

Valérie Coutu:

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Mike Paton:

Hello everyone Mike Paton here with the E O S leader podcast and today I have the great pleasure of speaking with Valérie Coutu. The president of Jovaco Solutions, a 37 year old provider of fully integrated technology solutions in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. Valérie's a second generation leader alongside her brother, Jonatan in her family business. With diverse experiences and complimentary skills Jonatan and Valerie have joined the company to each contribute their respective perspectives and talents. Today, The Jovaco Solutions family extends to it's 50 employees each of whom brings a unique range of passions and skills. Valérie, thanks for spending time with me today, welcome to the show.

Valérie Coutu:

Real pleasure.

Mike Paton:

So when you're talking to someone about your business, that doesn't really understand what a Technology Solutions Provider is and you don't want to make it too complicated, how do you introduce yourself and your career?

Valérie Coutu:

Hmm, good question. Well, I will say that we are implementing businesses solution for small and mid-sized companies, so we are implementing ERP and CRM and we are helping our customer building their business on top of those solution.

Mike Paton:

Awesome. That's very helpful. And we already covered the fact that you have 50 employees today. You've been in business 37 years. Tell me a little bit about your day to day responsibilities in the organization.

Valérie Coutu:

Well, now that I'm president of the company, I will say that my responsibilities change over the last year. So I'm really now focusing on the vision, the long-term vision, building partnership, external partnership, to help us develop our expertise and develop our vision, that the new project Doug, that we want to develop. I'm also part of developing our culture in Jovaco and over last year with the pandemic, I will say that it was a huge part of my day to day job where I spent a lot of time just reaching out to our employees, having different discussion one-on-one or just general virtual meeting with our staff to make sure everybody is going well and knows where we are going in the future.

Mike Paton:

Yeah and it sounds like you're underscoring something I've seen dozens of other leaders talk about in 2020 and 2021, which is that while there are some virtues of virtual or remote work, maintaining a sense of togetherness, collaboration and culture is a lot more work when you're not all in the same facility. Yes?

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Valérie Coutu:

For sure. Yeah.

Mike Paton:

Yeah. Good. So as I listened to you, describe your role, it feels to me like you're sitting in the visionary seat. And so I'll ask you about your brother, Jonatan, is he the integrator of the business?

Valérie Coutu:

He's a great integrator. Exactly.

Mike Paton:

Got it. And now just out of curiosity, is he older or younger than you?

Valérie Coutu:

You? He's older than me. Two years older and yeah.

Mike Paton:

Okay that's good. And then do you have any funny stories about what it's like to be a visionary integrator pair with your brother in a family business started by your father?

Valérie Coutu:

Well, I like the term funny, I would say that it has been a roller coaster before. It is now funny and healthy and we have a lot of pleasure now, but I will say that the rocket fuel of us, understand both of us as a visionary and integrator and how we were struggling before, because I was that type of visionary everywhere. A lot of ideas, opportunities, throwing everything and my brother was always saying "No we don't do that. No, we are not going there." So we found ourselves with this duality now really clear that I'm the visionary and now he's the integrator and we sit in the exact right seats now.

Mike Paton:

That's awesome. Would you say that the fact that he has a better handle on your gifts and strengths and you have a better handle on his and you're not trying to do the other person's job has helped you sort of settle into a healthy relationship?

Valérie Coutu:

Exactly. Yeah. That's what we found.

Mike Paton:

That's great to hear on behalf of Gino and Mark Winters, I'll say thank you for trumpeting the virtues of rocket fuel and the whole Visionary/Integrator duo. So I want to talk a little bit more about the work you do to ensure the culture stays positive and vibrant, even under difficult situations like a global pandemic. What are the kinds of things you're doing to ensure people feel connected, they're clear on where you're going, they want to help you get there. Give me a sense of how you do that work.

Valérie Coutu:

Yeah, well there's different things, of course, now we have clear quarterly meeting where we explain each three months where we are going, what's our vision, what's our priority for the next three months, so that's something that helped us a lot and we are really happy that we started that quarterly meeting earlier, before the pandemic. So it's just helping us through the pandemic to just keep the same message and make sure everyone is going in the same direction as us.

But that being said, it was not enough for us during the pandemic. So decided that really quickly, when everything shut down, we just create what we call the Q and A sessions. So we were having an hour or an hour and a half with everybody and just telling the truth that about where we were, what was the impact on the company. What was the decision that we were planing to make or not an answering question that the employee had? So, that was really a beginning and we started that with the pandemic.

We never did that before, but we just keep it going. We are doing it now once a month. And now we are using this Q and A. It's the same question that we are asking as of the beginning where it was more about how people were feeling or, or if they were having issues. Now we are just asking questions on different things and where we want to go or what, what they were listening at the TV right now. So different kind of question will be on the business or just personal, but just to keep this momentum with everybody together in the same room, virtual room and keep the connection.

Mike Paton:

So you're sharing a piece of advice that I think is really powerful and very simple and a lot of people think it has to be more complicated this, but what I hear you saying is when it's difficult to maintain a sense of culture, you have to work harder than ever to maintain a sense of connection with each of the people in your organization, understand how they're feeling, where they're going, what issues they're dealing with, and you need to do that proactively. And it isn't as easy when you can't do it, walking down the hall or in the lunch room together, you have to make a proactive effort to do it. Yes?

Valérie Coutu:

Yes, exactly. Exactly. And I've also done a lot of just virtual coffee, so virtual coffee break, I scheduled them with everybody in the company and had the one-on-one coffee every three months,

Mike Paton:

That's neat.

Valérie Coutu:

Yup just get that feeling that we were just going to the coffee machine and some use of the family and how things were going.

Mike Paton:

That's good to hear. That's good to hear. All right let's change gears for a second and talk about leadership in general, as opposed to your organization and the specific things you're doing.

Can you recall the first time you recognize somebody in your life was leading and who that person was and what they were doing and what you thought when you watched it happen, and it dawned on you that that was a leader?

Valérie Coutu:

I have a few people in mind, first that came in mind is for sure my mother was a great leader. I saw her as a teacher for the police officer so when I was young, it was a woman as in a very man environment. And she really helped break down some barriers for woman and in the police court, but also she went in some developing countries, also share her knowledge and share the passion and develop the competency there.

Mike Paton:

What kind of teaching or education was she doing for police officers?

Valérie Coutu:

Well, she were teaching a lot for them. So she was a lawyer and she transformed her career as a law feature for future police officer.

Mike Paton:

Wow.

Valérie Coutu:

And then she developed also an expertise to a learning by competency, that was a specific way to teach some competency for them and that's what she brings in Africa and I.T.

And she said it was a very nice woman in leadership that, that I saw all the years that I was growing and she was also a fantastic mother. So it was a great model for me.

Mike Paton:

That's great.

Valérie Coutu:

Yeah.

Mike Paton:

Just a Specific question, what of, all the things you watched your mother do? What are the things you try to emulate in your own role as a leader? What do you hope you're able to take from what you watched your mother do and apply in your own life?

Valérie Coutu:

Well, she was a person who was caring a lot. She's caring. She takes time for everybody that she knows that needs our help or that will that she knows that she could bring something to that person to help or just listening, or she's really pleasant to everybody around her. And I think it's a part of what I think I have and that's the human values that I developed myself.

Mike Paton:

Yeah. So connectedness and compassion is what I'm hearing you say.

Valérie Coutu:

Exactly.

Mike Paton:

Yeah. Great. Yeah. Okay. And then you, you had another role model as a leader you wanted to share as well.

Valérie Coutu:

Yeah. Well, when I was in high school we had two physics teacher that were, they were passionate about leadership and they developed a program, a leadership program at high school. It was unique, I would say at that time, and so they bring some kids in this program, kids that they were seeing that they had leadership skills and they teach us what was leadership.

And I was 12-13 years old leadership was not something that we really could put a name on it.

Mike Paton:

Yeah.

Valérie Coutu:

So they teach us what it was that we had skills to develop, and that we could be a great leader later and that we can inspire others. So they help us develop that, that sense of leadership, and I was really young, I was named captain of the basketball team. You don't see me now, but I'm, I'm five feet tall. So I was not that kind of basketball player you would think.

Mike Paton:

(laughs) There was no Dunking going on.

Valérie Coutu:

Exactly. So I was not the typical basketball team captain, but they saw that skill that I had, and I was working really hard.

I was encouraging my team, always optimistic. So I think that's where I developed my leadership skills, the first thing.

Mike Paton:

Do you remember anything specific that they taught you like a mantra or a phrase or a discipline or a tool that you use to this day to be a better leader?

Valérie Coutu:

Oh, that's a good question. What I remember is something that my brother also remember me when we were talking about this leadership program is that you don't have to excuse yourself for doing something or you need to listen, to maybe understand what was the situation, but not going around and excuse yourself, having done something wrong or something.

Mike Paton:

Yeah.

So a little bit is don't feel like you need to apologize for mistakes or things you would do differently a second time. Just you're allowed to make mistakes.

Valérie Coutu:

Exactly.

Mike Paton:

A great leader is going to make a mistake, just own it, take responsibility for it and move on. Don't apologize to everybody or feel shame about it. I would imagine is what they were telling you.

Valérie Coutu:

Yeah.

Mike Paton:

You don't need to feel ashamed.

Valérie Coutu:

No, learn from it and grow with the situation, even if you think that you were right.

Mike Paton:

Yeah that's exactly right and, I've also found that when you're afraid of making mistakes, you make fewer decisions and great leaders make lots of decisions every day and you can't possibly get all of them right. And the worst decision is the decision not to decide because you're afraid you're going to get it wrong.

Valérie Coutu:

Exactly.

Mike Paton:

Yeah. Great stuff. That's really good stuff. Thank you.

Tell me about the moment as the leader of your family business, when you feel like you or you and your brother together had your first big success, something to celebrate.

Valérie Coutu:

The first big success. I will say that is the first annual meeting with our team to tell them where we were now going and that the new role that we will each now have in the company and explain our vision, explain exactly where we were going in five years, three years, the role that we will each have and how it will be going through the company and that the changes that we will be making in the next few months, years to achieve our vision.

It was a big move. It was a way where we were really giving a clear vision through our team, we made an event around that. We bring everybody, The Planetarium and Montreal, we made this presentation and we feel so happy to share that with the team and have the support from everybody and everyone were so happy to see us working together and having exactly the right seats in the company for who we were and building on the strength of both of us, because everybody in the team were like both of us and like working with us and they just saw exactly the right fit for both of us.

Mike Paton:

Did everybody in your company pay attention that first time and understand it, or have you found that you need to repeat it quarterly and eventually they get there?

Valérie Coutu:

For sure. We see the advantage to repeat it quarterly, make sure everybody gets, gets it and stick the same vision.

Mike Paton:

Right.

Valérie Coutu:

I think this first annual meeting was a way to give clarity to the team and for the first time they really knew where we were going. So before that, we have so many ideas and so many opportunities, but now we have one clear vision where we're going.

Mike Paton:

So tell me how you and your brother were feeling before the meeting, and then what you felt immediately after the meeting.

Valérie Coutu:

For sure. We were nervous about that presentation. We were really happy too. We knew that people were looking for clarity or looking to have that we make a decision to where we were going, a decision that we had a hard time to make for years. And finally, we were just deciding exactly where we were going and I think for everybody, it was a relief to now know where we were going and they just happy and want to follow us exactly where we want to go.

So after the presentation of course we were really happy to have built that together, to have build a presentation with both trained and really focus on the strength of each other to build that great vision for the long-term.

Mike Paton:

That's exciting. So the two things I was hoping you would say is that you were nervous or scared beforehand, and you were relieved when it was over and you nailed both of those. So thank you. Thank you very much and part of what I'm trying to make sure the listener hear is, is if you're not terrified from time to time, you're not doing this, right. This is scary, lonely work. And it's great that you and your brother have each other and you've settled into these roles, but even when it's the two of you together, I'm sure you looked at each other and said, before you went on, well, we're either going to confirm for everybody, this was a great idea, or we're going to fall flat on our face and we'll know in an hour.

Right so that's normal.

Tell me about a time you and your brother felt stuck, or it was a difficult leadership situation, maybe something you feel like you wish you had a chance to do over again differently.

Valérie Coutu:

Yeah, for sure. It was the two to three years before we came to that clarity. And I think we were at the crossroad and we were both having issues. Well, we were having different vision of the company. We

were taking this decision for anybody so they were able to, came to me, ask a question, I'll do the decision. Or they knew that for another decision, they should go to my brothers.

Mike Paton:

Person who would give them the answer they wanted. Right.

Valérie Coutu:

Exactly. So, for years we were just struggling didn't find the right way to manage a business together. So we were just going to say yes, when the other were saying no. And so that was a really hard time, I would say, where we didn't know where to go and how to find the answer to the situation. So we are really happy that we have been able to go how I will say that holding in my pride to make sure that we can now connect together and move on and say, "Okay, forget about the past and now we're just looking in front and we want to achieve this together."

Mike Paton:

That's great to hear. Yeah, and what I find is it takes a lot less time to get on the same page than it does to clean up the messes of the decisions you make when you're not on the same page.

Valérie Coutu:

Yeah.

Mike Paton:

A lot of busy entrepreneurial leaders just think, well, we're never going to agree and correct me if I'm wrong, but my guess is when you and your brother got yourselves in a room and you started discussing and debating the things that you may be disagreed on in the past, you were surprised by how quickly you were able to make a decision together and move on.

Valérie Coutu:

Exactly.

Mike Paton:

You got to have the conversation. You got to have the conversation. Most of the time, you already agree. One of my favorite sayings with a client is, I don't know why you two are arguing because you seem to agree.

Valérie Coutu:

And it's exactly often. And it's silly sometimes we look like we are arguing, but we are saying the same thing. We want the same thing we are just saying differently, but at the end we have all the same vision of the situations.

Mike Paton:

And especially with family members right? Where you have a whole lifetime together of arguing about who gets to sit in the front seat.

And who gets the biggest cookie and all of that stuff. I mean, we're really good at finding some reason to disagree with the people we care about most it's totally natural. That's funny. What do you do personally, to sharpen your saw as a leader to develop and grow as a leader? What are the books or classes or study tools or confidants you rely on to get better?

Valérie Coutu:

All that stuff.

Mike Paton:

Yeah. Okay. Fair enough.

Valérie Coutu:

Well, there's different things. I like to join some other groups. So groups of leader, where we can share our experience and challenges and discuss how it goes in our company and have some ideas of how others are doing, so that group sharing information. I also like to jump in some trainings so some during the last year, there were a few opportunities where we have some training for leaders or for president or co development session with others. So I really liked those session where you can just learn from, from other leaders and from also just sharing your own expertise or experience with them.

Mike Paton:

Good stuff.

How has leading the family business influenced your life outside the business? Has it made you a better leader in your family? Has it given you more appreciation for other parts of your life that maybe you didn't have beforehand? What's changed about you outside of the business in the last couple years?

Valérie Coutu:

Now, I'm looking more for a life quality where I used to work a lot and really hard. Now I try to, we still work hard, but we still like to take time with the family, it's the family business that bring me that, or the pandemic, the last year pandemic, where we spend more time with our kids and my spouse. So I'm looking more for that balance. And now I appreciate a lot of what I have and that what I can do with my kids and with my family, even though we cannot travel anymore, we still can ski so.

That's what we are doing.

Mike Paton:

That's a Canadian law. Is it not? You can't stop skiing no matter what.

Valérie Coutu:

Exactly.

Mike Paton:

You mentioned your kids. How old are they?

Valérie Coutu:

7 and 11.

Mike Paton:

And what are you hoping to teach them as they grow up and contemplate life in the world outside of your family?

Valérie Coutu:

Well, I'm hoping I'll be able to teach them that they need to believe in themselves. They also can have big dreams and that anything is possible if you surround yourself with people that have the same value as you and that has the same passion for what you want to achieve. And I hope they will be able to achieve their dream. My sons wants to be one of the first astronauts on Mars, so that's a big goal.

Mike Paton:

Except that I would say, I think in Elon Musk's mind, he'll be hiring for that position in the next couple of weeks. So he should probably get his application in right away, right?

Valérie Coutu:

Exactly.

Mike Paton:

Well, and that's that's entrepreneurship, right? Is if you can dream it, you can make it possible. And many of us have failed over and over and over again. But if we don't try and fail, we're never going to succeed either. So that's really great stuff. If I were to ask you to give advice, not to your kids, but to a young leader who is maybe experiencing some of the same problems and challenges you've had in your life, What's that piece of advice you'd give them to make them their best leader every single day?

Valérie Coutu:

One advice will be to develop their coaching skill, to be a great leader, that the coaching skill will help them elevate the people around them. And I think that could be something that could help them for, for their lives to just be able to coach the others who bring them at the next level.

Mike Paton:

Well, that's great stuff. There was a hint in what you just said that I want to grab onto. Sometimes I find that in order to focus your time and attention on coaching, you have to not look at yourself as the obvious solution to every problem and instead give your people the opportunity to solve the problems themselves. Is that a part of what you're hinting at when you say that develop your coaching ability?

Valérie Coutu:

Yes. Yes. I think they you'd need to accept that things could be done differently. That the way that you will do it, it's not always easy. I think that's something that I tried to develop myself still today. Make sure that I'm able to just let go the vine, give the people what they need to just develop their capacity and make their own decision and learn from it.

Mike Paton:

You are preaching to an expert on that subject. Valérie. I have to remind myself every day that I'm doing it myself is not the right answer most of the time. So I appreciate you pointing that out.

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Well, Gosh, this has been a blast. I could go for another hour, but I won't because I know you're busy as well. Thank you for spending time with us before I let you go, where can the listener go to find out more about you, your brother and the company? Yeah.

Valérie Coutu:

Our website will triple W-W-W. J-O-V-A-C-O.com, so it's www.jovaco.com. And just as a funny fact, Jovaco is for Jonatan, Valérie, Coutu.

Mike Paton:

Oh nice.

Valérie Coutu:

My father didn't know, 37 years ago that we were going to be both in the company.

Mike Paton:

But he named it that without that. Whoa, that's crazy! Ah, thanks for sharing that little nugget.

Well, I'm going to say this as carefully and probably flawed as I possibly can. Merci beaucoup, Valérie. It has been a pleasure speaking with you. To the listener, I hope you enjoyed this conversation as much as I did remember, review us on iTunes, reviews help more people find the podcast and it's great to hear from you so we appreciate your passionate support or feedback that'll make the podcast better. Thanks for listening. That's the EOS leader podcast. Thank you again, Valérie.

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