

Mike O'Kane:

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Mike Paton:

Hello everybody. This is Mike Paton with the EOS Leader Podcast. So grateful to be bringing you Mike O'Kane today. He's the founder and senior technical advisor for O'Kane Consultants, a world leader in optimizing mine waste management. Mike's passion for the environment, led them to create a company that helps create a better tomorrow through a holistic integrated approach to mine, waste management and closure planning. O'Kane is headquartered in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, and has other offices in Canada, the U.S, Australia and New Zealand. And as you might imagine, has worked with mine sites all over the world. So Mike, welcome to the show.

Mike O'Kane:

Thank you, Paton. Really, really happy to be here and humbling, not so much that it's humbling where I'm thinking less of myself, but more of sitting with somebody who has created something that helped me quite a bit in my life. So I'm really, really appreciative.

Mike Paton:

Well, thank you for that. And as you know, it's a lifelong journey of learning and I appreciate you helping the people who are listening join that journey and work alongside us. So...

Mike O'Kane:

My pleasure.

Mike Paton:

Let's talk about your journey to become an entrepreneur. Where do you think it began? And when did it start to gel for you?

Mike O'Kane:

Tough question. Because often people ask me, "Oh, you're an entrepreneur?" I said, "Am I? Am I really?" But I think part of it probably started when I decided to become a research engineer under my mentor, Dr. Lee Barber, as I was doing my graduate studies at the University of Saskatchewan and lots of research engineers, they're very bright people. And I said, "You know what? I'm going to maybe do it a little bit differently. I'm going to see, could I actually create work? Could I bring in research dollars as a research engineer?" Because I'd already been a little bit exposed to my dad working in the mining industry and been to a few conferences and stuff like that.

And I said, "I'm going to see if I can actually do it." Emulate what my dad does, have conversations, network, et cetera. And that's what I did. I developed research dollars and development dollars, sensors that they wanted to develop, specific work for different mine sites, all applied R&D, because I liked being out in the field and figuring things out. But yeah, that's what I did. And as I look back on it, I guess that was an entrepreneur. Yeah.

Mike Paton:

I can't tell you what percentage of the guests on this podcast are accidental, woke up one day and found themselves running an entrepreneurial company and went, "Well, how'd that happen?" Right? So not unusual at all. Give the listeners a rundown of exactly what optimizing mine waste management is. Tell us about your company, how you got into the work, what it does.

Mike O'Kane:

So the optimization part, pens new perspective. If I was in a community around a mine site, I want to be optimized for water quality. I want to be able to make sure and protect that water that's around in the watershed. And I want to make sure that the promises that were made about what was going to happen with the mine site and the mine in the area afterwards, those promises were kept. If I was in the mining company, I want to maximize the value of that asset, that gold, that copper, that iron or whatever it is in the ground. And so what O'Kane does is we say, "You know what? There's an issue here." There's a fact that we've got today's risk is optimizing that value, making sure the landforms are stable and they don't fail and things like that.

Tomorrow's risk is the water quality, that social aspect what's the future land use. And so what we do is, can we begin with the end in mind? Can we actually think about what that future land use is and say, "Could we actually strategically develop that asset, that mine site, so that everybody has a say in it collaboratively as we go along and what that future land uses." So that's what O'Kane does, mine planning, how do you move the dirt around, get it out of the ground, optimize that or blending, but also the closure aspect. Can we do progressive closure? And it's very similar to how say the house that I'm sitting it, how did we get to get developed? It got developed because the city, the developer, the landowner all got together and they said, "Let's make a farm into a residential space."

Mike Paton:

That's very helpful. And my observation of the work that you do, it feels like science, technology, a lot of great listening skills, so that you understand the perspectives of the stakeholders involved and then just raw execution.

Mike O'Kane:

It's all of those, it's all of those. Lee barber just sent this to me, reminded me of it. And it was the story of, can't remember who wrote it, but it was two fish, young fish just swimming in the water. And have you heard of this one?

Mike Paton:

Maybe, keep going.

Mike O'Kane:

It's pretty cool. Two fish swimming in the water and two young guys and the old fish comes by and says, "Hey boys, how's the water?" And then they keep on swimming and then they go, "Hey, what's water?"

Mike Paton:

That's good, that's good.

Mike O'Kane:

Right. So what's obvious to us. So what's obvious to me is what I think is what is best? What does good look like is completely different than somebody else.

Mike Paton:

That's right.

Mike O'Kane:

So the first part is getting aligned on that. What does good look like? What's the assessment metric for that? What's the acceptable level of residual risk. And then all the technical stuff is the easy part. But that first part, that's the hardest part. I think that's common with most things we do, it's definitely common in the mining industry.

Mike Paton:

Yeah. Awesome. When did you found the company?

Mike O'Kane:

1996. I worked at the university as a research engineer for a couple of years. And then my dad and Lee barber encouraged me, said, "Hey, that's a niche technology. Why don't you go and see what's what?" And then I had one fellow who I'd met through, while a researcher dinner, Bob Gardner. And we were doing work for him and he says, "I'd like to continue to do that, when you leave the university there." I said, "Okay." I didn't know how it worked. And he said, "It's good to me." I'll just do what's right in front of me.

Mike Paton:

Well, don't we all, right? One foot in front of the other. And then you wake up one day and you're there. So 25 years later, how many people around the world? Give us a sense of size and scope.

Mike O'Kane:

About 70 people, a number of different small offices. That was actually pretty cool because unbeknownst to us, we were actually preparing for the pandemic. We're used to connecting virtually exactly how we're connecting right now. We've been doing that for quite a bit of time. So I was really proud of our team. We stepped right in from one day to the next seamlessly and have been highly functional all throughout. It's been pretty cool.

Mike Paton:

Great to hear, let's change some pace here. And I want to focus on your discovery of the idea of leadership and how you've evolved into the leader that you are today willing or unwilling, along the way. So, go back to the earliest recollection you have of seeing someone lead, maybe it's a historical figure, somebody on TV or a sports figure, maybe somebody in your family. Who is that person and what were they doing that made the idea of leadership resonate with you? And what did you take away from that experience?

Mike O'Kane:

Well, I'm going to offer a bit of a story about my aunt, my Aunt Kay, and another story about my mom. If you don't mind.

Mike Paton:

Of course, we'll start with my mom and it reminds me, because I was just in a call like this meeting, some scholarship winners for for my dad's memorial scholarship at the college of engineering. So where did that scholarship come from? We had this amazing wake for my dad in Vancouver, an Irish wake and hundreds of people, lots of people came up and talked and as my mom is receiving the condolences and stuff like that. And she's asking, "So, oh, would you care to actually contribute to a memorial scholarship in his name?" And I go, "Mom, this is not the time to be asking for money. It's dad's wake." And she turns to me and she goes, "What better time to actually ask for the money?"

Your mom was a closer.

Mike O'Kane:

She was a closer, had the conversation, asked the question that you just don't want to ask. And I think that's just putting yourself out there. I mean, it's amazing. And then you see the fruits of that labor. I'm with TEC in Canada, Todd Miller's our coach. And he always talks about leadership is about influencing outcomes, right? So all that's just a conversation, there's a scholarship. Well it's been how many years? 15 more years. Every year I get to meet these bright young engineers who are from the same college my dad went and when I went to school and I get to meet them every single year. It's amazing. Just one small little thing about being direct. So, that's the other one. And the other one is really, really make sure that you keep it simple.

Just keep your ego in check. And that's my Aunt Kay. So I'll give you the technical aspect. So the first thing I did was cover systems, right? So it's just like a landfill or even, I don't know you're a golfer Paton?

Mike Paton:

Yeah.

Mike O'Kane:

So what is a greens keeper do? He makes sure there's enough water, you cut a short enough, all that sort of stuff. Does the dirt have enough water, et cetera, et cetera, just like what a gardener does. My aunt Kay was a gardener. And I had to describe what I'm doing with this mine waste cover system, "They're super fancy Aunt Kay, you just can't imagine. It's the water and evaporation and transportation, storage release and run off." She goes, "So you're gardening?" "No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. It's really complex because there's fine texture material over the course texture material. It doesn't drain." She goes, "So that's what I do in my pots. So you're gardening." So I said, "Yeah, you're right Aunt Kay, I'm gardening." And that actually reminded because that's Lee Barbara, how he describes what cover systems are, is you're just trying to build the right size flowerpot.

Mike Paton:

Interesting. Really, really interesting.

Mike O'Kane:

But simple don't think that you're solving cancer, we're actually doing the best we can.

Mike Paton:

You've already introduced some really talented leaders from your life, mentors and family members. Have you ever worked with, or for, or seen a lousy leader?

Mike O'Kane:

You're looking at him Paton. Honestly. Yeah.

Mike Paton:

Do a harsh self assessment then Mike.

Mike O'Kane:

Do a harsh self self-assessment?

Mike Paton:

Yeah, what are the things about yourself as a leader, you've had to work hard to change or improve?

Mike O'Kane:

Moving too fast. Yeah. Moving too fast and not giving myself time to pause, to take a breath, have some compassion, try and get myself into the other person's perspectives.

Mike Paton:

Right.

Mike O'Kane:

And then also, I think as well as the saying, "You know what? I made a mistake, I'm sorry, that's my fault. And how can I make it better." And just recognizing that, not waiting to be asked or just saying, "Hey, let's reset here. And that's on me." And I think that's probably one of the biggest things that has probably come out as a personal evolution, but also EOS has been a big, big help for me. The very first thing that drew me to EOS and I know we don't we don't need to re talk ad nauseam about EOS, but I have to share the first thing that got drawn to me.

There was a YouTube of, those ones with the whiteboard and somebody drawing something like that and so they were drawing this guy with a bunch of stuff, going all over the place. Right? And I said, "That's the first two minute video that actually I watched that said, okay, what's this EOS thing." Because I said, "That's me." Right? And so I think that difference is, is that I used to be really proud of being highly functional in chaos. And now I realize how stupid that is. That's not a really good thing to be proud of.

Mike Paton:

It is much easier to do that by yourself than when there's a team of people around you who thrive on clarity and alignment. And it's one of the reasons so many entrepreneurial companies hit the ceiling is, what fuels you makes life difficult for other people, often. And I'm a poster child of that as well, as everybody who knows me well, that's listening to this podcast will attest.

Mike O'Kane:

I'll share my version of myself is that all my kids, my wife were down in Disney World and my kids love Disney World. My wife, not so much. Right? But I was saying to her, I said, "So we're going to do this. And then we're going to do that. And then Megan, you're going to go over here and Shay you're here. And you take that line, let's get out. Yeah. And it's going to be so great." And I turned to my wife and say, "Okay, let's go." And she goes, "We're doing none of that." "Well, what are you talking about? What are you talking about?" And she goes, "Well it sounds like you've decided everything." I said, "No, no, no, no, no. They're just ideas." And so there's a great example, when I show up with too much emotion, too much passion for our team within O'Kane it can be, "Oh, Mike's decided everything." I said, "No, no, no. They're just ideas." I got to give space for those people who bring that clarity.

Mike Paton:

Yeah. Yeah. Another little lesson in there and maybe you didn't intend it and maybe you're going to disagree with me. But I think sometimes we think we're being clear, that we're offering suggestions and ideas and what everybody else hears is orders and mandates. And there's definitely something wrong with everybody else. Right. Mike?

Mike O'Kane:

Absolutely. It has to be them.

Mike Paton:

That's exactly right. And so, again, you're hitting a nerve that I need to work on as well. So...

Mike O'Kane:

It's a big one for me. Man, if I could just slow down and make sure that I'm not making it about myself. Absolutely, it's a better world.

Mike Paton:

Let's flip the tables on you. And instead of the harsh self-assessment, tell me what you think you're proud of being a leader. What are the qualities you think help you build a great organization and lead people well?

Mike O'Kane:

Well, I think I've changed. I'm a much different person than I was even 5 or even 10 years ago. And I think a big part of that is really coming to the grips that the company doesn't need to define me and it doesn't anymore. Right? I'm happy being me. I've got my own little tests for whether I'm in the right head space, that means something really to me, how I feel. And we can talk about that if you want. But I think the biggest part is, is that I'm I'm front center and present with my family and with my wife. I think that's probably the thing I'm most proud of.

Mike Paton:

That's great to hear. Tell me how you came to the realization you needed to make that more important in your life.

Mike O'Kane:

Well, I think that if I was to stop and listen to sometimes, and this comes from the passionate part, that we talked about, is that when you're like that, and then somebody starts to question, you start to feel like, "Well, I need to be right. I'm right. I need to be right. I'm right." And then when somebody actually says to you while you're just trying to be right, the bad head space responds and says, "Well, so are you."

Mike Paton:

Yeah.

Mike O'Kane:

Right? the much better head space response is, if I'm feeling that I need to be right and somebody is telling me that, then I'm not listening and then I'm not actually seeking questions and I'm not prepared. And this is one from my brothers, another one of my mentors, Kevin, he goes, "Be prepared to have your answers questioned." And that's gold. Right? And if you can get yourself into that and stop trying to be right and listen to what somebody says, "Hey, you're just trying to be right." They're actually telling you, "You're not listening, Mike."

Mike Paton:

Yeah. And EOS, I'm sure you've heard this many times. We talk about the importance of being open and honest, open to everybody's perspectives and viewpoints before you make up your own mind and then just brutally direct, whatever you're thinking, feeling, needing, just say it. And that is an easier thing to say than to live.

Mike O'Kane:

Absolutely. Yeah. And I'd say that, probably the rub, a friction that might occur between our leadership team and myself and our integrator, is exactly around that. Getting into that comfortable space that we're each offering each of ourselves constructive, healthy conflict. And I think that a lot of people struggle with that. And I think-

Mike Paton:

You're a hundred right. And it's ironic because the things that really blow a team's organizational structure or alignment with one another or trust up, are much more often the things not said than the things that are said. It's after that six months of festering where your last nerve has been tweaked, that's when bad stuff happens, not the minute something happened that you need to get into some healthy, productive conflict, and you just say, "Hey, what was that all about?" Those can be re reasonably innocuous conversations, but man, after six months they get really, really crazy. So that's what I'm trying to teach my teams, to be afraid of the delay, not the conversation. For what's it's worth.

Mike O'Kane:

Yeah. I absolutely believe in that. And then you even start to have these conversations with yourself. Right? And you're asking the questions that you think the other person is going to ask.

Mike Paton:

Yeah.

Mike O'Kane:

"I can't ask that question, because then they are going to answer that question." You go, "Or you could just ask the question."

Mike Paton:

Well, I have re-read for the umpteenth time, the book, *The Untethered Soul* by Dr. Michael Singer. And it's almost all about the argument we have with the voice inside our head, that is constant. So trust me, I've perfected the technique. Tell me about a memorable moment of success for your organization or you as a leader. What happened? Why did it feel so good? And what do you think made it go so well

Mike O'Kane:

I think the memorable moment of the success, I guess for me, perhaps, even for the company, is that we, and this may be a bit too soft, but it's when we actually fully formed our leadership team. And when we actually had a real VTO and you're able to actually say and talk about, "Here's the vision part. This is the part that I love. Here's the traction part. That's the stuff that you guys love." Right? And move between the two, but they're both right there. And then right next to that, and I remember Mike Dunn, we talked about Mike Dunn, VC. I remember in that first meeting, "One day you're going to have the O'Kane way, the core processes." I'm like, "That sounds good, Mike, but I have no idea what you're talking about."

It was invigorating seeing our team, Bonnie, our integrator present our core processes to have even just something. Something simple Paton, as we had our business cycle, here's what our board meetings are, here's where we're having our shareholder meeting. I mean, just something as simple as that. And I went "Now that, to me, that that was powerful." Right? And a lot of things that Mike Dunn and Andrew, our current implementer, all these things are falling into place and you're on this little journey. So it's a bit soft, but it was powerful.

Mike Paton:

No, not at all. I always look at the business as an organism and there's a moment at which you recognize your organism is ready to go off to college or go out on its own or whatever. And until then, for most of us often feels like we're just working our butts off and doing lots of stuff. And there is no organism it's just us and work. Right? And so to me, I totally appreciate the significance of that and hope the listener does as well. What's the hardest or scariest moment of your leadership career? What rocked you to the core, if anything?

Mike O'Kane:

Probably what rocked me to my core and it actually arose from all the things that we've always talked about. I had a very good friend in the business and we got out of the line and unfortunately we had to go our separate ways. That rocked me to the core. I went, "Whoa, wow. I need to get better. I need to figure out what part I played in that." And I think that really, really rocked me to the core of Paton and I'm sure this happens to everybody, these kinds of things.

And it all comes from lack of clarity of roles, misunderstanding of accountabilities, assuming that everyone was on the same page and then you start to escalate and you try and have that reset and somebody becomes vulnerable. And this is a part of, this is one of the things that my personal growth here is that, every time he was vulnerable, "I knew you made that mistake." So we created the space for vulnerability and I held it against him, that's not productive. Right? So you're not going to be able to

create trust. If every time somebody is vulnerable, that you're going to say, "Oh, I knew you made that mistake." Right? And I think having that sort of framework, that rocked me, really realized just how incredibly important that is. That's without a doubt, one of my most scary moments.

Mike Paton:

Well, that's a great answer. Thank you. I appreciate it, Mike. What do you do to develop you? You mentioned this earlier that, you have a method for testing your head space, so I want to get into that and I want to talk about other things that you do to develop yourself as a leader, or be your best self every day as a leader. So share with me the testing thing and anything else that comes to mind.

Mike O'Kane:

The testing thing.

Mike Paton:

Yeah.

Mike O'Kane:

Sometimes when I share this, it sounds like I need therapy, but we all do.

Mike Paton:

We all do. And I have a name for you if you need it.

Mike O'Kane:

So my first test is that I'm an introvert, strong introvert, and often I would feel uncomfortable of wanting to be alone. Right? And I think one of the tests is to not feel lonely, when I'm alone, it's okay. I'm gaining energy, right? Not feel lonely, it's okay. And so I'm not being alone to avoid, but just not being lonely when I'm alone. And the other one is a really interesting thing too, is to not feel alone in a crowd. My wife is the one with energy. She's an extrovert, she's full of energy. If you walk into our house, you'd feel the culture of our home.

That's Krista, right. It's amazing what she creates, the smells, everything, but we have lots of people over all the time and family and sometimes I feel a bit, I mean, I don't feel comfortable, but don't feel alone in that crowd. To be able to say, "Hey, it's actually okay not to say anything." And just listen and then contribute when I need to, or maybe I'm at a low energy point, because I've been an extrovert all day and that's quite energy for me. And the third one is, and this is I think is a very common one for people, is that there's nothing out to get me, right? The world is not about me. Right? I just a tiny little thing in the world and what it's about is how I respond. And if I can take that pause and not feel that there's something out there that's out to get me so to speak.

Mike Paton:

And when you feel like there's work to do after testing yourself there, where do you go to recharge your batteries or get better?

Mike O'Kane:

I really, again, I'm not trying to oversell, Clarity Breaks.

Mike Paton:

Yeah. Yeah. Great.

Mike O'Kane:

And one of the things that we always advocate for it and I'm going to switch over and I'll come back, if you don't mind Paton. One of the things we advocate for, with the work that we do in the mining industry is we say, "We should do progressive closure." Right? Don't wait till the end. You should do it while you're doing it. You'll be able to demonstrate to people, stakeholders, the community that you actually can do it. And you'll be able to cost it out better, do progressive closures. Right? And then people ask, "Well, why don't you do progressive closure?" And people, "Well it's because you don't care." "No, no, no, no. It's not that you don't care. It's not part of the plan."

Right? If it's not part of the mine plan, then it just simply doesn't get done. So the question actually becomes not about not caring. It's like, "How do you get it into the mind plan? How do you demonstrate the value?" Right? I often say from mine closure, I've never met a closure plan that's ready to execute. And why isn't that? Because we're not on the same page for the acceptable level of residual risk and we're not on the same page of the future land use. So if I'm going to do progressive closure, but I'm going to spend money on that now to resolve tomorrow's risk for later, I better be able to actually demonstrate the value.

Mike Paton:

Right.

Mike O'Kane:

So it doesn't happen unless it's not part of the mine plan same with Clarity Breaks. They don't happen unless they're in my schedule. We didn't meet today by chance.

Mike Paton:

That's exactly right. And there's space for that. Right? So when [crosstalk 00:23:54]. Exactly what I've learned to do is when you say, "I just can't think I'm overwhelmed. I don't have time to think." I'm like, "Well, have you scheduled time to think?"

Mike O'Kane:

Yeah.

Mike Paton:

"What do you mean?" So...

Mike O'Kane:

I find it powerful.

Mike Paton:

Yeah.

Mike O'Kane:

I do meditation a lot as well. That certainly helps. I'm not great at it, but I do that quite often, but the Clarity Breaks for sure. And it can be all kinds of different things. It could be writing. It could be investigating stuff, looking online, reading a journal paper, all kinds of different things. Something to slow me down.

Mike Paton:

Awesome. Let's take a little fun detour here, before we wrap up with some serious stuff in a minute. My interview notes said you're a recovering over user of sports analogies, and I am not in recovery yet. And so tell me what you learned from sports, playing them, coaching them, watching people coach them, that you think is applicable to leaders today.

Mike O'Kane:

I'm going to use the simplest one, basketball, high school, Coach Chambers, losing a game really badly, just ridiculous. Years later when I went back and I always connect up with Coach Chambers and he tells me, "Do you remember that?" And I said, "Well, I do. I remember winning the game." He goes, "But do you remember what happened?" Right? And I said, "Well, no, I don't. I just remember the last part of the game." He goes, "We were down by 28 points at the end of three quarters. And the other team scored zero points in the fourth quarter and we score 29 and we won." And I said, "Oh no, absolutely. I absolutely remember that." But the piece that actually I really do remember is my football coach, Coach Connolly, afterwards, the [inaudible 00:25:31]. And it came up to me, pointed me in the chest and says, "O'Kane never lose your passion." And I think that my passion comes from a lot of places. My dad, my mom, my brother, that's a powerful thing, never lose your passion.

Mike Paton:

Well, Mike, that made the whole conversation completely and totally worthwhile. I couldn't agree with you more. So great. And I'm not going to recover from my overusing sports analogies anytime soon, that was beautiful. If you had to wrap everything you've learned up into one piece of advice for a leader who's just out there every day, doing the good work, trying to be the best they can be what's the most important advice you could give them?

Mike O'Kane:

The little things really, really matter. They really, really do. I'm going to go just back a little bit in time. If you don't mind. Many years ago, when I was in college, there was a horrible event that occurred in Montreal. It's called the Montreal Massacre. And I don't want to go into all the details, but that led to a really good friend of mine, Laurie Newman and her husband, Greg, we were really tightly connected. Greg, Laurie and I. And Laurie started as something called the Summer Sci-fi Camp at the college of engineering. It still exists, it's 30 years now. And it was designed for girls, interested in science, in grades five to eight. And I encourage people listening to you, Paton, to go look up what the Montreal Massacre is all about, a horrible, horrible occurrence, but that was Laurie's way.

And Greg and I support her on that. Now flash forward to maybe 10, 12 months ago. And I have one to ones with all of our folks, try to connect with them on every quarterly basis. And I'm sitting there listening and talking with one of our just incredible, like everyone else in the company, just incredibly bright, young, energetic, passionate, everybody embodying our core values. And I'm talking to Lindsey and I asked her that one of the same questions, probably like you, "How did you get into engineering? Why did you choose?" She goes, "Well, my mom knew I liked math and science and I went to this summer sci-fi camp.

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Mike Paton:

Wow.

Mike O'Kane:

Now talk about, wow, exactly. Little things, Laurie making just a little difference, "I'm going to do some summer sci-fi camps. Don't know if it's going to last." That's pretty powerful.

Mike Paton:

Brilliant. What an absolute joy getting to know you, Mike, I could go on for another hour, but I want to respect your time. We both need time for a Clarity Break, right? And maybe therapy. Before I let you go, I'm sure you've intrigued numerous listeners, were can they learn more about you and O'Kane?

Mike O'Kane:

O'Kane is www.okc-sk.com. SK as in Saskatchewan, that's at our heart. You can find us on LinkedIn under O'Kane or you can search for me and you can search for us. And we're going to really help create a better tomorrow for indigenous communities, for first nations, bring that entrepreneurial opportunity, to be part of bringing that to everybody.

Mike Paton:

Thank you, Mike an absolute joy. Speaking to the listener, if you enjoyed today's conversation, as much as I did, and you're not already subscribed, please open your podcasting app, subscribe to the show and tell your friends all about it. Mike. Thanks so much, really appreciate meeting you and wishing you and your team well in the future.

Mike O'Kane:

Absolutely. My pleasure. Thank you.

Mike Paton:

If he 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.