

Thomas E. Will

This professor knows that preparing students to adapt to change is smart business.

BY JOANNA NESBIT

Thomas E. Will, professor of business management at Agnes Scott College, can pinpoint the moment he shifted his teaching methodology. The year: 2014. The event: a week-long program at the Harvard Kennedy School. The topic: “The Art and Practice of Leadership Development.” The takeaway: Many professionals struggle with immunity to change in the workplace, but thoughtful training and education can help address the problem.

“I wasn’t a leadership guy when I signed up for the course,” Will says. “But that program completely changed what I saw as my purpose. I felt like in one week I understood what was really keeping people and organizations stuck in a way I had never understood by just studying it at the academic level.”

Will, who joined Agnes Scott in 2006, had focused on business strategy throughout his career, including his doctorate at the University of Georgia. However, discovering adaptive leadership strategies upended everything he understood about organizations and the people who ran them. Will suddenly had a framework to address why professionals often have an aversion to change and why new ideas are difficult to adopt.

Will had already been working with other faculty members to develop the leadership development program in the then-new SUMMIT core curriculum, which emphasizes leadership development and global learning. During his week at Harvard, he realized he needed to alter his methodology. His new focus would help his business students tackle personal growth while studying effective business leadership. It’s deep work that even seasoned

business professionals struggle to put into practice.

Will used his new knowledge to launch a class on adaptive leadership for Agnes Scott students. Adaptive leadership is defined by a leadership style that incorporates taking feedback and the ability to shift direction as needed.

“For my students, I will have them identify one thing they’d like to get better at, things like speaking up in class, taking risks, or getting better at saying no and establishing boundaries,” Will says.

Using a constructive-developmental psychology lens, Will helps students understand that impediments to their growth aren’t really cognitive — that making real change is more complicated than simply knowing what you need to do. As Will explains it, everyone has a self-protective reason for not making a change. That’s the immunity-to-change phenomenon.

“I help students understand the self-protective nature of their wiring and have them go out and test some of the assumptions they’ve developed,” Will says. “We design these small, safe tests of students’ assumptions that they can take into their internships, jobs, classes and their lives.”

Assumptions might be that saying no to a request for your time makes you look selfish or unlikable, or that asking questions makes you look incompetent. A test might involve asking your internship supervisor a question when you would normally stay silent, and then recording how the supervisor reacted, how you felt and how long that feeling lasted.

“With this framework, I can help students anticipate the developmental

challenges they will have in the workplace,” Will says.

Will also teaches a class in entrepreneurship, a senior seminar in strategic management, and an internship course. Until 2026, he directed Agnes Scott’s Bridge to



As Will explains it, everyone has a self-protective reason for not making a change. That’s the immunity-to-change phenomenon.

“I will have (students) identify one thing they’d like to get better at, things like speaking up in class, taking risks, or getting better at saying no and establishing boundaries.”

— Thomas E. Will, Agnes Scott College professor of business management

Business summer program, a three-week intensive program that enables students to explore various business topics, including marketing, strategy, accounting and finance. Not surprisingly, Will asks students to examine their assumptions about business.

“An organization needs all kinds of people with all different interests and passions to function,” Will says. “I ask students to be open to possibilities for themselves that they might have been inclined to write off early on.”

He has also applied his new adaptive leadership expertise to the business world outside of campus. Will is a senior consultant and executive coach at The Developmental Edge, a small group partnered by Harvard professors Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey. He also facilitates developmental workshops directly with clients through his own

consultancy, Growth at Work LLC, and at The University of Georgia’s Terry Executive Education Center in Buckhead.

His experience coaching adults through professional sticking points — such as difficulty delegating because they do not want to be disliked or perceived as unaccountable — deeply informs how he teaches business education classes. Coaching management professionals “who have hit their own developmental walls” enables Will to see where his students are going.

But Will has recently turned his lens on his own profession, publishing research that explores how academics might also benefit from an adaptive leadership framework.

“Professors can be prisoners of their own need to always be the expert — a lot of us could use developmental work at that level,” Will says.

