

Speaker 1:

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

Mike Paton:

Hello everybody. This is Mike Paton with the Lead Now Podcast, and I'm really excited to bring you Natalie Standridge today. Natalie is the CEO and founder of Casa de Corazón and early life Spanish immersion program and childcare provider focused on environmental consciousness, compassionate teaching and intercultural learning. In 2017 Natalie took her business to the next level and founded Casa Franchising, which trains mentors and supports other business people interested in making a difference to children in their communities. Natalie leads with great attention to the present and future of the children she educates, her community, and all she employs. Natalie, thanks for making time for us today.

Natalie Standridge:

Thank you so much for the invitation. It's an honor.

Mike Paton:

Yeah. Great. So tell the listener a little bit about the businesses you've built, Casa de Corazón and the franchising operation. Maybe give us a little two minute history if you would.

Natalie Standridge:

Sure. So I began the program in 2002, so it's been 18 years that I've been owning and operating early childhood education programs with this Spanish immersion and intercultural model. I have infused pretty much all of my values as a parent into the program with everything from scratch made organic ingredients, locally sourced foods for the children throughout the day to cloth diapering the babies to this bilingual accredited curriculum to teach the kids Spanish as a second language. Not all of the kids are from bilingual homes, predominantly they're from English speaking homes. And so they're learning Spanish as a second language with us throughout the day.

And it's just been growing consistently in those 18 years to more locations and finding that every time I open a new center, there is a wait list longer than the capacity that that center has. And so the pull to continue to grow to new markets has been there the whole time. And I think that that's part of the reason that I started the franchise model in 2017, but the other reason was to be able to grow it to markets where I don't live that do have a demand for this values based early childhood education programming, and also a pull for my leadership style to be able to mentor other entrepreneurial spirits, to do the same thing that I'm doing, but not have to suffer through the blood, sweat and tears of developing it from the ground up.

Mike Paton:

Men, our entire podcast is going to be full of just follow up questions to that great story you just told. So thank you for starting us on a high note. Just give us a sense of size or scope. How many centers, how many students or children do you care for that kind of thing?

Natalie Standridge:

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Yeah, so we have three corporate centers and three franchise locations and each location serves around 120 children from birth through pre-K. So seven classrooms, five levels of education from the early infancy stage up until they enter kindergarten.

Mike Paton:

And what was it that motivated your decision to get into this line of work in the first place?

Natalie Standridge:

Quite honestly, it was having my own child that was 18 years ago and counting. And my first of two children and looking for childcare for her because I was a working mom full-time, needed something that aligned with my values as a parent and not finding what I was looking for and saying, "Well, maybe I should this."

Mike Paton:

Yeah, for so many, the whole idea of childcare to facilitate your return to work is full of anxiety and frustration and despair. And so your commitment to doing that well is greatly appreciated and recognized as valuable.

Natalie Standridge:

Thank you. It's super daunting. Yeah.

Mike Paton:

Well, yes it is. Yes, a lot of pressure. No pressure, no pressure now. What's your role in the organization today?

Natalie Standridge:

So I'm the founder and the CEO and the franchise or a sole proprietor. And also from the EOS model, I am the integrator. I have some visionary pieces to my leadership style and I was very visionary when I created this, but my current role is the integrator in the EOS model.

Mike Paton:

And so what's your typical week consists of?

Natalie Standridge:

Oh my gosh. [crosstalk 00:05:06].

Mike Paton:

For the record, I understand the disclaimer should always be, there is no such thing as a typical week. But if you're-

Natalie Standridge:

That is so true, so true in an entrepreneurial organization. So I think that each week I am focusing on meeting with my team and meeting with my departments. So there are all times throughout the week, which is the EOS version of an effective meeting and making sure that we are troubleshooting the issues

in each level of the organization, and then also mentoring my franchise ease that are developing or considering the opportunity for opening a center. And so meeting with them weekly and working on and focusing on the growth of the organization.

Mike Paton:

Cool. And where do you see your organization being five or 10, whatever your long-term vision is? Tell us what it's going to look like in the future.

Natalie Standridge:

Yeah, so our 10 year goal is to be in 20 markets. So by 2030, 20 different markets for the early childhood education program.

Mike Paton:

All right. Thank you very much. So let's turn the focus to leadership in general, please, and bring your personal take on leadership to the way you answer all of these. The first question is just, I want you to go back to the first moment in your life where you recognized leadership or someone leading, who was that? What were they doing and what impression did it leave on you?

Natalie Standridge:

Okay. So I think the first time that I really noticed leadership for what it is, was in one of my very first jobs, I was probably 14, maybe 15 years old. I was working at a restaurant called [Blue Fees 00:07:06], and this was an entrepreneurial location named by the owner who is the leader I'm going to talk about. Her name was [Leslie Betancourt 00:07:15]. And she had named the restaurant Blue Fees because her little kid that she had at home couldn't say Blue Plate, which was a very popular restaurant in my city where I grew up. And that's how she would say blue plate. And so she said, She's going to start her own restaurant and name it after how her daughter pronounced this restaurant.

And I just remember looking at Leslie when I was working and just saying, "Wow, that lady is in charge." She was always poised, always driven, had this very serious sense of self and high expectations of us. And I just wanted to impress her. I wanted to be like her, which I think is something about leadership is acting in a way where people want to follow you, I think is the most important part of leadership, she just acted in a way where I knew she was in charge.

Mike Paton:

Can you give us an example of the kinds of situations she got herself in? What are the things she was doing that made you feel A, that she was always in charge and B, that you wanted to follow somebody like that?

Natalie Standridge:

One example would be leading by example. So showing us that in the restaurant situation, whatever the customer was thinking, needing, feeling, wanting was our primary concern. And so just really being responsive to people's needs and desires and holding us accountable to being responsive [crosstalk 00:09:00].

Mike Paton:

Yeah. As you incorporated that image into your own leadership style, what are some of the things you try to do to emulate that always in charge, making people want to follow you? How have you internalize that in your own leadership style?

Natalie Standridge:

Yeah. So it's a 100% aligned with doing the things that you expect and want the people in your organization to be doing. So if I expect everybody at every level of the organization to be cleaning and creating a safe and sanitary environment for these children, I'm going to model that, I'm going to clean out the refrigerator and vacuum the conference room and wipe down the tables and the door knobs to model for my team, that this is something that everybody needs to make as a priority.

Another example would be if there's a need at the centers. For example, this year, there were a lot of crisis moments, being frontline workers, where people either couldn't come to work or were too scared to come to work. So me physically going into a classroom to care for children and fill in those gaps and change diapers and put babies down for nap and fill out the daily reports and do those things I think is really important in leading and showing and inspiring other members of the organization to do the same. And I wasn't the only one, everyone on the HQ team went and did hands-on work in those crisis moments.

Mike Paton:

Yeah. So I'm hearing two things in your storytelling here. One is empathy, the power to understand what your employees need to see or your customers really want. And then the second is leading by example, not expecting anything you wouldn't be willing to do to serve a customer or make the business better. Is that a fair summary?

Natalie Standridge:

Yeah. Absolutely.

Mike Paton:

So let's turn the tables a little bit. I actually have more fun with this part of the podcast than talking about all the great stuff. Have you ever worked for, or with a lousy leader, someone who wasn't great at this, who made you not want to follow them? And if so, share with us what they were doing that made you feel that way. There's no need to reveal names. We can protect the innocent.

Natalie Standridge:

Yes, I absolutely have. And I think the driving forces behind a person that is not an effective leader, have everything to do with ego and control and nothing to do with empathy and leading by example, which are the focuses of my leadership style today. So I love the fact that EOS does not work in organizations where the person at the top is leading through control, and that organization is built around some sort of ego or self-fulfilling leadership style. And that if an organization really wants to get traction and work fully effectively, you have to look at that and you have to hold everybody accountable to being on par with each other and being willing to have difficult conversations and everybody at every level of the organization being held accountable for their actions and how those affected others.

Mike Paton:

Yeah. And my observation is the word conversation there is really important. So many times a leader who isn't vulnerable and isn't able to set their own needs aside and focus on the greater good. The conversations are all one way and you can't really call it a conversation. And so just the ability to listen to the people around you and let their perspectives inform your own leadership style is a critical component. Can you tell us a story, perhaps funny, perhaps tragic about somebody who just couldn't get out of their own way and was always about them, because I have about 400.

Natalie Standridge:

Oh, boy.

Mike Paton:

And 398 of them are about me. So just to be clear.

Natalie Standridge:

Funny. Yeah. I don't know that I can tell one, without people figuring out who it is.

Mike Paton:

That's all right. I totally get that. [crosstalk 00:13:25]. I totally get that. If something comes to you later, let's just re-ask that question and we can go back to it. Totally fine.

Natalie Standridge:

Okay.

Mike Paton:

That's so funny. That's why I love this part of the interview because I could just see people ready to say something and then like, "Oh, geez, [crosstalk 00:13:43], I can't go there. All right. Let me see if I can genericize a couple of things here and get you out of the awkward zone. How would your team members, the people around you on your best day describe you as a leader? And is there anything that they would say that's accurate that you wish you were better at or could change?

Natalie Standridge:

Tough questions. Yeah, I think that they would describe me as being very empathetic, very wholehearted, living all of the core values of the company in authentic ways, being present, being attentive and being a great role model for what we expect of everyone in the company. I think the way that they would challenge me the most is to be more emotionally vulnerable in the business. And to be more, I think it's something about being emotionally available to them, to connect on that really, really high level that they're craving to connect with each other and with me.

Mike Paton:

And what's the challenge for you in that, is it time? Is it style? Is it the inverse of that leadership lesson you learned of always being in charge, what is it that creates that challenge for you?

Natalie Standridge:

Yeah, I think it is exactly that, it's that challenge as a leader and especially as a woman, that vulnerability does not necessarily equate with weakness. And so this idea of being in charge and being always self-aware and always poised, I think that the challenge to show vulnerability and admit what's hard is always there. And I'm definitely doing that more this year, because this year nobody can deny how challenging and how much it's bumping up against all of what we thought was true in business. And so being able to say, "Hey, you know what, it's really hard for us to talk about the holiday party this year and what we're going to do, instead because we're all grieving the fact that we can't have one, like the amazing one that we had last year with 120 employees, plus their families in a room." So it's acknowledging that grief, I think just sort of, you have to put aside the poise and the social construct of being in charge in order to do that.

Mike Paton:

Yeah. I think what people want from their leaders in the face of crisis and uncertainty is authenticity, the good, bad, and ugly. And that rubs counter to always being in charge because this has been a tough year and it is okay to let people know that it's been tough on you too. For sure. For sure.

All right. So you said a couple of things about your business that I think are interesting choices that deserve some more study. So the first is the Spanish immersion at a very young age. And the second is your commitment to sustainability and locally sourced, organic foods. This is a different business model than most people you're competing with. And so I'm interested to know how you came up with this idea and why you think it's important and what value your children and their families get from your unique approach to your business?

Natalie Standridge:

Yeah, I think it really goes back to those daycare tourists that I took when I had my daughter. And looking around at the lack of diversity, I wanted to raise my daughter bilingual. It was really important to me that she be exposed to both Spanish and English from those key early years where children's brains are wired for learning English. That's their main focus in those first five years of life. And if you expose them to it at that time, it's so easy for them. So just going, "Wow, nobody's doing this at the infant level." And it's the best time to start at that time. I couldn't find anyone in my local community that was doing it at the infant level. And so really inspired me to say, "This is missing. This is up and coming. This is something that children should have as a resource in their lives."

And then looking at the food, Oh my gosh, the food that these places were serving 18 years ago, processed, packaged, so much garbage for the landfills, so much waste. Serving it on styrofoam plates with plastic forks that they were literally throwing away at every meal, but then the food itself. Literally pizza, chicken nuggets, canned fruit in syrup, and I'm going, "This is what my baby's going to be eating, my one-year-old or my 14 month old is going to be eating this food and being raised on this five days a week, this is not okay." We need to be way more conscientious about how we're affecting our children's health longterm with these... What's going on at childcare centers in the first five years of life and how we're affecting their brain development. And so it just goes back to really being inspired to provide something that I didn't see existing at that time.

Mike Paton:

Yeah. By the way, I just threw the pizza and can of fruit I had set aside for lunch today in the trash. So I'm feeling a little guilty right now. So you're leading an organization that is focused on multiculturalism, interculturalism. What are some of the leadership lessons you've learned from that unique approach? Is anything different in a multicultural organization than a single culture organization?

Natalie Standridge:

Absolutely. It is so, so, so key to where we are at today, it is a 100% tied to being able to be in a meaningful business in the modern world. And the way we live, that core value of pioneering interculturality is by infusing it into every level of our organization. So people in leadership positions are of all genders and diverse ethnicities and sexual orientations, people that we choose as mentors and advisors and role models for our organization are diverse. And then really infusing that teaching of interculturality to the children by not only having it be written into the curriculum, but also having people that represent different cultures because were born and raised in those cultures, teaching the concepts. It is so breakthrough and so meaningful for children to be learning from these people about the different cultures. And then I think seeing that manifest as they move out into the world, being more open-minded, being more just understanding of diversity human beings from early childhood, I think it's just so, so simple.

Mike Paton:

Yeah. Couldn't agree more. And having traveled fairly extensively, I've always been amazed at how alone the United States is in that not being the way things work, and almost every other country, people know two languages from the start.

Natalie Standridge:

So true. So true. I think [crosstalk 00:21:36].

Mike Paton:

It's just odd. Yeah.

Natalie Standridge:

Yeah. We're just starting to embark on prioritizing bilingualism in the United States. And there is more research coming out about how beneficial that is, not only from a language perspective, but from a brain development perspective and a social-emotional learning perspective for human beings to have that exposure from childhood.

Mike Paton:

Well, and there's a lesson in communication there too, in that I think the danger of internally focused individual from a communication standpoint is, "it's the other person's job to understand me." And I think when you learn to speak a second or third or fifth language, you learn how valuable it can be to meet people where they are and communicate to them on their terms. So it's a big part of the brain that goes missing if you're not doing that work at a young age.

Natalie Standridge:

Absolutely.

Mike Paton:

Really interesting stuff. What would you say your greatest moment of success as a leader was? When you and your family members or team members at work were high-fiving each other, because something great happened as a result of your leadership, what was it?

Natalie Standridge:

Tough one, I would say this is when we get to see what we're doing manifest in the world and the greater community. We have a big vision. We are trying to impact society in a positive way through our early childhood education model. And so I think my biggest success is when our pre-K graduates and their families leave our school and they go out into their communities and their elementary schools and they make change. When I hear a story about a kindergarten teacher saying, "Okay, all the kids who speak Spanish line up at the door." And my little graduates who are native English speakers, but speak Spanish very well at a second grade code switching level in kindergarten line up at the door. And the teacher looks at them and goes, "Wait, are you in ESL?" "Well, no, but I speak Spanish." And then they say full sentences in Spanish and the other, gives a sweet Spanish look at them.

And then the teacher realizes, wow, this kid could be an amazing liaison for those native, Spanish speaking children who don't speak English, they're not bilingual. And my graduates become helpers for those children that are adjusting to an English speaking school, may have just moved to Minnesota from a Spanish speaking country weeks ago. And then they have this bilingual student at their age level. It's such a manifestation of what we're doing and so exciting to see. And then the parents of these children going, "My kid's bilingual and she's going to an English speaking school and I don't want her to lose the Spanish." And so I literally have like cohorts of graduated families from Casa de Corazón, going to their public elementary school and saying, "We need a Spanish afterschool program." And manifesting that and making that happen, like basically lobbying for it and saying, "My kid needs to continue to learn Spanish. And here's all these other families that want this too, and let's make this happen." I think those are the greatest successes because we are impacting the community at a greater level than just within our walls.

Mike Paton:

What a great way of answering that question. Thank you. Let's flip the tables. I'm certain, you've had moments where you were stuck, challenged, maybe made a decision you wish you could do over again. Tell us about one of those experiences and what you learned?

Natalie Standridge:

Yeah. So we don't have to go too far back to actually feel the biggest challenges of my career, they have been this year. Being frontline workers in one of the very few industries that was asked to stay open through the greatest moments of the insurgence of the pandemic has been the most challenging thing that I have had to face in my career. And so the hardest part of it was I'm a rule follower, I'm the integrator, here's what we're doing here. This is how we do it. And this is our parent handbook, and this is our employee handbook, and this is what we follow. And here's our core values. And here's our structure. And this is what we went by.

Well, guess what? This year we had to set the policies aside and say, "What makes sense from an ethical perspective, how do we keep people safe and keep our doors open at the same time?" And it felt like every time we made a decision or an exception, which was not optional, we had to make exceptions. There would be another challenge that would come knocking at the back door saying, "Wait, but if you did that, you should do this or you should do the other thing." Examples like making it okay for certain staff members who are of high risk or have family members of high risk to stay home while we expected other people who weren't high risk to show up and keep things open and keep caring for these children or families that needed us.

Mike Paton:

Well, in an environment where the definition of high risk seemed to change every other day. And where you were relying on a set of evolving facts. That's what I noticed early on, and your industry is the epicenter of this crisis is you were being asked to make decisions on air. Nobody knew the right answer to anything, and yet you're supposed to come up with the right decision every time. That's scary and frustrating. And it happened when, what you probably want to do as most of us did is crawl in a hole and wait until all this stuff went away so you can come back and start making fully informed decisions. Right?

Natalie Standridge:

Absolutely. And everything was constantly changing, multiple different authorities communicating with us, communicating different things. And then as soon as we think something's working, it's changing again. Yeah, ask my top administrators about duty decision three, and we'll get tears and laughter and all of [crosstalk 00:27:59]. What we're supposed to do when there's confirmed exposure and all of those things, I don't know how many [inaudible 00:28:06].

Mike Paton:

I can only imagine. And then you add into that, the varying opinions about what the right course of action is that exist in the world. And I'm assigning that to your team members and your customers. There's just so much at stake and so many potential wrong answers. I empathize completely with what you've been going through and thanks for doing the good work of leading. That's what this podcast is all about. We need to lead when things are tough, more than we need to lead when it seems like we're sailing.

Natalie Standridge:

So true.

Mike Paton:

One of the things I wanted to poke at because of your franchising business is that you also assess and select leaders for your non-corporate centers. And so what do you look for in somebody who's a perfect fit for your organization when you're evaluating leadership capabilities?

Natalie Standridge:

The first thing we look for is core values alignment. Our whole discovery day, which is something that franchise companies usually do to vet potential franchise owners revolves around values alignment. We do an exercise where basically, the goal is to figure out if the person that's the perspective franchise owner believes what we believe. One of my favorite Simon Sinek quotes is, "The goal is not to do business with people who need what you have. The goal is to do business with people who believe what you believe." And this is how you create a meaningful organization is through core values alignment. So just knowing that there are people who want to be part of what we are trying to manifest in the society. That's what the main goal is.

Mike Paton:

Yeah. Thank you for that. Let's talk a little bit about your EOS implementation journey for a second. Is there anything about implementing EOS that you feel has made your job easier as a leader or helped the

rest of the team get on board with something that you otherwise would have had to kick and scream to make happen?

Natalie Standridge:

Oh my gosh, everything, everything, this system has turned the company around. I'm such a raving fan because it creates a simple structure. Okay. Not simple. It's a lot to learn. It's a lot of new vocabulary, new concepts, new ways of running meetings, new things to just understand and practice. It takes a lot of practice and it's difficult, but it creates the platform for focusing energy in the right direction. And so if everybody that's on a leadership team gets in a room and lists out the things that they think are important to the company going forward or the three year goals. And then you are forced to narrow them down... I have a big leadership team, there are eight of us on it. And so our mode of operation prior to EOS was there's too much going on. Everybody is trying to do things in different directions and we're not prioritizing correctly or effectively.

Mike Paton:

Yeah. And when every thing is important, nothing's important.

Natalie Standridge:

One of the best EOS quotes for my team, because we all want to do so much. And so being able to organize that in, here are the actual top priorities for the whole company this year, and then rock setting, which is having everybody have very specific things that they're responsible for completing in this order has given us the organization to be able to actually focus and focus on what's most important and move forward for those goals.

Mike Paton:

And then, what's been the toughest sticking point for the EOS, have you encountered any challenges or things that don't really fit in your organization or create problems?

Natalie Standridge:

Yeah. So the two toughest things, right. [inaudible 00:32:13]. So having to look at the fact that we may have had some people that were not right for the position that they were in was very, very, very hard and very challenging to go through in the beginning. And then also the accountability chart, "Putting everything in boxes, what? No, we're all doing everything and we're all passionate about everything and everything works because we're all collaborating on everything." "Oh, wait, no. If we actually make one person responsible for every little piece of the company in the organization, it's actually going to work better." And so that made us look at some sections of our company that were not well organized. And that had been pain points for years, of "Who's my actual supervisor, is it this person or this person?" Literally people that had four supervisors and these supervisors didn't always agree with each other, right? So very contentious sort of issues coming up in certain segments of the company. And so it was very challenging to get that sorted out.

Mike Paton:

Right. Well, and you mentioned ego in our conversation about leadership earlier. I think part of what the accountability chart does is it takes ego out of the right structure and says, "You can't control everything, so what are you really accountable for in this organization?" Let's make sure we agree what

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everybody else is really accountable for. And if you need to collaborate to do great work, do it, but let's not collaborate on everything, right?

Natalie Standridge:

Absolutely.

Mike Paton:

Because then none of us are going to get anything done. And that is a tough part of the journey for a lot of organizations. So your storytelling is beautiful around that. Last question for you before we conclude today, even though I think I could chat for another half hour and create real value for the listener. There are lots of young leaders in the world today who are just stepping into their first leadership role at a time when the world is literally on fire. What advice do you give a young leader, just forming their own style as a leader, manager, supervisor, advisor, what should they be focused on so they're great under all circumstances?

Natalie Standridge:

Be authentically you. Show up as the best version of yourself every day, no matter what you're doing, manifest what you truly believe into your organization, company, business, whatever it is that you're doing. Business is so much less about providing products and services and so much more about creating meaning for other humans that again, believe what you believe. And if you're doing that and you're being authentic, people are going to want to be a part of that.

Mike Paton:

Beautiful, beautiful way to conclude today. Natalie, thank you so much for joining us. Before I let you go, please tell the listener where they can learn more about you and your company.

Natalie Standridge:

casaearyllearning.com is our website. And then our social platforms are also very, very fun. So [casaearyllearning](#) on Instagram and Casa de Corazón on Facebook.

Mike Paton:

Great. Thank you so much for being here and thank you for listening. Remember that the world needs us to lead now more than ever. And I know today's conversation with Natalie will help you do just that.

If you 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.