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Mike Paton:

Hello everybody. This is Mike Paton with the EOS leader podcast. And today I'm excited to introduce Zach Stewart, the visionary, and vice-president at Wilcox Doors, just outside Toronto. Zach is a second generation leader in a certified Aboriginal owned businesses his father started 30 years ago. The Wilcox team truly celebrates multiculturalism, collaboration and engagement, and I'm really looking forward to having Zach share with us exactly how they bring those things to life in their organization. He's a huge fan of the Toronto Raptors, enjoys traveling throughout the world, continuous education and finding ways to give back to the community. Please welcome Zach to the EOS leader podcast. Zach, thanks so much for being here. Just, when you are introducing yourself to somebody new that you meet, how do you introduce you and what you do?

Zach Stewart:

So it's an interesting question, because it's different almost every time, depending on who I meet. One, our industry is very unique and we service overhead doors and loading docks, which is interesting to some people, not interesting to other people. So typically I would introduce myself as the vice president of the organization. I focus in on the culture, the big relationships, all those types of things really aligning the employees with our vision and everything like that. And that's kind of my role.

Mike Paton:

Yeah. Give me a little sense of the company, the size, scope, where your geographic footprint is, et cetera.

Zach Stewart:

Yeah. Again, that's changing a little bit. We were about a 70 person company just before COVID. We downsized a little bit there and now we're growing back to about that size. We recently launched, last year, a national service. So our footprint initially was just in the Toronto geographic area, but now we offer services throughout Canada, every province and every territory. And we're actually expanding with some of that national service for our customers in the United States as well.

Mike Paton:

That's exciting. I want to talk about leadership in general. Can you take me back to the first moment in your life when you think about leadership, where you recognize someone was leading? Maybe a family member, a teacher, a historical figure, what was the first recollection of leadership you had?

Zach Stewart:

So when I was a kid, almost every dinner was about the business. My father started it. My mother is funny, before we'd even learned about these terms, it was a visionary integrator type of relationship. So it was just always around me. And I always saw my father as that person thinking about the big picture, thinking about these other companies that he was looking to acquire, people issues, all those types of things. And I really, really saw my father, as a child, as a really revolutionary leader in his own right in

our industry, coming up with these different ideas that nobody had ever heard of and being around that all the time really inspired me to kind of go down that path a little bit more. I picked up a little bit at the other side with my mom and being very analytical, and she's that type of leader, but I'm much more on the other side. And seeing that every day really, really sunk in.

Mike Paton:

Yeah. And in that experience, because I had a similar upbringing, did you have to teach yourself how to draw boundaries between family and business because that's the way you grew up?

Zach Stewart:

Absolutely. To this day, if we have family dinners, not allowed to talk about business. It's always been something that we've had to put that line in the sand and 8-5, talk about it all we want, after 5, we try to leave that stuff.

Mike Paton:

Yeah. If you're not careful, it consumes everything and there's some dark side to that as well.

Zach Stewart:

Absolutely.

Mike Paton:

So as you think about your mom and your dad as leaders, give me the things you hope to emulate in what you saw in them.

Zach Stewart:

With my father, he just had the ability to capture a room with his ideas, his visions, where he wanted to go. He was just a great leader that people wanted to follow. And when he started his company, there really wasn't that in the industry. He gained a quick following. We're such a niche market, there's lots of people that were going to different companies, that once they saw what he was doing and the way he led, they wanted to come here. He attracted them to the company that way. That's something I'm trying to emulate now in a different way, in my own way.

Mike Paton:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Interesting. And how about your mom? Like a lot of visionaries, when you talked about inheriting some of her analytical capabilities, you weren't particularly enthusiastic about that.

Zach Stewart:

Yeah. She instilled a really good financial background with me. My father, he's good with finances, but she's definitely the brains of all that. So I learned a lot from there. And a lot of my decision-making comes with financial backing and understanding the true financial implications to what I'm trying to do, which I think strengthens me as a visionary, that I'm not just swinging for the fences every single time, I'm coming up with good, sound ideas that make sense and are affordable.

Mike Paton:

Yeah. And we talk a lot about rooting your vision in a firm foundation of execution and accountability and your comfort with a balance sheet and income statement allows you to feel good about your ability to execute on the big ideas that you come up with, I'm sure.

Zach Stewart:

Yep. Absolutely.

Mike Paton:

Is there anything about either of your parents' leadership styles that you observed as a young man, that maybe you want to be different in some meaningful way?

Zach Stewart:

I would say when I was a kid, we had our blue collar environment. There was the office staff, then there was the technicians. And I think it was more protect me than anything, but they really kept me away from the technicians. I never went on the road. I never learned on that side of it. I was always in the office side. And I don't think there was any malice towards that, but I'm now completely ingrained with my technicians. I talk with them every day. They have more ideas about how to fix the business than I'll ever have. They see the customers every single day. And that's something I'm trying to ingrain in the organization. I've broken down the walls in here. There used to be a wall at the back where technicians weren't allowed to come in the office, for whatever reason. I don't know what the reasoning was behind it. But I got everybody in one room so the technicians had to come in every day and they'd meet everybody. And within the course of a couple of months, everybody knew who everybody was and they were asking questions about their weekends. And just breaking down those walls, there really doesn't need to be that separation from office versus technicians that way.

Mike Paton:

That's awesome. Have you ever worked for a leader, inside or outside the family business, or been subjected to leadership that was difficult for you, created challenges for you, your idea of not leading well?

Zach Stewart:

Yeah. So a couple of years ago we had a general manager that I reported into. And just before that, we had another general manager that was very much interested in myself and developing me, trying to scale the business. And he taught me so many different types of things. And then this general manager had come in and I just, his style didn't suit our organization very well. It was very much his way or the highway. Didn't listen to people, made decisions on a whim and spent so much money. And he ultimately left the organization. And then we did our financial reviews and he drove us into the ground. And we trusted too much, I think, in that sense. And me and him, we just, we didn't get along very well. There was always a back and forth, a little bit of a fight. And I know it could probably be difficult to be a general manager and the owner's son is reporting into you, and that's a hard thing to deal with. I just, I've had that situation all the time in my life and I didn't think he handled that the best way.

Mike Paton:

If you had to pinpoint the root cause of that, what was it about him as a leader that created this Gulf between you?

Zach Stewart:

There was just an air of entitlement, I would say. He made it very well known that he was a general manager and he was better than everybody else in the organization, with the exception of the group that he really liked. And I think that drove up a lot of the walls. The technicians did not like anything at that time that the office was doing because we weren't listening to the people, we were making ideas and making changes that one person thought was the only direction we could go in rather than really talking to our teams and learning what they were going through or getting feedback when we made a decision to see how they felt. And so I ultimately have always been the person a lot of people would come to and I'd be hearing all this stuff and I'd be bringing it in and just the attitude of, "Well, that doesn't really matter to me," was just not... I don't know. It didn't sink in well.

Mike Paton:

So it needed to be his idea to be a good idea, dismissive of others, played favorites, little ego driven. Yeah. Okay. Those are very common qualities I hear shouted out in answer to that question on this podcast. So that's great to hear. How do you think the people in the organization who get to watch you lead every day would describe your best qualities?

Zach Stewart:

I'm definitely an innovator. And I think maybe I innovate too fast sometimes, but that's definitely a quality they see in me. I'm a listener, especially with the EOS platform and how it's changed a bit, but I listen to them all the time. Whether they report to me or not, it's an open door policy. Come and talk to me. Because again, if I'm responsible for the culture of the organization, I need to know when they're not feeling like they're being heard or managers dealing with them in a way that shouldn't be dealt with that way. So I consistently had people coming to me to talk to me about new ideas, their innovations. I really try to empower my team to take on their roles. The way I've put it with some of the growing leaders in our organization is, I've showed them the road that I will go down, but I don't show them how to take it. They need to learn how they're going to go down that road on their own. But I kind of say, "If you're struggling here, when I had done this, I had looked at these avenues. So take a look at that. See how that takes you there." And most of the time that feedback comes back with a, "Wow. That was the key. My manager is so happy with what I'm doing now," without stepping on the managers' toes too much.

Mike Paton:

Right. Oh, that's great. Is there anything you think people see in you, you wish you could change?

Zach Stewart:

Something I'm still growing with is just dealing with that confrontation sometimes, that's not my strong suit. And that's my integrator's strong suit, so we have a good yin and yang with that, but it's still something I got to grow on a little bit. Terminations, those difficult conversations are always difficult. I have them, I just think that that's still a skillset that I need to develop more.

Mike Paton:

Interesting. Tell us about the most difficult challenge. Maybe it's a difficult conversation you had to have with somebody or something else that happened in the business. What'd you do about it? How did it work out? What did you learn?

Zach Stewart:

So at the beginning of this pandemic is probably the biggest challenge that we had. We were about a month into our EOS implementation. So we had a whole new leadership team, not very much management experience, and then this thing hit us like a ton of bricks. And we had to lay off 40% of our staff at the beginning of this, just because our revenue has taken the biggest plunge it's ever taken. And it was a very tough, trying time. And we called it the pressure cooker management lesson on how to deal with this stuff, where basically it was just three of us that sat in a room, we called every single employee, explained what we were doing. We stayed in communication with them every two weeks on where the company was at, when we would be able to bring them back. And it was a very difficult time because of the uncertainty and not knowing where the organization was going to be, not knowing when that finished line could be, when they could be coming back to work.

But from all the feedback we got from our employees, we did everything great because a lot of people just send blanket emails saying, "Hey, you're laid off." My wife got that. And when my wife got that, I knew the feeling that she had felt receiving something like that. So we wanted to make sure everything was done by a phone call. And they heard from a leadership member's voice that we care about them, because we genuinely did. And the only reason why this was happening is because we had to do it. And as soon as we were in a financial position to bring them back, we would be bringing them back. And just by staying in communication week over week, I think we gained a lot of trust with them. They knew that we had their best interests at stake, and ultimately we needed a company for everybody to come back to and they understood the sacrifices that we had to make during that time.

Mike Paton:

Yeah. What a great story. I presume you're back. I think earlier in the conversation, you said you're back to just about full strength today. And are there any lingering after effects, I guess is the question I want to ask?

Zach Stewart:

Just if somebody's sick, they have to still go through that COVID testing protocol and everything, but we're pretty much back to full services, full installs, just a different way of doing it now.

Mike Paton:

Nice.

Zach Stewart:

A lot more temperature checks when they get to sites and different things like that, following protocols, but as a business, we're pretty much back. We're actually more profitable now than we were before, which was interesting.

Mike Paton:

Yeah. You know what? Just going to make a note of something for the listener in that what I heard through that whole story is just real empathy. Your ability to see what your wife went through and the way her company handled this and understand that you didn't want to make that happen for your employees and incorporate that into the way you make decisions and execute on those decisions, it's such a simple concept and it's often when you're busy and scared, it's very hard to follow through on

those simple concepts. So I applaud you for that. Are your parents still involved in the day-to-day of the business or mostly out completely?

Zach Stewart:

It's a bit of both. I would say they're probably in one day a week.

Mike Paton:

Got it.

Zach Stewart:

They're kind of launched another division within the business. So it's in its infancy, so it doesn't require too much time, but they were going to build it and then hand it over once it was at a point. And that was that national service I was talking about.

Mike Paton:

Got it.

Zach Stewart:

They're kind of one day a week working on that. They have their own team involved with that. But in everything else, they're not really involved in the day-to-day anymore.

Mike Paton:

All right. Tell me about your relationship with the integrator. Is it another family member or somebody not affiliated with the family? How's that work?

Zach Stewart:

No. So my integrator, he came from the industry. We hired him on. Funny story, he's got a full operations background and we interviewed him and I just knew I needed him on our team. And this was probably three or four years ago. We didn't have a role, because we had an operations manager, we were stuck, but we needed a sales manager. And I thought, well, the sales department's struggling with organization, struggling with structure, there could be a fit there. So we hired him on and he just, he learned sales pretty quick. He jumped in and that sales team started to produce really well. And once we got to coming up with the EOS structure, he, with the operations background, it just made so much sense. And he compliments me and everything that I'm not strong in, he's strong in, and everything that I'm strong in, he's not as strong in. So it's a really good yin and yang. And yeah, he's a very, very reliable guy.

Mike Paton:

Yeah. Excellent. Yeah. I've found that people who have multi-functional leadership experience, it prepares them well for the integrator role, because they're able to look at every issue from the angle of multiple perspectives, not just their ops perspective or finance perspective. So great to hear. Let's talk about your real commitment to living and breathing multiculturalism. Let's start by you sharing with us why that's so important to you as a leader.

Zach Stewart:

So my background has always been, I'm an Indigenous Canadian. We're from Old Crow, Yukon, which is about 300 kilometers North of the Arctic Circle. It's a little flying community that we didn't really know very much about when I was a kid, because my father was adopted. And in the business, particularly in our industry during the nineties, diversity wasn't really a popular thing. And my father was a little nervous to talk about it and to promote it and to do anything like that until probably the early 2000s and coming into now. And that's a big part of what I brought to this team, is I thought, it's a strength, it's not a weakness. And it's something that we need to celebrate.

So we had joined a few organizations, so there's the Canadian council for Aboriginal Business and the Canadian Aboriginal Minority Supplier Council that focuses really on that with major customers across the country. But through that, we learn about so many more initiatives. So what was really important to me, especially during the last year, was joining an initiative called the BlackNorth Initiative. And what that is, is just improving the amount of jobs and the amount of jobs on leadership councils for diverse people. And it just translates well to our organization. We've always been diverse. We've always had minimum 35% of the organization being diverse. The leadership team is 60% diverse. So it's always been something that we focused on. And I tried to think of ways to celebrate that with our team a little bit more. So I came up with culture day. I learned about it in a book I was reading and I kind of put some tweaks to it that would match what we wanted to kind of achieve here. And what we did with culture day was like, we just wanted to make it really fun. Get people enjoying our other teams' cultures, to learn more about their team members.

So we had the Caribbean culture day, for example, and it was, bring in some presentations, teach us about what it was like to grow up as a kid with that cultural background, bring in foods, bring in decorations. There was a salsa lesson, there was a hot sauce competition, all of these different types of things that people from completely different backgrounds learn so much. And they learned about their team members. And at the end of it, the amount of feedback that we got was like, that was one of the best days of work I've ever had. And just sharing that, you just gain so much more with that person that you're working with, so much more respect, I think, for your team members when you're learning a lot about their backgrounds. And for our staff, I think it just translated really well to outside, we're really promoting that we're diverse and inside, we're celebrating that diversity. It was really, really important.

Mike Paton:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Well, you're showing up as consistent people everywhere, and people who care about folks that aren't exactly like them. And those are really valuable assets, inside and outside an organization. My hope is you're comfortable with us sharing your video in our show notes because watching your employees talk genuinely about how fun it is to come to work and how much they care about the company and one another is really inspirational at a time when, quite frankly, a lot of people are in pain around this issue and other issues we all face right now. And I know it put a little spring in my step and I hope it will do that for other listeners as well.

Zach Stewart:

Yeah, absolutely. You can use the video for sure.

Mike Paton:

Terrific. Thank you. Is there anything you wish you or another leader in your organization had done differently over the last umpteen years? Any regrets?

Zach Stewart:

So one thing we're implementing now that I wish we had forever, skilled labor is a shortage across everywhere. And especially in our industry, it's an unregistered trade. So there's not even education from school systems to get more overhead door technicians. And right now, it's insane. There's no labor, everybody's just paying and paying and paying more. So we've implemented training now for apprentice training and then kind of examinations for them to get into lead hand positions and grow in their careers. And if we had that five years ago, 10 years ago, again, we'd be that go-to company for everybody in our industry, they'd want to work here, because their skill sets are constantly going to be growing. And for us, we'd constantly be having the best workforce by training from the ground level up. And I'm looking forward to what's going to come from that, it'd just be amazing if we had that before.

Mike Paton:

So I love that you brought that up. And it's something I've observed for many, many years, is when there are swings in the labor market, leadership teams that take a long-term view of solving the issue at the root, versus, we need more skilled labor that are 10 to 12 years on the job and trying to solve that immediate problem, win the game. There's no question about it that if you can't find it, you need to learn how to grow it. And I'd rather see a team solve the issue over the next three to five years with a long-term initiative, than complain about it every third year when it becomes a pressing problem again. So kudos to you for taking that long-term approach.

Zach Stewart:

The other thing we saw with that is when we try to chase other technicians in the industry, they often don't meet our core values. They often have their own set of rules that they've grown up with with other organizations that, what we're really trying to do with our apprentices is, if you have the values, we can teach you the rest. And we can really teach you to become the best overhead door technicians here, as long as you represent what we represent.

Mike Paton:

Yeah. Hire for values and attitude and train them the skills. The opposite rarely works. Yeah, really well said. Zach, last question for the listener really is, as you're working every day to be your best as a leader, if I asked you to distill an important lesson you've learned down to one piece of advice to a growing leader, what would it be?

Zach Stewart:

Listen, listen, listen and observe, observe, observe. I've learned so much from listening to my teammates and accepting feedback that I probably didn't like at the time, but it's really given me a lot of stride in my growth by actually swallowing my pride a little bit and taking some of that stuff in and observing the leaders. Even good leaders that I've had, there's areas there that they taught me what I don't want to be, because that's not what I want to be represented to. So by just observing good leaders, you'll learn the good and the bad, and you'll kind of be able to mold your own way from there.

Mike Paton:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Great piece of advice. Couldn't agree with you more. I'm glad you started with the word. Listen. All right. Before I let you go, I just want to ask you to share with the listener where they can learn more about Wilcox Doors and about you, if they'd like to do so.

Zach Stewart:

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Yeah. So I'm on LinkedIn, Zach Stewart, if you look up Zach Stewart Wilcox Door, you'll be able to find me. And at wilcoxdoor.com, we have all of our video libraries there, we have all the initiatives that we've been talking about, our environmental initiatives and diversity initiatives. There's a bunch of web pages on everything that we do there.

Mike Paton:

Great, thank you. A genuine pleasure spending time with you today. Super grateful for your willingness to be on the podcast today, excited about what you're doing and wish you nothing but success in the future. I'll just ask the listener to join me in saying thank you. And if you enjoyed today's episode as much as I did, please go on iTunes and put in a review and let us know that we're making a difference in your life as you work to become your best as an EOS leader. Thank you.

Zach Stewart:

Thank you, [inaudible 00:23:48].

Mike Paton:

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