

Episode 3 Charlie Baker Podcast Transcript

SPEAKER_03 0:00

I also want to say I read your Wikipedia page. Wow. You have a long biography on Wikipedia. Have you read your page? You need to read it. It is unbelievable. The amount of detail. The amount of detail they go into is insane. Like it's it's like you're you're, I mean, you are a celebrity, but anyway, I learned that you're a Scorpio like me, you're born in November, and you're also left-handed, and that's about where it ends, because I'm 5'1 and you're 6'5.

SPEAKER_02 0:34

Welcome to the USS Constitution Museum Leadership Forum Podcast, where we gather for conversations about leadership that serves, not theory, real decisions, real responsibility, and the values that hold when the stakes are high. In this episode, former Massachusetts governor and current NCAA president Charlie Baker joins Meet Boston President and CEO Martha Sheridan for a candid conversation about pressure, resilience, and what it takes to lead when every decision lands on real people with real lives. You'll hear why Baker believes resilience starts with perspective, why listening is a discipline, especially at scale, and how honest leadership creates cultures where the truth shows up early, not late. From the USS Constitution Museum in the Charlestown Navy Yard, this is Leadership That Serves, Lessons That Endure.

SPEAKER_01 1:36

Good evening and welcome. I'm Jeff Drager, President and CEO of the Museum. Thank you all for joining us. USS Constitution Museum Leadership Forum is where we bring people together around leadership that serves. Not theory, but real decisions, real responsibility, and real values that hold when the stakes are high. Leadership that reflects the honor, courage, and commitment embodied by America's ship of state. For those who are new to us, the museum is dedicated to the story of the USS Constitution and what it continues to represent: a standard of service, resilience, and purpose. Tonight we convene voices from across Greater Boston, across sectors and generations, to listen closely and to carry forward what is useful, timely, and true. Thank you for being a part of it. Now to our featured guests, Martha Sheridan, president and CEO of Meet Boston, will lead this evening's conversation. A seasoned tourism leader, she rebranded the Greater Boston Convention and Visitors Bureau in 22-22 as Meet Boston, strategically evolving and focusing the 1000-plus partner network to build a robust and equitable visitor economy. Under her leadership, Meet Boston has quadrupled its operating budget, introduced the Michelin Guide to Greater Boston, and secured a surge of major conventions and events, including seven FIFA World Cup 2026 matches, the 2023 Army Navy game, Go Navy, fueling great creation, fueling job creations, small business growth, international visibility for Greater Boston, a nationally respected voice, industry voice. Martha holds leadership roles in local, regional, and national organizations, including serving as the chair of the Destinations International Foundation. In 2023, she was named to the Boston Business Journal's Power 50, has appeared in Boston Magazine's 150 most influential Bostonians list every year since 2022. And now, Governor

Baker, since taking the helm as president of the NCAA in 2023, Charlie Baker has pursued a mission to improve student athlete experience, increase national office efficiency, and advocate for college sports. He has rolled out sweeping reforms from post-eligibility insurance and new health and academic guarantees to a landmark ESPN media rights deal, putting student athletes first while safeguarding the integrity of college sports. Of course, we all know him best as Governor Baker. Consistently ranked as the most popular governor in America, he was celebrated for his bipartisan leadership and pragmatic problem solving, guiding the Commonwealth through particularly turbulent times to attain nation-leading rankings in health care, education, and fiscal stewardship. We also know him as a longtime friend of the USS Constitution Museum and are honored to welcome him back home to Boston and this forum. Please welcome President of the NCAA and the 72nd Governor of Massachusetts, Charlie Baker.

SPEAKER_03 4:52

Great, thank you. It's so great to be here, see so many of my friends in this room and support an incredible um venue for Boston tourism over in Charlestown. I want to thank the governor first of all because when we did uh remodel our funding structure, um he was very supportive of that and has allowed Meet Boston and the Greater Boston region to um really rethink how we promote the uh the area and uh, in my words, um put ourselves on a global stage and achieve global domination. So thank you for that. It's been uh it's been a fun ride.

SPEAKER_02 5:31

Before the leadership questions begin, Martha and Charlie do what great leaders often do. They connect as people first. It's light, it's local, and it sets a tone of ease that makes the honest parts possible.

SPEAKER_03 5:44

Um I I had gotten a couple of icebreaker questions, but hearing you talk earlier today to all of our friends in the room about an impending game this weekend, my icebreaker is gonna be what are your thoughts on this weekend's game? All right.

SPEAKER_00 6:05

How could the answer possibly be anything else? The um I do think it's gonna be a low-scoring game. I've said that to a lot of people. I think the that both teams have better defenses than they get credit for, and defense, generally speaking, usually in those games overwhelms offense. So and I think it's gonna be close. I think I think you're gonna have to wait until the very end to figure out who wins.

SPEAKER_03 6:28

All right.

SPEAKER_00 6:28

But it's gonna be the picture of the street.

SPEAKER_03 6:30

You heard it from the expert here. So um we're gonna talk about um kind of uh three buckets of of uh questions and in different categories, but really digging in. I know you most people heard your bio, they all heard your bio and really know a lot about your your life so far, and it's been extraordinary. Um but I really want to talk a little bit about leadership tonight and how you've evolved your leadership style from your your early days in politics through your years as governor, and I I was serving as CEO here, so we interacted quite a bit at that point, and then now in your role at the NCAA.

SPEAKER_02 7:10

Their first chapter goes straight to the hard stuff. What keeps a leader steady when scrutiny is high, emotions are real, and the decisions will be felt everywhere? Their first chapter goes straight to the hard stuff. What keeps a leader steady when scrutiny is high, emotions are real, and the decisions will be felt everywhere? Charlie Baker's answer begins with a reminder that changes the temperature in the room perspective.

SPEAKER_03 7:37

You know, the first area we want to touch on is what we call pressure and resilience, which in this day and age is a um I think a very salient topic for many of us, right? Um so really you've led in some very intense moments, um, obviously COVID and many others, where stake scrutiny and emotions were high, and and your your decisions would be felt by many communities and many with uh sort of disparate um uh stories and priorities. So, you know, what I really want to know is how do you remain resilient and consistent in that type of environment and under the pressure that you're under? And you can answer this in the context of your years as governor, before governor, leading a you know major healthcare organization and as well as leading the NCAA.

SPEAKER_00 8:27

Well, I one of the things that happens if you spend a bunch of your time in public life, which I've done, and you grow up in a family that spent a bunch of time in public life, um, is you meet and you run into a lot of people whose lives have far more pressure than anything you ever imagined. And um when I mean my parents were really big believers in um appreciating what you have and recognizing how lucky you are. And um and part of the way they demonstrated that was by having us when we were kids spend a lot of time doing community service projects for a lot of folks whose circumstances were far more challenging than ours. And and I've always thought that you know Harvard Belgrim was basically on its way into bankruptcy when I took that job. State of Massachusetts was on its way into bankruptcy when I went to work for Bill Well. Um, the state of Massachusetts had all kinds of financial problems when I got here. The NCAA helps splitting up the thousands of little pieces when I got that job. Um but those are nothing compared to a lot of the stuff that my parents exposed us to as kids. And um and to some extent, resiliency is about being able to say, where else would you rather be? You know, are you are you doing something you think matters? Are you trying to fix something that you believe is important? Are you making progress? Do you feel like you have the people around you

who you can count on um as you work your way through whatever this professional challenge is? And and if you and and honestly, if you've got a pretty decent life, that's nothing compared to the kind of resiliency and the pressure and the challenges that so many other people face every single day. And so I always thought this was just a matter of perspective. I'm a really lucky guy. I had a great mom, a great dad, we grew up in a great community, I got a great education, I have great friends, I married way above my pay grade. We have wonderful kids, we live in a great neighborhood. I mean, Jesus, I'm like the luckiest guy in the world. So, how could I ever possibly think, in the midst of all those icky professional situations I found myself in, that there wasn't a way. And that I couldn't stay positive and just work it. And I will say this I, you know, that old joke about the guy who starts to swim across the English Channel, gets halfway across, thinks he can't make it, and swims back. Um the simple truth is more often than not, when you're in the middle of it, the thing you have to focus on is whether or not you're making progress. Is it getting better? Do you think it's better than it was a month ago? Do you think it's better than it was a quarter ago? And if you believe that you're making progress, stay the course. Make adjustments if you need to based on the facts on the ground. But I'm telling you, more often than not, it's it's being stubborn enough to see it through. And, you know, I can't tell you how many times when I was at Harvard Pilgrim, people said, You're never gonna fix this. Or how many you're gonna run out of time and you're gonna run out of money. We could have run out of both. We didn't. Um, when I worked for Weld, we walked in the door, and first thing we did was we met with the creditors who told us that unless we made a staggering amount of progress on dealing with our financial situations, they weren't gonna let the Commonwealth borrow any money and we were gonna go junk. Um we got there. I mean, I this is so much more of a mindset and um and sort of a way of just believing that if not you, who else? And aren't you lucky that you have this chance to try to solve this problem and communicate, talk to people, pay attention to the facts, don't make up your own. But in the end, start with the premise and the proposition that as pressures as you feel, there are people who are in far worse circumstances than you could ever possibly imagine, and somehow they get up every day and go to work and persevere and do what they need to do.

SPEAKER_02 13:11

Next, Martha names what many people remember most about the pandemic. Leaders were often carrying competing responsibilities at the same time. Public health, livelihoods, fear, grief, and urgency all colliding. They weren't always aligned in the moment, but they stayed in conversation. Here's how Baker thinks about empathy, accountability, and the discipline of staying connected to what's happening on the ground.

SPEAKER_03 13:36

Yeah, I, you know, when I started my role and I had this extraordinary funding challenge, and you know, for me, tourism development and promotion, of course, it's about elevating a destination, bringing more people here, heads and beds. But ultimately, what I like to bring my team back to, and Linda's here and she's been working with us a lot, uh, is the fact that why are we doing this? What's the why? And the why is because there's a housekeeper in this hotel, there's a bartender at that restaurant, at you know, Union Oyster Bar or somewhere, that if we do this and we do it right, they're gonna have an extra shift and they're gonna make the money they need to pay their rent this month. So when you get dragged down, and when I started my job and people looked at me as this little woman from Rhode Island, you're never gonna get this bill through the legislature and through the

governor's office. I said, watch me. And we did. So I can certainly appreciate that. And, you know, I've um I've learned a lot in this role in my last seven years, and I think probably for me, you know, one of the most pivotal times was COVID. And, you know, we all know that the tourism sector, you know, and and we know that, you know, lives and and livelihoods were obviously greatly impacted by COVID in so many ways. But, you know, my my perspective at that time was obviously the fact that the tourism sector was one of the most heavily impacted um uh segments. So it it became for all of us that were in that space a very emotional time, right? So you so you had to learn to lead with resilience, but you how could you avoid the emotion of getting, from your perspective, watching, you know, people dying of the disease and trying to figure out the best course forward. Um, you know, from our perspective, it was how do I deal with that small business owner who cannot make it another day without someone walking in their door and buying something? So we were at odds sometimes, I think, in the decisions you had to make and the decisions that the message that I had to deliver. But we just hadn't agreed yet. We hadn't agreed yet. We did ultimately, and we got there. We certainly did. But but I do want to talk a little bit about you know the emotional side of leadership and and how you you deal and wrestle with that.

SPEAKER_00 15:53

So um I don't know how many of you tuned in at noon every day during the pandemic. Um I have all kinds of people used to say they had lunch with Charlie for like a hundred days.

SPEAKER_03 16:06

Every day, every day.

SPEAKER_00 16:08

Um and they were all pissed off about the fact that I kept breaking in on the prices right. But the I got asked a question pretty early on by one of the reporters um in Gardner Auditorium who wanted me to speak to how I felt about the people we were losing. And and I said, because it was the first thing that came to mind to me, I said, you know, my best friend just lost his mom. And um and that was and he lost his mom because she was in an assisted living facility. There's a guy who worked there who she loved. He was infected, but he had no symptoms. This was really early in COVID, before we even understood that there was like all this, all these people would get infected and never show any signs. And um and nine people who he took care of got COVID and died. And um and I I said, you know, Joe's my best friend, and you know, his mom meant everything to him. And I talked about him and her. And I talked a lot about my dad, who I couldn't see for months because I couldn't. And we did everything we could, even going so far as getting the Patriots to fly their plane out of Providence to Anchorage, Alaska, from Anchorage, Alaska to Shezhen, China, from Zhuzhen, China, back to Anchorage, Alaska, back to Massport to get a whole plane load of gear for um our healthcare workers. And you you basically just get into this mode where every day what you're trying to do is make things a little better. And you're paying attention, you're listening, and you're having conversations. And one of the things we learned early on was that the federal uh government's PPI program only worked for businesses that had lots of employees. If you didn't have a lot of employees, this thing didn't work at all. And Massachusetts has a lot of small businesses, retails, restaurants, um, bars, I mean, just all kinds of places like that. And I don't know if you remember this, but we were the

only state in the country that ran a state-funded um relief program for businesses that had less than 25 employees. And um it was \$650 million that went to 15,000 very small businesses. I mean, the Lieutenant Governor and I I mean the dialogue I mean, the thing I wanted most was to not miss shit. Now, we did miss things. And one of the things we missed was what was going on at the Holy Oak Shoulders Home, which I have to live with for the rest of my life. Um, and so do all of the 87 families who lost somebody, every single one of whom I called and talked to at some point um in the intervening two or three weeks. 87 phone calls. Um brutal. Um but I made every single one of them. I didn't pass them off to the staff, and um and the goal was as long as we keep the dialogue and the information flowing back and forth and we pay attention to what people are telling us about what's going on on the ground, we will find a way through this. And we in Hawaii finished way above whoever was third, I don't remember. But you know, Hawaii's an island, for God's sake, and we're not, and it has really nice weather, which we don't. And um I kind of felt like if they graded the thing on a curve, we probably would have finished first. But but the mere fact that we were number one in the continental United States, I think was a tribute to um the fact that everybody kept talking, and everybody kept making what I think of as sort of the best possible decisions they could given the information they had. And if people thought they had something wrong, they changed their mind and they did something. Um we didn't fight over it. We tried really hard to embrace the challenge and stick with it and and be willing to be personal and wrong sometimes, and to accept that we needed to make decisions and change things if we were. But that was, you know. I sure hope I don't ever go through anything like that again. I sure hope no one does.

SPEAKER_03 20:56

Well, we want to thank you for your incredible leadership because it was a challenging time for all, and you really um you deserve all the credit for leading the state through that very difficult time. So thank you for that.

SPEAKER_00 21:06

We had we had we had a lot of leaders.

SPEAKER_03 21:08

A lot of leaders and I was I was one of the vocal voices, and I, you know, I was listened to, so I know that you're not just um you know talking. And and I've learned uh through this process that you, when you took over the NCAA, made it a point to have personal um conversations like you've done in the past in your past roles um with every conference every year, and and really want to hear their feedback. So that's a lot, I know. And I know how passionate people are about their sports. Um and you think PC Friars, PC Friars fan, uh huge big East basketball fanatic. So uh we go into the Seton Hall Providence game next week. Oh, the best. That'll be so much fun. Yeah, that's um I mean actually I'm so Passionate about it that I live in a condo in the South End, and um I say to my husband, I think our neighbors think you're killing me, you're murdering me right now because I'm screaming at the TV. But that's another story for another day.

SPEAKER_02 22:13

If resilience is the ability to stay in it, listening is the way you avoid leading from a distance. Baker moved from governing a state where he knew the landscape to leading an organization where he knew almost no one. His solution was simple and demanding. Show up, make the calls, and build two-way trust.

SPEAKER_03 22:33

So how do you listen at scale? How do you, as the CEO, and again, you're not sending other people to do this, you're doing it yourself. How do you listen at scale and really try and take in all the information that you're gathering from your various um internal constituents?

SPEAKER_00 22:51

Well, in that job, I sort of felt like I had to do that. I mean, people say all the time, what's the difference between being governor of Massachusetts and being the president of the NCAA? And literally one of the biggest differences was I served in the administrations of two governors, right? I was um Health and Human Service Secretary under Weld, I was ANF Secretary under Paul Salucci. I then ran Harvard Medical Associates and then Harvard Pilgrim, ran for governor and lost, um ran and won. And so by the time I got the job, I kind of knew, and I'd served in local government. So I kind of knew all of the players, right? I mean, I knew most of the folks in the legislature, I knew most of the folks um in the business community, I knew most of the local officials. My partner in crime, Lieutenant Governor, knew a whole bunch of people in the legislature and a local government. So, and and they knew me and they knew her, and they knew a lot of the people we brought into our administration. And so, you know, that's really important because one of the things that comes with that is knowledge about like who you can believe, who you can't believe, who really doesn't have the army following them that they say they have, who does have the army following that they say, and you know, and and here I am taking this job at the NCAA where I literally know no one. And so for me, goal number one was to try to create some of the two-way conversation. I mean, I'm not kidding when I say that every municipal official and most folks in the legislature had the lieutenant governor's cell phone in mind. I mean, she and I used to get calls from everybody, and um and everybody who worked in our cabinet knew that. So Jordan will vouch for me on this one. If you didn't call back a legislature, legislator, or you didn't call back a town manager, or you didn't call back a school committee member, the problem for you with that was they were gonna call me or the lieutenant governor, and then we were gonna call you and say, WTF. How come you haven't called those people back? And um and so for me, the point was get in front of as many of these people as I possibly can in my first year and make sure they have my phone number and I have theirs, and they know they can call me about anything, so that everybody who works for me knows that those folks can call me about anything. And um, you know, my parents always said you have two ears and one mouth for a reason. Um, you will learn way more from listening than you'll ever learn from talking. And um and this is no joke. You can talk to almost anybody who works at the NCAA's offices in Indianapolis, you can talk to sort of anybody in Division II or Division III or Division I. And if you ask them, you know, how much of me they've seen in the first three years of my time there versus how much time they saw of any other president whoever had the job forever how long it was, I mean, most of them will tell you that I am way more present than others. And I'm present because I know I don't know it all, and I don't want to be surprised, and I really want to know what's on people's minds so that I don't make big mistakes.

And the ivory tower is a real thing, and a lot of people a lot of people get trapped there, and I spend my whole life trying not to get trapped there.

SPEAKER_03 26:30

Going off script a little bit, just because I'm curious, what was the biggest elephant in the room when you got there? What was something that you knew you had to tackle immediately?

SPEAKER_00 26:42

The um college sports is three divisions, division one, division two, and division three. Division one is where most of the big name brand schools are, and they represent um there's probably there's probably 300 schools in division one, three twenty-five, I think. There are about 70 that fall into the sort of you know the top tier, the ones that you know make 50, you know, 95% of the news, but they represent like 5% of the kids and 5% of the programs. Um but they also generate a significant amount of the revenue that supports the NCAA and all the other folks in D1, D2, and D3. Um I walked in the door, one of the first things I got told was they had a plan to break away from the NCAA. So here I am. I'm new, I don't know anybody. And the first thing I'm being told is that the the biggest dogs in the pound are all walking out the door. And so goal number one was to figure out a governing model that would keep every keep what I refer to as this unhappy family together. And um and we're pretty much there. We're we are we are we are together. Everybody is in a place where people are comfortable. And I used some of the stuff that, you know, I put together a working group. I figured out who the people that everybody believed in and supported across all these different constituents, put them in a group, had a whole ton of good old-fashioned face-to-face meetings where people actually tell each other what they really think. And um and we came up with a governing model that got rid of a whole ton of um what I think of as really I mean, uh, you've never seen an architecture like the NCAA. Oh my God. Um those of us in the room who've worked in government, I'm telling you guys, state government looks like Amazon compared to the way this thing is organized. And um we got rid of about 80 percent of the committees. So now we only have 50 in Division I. And um and we said no committee could have more than 20 people on it. Most of the committees had like 50 people on it. And one of the things you learn when you have committees that are that big and you have that many, no one's accountable for any decision that anybody makes. I would literally have conversations. People say, You were on that committee, why'd you guys do that? Well, I was like one of 50 and went to three other places before it was going to, you know. I mean, this was like unbelievable. And so by making the committee structure leaner and by making the committees smaller, increasing the number of student athletes who serve on all the committees, so their role and participation is enhanced, um, we actually came up with a governing model that most people look at now and say, okay, that looks a lot. It's gonna be and it is translated into people now know if they make a decision, they're accountable for it, which is awesome. That's kind of the way I mean, Sean, when you make a vote, where's Dan? Did Dan stay? Dan left. Just Dan Ryan left. I still love him, he left.

SPEAKER_03 29:50

Um Sean's still here.

SPEAKER_00 29:54

People make when people in the legislature vote, they own it. When I sign or don't sign a bill or I file a bill, I own it. And I wanted this place, it's a governing entity, right? I mean, it runs championships, it does a whole bunch of other things, but fundamentally it also sets the rules. You gotta own the decisions that you make. And part of the reason why the power conferences were leaving was they felt like the governing process in D1 was just too complicated. And they were right, it was. Um so, but I don't think I would have got there if I hadn't done the done the rounds with everybody early on. One of the things I heard early on was that D2 and D3 were having trouble getting officials to certain sports. Don't have officials, you can't have the games. So we went out and we found a company that um the NCAA knew about, which is actually located in Indianapolis, but hadn't ever done much work with. I went and visited them. They brought 25,000 new officials into our world around the United States. We don't have a problem anymore with getting officials to games. Now, that may not seem like a big thing, but to a lot of folks in D2 and D3, that's like the biggest win of all. Because now they don't have to worry about that anymore. And I just think sometimes sometimes the most important thing you can do is shut up and just listen to what other people are talking about and then do something about it.

SPEAKER_02 31:33

Then comes a leadership challenge that sounds basic until you try to do it. Creating a culture where people tell you what's really happening. Baker frames it with one word leaders should never be comfortable with. Surprise.

SPEAKER_03 31:46

So how how do you're clearly a straight shooter and a very honest individual, but you know, I'm sure in the NCAA, in your time as uh in in government, honesty may not have been um a top uh virtue of some of the people that you've had to deal with. So how do you instill the importance of honesty in your team? But also how do you work with your team when you have to give them truths that they may not find convenient for their particular priorities?

SPEAKER_00 32:27

What's the single biggest thing you don't want to do with your teams, your colleagues, your customers, your vendors, your suppliers?

SPEAKER_03 32:39

Lie to them?

SPEAKER_00 32:40

Surprise them.

SPEAKER_03 32:41

Surprise them.

SPEAKER_00 32:42

Lie to them too, but surprise them, right? I mean, and you always want to give them room to respond and react to whatever it is you need to talk to them about. And um of the things we just went through an exercise at the NCAA where um we are helping our membership pay for a couple of lawsuits that we inherited that we settled. And we're doing that because we raised a bunch of money and we also reduced a bunch of our spending. We had a pretty good process where everybody knew what the goals and the objectives associated with the spending process were gonna be. People felt like they had ownership over the decisions they could make. We we did some stuff to soften the blow going into that process. And an organization that basically never gone through an exercise like that before came through it in pretty good shape. And we saved about 45 million bucks, which is not small money. And um and we're gonna be able to use that to help support Division I pay for some legal expenses, and so they won't have to take it out of scholarships and programming and all the rest. And I think um we gave people ownership of the opportunity to solve their problems. We were very clear with people about why we had a problem and what why we needed to do something, and we gave them some runway to figure it out, and um and it worked out pretty well. And I think I remember saying to people at one point early on in my tenure at Harvard Pilgrim, when I could see that thing just literally falling off a cliff, I said, No one is gonna be punished around here. You can't give me enough bad news because I see it already, okay? No one's gonna be punished for delivering bad news unless you sit on it for two or three weeks before you tell me about it. And then it's gonna be trouble. And um and you have to create a culture where people really think you mean that. And, you know, so when someone gives you really bad news in front of a whole bunch of other people, you can't bite their head off. You have to accept it and say, Thank you. Um but you know, the first exercise we did when I got to Harvard Pilgrim, which really was on its way into the harbor, um, was I said to the team, we got all the management team into a room with a big whiteboard like this behind me, and I said, Okay, let's talk about everything that's wrong. We like this long silence. And I said, Come on, guys, you know, we're gonna be hundreds of millions of dollars in the hole by the end of the year. There gotta be some things here that aren't working the way they're supposed to. So people started talking, we started writing, we got to the end of the process, and I didn't make any faces, I didn't, you know, no value judgments, I was just making a list of to-dos. And so this was in July of 1999, right? So I stand back from the board, it's time for lunch, and I said, Okay, so this is it, right? There's nothing else. And people were like, nope, there's nothing else. I said, You're sure? Nope, nothing else. I said, Good. You guys can go um go grab a sandwich, um, come on back, and we'll start talking about how to organize this and prioritize it and figure out how we're gonna deal with it. But this is it. Yep, this is the list, right? So I said, okay, go get lunch. Guy puts his hand up and I said, Yeah. And he goes, We don't have a remediation plan for Y2K. This is July of '99. I mean, almost every other company in the United States had already put their Y2K remediation plan in place by July. I mean, this was but just spent three hours, right? And it was such he knew that this would be like such an unpopular thing, and he also knew that if he came back after lunch and brought it up, that was gonna be a problem. So the point is, most people, if they believe that you will give them grace for being honest about what can work and what can't work, and will help them figure it out. You know, you can you can get through a lot of bad news. That's funny.

SPEAKER_02 37:24

They also carry inertia. In this chapter, Baker offers a useful rule: honor the past because it got you here. Then lead change without making people feel like you're burning down what they built.

SPEAKER_03 37:36

All right, it's just shifting gears a little bit. Um both the NCAA and the Commonwealth are um institutions, if we can call them both that, that are rich in tradition. Yep. Uh a little bit dug in, right? Yep. Um, but both of them, under your leadership, I'm sure, needed vision, needed change, um, which was going to be difficult to accomplish. So how do you balance that retaining that sense of tradition that is so important to your constituents and and your, in the case of the NCAA, your conferences, but yet um fostering change that's needed to bring them up to speed?

SPEAKER_00 38:21

You always gotta honor the past, right? I mean the past the fact that you're still around means the past was pretty good. Um and I think a lot of people sometimes start with the proposition that they have to burn down the past. And you know, more often than not, the people that are in the room that you're talking to while you're talking about burning down the past, they built it. And um and I never understood that. You know, to me, to me, an organization that's struggling is usually not an organization that has always struggled. It's an organization that's going through a thing. And it's going through a thing for a whole bunch of reasons, but it's usually an organization that is done well by the people who've worked at it and the people who've been served by it and the communities it's been part of for a long time. And um so you honor the past and you speak to the fact that there's things that have changed that we have to make adjustments based on, like this, some of these lawsuits we settled, which changed really big things that I would argue the NCA was long overdue in dealing with, the biggest of which was revenue sharing with the kids who played the high revenue sports, which they've been fighting for like 15 years. But I didn't come into it and say, you know, God, you guys suck. I can't believe you've been fighting this thing for 15 years. Shame on you. I said, I think it's really important in this day and age that if kids are going to be making decisions about where they go to school and how NIL works and all the rest, they need to be talking to their schools about that, and their schools need to be allowed to talk to them about that because their schools in many cases will help them make better decisions. Period. Nothing about no blame here. Let's just figure out how to figure out what the right answer is going forward. And I think there's like this tendency sometimes to want to burn down everything that came before you because you think that's gonna help sell the future. And I think just the opposite. I think I think most people who work in most organizations, you know, are there because they believe in that organization and they want to know that you believe not just in its future, but also in the work that people did, even if they're struggling through a particular period now. I mean nobody bats a thousand, right? I mean, the best baseball players in the world, Ted Williams, right? 400, last guy that ever hit 400. It's okay.

SPEAKER_02 40:56

At this point, Martha asks the question a lot of sports fans have been waiting for. And Baker answers with maximum clarity.

SPEAKER_03 41:04

I have to just ask this NCAA question out of curiosity. You you brought up like the compensation issue, which obviously has been a game changer and a very bold big change for the NCAA.

SPEAKER_00 41:16

Biggest thing since Title IX.

SPEAKER_03 41:17

How about transfer portal?

SPEAKER_00 41:19

Fucking hate it. Um the transfer portal is a really great example of what happens when one school wants to break one rule. Okay? So the transfer portal that we put in place after I got there was pretty simple. Every student athlete could transfer once and play right away. If you wanted to transfer more than once, there had to be some and play right away. There had to be some extenuating circumstance. The coach left. Um, somebody in your family died and you need to move closer to home. You know, something that was like a big reason for why you would you could transfer, right? Fine with a second transfer, but if you transfer a second time, you're not going to be able to play right away unless there's a really significant reason for why you need to make that second transfer, because every time you transfer, you fall behind. And if there's one thing the NCAA is very proud of, is the fact that college kids graduate who play college sports at a higher rate across every economic and demographic group you can think of at a higher rate than kids who don't play college sports. And that's not the way it was 15 years ago. That's really important. So that was the rule. And I think most people thought it was a pretty decent rule. Um, West Virginia wanted to get a basketball player who would have been transferring for the third time in three years, who had huge academic issues. And part of the reason he was transferring to West Virginia is because they don't really have, um, because they're a state school, they don't really have a bar you gotta climb over to get in. I mean, they'll basically almost anybody can get in, which is fine. Um, but we didn't give them a waiver for that kid to play right away because we said, so he transferred twice, and he's way behind. He needs to catch up. And West Virginia had the attorney general, who was a West Virginia grad, sue us in court in West Virginia in front of a judge who was a West Virginia grad. Um, and they got three or four other AGs to come in and join the suit. And the decision that came out of all that from the judge was everybody can transfer once a year and play right away. Now, we said at the time that's gonna create a lot of problems around team chemistry, team culture. Um Progress to graduation? I mean like. Um but the answer was basically no, this is the deal. And what's really interesting about this? Two things. Number one, a reporter went back to the four AGs, five AGs, who signed this deal originally and drove this deal. Four of them would not talk to the reporter. The fifth one said, the transfer portal is a train wreck and it's sucking the life out of college sports. To which I said, well, yeah. Dude. And I said, you want, you know, we will meet with you whenever you want to talk about making a change to that settlement slash injunction if you think we could do better. And I'm curious to see if they ever go there. But I talk to a lot of kids who don't like the everybody can transfer once a year thing. Because they can't create any kind of chemistry and they can't build the kind of continuity in their own programs. Now I think kids should be able to transfer. I'm all in. Transfer all, transfer as much as you want. But if

you're gonna transfer multiple times, you gotta keep up with your academic requirements. And um and we'll see how that one plays out. But you know, the the funny thing to me is I have all these coaches and and and kids and and ADs all saying, God damn it, the transfer policy ought to be you can transfer once, play right away, but if you transfer more than that, it's gotta have some extenuating service. I'm literally like, guys, that was the policy in 2024. Which was taken away by the courts. So I don't like the current policy. I think it's I think in the in the long run it will be bad for kids. But um but it is this the result of a one student athlete, one school, one state, one decision. These decisions create precedents. And I, you know, I say to people all the time you know, the membership makes the rules. You may not love the rules, but come help the membership change the rule to make it better. If you go to court and you do this, you create a dynamic that's really hard to get out of. Like we're having all these issues with eligibility decisions right now. The case that started the eligibility conversation was in 25. That case won't go to trial until 27 and won't get decided until probably 28. So in the meantime, you know, we gotta juggle the balls associated with what's going on there, recognizing that um it's gonna be a while before that process will give us clarity.

SPEAKER_03 47:02

Well, we wish you success in overturning that because I think from my perspective and being from a region where you know our in particular our basketball teams are not Big Ten or the middle of the road teams, they can they'll never they're never gonna get that Cinderella experience because that superstar has always got the ability to move on to what they're doing. And they should be able to go.

SPEAKER_00 47:23

They should be able to go once, play right away. And if the coach leaves, they should be able to play right away.

SPEAKER_03 47:27

Right. So well, good luck with that. All right, so I'm gonna ask you.

SPEAKER_00 47:30

I will say this, it does create some uh some parody. I mean, you would never have had Indiana and Miami playing in the national football championship under the old system. Just couldn't have happened. Um and I I think that's a good thing. Um but like I said, there's a good thing, and then there's too much of a good thing, which in this case I worry will have consequences down the road for a lot of kids. And and I was the first person to propose RevShare by the schools. I did it six months after I got the job. So I am not one of the stick in the muds about that. I'm all in on that. I think you play in a sport that makes a lot of money, you should definitely benefit from that. Um, but I do worry that we're gonna end up with a whole bunch of kids who a couple years, three, four years from now, are gonna be a long way away from getting their degree.

SPEAKER_02 48:30

To close, Martha invites Baker to step back from policy and positions and name the legacy he hopes his leadership leaves behind. It's not a list of accomplishments, it's a portrait of how he tried to show up and what he hoped people felt while doing the work alongside him.

SPEAKER_03 48:47

Alright, final question of the night. When people look at your career, what's the one thing you hope they take away from your journey?

SPEAKER_00 48:59

Well, I certainly hope that people think I made the places that I worked with and at better. Um I hope people think I was a better listener than anything else. Um I hope people think I was approachable. Um and I and I and I hope that um I don't I hope my I hope my intentions, I hope I hope people believe that my intentions, even if they didn't agree with me or they thought I got something wrong, it wasn't because I was trying to do something for myself. It was because um they just disagreed with where I went or why I went there. But believed that I was trying to do what I thought was the right thing. Um in public life, especially, um the whole name of the game is public service, right? You're supposed to be there to serve the people who put you there. And you know, you should walk out of that job, hopefully richer, for a whole bunch of reasons that have nothing to do with money. And um and I really hope for the folks that have had a chance to work with me or get to know me, or I mean I'll tell you something. You know, when we have reunions of the people I worked with in state government in the 90s, and we have reunions with people I worked with at Harvard Pilgrim in the 2000s, and we have reunions with people that served in my administration. Um people thought those were pretty good times. Um and they they still have bonds and and and relationships that have lasted in some cases decades. And I think that's because people felt like they were pulling the oar in the right direction for the right reasons. And and at the end of the day, I think that's what people want more than anything else is to feel like you know they get the mission, they believe in the objective, they see the path forward, and they got a bunch of teammates who they believe can help them get there.

SPEAKER_03 51:11

That's fantastic. I'm guessing Dan Ryan's not gonna be invited to the next reunion.

SPEAKER_00 51:17

Shame on Dan. You tell them that, right, Sean? Shame on Dan.

SPEAKER_03 51:21

All right. That uh what a what an incredible conversation. I I do want to close with a a little bit of a self-serving comment. Um Meet Boston's in the mix for several tournaments in 20 from 29 through 31. So, you know, if you have any sway, let us know what you can send our way.

SPEAKER_00 51:42

By the way, the soccer, the fact that we got a whole bunch of World Cup soccer games here is pretty goddamn cool.

SPEAKER_03 51:55

But I want to thank you for this conversation. I, you know, I wish I could have sat here and taken some notes because you had some nuggets that I would love to have written down from my own leadership um journey. But um I really appreciate having spent this time with you, and I I want to have you all give a big round of applause. Applause to W. Baker.

SPEAKER_02 52:25

You've been listening to the USS Constitution Museum Leadership Reform Podcast. This episode featured NCAA President, the former Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker, in conversation with me, Boston President and CEO Martin Sheridan. Recorded live at the USS Constitution Museum in Charlestown Media. If this conversation gave you a takeaway you want to carry with you into your own leadership, share this episode with someone you trusted. And if you value gatherings like the leadership form, consider supporting the museum through membership. You can learn more at usscm.org. USS Constitution Museum presents the leadership form. Produced by the USS Constitution Museum, recorded and mixed by Travis Grant. Music license from the Music Red and the Lens Discovery Museum. Copyright USS Constitution Museum. The Leadership Forum returns in fall 2026 with more conversations featuring leaders in service, civic life, and business. Thanks for listening.