

Speaker 1:

Leadership is more important now than ever before. The entrepreneurs are the 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. Today I'm really excited to bring you Michael Lennington. Michael is the vice-president of The Execution Company, an organization dedicated to helping individuals, management teams, and leaders execute their ideas more effectively. Michael is also the president of the 12 Week Coach, a coaching company focused on improving the results of sales professionals. He helps clients accomplish their goals within a 12-week execution system and direct support, and has used his extensive executive experience to co-author the book the 12 Week Year. Michael, welcome to the show.

Michael Lennington:

Thank you, Paton, and really great to be here.

Mike Paton:

Yeah. And I'm thrilled that you're making time for us. I think you're going to help the listener really understand the ins and outs of great and maybe not-so-great leadership. So, that's what this is all about.

Michael Lennington:

Absolutely.

Mike Paton:

Just to start, give me a little two-minute history of your background and your experience with leadership.

Michael Lennington:

So I'm originally from Michigan and I was in Northern Michigan, grew up and raised there, and I was really seeking a job that I could work outside in. So I went to college, I got a degree in fisheries and wildlife management, and then when I left and went into banking. It was quite the preparation for a banking career. But I immediately gravitated towards the consulting process. So I joined a group in the bank that was what they call productivity management. We were working with the branches and other areas of the organization to help them to be more effective. So I sort of cut my teeth on consulting in my first role. And then I spent most of my adult career as a consultant, either coaching or consulting with organizations and with individuals to help them accomplish more. So that's a really quick overview of my background. Worked in Europe, worked in the Middle East a little bit, worked in the US quite a bit.

Mike Paton:

Yeah, so tell us about the 12 Week Year. What is the philosophical underpinning of that approach, and with whom do you work and how does it work?

Michael Lennington:

That's a great question. The 12 Week Year sort of evolved organically. My business partner, Brian Moran, and my coauthor, Brian Moran, worked together in the financial services industry when we first started out. And we worked there because there's a lot of connectivity between what advisors do, because they're 1099, and how much they earn. So we felt like, if we could work in that, we could really create this line of sight between action and results. And we were right about that. So we picked that industry because it really seemed like it was ideally suited to what we were trying to help our clients do, which was to get more stuff done.

What we realized when we first started working in that industry was that they already had a lot of great ideas. There's a group called the Million Dollar Round Table, and they share ideas, companies share good ideas. So we came in trying to give them ideas and we realized pretty quickly, that's not what they wanted or needed. But what we realized was, they weren't even doing the stuff they knew to do. They had all these great ideas, but they weren't executing them. So we decided to focus on execution. That's really the first thing that really kind of created this whole process we do now, is that we decided to focus on something that they didn't do well. Genius move there. And we just helped them do that.

As we did that, we learned what worked and we learned what didn't work. We took what worked, and we put it into our process. One of the things that didn't work was, we couldn't get their attention very well in the first quarter of the year, and sometimes the second quarter, even the third quarter, we couldn't get them. We could set goals and build plans, but we couldn't get them to take action. But something magical happens in October and November and December in that industry, and others as well, we've discovered. But at that time, we were primarily in that industry. They were willing to do the things they weren't willing to do before. They act with greater urgency. They get more actions done. They get more results. So we started to see this peak in activity and peak in results in the fourth quarter. But in the earlier parts of the year, we just couldn't get their attention.

So we dug into that, and I guess it's probably obvious, but the reason that there's a peak in activity in the last quarter is because goals hang in the balance. My success, my failure, hangs in the balance. So in the earlier parts of the year, I feel like I've got a lot of time to get things done. But by October, November, pretty soon I realize there's not much time left, and so I can't waste time, and so I'm now being more active.

So we thought, that's really interesting, the way that people think about their success and failure cycle causes them to behave in a certain way. We were working with other companies that had fiscal years that ended at different times, and they'd have a peak right before their fiscal year end, not in the end of December, but in the end of June and things like that. So we thought, well, it's nothing special about the end of the year in particular, it just has to do with when you decide your success and failure is going to be evaluated, when people get bonused, when people get promoted, when you go on... get recognized, you go on trips, bonus trips, things like that.

So we decided to create a different way of looking at time, and that's really where the 12 Week Year came from. One of our clients was a bicycle racer, and he introduced us to this concept called periodization, which was an exercise training routine for athletes in strength and endurance sports like bicycle racing. What they do is, they focus for a short period of time on one skill, overload the athlete's ability to execute that skill, and then they move to the next and the next. And they time all this stuff to come up so that you're at your peak performance just before a race. While you can't do that in a business, you can't take off six weeks to go train, you've got to execute, as you learn, we adapted the concepts of these short cycle focused sessions into the business processes that we were working with our clients. And that's where the 12 Week Year came from.

Mike Paton:

Yeah, that's cool. I'm reminded of a story that a former basketball coach at the Ohio State University, the Thad Matta, when he interviewed for that job, explained his philosophy was that the 40-minute college basketball game was really eight 5-minute games. And his coaching philosophy was winning each of those 5-minute games, and if he did that, they'd win every game.

Michael Lennington:

That's right. Same concept.

Mike Paton:

Same philosophy.

Michael Lennington:

Exactly, yeah.

Mike Paton:

Yeah, really cool.

Michael Lennington:

So the way that we did that though, most effectively is, we wanted people to think about the 12 weeks as their success failure cycle. So if they hit their 12-week goal, they were successful. If they missed it, they'd failed. If I look at it that way, then earlier in the year, the first quarter, even if it's January 1st or the first couple weeks of January, I'm already adapting. I'm already being responsive to what's happening.

Mike Paton:

Yeah, and certainly, as you know, there's a lot of similarities in the 90 Day World, we created an EOS company of reacting more quickly to off-track because the nearer-term goals help remind you that you don't have as much time as you really think you do. And once you're off track for the first quarter or two, it's awfully tough to get caught back up.

When you're working with leaders to implement this sort of philosophical change in the way they look at their year, what are the things that they naturally gravitate to? And then second question is, are there any areas of resistance or pushback that you find, that are really tough for people to master?

Michael Lennington:

Yeah. I think the thing that people most gravitate to is, when we explain the concept of a shorter execution cycle, people are excited by that. Because, what ends up happening is you can reach... You're not hitting your 12-month goal. Some people do, but mostly they don't. But you're hitting a goal in the short term. So you could be successful now. So in a 12-month execution cycle, you can work a long time and you're still a long way away from your goal. So we front-ended the goals. We front-ended the success result, which really people gravitated to. Plus, because in 12 weeks you can't do everything you do in 12 months, there was a lot more focus, so people didn't feel as diffused.

Mike Paton:

Yeah. Yeah, the challenge side of it, what's hard for folks?

Michael Lennington:

Part of it is that, but people hear it, but they don't believe us until the second 12 Week Year, is that the hardest thing that people have to do is narrow down the things they're trying to get done. So you don't have too many goals. Less is more in 12 weeks. People want to do everything, and the reality is, you're going to be mediocre at everything. You can be great at a few things, but mediocre. You can do all this stuff in 12 months because you sequence it, but you can't do it all right now.

Mike Paton:

Right. Yeah, and we find that, too, when we're working with a brand-new client, the first quarter of rock setting, the average completion rate's about 50% and the goal is 80%. The good news is, I find failure the fastest and most permanent teacher. So hopefully your experience is the same.

Michael Lennington:

Yeah, it is. We tell our clients and our trainees, we don't guarantee your success. We guarantee though, if you're applying the system, you're going to fail faster. And you have to fail on the way to be successful, in my view.

Mike Paton:

Couldn't agree more. Couldn't agree more. Let's transfer our attention to leadership in general.

Michael Lennington:

Yeah.

Mike Paton:

I want you to go back to the very earliest moment in your life where you recognized leadership. Maybe you saw someone acting like a leader and that resonated with you, or scared you, or had an impact on you. Who was it? What was the situation, and what did you take from that experience?

Michael Lennington:

I think it's probably the same example it is for a lot of us, and it was my father. He was a full-time employee at a company, but he had his own business on the side. We had a Christmas tree farm, and I tell people, I used to live on a farm and they say, "You didn't live on a farm." Because I guess the livestock doesn't move on a Christmas tree farm or something. But anyway, it felt like farming. But we had a Christmas tree farm, and several of them. And we would harvest Christmas trees every year. We were selling to Kroger. It was a pretty big business. What I saw my dad have to do is, he'd have to bring people in for the seasons. You have to have people shear the trees. You have to have people harvest the trees and load them on trains and stuff. So he'd have to hire people locally that were already full-time employed, but that needed to come and work for us, and he wanted to get their engagement and their involvement.

So very early on, what my dad did is, he treated people, as well as I've ever seen a leader treat his people. They were eating with us. They were paid quite a bit of money. He was paying a lot more than he would have had to pay for just labor to come in and do the work. But he wanted people who were already working, who had a work ethic, and who would do a great job and show up. And so he paid a lot for that, but it saved him some money. So I learned that you treat your people well, and you treat them like they're equals, and you work with them as professionals, and they respond a lot better than if

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you bring people in and treat them like they're just there to get a dollar and then get out. He was generous, he was humble, and he shared his revenue.

Mike Paton:

He had an investment mindset when it came to people, not an expense mindset.

Michael Lennington:

Yeah.

Mike Paton:

Yeah, that's pretty-

Michael Lennington:

Because they always showed up.

Mike Paton:

That's great.

Michael Lennington:

Now, they were always work-focused. So I would, I was younger and I would throw pine cones at the guys, because I thought it was funny. At one point, they put me through a bundler, and not the automatic ones, the manual ones, because this was back in the old days. And they tied me up and threw me next to the pile of trees. I stopped throwing pine cones.

Mike Paton:

So that is a valuable lesson to learn.

Michael Lennington:

Oh yes, it was.

Mike Paton:

Valuable lesson.

Michael Lennington:

Don't mess with workers when they're working.

Mike Paton:

And you lived to tell a story another day.

Michael Lennington:

Yeah, my dad thought it was funny.

Mike Paton:

Who's the best leader you've ever worked with or for?

Michael Lennington:

That is one of the toughest questions I get asked, and that I've been asked. It's hard to say because a lot of leaders are good at different things. But when I said that, I'm really forced myself to answer that question. A lot of people know me, and I could name a lot of people. But I think the best was a guy that was part of the Encompass Group at Allstate. His name was Ken Branch, and he was very smart, one of the smartest people I've met in my life. But he was simultaneously very humble, and he listened to the people. He never felt as if he didn't have time for his team or time for you to talk to him. I always felt that he had high ethics, that he was going to do the right thing, even if it costs him or if it costs the company. It was a strong set of ethics that weren't situational.

I think because he listened, because he was an honest guy, I think his team liked working for him, and I think that they would do... Plus, he was super smart, so he didn't make a lot of mistakes from that perspective. But he wouldn't let you down.

Mike Paton:

Yeah, great to hear. And thank you for sharing the specific things that made him feel like a great leader. What about the other side of the coin? You've seen a lot of people lead. Tell us about the worst leadership you've ever witnessed, and the important things-

Michael Lennington:

There's a lot of those.

Mike Paton:

What were the things that you were witnessing that scared you or troubled you?

Michael Lennington:

So here's the thing. There's a lot of ways that leaders can be great, and there's a lot of ways that leaders can drop the ball. So the one I'm going to talk about wasn't that he was a bad person, it wasn't that he did things that he shouldn't have done. He was actually a leader of a Fortune 50 company, one of the biggest companies in the world. I was a few leadership levels separated from him, but I was at the executive presentation, where he announces to the whole company what he's doing and what's coming up for the next year.

And he started the speech with, "The single most important thing that we have to do as a company this year is..." And then he stopped before he continued, and he said, "And you all know, I have a hundred most important things." Then he went back to what he was talking about. And I immediately said to myself, "You can't have a hundred most important things. I don't care how big you are as an organization. Your capacity is limited, and everybody's focused on the same set of goals. So if you have a hundred, everybody's going to be diffused." I felt like he just wasn't very good at leading from a capacity perspective.

Mike Paton:

When everything's important, nothing's important.

Michael Lennington:

Nothing's important. Yeah, even for a big company.

Mike Paton:

Well, and in a big company, the challenge of that is that as the conversations about prioritization migrate down into the organization, and there's no clear sense of priority at the top, those debates and discussions don't have a right answer.

Michael Lennington:

Right.

Mike Paton:

And so there's a ton of wasted time and energy in that situation. What a great story, great story.

Michael Lennington:

Lack of alignment, yep.

Mike Paton:

If I asked you to identify the three most important traits of a great leader and the three most important things to avoid if you don't want to be a lousy leader, what are the words that come to mind, or phrases?

Michael Lennington:

Well, for the best leaders, I think being strategic and focused on the direction for the company in a way that is realistic, but also a stretch. So you've got a leader who sets a vision that is inspiring, but that isn't so far away from where you are today that people can't buy into it. So, strategic from a vision perspective. And I think also, I believe that the best leaders are really good at executing and getting things done, and they don't spend time doing things that aren't really their role, but they're making sure that the whole organization is executing well, that they help the company execute, if that makes sense.

Mike Paton:

Yeah, and then what about the things that get you in trouble as a leader, that you see regularly?

Michael Lennington:

Well, I think we talked a little bit about it before. I think taking on too much, but also being a really harsh leader. I had an opportunity to work with a company, very large organization, financial services company, and in that company, I was working directly with a, what would be called a unit or a branch manager. They had cities that they were in charge of for that company. And they were really good. They were really good with their teams. They were really good at recruiting people in, and treating them well, and keeping them. They were good at helping people be effective and successful in that business. But their boss was a terror. He was belittling. He was hard to talk to, because he made you feel that he was better than you, that you kind of were, I try not to use bad words, but that you just weren't very good at what you did.

So this guy that was very successful would go in and meet with this guy and he would get hammered by this guy. I talked to him about it, "So how do you live with that, that kind of hammering

and that go do that to your team?" And he said, "I eat it. I have to eat that, because I'm not going to do that to my team."

Mike Paton:

Oh, no.

Michael Lennington:

I think that kind of leadership, that caustic, punitive, belittling leader. And I think that's so obvious, but having seen that work, and since your question was the worst I've seen, that's kind of the one I would pick.

Mike Paton:

Yeah. I had the great honor of hanging out with Simon Sinek for a while several years ago, and in a talk that I sponsored, he was asked, "What's the thing that all great leaders have in common?" He thought for a minute, and he said, "Followers." Then he went on to explain that there's no magic pill. Either people want to follow you, or they don't. And the more caustic you are, the less likely you are to wake up one day and have followers. I thought that was a really interesting way of putting that.

Let's talk about your choices as a leader. Before we started today, you were very careful to point out to me that you have chosen not to manage, build and manage your own teams. How'd you come to that conclusion and how's it working out for you?

Michael Lennington:

That's a really great question. I can lead. I have led, but I don't like it. The reason I don't like it is that, I find that I have to really spend time to be a good leader. I have to really work at it. It has to be a central part, if not the central part, of my role. And a part of me really likes to be creative. I like to be a problem solver. I like to consult. I like to coach, I like to write books. And that's a creative side of me and an innovative side of me that I really love, and I don't know, you'd have to be the judge, but I'm kind of good at, so that's what I wanted to do.

And because of that, and because I'm very flexible, I have some tendencies that make it hard for people who don't like a lot of flexibility to work with. Because I'm very quick to decide, this is better than that, but it's hard for people who have the structured role to really flex to that. So I think I'm just better at not leading. It's not that I can't, and I have certainly done so, it's just that it's not my favorite thing in the world to do.

Mike Paton:

Yeah, the reason I wanted to talk to you about that specifically is that, so many entrepreneurs who start a company because they're good at something, passionate about it, and have customers, find themselves in a leadership role five years from now, and they don't like it, and they're not very good at it, and they have a hard time letting go of that. And I love you being open and vulnerable your discovery and just going with that. There's a way to own and run a great organization without direct responsibility for managing people. Find somebody else who loves it and is great at it and go do the stuff you love.

Michael Lennington:

Yeah, I think that's so true.

Mike Paton:

Couldn't agree more.

Michael Lennington:

Yep.

Mike Paton:

Couldn't agree more. Tell us about the project you're working on now. I know you have a creative project in the works.

Michael Lennington:

Yeah, and in fact it's really, it's related... There's two of them I have right now, I'll just quickly talk about both of them. One is, I started a company with Kristen Tabert and Mike Gandolfo, who you know, called the Aligned Life Pro. One of the things that really gets in the way for a lot of people in terms of getting more out of what they're capable of is that they're misaligned in many ways. I'm pulled in one direction by my family life and pulled in another direction by my business, and some of my self-interests, and I could feel like I'm being spread too thin and pulled in many different directions. So if you've got a lot of different pulls in your life, it's hard to be really super good at any one of them.

So that group that I'm working with, with Mike and Kristen, is really about helping people be more intentional about the alignment. Is where I'm working matched up with my value, or do I feel like I'm not able to express my values? Is it something that I feel like I'm really good at and that I love to do, or am I, like you said, am I a my manager who really wants to do something other than manage people. And so helping people get better aligned is what we're working on. We have a podcast that you've been gracious enough to join us on next week, and that podcast is on our website, Aligned Life Pro. It's also available on Apple Podcasts and also available on Patreon. So anybody who would like to hear what we have to say about personal and professional alignment, love you to join us there.

But the other project that we were talking about before that I'm working on, and I'm really excited about, as well, Brian and I are writing a second book. And it's called Accountability, and that's our working title. You'd probably say, "Okay, I'm switching off the dial now, because everybody writes books about accountability." But we have, I think, a very fundamentally different take about accountability, especially from the leadership perspective, that I think is going to be refreshing. And it's going to help, I think, to really create more creative cultures than currently exist, when there's this view of accountability that's sort of the negative consequence management side of accountability. I think that costs organizations and individuals quite a bit of a productive capacity. So I'm really excited about that project. And we're getting published again by Wiley, so it's really a book about leadership more than anything, but also personal leadership and the leadership of others and how your view of accountability can either create great results or get in the way of that.

Mike Paton:

Yeah, and I hear so many people use the term accountability as though it's a weapon, both from the wielder of the weapon and the victim of the weapon's side. It sounds to me like you're intent on helping people understand that's not what accountability really means.

Michael Lennington:

That's such a great way of putting it. I think that that mindset of accountability, if you hear, "Look, I want to hold you accountable for that." Or, "We need to hold that person accountable." What thoughts come to mind? Is that going to be, "Hey, great job"? Or is that going to be, "Hey, you dropped the ball, and you're going to get hit"?

Mike Paton:

That's right. Well, and what we talk about in EOS all the time Michael is, you don't hold people accountable. You create an environment where accountable people thrive and non-accountable people are uncomfortable. And what you'll do is, attract and retain accountable people and scare everybody else away.

Michael Lennington:

Yeah, you're right.

Mike Paton:

And perfectly aligned with the EOS approach to leading and managing. So last question for you. The purpose of this podcast is to really help leaders of all stripes and all levels of experience show up as their best selves as a leader every single day. So if you, as somebody who's watched great and not-so-great leaders work your whole career, give us one piece of advice a leader who needs to do that every day should follow in order to get better at it.

Michael Lennington:

My whole professional career has really been around execution, since I first started working with people. And I think as a leader, being good at that is probably one of the top one, two, or possibly maybe three, but I'd almost put it number one, and abilities to execute, and create a culture of execution, and to take that seriously, can change everything.

Mike Paton:

Results-

Michael Lennington:

The best ideas.

Mike Paton:

Results solve a lot of problems, no questions about it.

Michael Lennington:

Yeah, they do.

Mike Paton:

Okay.

Michael Lennington:

The best ideas are worthless unless you take action on them.

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Mike Paton:

Yeah. Michael, thank you so much for being generous with your time today. One last time, for the listener who wants to learn more about you and the great stuff you're doing, where should they go?

Michael Lennington:

Well, they can visit for the 12 Week Year. They can visit 12weekyear.com, and there's a lot of great stuff there about what the 12 Week Year is, and how it works. But if you're looking at personal alignment, go to alignedlifepro.com. If you'd like to hear a podcast, go to visit for Aligned Life Pro on Patreon, and look for us there.

Mike Paton:

All right. Thank you so much.

Michael Lennington:

Thank you.

Mike Paton:

Thanks for being generous with your time. That was the Lead Now podcast and Michael Lennington. Remember that it's more important now than ever that you lead as your best self. Hopefully today's podcast helped you do just that.

Thank you so much for listening to the Lead Now podcast. To learn more about the podcast and share it with your friends, please visit EOSworldwide.com/podcast.