

Credibility, Context, and the Future of Leadership

Speech for Business Law Program CEC Graduation ~ by Wes Bricker

Good afternoon graduates, faculty, families, and friends. Thank you for the opportunity to be here. My name is Wes Bricker.

I currently serve as PwC's Global Assurance Leader, and I'm especially proud to stand before you as a graduate of American University's Washington College of Law, Class of 2007.

That year...2007...may sound like a long time ago. It does to me as well!

It was the year Apple introduced the very first iPhone...a device that combined a phone, an iPod, and an internet communicator into something entirely new. It didn't have apps yet. It didn't have 5G. But **it fundamentally changed how we connect, how we work, and how we think.**

The Dow Jones Industrial Average that year averaged about 13,170—a sign of a strong economy, at least on the surface. And yet, just beneath that strength were **early signals of the financial crisis that would reshape markets, institutions, and trust itself.**

2007 was a year of **transformation and contradiction. Innovation and disruption. Confidence and risk.**

In many ways, that's the same world you are graduating into today.

I've had the privilege over the course of my career to see this world from a few different vantage points.

I served as Chief Accountant at the SEC during a time when trust in markets and institutions was under intense scrutiny. And now, in my role at PwC, I have the privilege of meeting regularly with business leaders across industries and around the world.

And I want to share something with you—what they're saying.

They're not just talking about **growth.**

They're not just talking about **technology.**

They're not even just talking about **regulation.**

What they are talking about—consistently—is **TRUST.**

They are asking: ***How do we build it? How do we sustain it? And how do we lead in a world where it can be lost overnight?***

And that's where you come in.

Because compliance and ethics professionals are not just rule followers.

You are **TRUST BUILDERS**.

In a world that often emphasizes personal branding and marketability, it's easy to start thinking of yourself as a product.

“What's **my value?**”

“How do I **position myself?**”

“How do I **stand out?**”

And those are fair questions.

But if you see yourself *only* as something to be marketed, you risk missing the much bigger value you bring.

Because what the world actually needs right now is not just talent.

It needs **credibility and context**.

Credibility—because people need to trust not just what is said, but who is saying it.

And context—because in a world overflowing with information, what matters most is understanding what it means.

That's your role.

Not just to know the rules—but to interpret them.

Not just to enforce standards—but to elevate judgment.

And that brings me to something I believe deeply—and a theme I've spoken about before.

You may be tempted to think that your days of learning are over because you're graduating this program. But in fact, **it is a life long endeavor**.

And, it's not something you can plug into AI and expect it to gain instantly, or hand it off to a junior team member to do for you.

Leaders can't delegate learning.

You **cannot outsource your understanding**.

You **cannot delegate your curiosity**.

And you **cannot rely on yesterday's knowledge to solve tomorrow's problems**.

In compliance and ethics, this is especially true.

The rules will evolve.

Technology will evolve.

Risks will evolve.

And increasingly, the hardest questions won't have clear answers.

That's where your judgment comes in.

Your ability to say:

“Something doesn't feel right.”

“Let's take a closer look.”

“Let's challenge this assumption.”

That ability is not built overnight.

It's built through **continuous learning**.

So what does that look like in practice?

It means **staying curious**—even when you're busy.

It means **asking questions**—even when it's uncomfortable.

It means **seeking out perspectives** that challenge your own.

And it means **recognizing that expertise is not a destination—it's a discipline**.

Because the truth is, the most effective leaders I meet are not the ones who claim to have all the answers.

They're the ones who are constantly learning.

Let me also share something else I hear from business leaders today.

They are looking for people who can do three things:

First—**bring judgment.**

Not just technical knowledge, but the ability to apply it in complex, real-world situations.

Second—**bring understanding.**

Understanding of the business, of stakeholders, of the broader environment.

And third—**bring the capability to challenge.**

To **speak up.**

To **ask the hard questions.**

To say, respectfully but firmly, “**We need to think differently about this.**”

That’s not always easy.

In fact, it’s often uncomfortable.

But it’s essential.

Because without challenge, there is no accountability.

And **without accountability, there is no trust.**

So as you leave here today, I want to leave you with three thoughts.

First—**never underestimate the value of your perspective.**

You see things others don’t.

You ask questions others might avoid.

That’s not a limitation—that’s your strength.

Second—**invest in your learning relentlessly.**

Not because someone tells you to.

But because your effectiveness depends on it.

And third—**lead with credibility and context.**

Be the person people trust.

Be the person who brings clarity.

Be the person who helps others see not just what is happening—but why it matters.

Let me close where I began...way back in 2007.

At the time, no one fully understood how much that first iPhone would change the world.

Just like no one fully understood how much the financial crisis would reshape our institutions.

Moments of change are often only obvious in hindsight.

But what *is* clear—right now—is that we are in another moment of change.

And you are stepping into it.

Prepared.

Equipped.

And needed.

So **congratulations.**

Not just on what you've achieved.

But on the responsibility you now carry.

The responsibility to build trust.

To uphold integrity.

And to keep learning—every single day.

Thank you.