pietersen (09:07):

Do we just go along to them and say, I've got a great idea for success. I want you to participate in this with great enthusiasm. Well, you might as well just call it in or just write an email and ask people to be inspired and enthused. It doesn't work that way. And now what I have found is that the best way to engage people is to involve them in the decisions that need to be made, is to get them to participate in thinking about the future of the organization and how to create a strategy to have a structure, to do that, to invite diversity of thought. When you involve people and ask them for their point of view and sincerely listen to them, you showing that you value them Mm-Hmm, <affirmative>, and you're creating a shared commitment to a successful future now, then you'll get an interesting juncture.

Willie Pietersen (10:02):

'cause diversity of thought of that kind produces the best ideas. So back to what you said, Corey, it's not telling people what the best ideas are. It's asking them to participate in the discovery of the best ideas. And we need a technique to do that. So diversity of thought produces that and then has that issue of engagement. Now, when the decision gets made ultimately on what to do, you better shift in gear to go from diverse thinking to convergent action, to unity of action. Now, by definition, not everybody's gonna agree with the decision that got made because you've invited diversity of thought. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. But what you can do then is to thank everybody for their points of view, even though there might have been some conflict of ideas. And to say that's improved the quality of what we've decided to do. Thank you for your input.

Willie Pietersen (11:05):

And there's a little formula I think we can provide to, to make that ch shift of gear successful. And that is to say, being on board is how we behave after the decision has been made before the decision has been made. I want all the diversity of thought. I want all the best ideas on the table. And you know, at meetings when I'm listening to ideas, big issue is this, who speaks first? Do we as a leader begin to say, well, you know, here are my thoughts. Tell me what you think. Now the trouble with this is people look at you as an authority figure. Everything you do is symbolic. And what you say sounds almost like a piece of legislation. Right. And it kind of, people are a little bit reluctant to argue against, you know, what you put up as the, if you like the straw man and say, knock this one down. It's much better to say, here's the issue we confronted with. I want the best ideas. I want to listen first, and then let's pull our ideas together. Hmm. Yeah. So one of these type of techniques, as I think about ultimate inspiration and motivation, it's the opportunity for human beings to de dedicate themselves to a cause larger than themselves, combined with the opportunity to make a difference to the outcome. And I think that's the way we need to, to, to lead organizations.

Corey Andrew Powell (12:41):

When you speak about that in the realm of diversity and diversity of thought, of course, my mind goes to the idea of diversity of people as well. Because you then need to bring in or not need to bring in, you would most likely have people of varying backgrounds and varying walks of life as part of your organization, many of whom may not have felt that they've been invited into the conversation, uh, proactively to have that kind of collective result. So when you mention that, I do think about your upbringing in South Africa. I'm old enough to remember the whole apartheid thing as a kid because it was tied to, um, uh, a performance casino called Sun City. And I was a big music kid. So I remember, um, that like it was yesterday. But I do wonder for you, um, you said you, when you left South Africa, that's sort of when your, your worldview changes. So what was that like to kind of have a realization that wow, the whole world that I thought I knew based on what I was being told, sort of governmentally is different and there's a whole other realm of how people think out there that I need to embrace?

Willie Pietersen (13:51):

That's a really interesting question, Corey, of, uh, if you like, how the way we evolve our thinking, and we've gotta be willing, of course to accept and consider alternative ideas. Now, as a five or 6-year-old, you know, we are not equipped to do that. We want safety in our surroundings, and we're told this is the way the world works, and we follow those presets and principles without really questioning them. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. So my learning had a number of growth stages that are very specific. The first is going to my local, uh, university in South Africa where I studied law. Now for the first time, I was in contact with conflicting ideas, people who are challenging the status quo and saying, there's something wrong with this. And I would say, well, what's wrong with it? Everybody's been given a separate but equal opportunity. Hmm. And then they said, let's see how that's working in practice, because that's a slogan.

Willie Pietersen (14:54):

How is it working in practice? What is fair about what's happening now? Is everybody being given an equal opportunity at the end of the day to participate in the development of this wonderful country that's been bequeathed to us? Yes or no? Citing evidence to going to and fro began that way. To question my own underlying assumptions of what's true. You know, I'm a great follower of philosophy, like, you know, I, we seek wisdom. When wisdom is the answer to three questions is the first question is, you know, what's, what's true and what's not true? The second question, the second question is amongst all the things that are true, uh, what's important, um, amongst all of those things and what less important? And the third thing is how will we act? How will we act on the beliefs that we develop that way? So its philosophy and action.

Willie Pietersen (15:50):

Now that began, uh, a, a set of questioning. Then I was lucky enough to win a Rhodes scholarship to go to Oxford in England. I'd never been outside my home country. It's at the southern tip of Africa, a remote place. And the whole wide world was there. And I'd not discovered it and was intrigued by it. And now I was really introduced to a colle. Again, I used the word kaleidoscope of ideas from people from many, many different countries who were looking from the outside in at what was happening in South Africa. Some of them very well informed. It invited me to do this leap in my own understanding was the ability to look at something from the outside in and truly understand it that way. You know, what they say is the last thing a fish notices is the water that it's swimming in. Now.

Willie Pietersen (16:47):

You have to get outside of your environment and mentally even, you know, my, that was physically I got outside of it, involved in a lot of debates with people from many countries and had a, a shift there was somewhat profound in my thinking, realizing that what was happening was wrong, unjust, and cruel. And, and knew in my bones that something needed to happen to change it, otherwise there was gonna be the prospect of a violent revolution. Mm-Hmm. Yeah. So that was a, you know, an epiphany. Mm-Hmm. And a realization that, you know, the beliefs that I'd started with had evolved to an understanding based on this kind of more objective way of evaluating things and opening my mind more deliberately. You know, there was discomfort. There always is. When, when the anchor is pulled up from what your original beliefs were, it's a very uncomfortable situation.

Willie Pietersen (17:51):

Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. But that's how real learning happens. You know, Margaret Wheatley likes to say that, um, you cannot change a living thing from the outside. You can only disturb it so that it changes itself. And these were the disturbances that enabled me to change myself in terms of the way I thought. And Mandela had the same experience. I went back and practiced law and, um, in Cape Town in South Africa, uh, that's what I'd been trained to do. And, um, there was a, um, a process to classify people according to their race because there was complete separation was called apartheid. That's the pronunciation of it. Apartheid the word hate, of course. Sounds like you know what it is. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative> apartness is what it means in Afrikaans. And, uh, when there was ambiguity, you, you were not allowed to go to the same school. You were not allowed to live in the same area.

Willie Pietersen (18:54):

You were not allowed to marry people of a different race. You were not allowed to have sexual relationships with people of a different race, believe it or not. And there was this board called the Race Classification Board, um, that heard cases of ambiguity. And people would show up, you know, with their representative lawyer, whatever it is, and examined like laboratory specimens, but a pencil through their hair to see its kinkiness, look at the color of their skin, some close. And, um, I happen to represent a number of clients whose lives have been torn apart. Um, kids in the same family, you two belong in that white school, U2 seem to have a colored kind of element. And you go to the other school and then looking at the parents and say, your marriage is illegal because you're from different races. You've gotta separate, you can't live, you can't cohabit.

Willie Pietersen (19:55):

I mean, I, it's hard to, this is fascinating. Something like this, you say, can that really be true? Well, it was. So I represented these, uh, people and what I saw brought home something to me. Now I'd been at Oxford, I'd changed my view. But, you know, we generalize, we talk about being unfair to people of color. Well, you know, it's not people, it's individuals. And now, for the first time I saw the crushing effect this had on individual human beings. So getting away from group think and thinking about, you know, the people involved, that was to me horrifying. Hmm. Now, I, I'll just end this story <laugh>, uh, quickly by, by telling you how planned out for the clients I had, there was one, only one appeal, uh, from the findings of the race classification board. That was to the Minister of the Interior. And, uh, you can't appeal to, you couldn't appeal to a court, just to, the minister of the Interior had final say and said, ah, I support that finding.

Willie Pietersen (21:08):

And I overrule this one. I happened to know the leader of the opposition party, and I belonged to that party anti part party. I asked for a meeting. I said, I could, I just have an hour of your time. I was granted that meeting. I said, here are five files of, uh, these claimants, these, uh, victims of, of this examination. And I'd like you to have a look at them. Do you have a good relationship with the Minister of the Interior? Of course, who was a member of the governing party, the National Party. He said, I know him. Well, yes, we have totally different world views, but I know him well. I said, well, can you call in a favor, do you think? He said, I might be able to let me look at these files. A week later, he called me up and he said, I've managed to get the most of the interior to overrule all these cases.

Willie Pietersen (22:10):

I tell these families that they were gonna be okay, but I was just lucky I happened to know people in power. The system itself wouldn't have provided that kind of justice to people. I literally, that evening, had a discussion with my wife and said, we cannot continue to live here and raise a family, a family in this environment. We need to get to another place. I really had the aspiration to come to the United States, but I was a lawyer with the local qualifications in South Africa. So I applied for a job with Unilever Global Company. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative> in the hope of an international career. That would be my exit route. Right. It was really rather amusing. I had my interview with, uh, the head of HR at the time, a guy called Peter Murray, and he said, oh, well, you're a lawyer. Do you want to join the legal department?

Willie Pietersen (23:16):

I said, no, no, no. I, I want to join the marketing department, <laugh> Fun marketing. I said, I've read 19 books. And I gave him the title. I said, well, that's what I know. I said, that's in books, but I'm a an eager learner. Try me out. And he said, well, um, you know, what are your real aspirations? Um, in Unilever? He said, I'd, I said, I'd love an international career. And he looked at me and he said, Willie, Unilever is not a travel agency <laugh>. I said, okay, I understand. I apol, I'm just being absolutely honest and transparent. It'll all be on the merits. You know, give me a, give me a chance. Let me prove what I can do, and let me see what happens. As it happened, I got very lucky, and I got transferred and promoted wonderful roles within Unilever in the uk, um, in Australia, in Holland, and then ultimately here in the USA, and we became citizens here.

Willie Pietersen (24:15):

So that was a wonderful, both wonderful career experience with Unilever, inter learning about leadership becoming progressively more senior in their system, and a way to get out of South Africa. Mm-Hmm. So I watched the whole phenomenon of a peaceful transfer of power from my home in Connecticut in the United States Mm-Hmm. With literally tears in my eyes of disbelief, wonderment and joy to see what was possible under a leader like Mandela. Mm-Hmm. And honestly, I would tell you, Corey, if you, if you saw the raw details that I saw, the anger and the resentment that that caused, I thought a peaceful transfer of power was impossible. And Mandela pulled it off the most majestic example that I've ever experienced in my lifetime of great leadership.

Corey Andrew Powell (25:20):

Hmm. You know, this is one of the most fascinating conversations I've ever had on this show, again, because I have a reference for it in my lifetime. And watching the civil unrest in the early eighties, I guess it was when I began to notice what was happening. And it seemed very foreign for me as a little black kid in America who, you know, as far as I knew, was in a very integrated country. And we had moved beyond that kind of stuff. But when I look at it actually time wise of when it was happening, America was not that far behind from the Civil Rights Act from what was still ha you know, there, the, those time periods are really, really close. So, you know, you putting that in perspective for me, the fact that, um, all those legalities were in place of inter of, of separation, I mean, from the point of you couldn't even have friends or <laugh> or sexual relations or, you know, and then the, the ambiguity of like the children within one family like that is mind blowing. One child might look more white presenting, so they would actually legislate for them to go to one school in the blacker, darker kid would go. Like, that's mind-boggling to me. Uh, but America was not that different just years prior, which is interesting.

Willie Pietersen (26:38):

I found, I, I realized that when I began to, you know, read about American history and see about the transition they got made and realize that these things are not a single event that happened on a particular day. They are a journey, and that journey is pursued with determination and courage by leaders. And, uh, you know, Martin Luther King, for example, I, you know, it was a pH you know, phenomenal example of this. I think, you know, Lyndon Johnson did a great deal, um, at the end of the day, but he was persuaded to do it. I don't think he just said one day got outta bed and said, well, this is all wrong. I'm gonna try and fix it with

Corey Andrew Powell (27:22):

Right. <laugh>, you

Willie Pietersen (27:23):

Know, I don't think it happened that way. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative> and the power of, you know, moral persuasion by somebody like, uh, Martin Luther King and others that were involved in that movement, you know, always change. Leadership is involving setbacks, disappointments, discouragement. And, you know, as the Japanese like to say, fall down six times, get up seven. Hmm. And I think that's what that kind of leadership was about. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative> the sustained effort and passing the bat on to subsequent leaders to say, this is not just my idea. It's a movement based on justice, and somebody has to carry it forward like a relay race. Hmm. And so it went progressively. And, you know, but we are not there yet. You know, there's no, there, there, it's a journey and it never stops. I always think about these things as kind of pushing a lever, and the moment you take your hands off that lever, it just goes back by itself to where it was. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>, you can never take the pressure off. Now, I think there'll come a day where people will literally come to the realization that race is irrelevant. We are not there yet. <laugh>

Corey Andrew Powell (28:45):

No. Far from it in some aspects. I, I I would say, um, or some people are more, you know, progressive than, than others. But when you mention that though, it is fascinating to think that we have really not realized that we as a human race have actually been stunted greatly. A great disservice done to ourselves by deeming people and not valuable because of genetics or melanin, or a lack of melanin or all the like, sort of physiological things that happen that have nothing to do with ability. And at the end of the day, I say, who's the big loser in all of it? Is all of us, we are the losers.

Willie Pietersen (29:27):

Absolutely. Right. It diminishes all of us. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>, you know, it's, it's, it's based on a set of human biases. And, uh, the truth of the matter is nobody is completely objective and unbiased. We're all right. Right. Impulses. We're born with them. And the big task I think for us is awareness of our biases. Um, confirmation bias, status quo bias, um, denial, and all of these things. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative> and wired into us is a bias that makes us suspicious of somebody who doesn't look like us, speak like us, and act like us. That kind of a primordial bias. And, you know, maybe it was true in caveman days, right? <laugh> at when, you know, um, people were competing for food, literally going out and kind of fighting over it and all that sort of thing, and saying, oh, here are people who look different. There might be a threat to me now.

Willie Pietersen (30:31):

I think just uncovering that within ourselves and saying, I'm, I wanna make myself aware of the biases that drive my attitudes and behaviors. And once you begin to realize that, you begin to critique it and say, I know it's a kind of a, a, a raw impulse, but is it just, hmm, is it correct? Does it respect the basic dignity of human beings regardless of where they're from or what they look like? Can we build a better world by dwelling in that kind of way? Because it's divisive based on suspicion and sometimes even hatred. And, you know, those are the big questions. And if you answer, no, we can't build a better world, and it's back to bringing out the best in others. Do we bring out, when we bring out the best in others, everybody benefits. So it's that challenge, you know, it's back to imprinting for me as a kind of a, you know, what I've learned of, you know, these things get embedded now they become unquestioned.

Willie Pietersen (31:42):

We have to question our own assumptions and think about our own framework of leadership. What are our guiding principles? Do we want that to be a guiding principle, the way we lead our lives and make other people better than they would've been without us? I mean, why are we here? I mean, we're here really for others. I love these African proverbs. I I laid them out in my book Yes. Because none of them is in a library or written down, you know, the ancient Greeks and you know, the Asian ancient sages, et cetera. All of this sun and all of these people, and Confucius, all these things are written down. These are word of mouth, but they are just as profound. And, you know, one of them that I love, and Bishop Desmond Tutu used to quote it a lot, Archbishop of Cape Town. And, uh, he used to say, I am because you are, and we all help each other become better human beings. So I think it's a way of saying, I've got certain things imprinted on my mind. I I need to step back and think about them and challenge 'em according to my norms and principles of justice and fairness. I think fairness is the governing principle for democracy, for interacting with human beings, for creating a political system that is beneficial to all. And so that's just the way I've began to think about it.

Corey Andrew Powell (33:25):

Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>, you know, your adoration for Proverbs. It's so, um, I I I completely understand it now too, because one of my favorite parts of your book is when you talk about, uh, respect for the elders.

Willie Pietersen (33:39):

Yeah.

Corey Andrew Powell (33:41):

Uh, it's a, it's a big one because, you know, you're basically in this aspect doing that with quoting people like Mandela. We're talking about the teachings of, of Dr. King and the, and the actions he put forth, uh, Bishop Tutu as well. And it resonates with me because I had a situation, my grandfather who he passed away like two years ago now, and in his nineties, but he was born in 1929, and we were ta we were talking about three years ago about his grandkids and some of them who've done really, really well in their careers, in scientific fields and engineering. And, and they were discussing like the homes they were buying, the, the grandkids in and their salaries. And my grandfather was so taken aback by like the, the money <laugh> that he heard his own grandchildren being able to afford in today's world. And he said, I can't believe you kids live like that. I mean, you know, how, how long I would've had to work on a farm to make that kind of money, I would've never done it. And we reminded him that the only reason why any of your grandkids do that is because you worked on the farm.

Corey Andrew Powell (34:47):

And to make sure that your son, who's their father, had a better life than you had. Therefore, he was able to now make sure his kids had a better life. Thus they are engineers and doctors and Right. And he, he had to, you know, I had to make sure he understood he was part of that legacy brought forward, and it made all the difference just that respect of the elder. So I just wanna let, just thank you for that part of the book because, um, I had a personal story that resonated with, with me. So, um, I just really appreciate that. So I wanna make sure I tell you. Well,

Willie Pietersen (35:15):

Good. Well, thank you for mentioning that. Now, as being an elder myself, <laugh> <laugh>, um, I, I sometimes have to remind executives I work with at seminars and so on is to say, listen, I, I don't, I'm old, but I don't know everything

Corey Andrew Powell (35:31):

<laugh>,

Willie Pietersen (35:32):

We have to learn together. Right? I will tell you what I think you must decide what you think you must have agency over your own life. Hmm. I tell you an interesting thing though, on this issue of, uh, of the biases that guide our thinking so often, that often they are hidden from us until we make them explicit through our thinking process. I think it creates self, self-doubt on the part of people, um, who have a different color. Now, when I was running Seagram's USA business, uh, we had, uh, four regional, uh, VPs that were very powerful in the organization running particular regions of the USA and an opening developed in one of the big regions. And there were two candidates. One candidate was a white man, the other candidate was a black man. And I had to make the decision. And, uh, everybody was watching.

Willie Pietersen (36:31):

Everything you do is symbolic as a leader. It's called what I call symbolic fallout to all your actions. Even though you might not say anything, just your behavior does it. And, uh, it was a hard decision 'cause they were both extremely capable people. Uh, the black man, in my opinion, was the better choice because of his interpersonal skills. Uh, he was a good business person, but his people loved him. Leadership is about people. So I chose him, and we had a meeting. He came by my office. He flew to New York, thanked me. We talked about his priorities, and he said, you know, I'm, I'm really aware of the choice that you had to make and the symbolism. He said, did you choose me because I'm a black person and you wanted to create diversity? Hmm. Um, it's a sad question of self-doubt. And I said to him, no, I chose you because you are, you and everybody in this world is unique.

Willie Pietersen (37:43):

Nobody else is like you. And I chose you for the unique contribution that you can make. Please believe in yourself. Now, that was kind of a notable meeting. Now, I was a bit preachy <laugh> say to somebody, believe in yourself. But I said it because soft data is corrosive. I, I didn't want him to go into his leadership role thinking, well, I hope they accept me because I was chosen as a black person to create diversity. And I had to really reassure him. Now, it ended up that he was an, an extraordinarily successful regional VP arguing, uh, arguably one of the, the best of the four. And, um, became a thought leader. They had, uh, quarterly meetings, the four of them, them and I used to leave those meetings. And, uh, his voice was often the voice of wisdom and thoughtfulness. And it was a lovely thing to see.

Corey Andrew Powell (38:46):

Hmm. That's incredible. And I think, um, we have that whole conversation now happening a lot with diversity and, you know, the, the sort of reversal of thought that this idea that people who are, um, being allowed in finally, and executive decisions are just being allowed in because of skin color. Like this sort of idea of like reverse racism, which I find to be completely, uh, I don't discount concerns about that. But you know, the idea is that there's always been equally as talented people just not given the opportunity. So the, the effort is just to allow others to also have the opportunity, not just give them the opportunity because their skin is a, a certain color. Um, but it's fascinating again, that we're in that same place right now in 2024. Yeah. Having those same kinds of conversations. So, um, I, I appreciate your efforts though, and what you've done in that realm. Uh, those are visionary positions and, and visionary, um, those are efforts to make the world a better place by making conscious decisions like that. So it's, uh, it's like you doing your part to balance that scale.

Willie Pietersen (39:58):

Yeah. I think we must, we must all participate in this, um, activity. Um, it is difficult to do because you want to create diversity, but if you appoint somebody who's not qualified for a role Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>, they set up to fail, that compounds the problem. And that's visible. So the way I like to think about it is you need to develop people, diverse groups of people, develop them actively so that they can realize their full potential and then make the appointments on the basis of merit.

Corey Andrew Powell (40:38):

Hmm.

Willie Pietersen (40:39):

And I think then you're doing the right thing if you just wait and don't do anything to develop human beings as they grow in an organization and then make appointments and say, well, this is a bit all male, all white. We better make a difference. Um, that is not the healthiest situation. I mean, they need to be forcing mechanism. And I think the, the original forcing mechanism, this is the development of people and um, and bringing them along and giving them self-confidence and the belief in themselves and doing it very, very deliberately on a diverse and broad basis from the organization. And you'll develop, eventually develop a cadre of diverse leadership that way. But it has to be a systematic and deliberate process.

Corey Andrew Powell (41:25):

Hmm. Excellent. Those are wonderful words of wisdom and inspiration. And I think it transpires into everyday life as well. Not just in organizations, just go through life that way. And, uh, just kind of putting everyone on equal playing field. And I think we'll be better off for it. So Willie Pietersen, what an amazing conversation. Thank you so much for joining me today here on Motivational on Mondays. And uh, the book again is called Leadership. The Inside Story, time Tested prescriptions for those Who Seek to Lead. And I wish you much success and I really enjoyed it, so I recommend it. Thanks for being here today.

Willie Pietersen (42:00):

Thank you, Corey. I enjoyed the conversation.