

Mike Paton:

Leadership is more important now than ever before. The entrepreneurs are natural leaders. It's time to step, take control of your business and decide to do your very best as a leader, right now.

Hello, this is Mike Paton with the Lead Now Podcast. And today I have the great pleasure of speaking with Rob Dube. Rob is the president and co-founder of imageOne, an award winning print management company that specializes in helping clients optimize a managed print, automate their process and secure documents. Rob is a speaker, author, and hosts the Leading With Genuine Care Podcast. Welcome to the show, Rob. Thanks for taking time.

Rob Dube:

Thanks Mike. It's such a pleasure. I'm really grateful to you for inviting me on today. It's an honor.

Mike Paton:

It's absolutely my pleasure. Do me a favor and start by sharing with the listener when your entrepreneurial journey began?

Rob Dube:

Well, it was in ninth grade with my best friend and my current business partner, Joel Pearlman. We started selling Blow Pop lollipops out of our locker. We bought them for a nickel from Joel's uncle who owned a drug store, and we sold them for a quarter out of our locker in high school and great product, great margins, never seen anything like it since. They were lined up down the hallway. And then, we did a lot of things in between that time and graduating from college. And after we graduated college, we started our company and we're still at it.

Mike Paton:

20% cost of goods sold in high school. Well done.

Rob Dube:

For sure.

Mike Paton:

Bring us up to the present day, if you would, from the Blow Pop adventure to starting your first company out of college, give us the imageOne story too.

Rob Dube:

Yeah, so we started in '91, out of a basement. For the first eight or nine years we really didn't know how to run a business, what we were doing, we were tripping over ourselves. You and I were speaking beforehand and I mentioned how impactful EOS is been. So I say this from my heart, we had an opportunity to meet Gino Wickman. The reason we met him was we had purchased an IT services company and the acquisition wasn't going well. And this was a small acquisition. It was nothing major to say... It just wasn't integrating well. Someone introduced us to Gino, and this was actually before EOS was EOS, and he gave us some great advice, which you will probably appreciate, which was, "Stay focused," and gave us a book called Focus by Al Ries. And we took it to heart and we undid that acquisition, took our lumps, both ego and financial, and stayed focused ever since.

Not soon after we started working with Gino and with his process, which has evolved since then, but it was pretty much the same then. He was the first person that brought core values to our awareness. And I remember our first session with him and he said, "Today, we're going to spend most of the day uncovering your core values." And I remember saying... I came with a list and I had a notepad and I said, "It's like a mile long here and can we get through these first and then we'll talk core values?" And he in very Gino fashion, he said, "Give me a little blind faith. Go with me on this for the morning and if by afternoon, it isn't resonating, we'll go to the issues." Obviously it very much resonated and we really transformed our company over the next several years in working with him.

And so much so, in 2004, we were approached by a company, a public company, and they were interested in acquiring us, and we did ultimately sell. Two parts of the story I like to share about that. First is when we were getting towards the tail end, the president of that company asked us to come down and meet with the board of directors and the executive team to kind of talk a little bit about our company. And at the time, it was in my early-ish 30s and I was very intimidated. And I said to the president, "What exactly do you want us to talk about?" And he said, "You know what? Tell them how about how you're operating the company. That process that you were telling us about? Just do that." And we made up a PowerPoint describing how this whole thing works.

And after the meeting, he came up to me and he said, "That was great. They loved it. I mean, the feedback has been so positive and we should do something like that here." And we also, we did sell the company, went through, we did receive higher multiples. And I truly believe that was because we were operating the business very well. And I attribute that very much to EOS. In 2006, we bought the company back and we've been focused ever since at the same thing we were doing before we sold it. We've just been laser focused on growing the company and our core competencies.

Mike Paton:

Awesome. So before I start diving more deeply into little snippets in your timeline there, which I think is going to fill our entire time together, tell me and the listener, what do you do? Who are your clients? How big are you today, Rob?

Rob Dube:

Yeah. So we provide managed print services as you said, at the outset, which is multi-function printers, copiers, software solutions to help keep these devices secure, and help people print less. Today, that's easier for our customers than it ever has been. And the reason for that is COVID. They're not in their offices. As you and I speak today, and I don't know when this will be live, but as you and I speak today, our business has been significantly impacted by COVID. We're down 40%. This year, we would have been on track to do about 20 million in sales.

We were making an acquisition at the beginning of March, which we were literally just at the goal line, and called it off. Thank goodness we did call it off. And so, this has been a really emotional and impactful time for us. I'm proud to say that we stayed very resilient. We've kept the team together, all the while being very mindful of keeping the company healthy. We've pivoted. We now have a line of smart health solutions, which include things like a temperature and facial kiosk and a device that helps organizations and facility departments better organize their workspaces and better manage their workspaces. And so, those are two products in our product lines that have been very impactful for us so far.

Mike Paton:

Yeah. Cool. Let's go back to the early days when you first decided to ask Gino for help. Or volunteer to be helped by Gino, however that all played out. What was it that instigated that? That's an unusual move for an early stage entrepreneur. We have this sort of rugged individualist mindset. So what made you feel like getting help from an outside expert might be valuable?

Rob Dube:

I think Joel and I are lifelong learners, so we were trying to figure things out and get help for a good eight-nine years. Just nothing was really clicking for us.

Mike Paton:

Got it.

Rob Dube:

And when Gino came into the organization and the way it was organized, it just clicked. That's all I can say. For our minds, it just clicked. And it has ever since. I have no learning curve with it. It works for us and for me.

Mike Paton:

Yeah. Got it. Describe you, and maybe Joel, or just yourself as leaders before implementing EOS versus leaders afterwards?

Rob Dube:

Yeah, I think before we were more command and control and passive-aggressive. I think our egos were way too in it. And that was a clash of the two of us, which didn't bode well for our culture. Post EOS, I think we started to let our guard down and become maybe more of our true selves, being more open and honest about our feelings, being willing to be more vulnerable and show some humility. And I think that was one of the key things that EOS helped us bring out. And more significantly, a lot of people stuff, starting with the two of us. What were our roles, where do we fit? What were our strengths and how could we appreciate our strengths? And I think once we got comfortable with that, the rest fell in place very nicely.

Mike Paton:

Yeah. Yeah. Do you remember a major transition from that command and control? Your first option is doing it yourself or barking orders at somebody. Do you remember a moment where you transitioned from that way of leading into a different, more vulnerable, more open, more collaborative format?

Rob Dube:

Yeah. It's when I read a book called Small Giants by Bo Burlingham, and that was right around the time we were given the opportunity to buy our company back. And through reading that book, I learned that there are other entrepreneurs out there that have a management style that felt more true to who we were. Prior to that, and especially being in the Detroit area, there's a lot of old school automotive companies here. And there's a lot of strife between management and workers. It's more modern nowadays, I think, but just back then, some of the people that we were associating with were, they were tough leaders. And they just had a certain way and it was command and control and that's just the way it went and that just wasn't working for us.

Mike Paton:

Yeah. For the listener who's listening and saying, "I wonder what kind of leader I am?" What are some of the things you were feeling or experiencing that in hindsight is a sign you're a command and control leader?

Rob Dube:

I think when I was taking command and control actions outwardly, but inwardly, it didn't feel right. So if you're able to feel into your actions, there's something that your gut and your heart can tell you if you're paying attention.

Mike Paton:

Yeah. Nicely said. And then, conversely, when you're leading collaboratively and you're open, honest and vulnerable, and you're engaging your people in problem solving and moving the organization forward as a team, what does that feel like? What would I recognize as that kind of leader?

Rob Dube:

Well, for me, it feels like flow. It just feels like you're empowering your team. We all have very talented people and quite frankly, the only thing in their way is you. And so, if you can get out of their way, they can take you places you could have never imagined.

Mike Paton:

Yeah. That's great to hear. When you're stuck as a leader, what's your ritual? How do you get yourself unstuck?

Rob Dube:

Well, I have a regular meditation practice and that has served to be very useful for me. It helps me become aware of my thoughts, be curious about what's going on in my mind without trying to solve it, but just letting it take course, and then taking myself back to the present moment and being grateful for this moment right here, right now. And I think that's been one of the more useful tools that I have in my leadership is just the ability to go back to that.

Mike Paton:

Do you find the meditation practice shuts off the competing voices in your head that sometime contribute to being stuck?

Rob Dube:

I don't know if it shuts it off, but I have permission to let them go at it, without judgment, and without trying to solve it or stop it. And so, usually when we're grasping on hard, it makes the flame go higher. And so, but when we allow it to be and just recognize it and be okay with frustration, I mean, that's a useful emotion. Anger is actually a useful emotion. We just don't like the way they feel. And so, we do things to try to get away from it, and usually it works against us. And so, when we just allow them to be and serve their purpose... And that means again, not trying to push them away or not trying to grasp at the feelings we like, usually it plays out quite well.

Mike Paton:

Gosh, really well said. Your role in the organization today?

Rob Dube:

Yeah, so, I realized probably at least five years ago that I think I had hit a ceiling as integrator. I didn't really feel like we could take the company to another level with me being in that position. And that was really a great feeling to recognize that and know that we really needed to bring somebody on who was a stronger leader than I was, and who could take us to the next level. So that started our pursuit and we found somebody, and I feel very fortunate and extremely grateful that through a series of unlikely, but likely events... As you know, things happen for a reason.

Mike Paton:

That's right.

Rob Dube:

We met our current president and integrator Josh Britton, and he is the person who will be taking us to the next level without question. And then, I could move into a role that better suited me and my strengths at this point and time in my life.

Mike Paton:

And that is?

Rob Dube:

That is, I am a co-CEO with my business partner, Joel, and he has some very unique skills on the visionary side where he's super creative. He's great with the deals and with the customer interactions. On my side, I can see out into the future. I'm connected to that future. I feel very strongly about what our capabilities are and our ability to get there. And also culture. I'm very creative when it comes to how we can integrate things within our culture that can become part of who we are on a regular basis and not a shiny thing that we do for a quarter, or for a month, and then kind of floats away.

Mike Paton:

So you and Joel, the founders have split the visionary seat into two distinct roles, and you each fill a role working together with your integrator or chief operating officer? Or president, you said?

Rob Dube:

He's our president.

Mike Paton:

Yeah. To run the business. And as I like to say, keep the trains running on time. Correct?

Rob Dube:

Yep. Exactly.

Mike Paton:

Awesome. Awesome. And then tell us about the rest of your leadership team. What are the other major functions and who are the other people you rely on to grow this business?

Rob Dube:

Yeah, so we have our finance side of things. We have a controller there, Emily Kmita, and then we have our sales and marketing side of things with Grace Andres who joined our team in January. And she has proven to be a leader times a hundred, because she didn't know she was going to get into this situation where we'd have a pandemic, and her job would be amplified and then some with the sudden drop and deep drop of revenue.

Mike Paton:

Yeah. So a 40% drop in revenue is a crisis, whether it's caused by a global pandemic or not.

Rob Dube:

That's right.

Mike Paton:

And so, let's talk about leading in a crisis. And how is that different and what have you and your teammates done to respond as leaders?

Rob Dube:

Yeah, well, first I'll say, we're doing our best in uncharted waters. So I hope it all is the right stuff, but a lot of it might not be, and hopefully some of it is good. What happened was in the middle of March, we recognized that we were going to have a situation happen pretty quickly. And so, we went to the team and we showed them the math. We happen to practice open book finance. So I felt like we had a leg up there because we didn't have to teach them the math. They understood the math. And so, we could do the math problems and show them what this was going to look like. And then once you go into normal cost cutting, all the everyday regular stuff, and you go as deep as you can go and then some, the next thing that is a major expense for most companies, certainly for ours, is payroll.

And so, there's two ways, or there's many ways you could deal with that, but a couple of ways, is you could do layoffs, or you could reduce the number of people in the company, or you could do pay reductions, and so on. And so, we went to the team and we said, "Here's some ideas, but what we're going to do is break you off into groups and you're going to come up with the best idea. And whatever that idea is, we're going to look at that as a leadership team and figuring out if that makes sense for us, and how we might be able to make that happen." And that's what we did. And the team agreed to pay reductions with a program in place where if things turned around later in the year, which at that time there was a lot of hope it would, that we would have a program in place to get their loss pay back. And that seemed really fair for everybody and to keep the company healthy.

Of course, we had the PPP and that was super helpful. But, as things progressed, we were pretty clear that for us, it was like a stop gap. It was something that was nice, that was going to help, grateful for it. It did help, but we had to go right back to the same program. So we're back on that. So what do we do in the meantime? So we have, since the outset, five things that we track on our scorecard every single week. And that was to ensure that the company stays healthy, that we keep the team together, and that we ensure that we are all participating and keeping each other connected, cared for and informed. And so, that's been sort of our mantra each and every week. Are we hitting that? Are we

nine or above on that? Or eight and a half and above on that? We've been nine or above but our goal is eight and a half or higher. And so, at a high level, those are some of the things that we started with and that we continue.

Mike Paton:

And so you're implying this, but I'm going to ask, people on a regular basis, are we doing those things well? And they're rating it on a score of one to 10?

Rob Dube:

That's right.

Mike Paton:

Lovely. So when in doubt ask, can we call that a leadership maxim, Rob?

Rob Dube:

I love it. Yeah, for sure.

Mike Paton:

That's great. That's great stuff. And then, tell us what the outlook is for you? You've talked about some pivoting things and we're done talking about W's or U's right now. And so, so how are you feeling right now about the future of the business and your team?

Rob Dube:

Well, our outlook is that for our business, this could go well into next year. And so, we've brought on this smart health line that we've put together and that has some longterm stick and then some short-term help. And so, we're watching that and we're adding and taking away from that as we see needs in the market. So, that has yet to play out where I could say that's gotten us to the right point, because for us at this point, it's really just a revenue game. As long as we can maintain our margins, it's just a revenue game for us. Just get that revenue to a certain point. At the same time, we're doing things like looking at potential acquisitions, potentially in the industry to pick up that revenue and synergize very quickly. There may be some smaller companies out there that are struggling when the PPP kind of runs out for them.

So that's one strategy we're looking at, but we're also looking at complimentary products that can serve us in the longterm. There are certain criteria that we put into place. And as part of our 2026 vision, we knew that our business would change, and we knew we'd be in a different business. We actually state that in our 2026 vision. We just didn't think it would come so soon and so abruptly. But hey, sometimes that's what you need. You need a swift kick in the butt to get it going. And so we're actually quite energized.

The financial part of things, we're staying profitable through the pay reductions, and that's important to us. We have a keen eye on cash and our quick ratio and, of course, receivables. Making sure that our customers are healthy. And so, we're just trying to keep a close eye on every single thing. And I heard a talk... I'll just end with this. I heard a talk recently from an organization that I'm part of, and we had our virtual summit, and one of the companies and the person who was doing the talk also was quite impacted. And he said, "I'm staying on one leg, very firmly planted, and I'm letting the other leg just dance around."

Mike Paton:

Yeah. Well, it is hard to back a single horse in times of real uncertainty about what the future holds, particularly if you're serving people with workplaces, because there's a lot of question marks about that. Totally get it. Which of the EOS tools did you find most comforting or helpful in your response to this crisis?

Rob Dube:

Oh, you're probably not going to love this answer, but I actually think, and I think this is sort of how we work around imageOne. It's a lot of little things that add up to a lot.

Mike Paton:

Yeah.

Rob Dube:

And to me, the entire process is a lot of little things that add up to a lot. So, what we had in place was a strong foundation. And when you have a strong foundation, you can better get through these sorts of times because you're not trying to get a scorecard up to speed or determine who the right people in the right seats are, and who gets it once it has the capacity to do it. You're trying to do these things. You're not trying to figure out your meeting rhythms. Those things are in place. You might be enhancing them or shifting them slightly.

Like in our case, we decided to meet more regularly, so our rhythms are more frequent. We put new things on the scorecards. Other things weren't as significant as they used to be. We had people conversations, but it was easy to have those conversations. And the last thing I'll say is, the ability to IDS, identify, discuss, solve. I mean, when you're already good at that, I mean, the amount of decisions that we've had to make over those last five months has been unbelievable. My mind sometimes feels just so drained at the end of the day, but I couldn't imagine if we didn't have that muscle already sort of built. I mean, I don't even know, I couldn't even imagine where we'd be.

Mike Paton:

Yeah. One of the other people I've interviewed recently said, "I've been operating my business in crisis since I started it. So what's a new crisis to add to the mix? I still got to make decisions. I still got to generate revenue. I still have..." Yeah. So, once you have that mindset, the stuff you don't control just gets factored into the machine. So, let's talk a little bit more about you, Rob. I've had the pleasure of knowing you for many years, and I know you have a great close friendship with my good friend and business partner, Gino. How have you found your development as a leader in your business influences your life outside the business as a family person, a member of your community, a leader in your other passions?

Rob Dube:

That's a good question. I think for me, one of the things is doing my best to lead a, I want to say, balanced life. But we always say at the company, it's not a work-life balance, it's just balance. So how do you integrate that into your everyday interactions with your family, your friends, and of course, your business? And of course, for those of us that are entrepreneurs, business leaders, business is such a big part of our life. And so, how do you switch gears and sometimes having to do that quickly? And I guess, what I'd sort of learned for myself is first of all, I don't always need to necessarily switch gears.

That's a part of who I am and what my day's been like, and so it's okay to share things that have felt impactful to me, whether they be frustrations or celebrations. But I think also really just tuning into my family and my friends and being curious about them and always being sure to be fully present and deeply, deeply listen to them and what's happening in their lives. And sometimes when... I know in entrepreneurial community, some that I meet, they can't turn it off and they can't even go there no matter how hard they try. So, that is a practice. And it's one that I think I'll have to practice forever.

Mike Paton:

Yeah. Welcome to the club. Thanks for that. Thanks for that gentle nudge. I'm occasionally guilty of that myself. If you were to give a young leader... Fast forward backwards to your early days as a leader and the journey you've been on, what one piece of advice would you want them to hear that would make them a better leader?

Rob Dube:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). I think to just be really open, honest, vulnerable, transparent. People will bend over backwards to help you once they feel your authenticity. If everything's always great, you know that that's not true. And so, I think that's whenever I'm working with a young entrepreneur, somebody in a startup mode or early on in the first five years or whatever it might be, I'm always looking for the authenticity. What are the challenges that you're dealing with? Because I know you have a thousand of them and if you're not sharing with me, I'm not really sure how I can help you.

Mike Paton:

Yeah. Great advice. Thank you, Rob. What a wonderful conversation. I want to first say thank you for spending time and being generous and vulnerable with our listener. And then I want to make sure anybody who wants to learn more about you or imageOne can find information. Where should we go to learn more about you or imageOne?

Rob Dube:

Thank you. Thank you for having me, Mike. I really appreciate it. Imageoneway.com is our website. It's all spelled out image O-N-E way dot com. And I also have a book, the donothingbook.com; that's donothingbook.com. And you can find information about the book and the retreat and my podcasts there.

Mike Paton:

And I have a copy on my bedstand and my wife is very grateful that you wrote it, Rob.

Rob Dube:

Oh, that's so sweet. I love it.

Mike Paton:

Thank you very much.

Rob Dube:

Thank you for sharing that.

Mike Paton:

So, and I'll close with this. Please share this episode with a friend. If you know somebody who would benefit from the conversation I had with Rob today, and become a better leader themselves, I hope you'll share it with them and spread the word. The last thing I'll say is thank you all for listening. Remember that the world needs entrepreneurs and leaders to lead now more than ever. And I'm hoping the time Rob and I spent together helps make that happen for you. Have a great day.

If you got value from today's episode, do me a favor, share the episode with a friend. If you know someone who would benefit from the conversation I had today, make sure to share it with them.