

Billy Friley:

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Mike Paton:

Hello, everybody. This is Mike Paton with the EOS Leader podcast. And today, I have the great pleasure of speaking with Billy Friley, founder of Village Ice Cream in Calgary and the author of an amazing entrepreneurial story.

In college, Billy, first studied aerospace engineering, then physics, then chemistry, and then Latin American culture, which makes him appreciably smarter than me, for the record. In fact, it may have been a South American motorcycle trip cut short by stress and fatigue that led for his passion for creating the freshest, creamiest ice cream Calgarians had ever tasted and serving it in decidedly untraditional shops that bring people together.

Nine years and four locations later, Village remains in hot pursuit of cold perfection. Billy, great story. Welcome to the show, and thank you for being willing to share your story with us.

Billy Friley:

It's an honor. Thanks for having me, Paton.

Mike Paton:

My great pleasure. Why don't you go into a little more detail. Take me back to the earliest days of your entrepreneurial journey. Just walk us through the events and the way you were thinking about them and feeling about them as they played out.

Billy Friley:

Man, I mean, it kind of goes back to college for me. As you mentioned in the introduction, I was a soul searcher from a very early age. I was quick to move on if something didn't feel right. When I was in high school, I wanted to become an astronaut, but that was mostly to listen to my favorite albums in space. Which once I got into university and into my undergrad, I realized it was going to take a lot more work than that. A lot of teamwork.

One thing I was discovering when I was young was I was a bit of a lone wolf. I struggled to integrate into a team effort, and partly maybe because I didn't play team sports as a kid or maybe just my personality and my background and how I was raised, but that became a very difficult trait to negotiate while I was in pursuit of this aerospace engineering degree because it's all about teamwork. And becoming an astronaut is all about figuring out how to work in the context of a team.

From then, I kind of moved on to physics and chemistry. I had been to University of Colorado. I moved to McGill in Montreal, and then finally landed with a Latin American studies degree, which was pretty much just my easiest way out of university at that point. I had fallen out of love with the sciences, and I didn't know what I was doing.

One thing I did discover ... And this has been a major influence in my life is in my university years, when I moved to Montreal, I do think it was destiny of some sort. I grew up in a very monolingual family in a very monolingual city, Calgary, a prairie city, not unlike the Denver of the north, I guess. When I moved to multicultural Montreal, I discovered foreign languages. I actually ended up learning Portuguese, French, and Spanish while I was in university. Foreign language acquisition's been a big part

of my life since then. I speak Russian with my kids. My wife's native tongue is Russian. That is the first time where I discovered that I could find passion, real true passion with no other goal than to just experience what it's like to be totally and wholly dedicated to something that had nothing to do with advancing my career, kind of getting checking off the boxes of my life.

So, that my had a major influence on me, but when I graduated university I got scared and moved back home to my parents' house and tried to get a regular job, which I did. Ended up landing a job with an entrepreneur here. I had no interest in business. I had never grown up thinking ... I grew up thinking maybe I'd be an engineer or doctor, something like that, typical professional. I never thought about business in any sort of context. And when I fell into this job, which I ended up working for this guy for three years, it was just so inspiring. He was so inspiring that I discovered a passion for small business, not unlike the passion that I had experienced around learning foreign languages.

I liked it beyond the idea of just making a living or something. I really fundamentally loved what it was like to work around just normal people wearing normal clothes talking about normal things and working hard to make something great. I just loved the simplicity of it and the lack of pretense. I look back on this, and it's clear I'm speaking retrospectively here, right?

Mike Paton:

Of course. Of course.

Billy Friley:

But, that's what was going on. In terms of how I got to this adventure down to South America and this motorcycle trip, after three years of working for this gentleman, I kind of fell out of love with what I was doing for him and I figured I'd have this kind of big quarter-life journey. I spoke Spanish and Portuguese. I'd head down to Brazil solo on my motorcycle. I don't know if you've seen the movie *The Beach* with Leonardo DiCaprio where he kind of goes crazy at the end.

Mike Paton:

Yes.

Billy Friley:

But, that was kind of the extent of my trip. I really, really spiraled into a dark, isolated experience made worse by rumbling down the highways with a helmet alone with my thoughts day, after day, after day.

One thing I realize is that traveling was not going to fix my kind of existential yearning to find meaning in my life. For me, it wasn't. For others, it could. I needed to build something and create. And I had always been very insecure about my ability to truly be a productive person in society and to do something that was uniquely my own and gave me value and gave society value. I realized on that trip what I wanted was to wake up every single morning and be really excited about what I was doing with my life.

And so long as I was traveling down the road looking for my next beer, my next flirt, my next day at the beach, I needed to U-turn and head back north. I didn't need anything fancy. What I needed was to wake up in the morning and feel excited about my life, excited about what I was doing, and that's what I did. I made a U-turn after four months. I missed 13 countries that I had intended to travel through and headed north as quick as I could and started the next step of this journey.

Mike Paton:

And as I understand it, there was a Grandma Gladys involved in this next part of the story. Do I have that right?

Billy Friley:

Yeah. I have a bunch of family from the US. And my grandma, my mom's mom, lived at Helena, Montana, the capital of Montana. Shortly after I came home, I took a trip down to Montana. I was actually thinking of a totally different business that I might start at the time. I had realized after a few months of research and I happened to be down there that that wasn't feasible for me, for whatever reason. I was sulking over a bowl of huckleberry ice cream, locally made huckleberry ice cream.

It was just before dinnertime, and I grabbed that pint, which I would normally never do that just before dinner because I'm an adult. I have some sort of structure around how I eat. I took one bite, and I ate half the pint or something. I just thought it was just the most incredible ice cream I'd ever tried. My family warned me that it was made just down the road, and I just couldn't believe that in a city of Calgary 20 times the size of Helena, we're a city of about 1.3 million people, that we didn't have high-quality ice cream. I woke up the next morning, and I never looked back. That was the end of it right there.

Mike Paton:

What year was this?

Billy Friley:

That was in 2011 in February, an unusually warm February in Montana-

Mike Paton:

Wow.

Billy Friley:

... in 2011.

Mike Paton:

That's crazy. What a great story.

Billy Friley:

I always wondered as a kid, do adults have some kind of like ... Does something happen in adulthood that you can possibly know or understand as a child? In a way, this was kind of that moment where I kind of saw my destiny play out before my eyes. I never questioned anything again after I found this businesses-

Mike Paton:

That's funny.

Billy Friley:

... and never looked back. This is what I was meant to do.

Mike Paton:

One day, all you have your questions. And the next day, all you have is a journey you're on and you're just going to be there. I love that. Love that. Love it.

Billy Friley:

It's a great feeling.

Mike Paton:

So when you got home, what was the first thing you did? Tell us how you went from idea to business in those early days.

Billy Friley:

The idea, it's important to understand that even 10 years ago ... We live in a world that evolves so quickly now. Even 10 years ago in a city like Calgary, a Midwestern city, we did not have a great food scene. Craft beer, it'd be weird to go buy a six-pack of Heineken now. Even 10 years ago, that wasn't that weird of a thing to do. I mean, we're just inundated with craft everything.

The idea was that everything that was considered quality in the food realm, there was always some reference the old world, to Europe. You think about gelato or you think about high-end beer, anything. And we've seen this for the last 20 years, a real movement in North America to celebrate North American cuisine. So, I really used craft beer as my model in that here's a product that is uniquely North American that's being celebrated as North American and can celebrate our tastes, and our palate, and can be made locally.

The idea was that we weren't going to talk about gelato or anything like that anymore. We were going to use North American flavors but the best versions of them you ever tasted. We were going to do it in a really hip environment with awesome music and tons of energy. We wanted to be the best beer-free party in town. That was my goal. If you didn't want to go out for a beer at a pub but you wanted to have the experience of feeling connected to your community, to the world at large, to have fun, to just feel that energy that you get usually in an alcohol-based environment ... And that's what I created with Village Ice Cream. So, that was the idea.

I followed a very conventional path. I rented an office. Or, I think he gave it to me for free, my dad's downtown office in downtown Calgary. I went there every day for eight hours for the better part of two months and I wrote a business plan. Part of that was learning how to get money from the bank without having any collateral, using federal subsidies, federal loans, doing everything I could to figure out how to turn this vision into a reality. And I really did it just like you'd imagine, business plan meeting with the banks, having those conversations, and figuring how to incorporate a business and just one foot in front of the other, as they say.

Mike Paton:

Other than your dad lending you his office, who were you leaning on for advice, help, counsel, or were you just heads down studying this thing yourself and working independently?

Billy Friley:

For the first [inaudible 00:10:38], I was working independently, but I had a real bonafide angel come into my life about eight months during the process. I knew what my recipe needed to be more or less, but it

needed to be commercialized. Because in the world of dairy, you have to homogenize, which means sending it through a tiny, little nozzle at super high pressures in order to beat down the molecules. That's what keeps your milk from separating and your fat separating from your liquids. Milk that you get from a store, it's homogenized so that it stays consistent throughout. It needs to be homogenized and pasteurized, and pasteurization methods can have an effect on the caramelization of the sugars and how that comes out on the palate. There's all these things.

As I was taking it from this home recipe to this commercially viable product, I had just opened a Twitter account. I still can't operate social media. It is not for me. But, I did open a social media account, a Twitter account, and this local ... I guess an influencer had me ... Hardly even knew what that was in 2010. This influence, she wrote ... She was the first tweet. She was this local girl who was well known in the city. She said, "This is amazing. Gourmet ice cream Calgary."

My favorite ice cream in the world is in Seattle at a place called Molly Moon's. Molly Moon's pretty famous woman in Seattle who's build a 250-person ice cream business. She's very politically active and amazing woman. I read her bio just for fun. I said, "I should go check this out online." I read her bio, and she was inspired by the same Montana-based ice cream business-

Mike Paton:

No, she was not.

Billy Friley:

... I was 10 prior. Yeah, yeah. The very first line in her bio was, "Molly Moon's ice cream career started at the University of Montana while she worked at the Big Dipper."

Mike Paton:

Wow.

Billy Friley:

And the Big Dipper is where I tasted the huckleberry ice cream, or we swear it came from where I was tasting at my grandma's house. I thought, "That's insane."

Mike Paton:

That's crazy.

Billy Friley:

So, I called her and I said, "Hey, I also been inspired by the huckleberry ice cream in the Big Dipper. I was just wondering, there's a university out in University of Penn State that has a 108-year-old ice cream course that you can take that teaches you all about the science of ice cream. You think I should take it?" She said, "Heck no." Sorry to Penn State, University of Pennsylvania." She said, "Heck no. Just come hang out with me for a few days. I'll show you the ropes."

Mike Paton:

That's awesome.

Billy Friley:

I got in a flight with my mom and we head down there, just kind of make a mother-son trip and enjoy each other's company for a few days. I would spend my days with her or with her number two IC. I am very indebted to this woman who really in two or three days taught me what would've taken me a year to learn all by myself.

Mike Paton:

Wow. Wow.

Billy Friley:

One of the main things that she told me, she said, "With your expensive ice cream that you're going to make, you are going to go bankrupt before the year's out if you try to sell wholesale to restaurants, so you go to retail." I had intended originally to just go wholesale and test out the market. And with her and scraping together another 25 grand, I finished and opened up a little storefront in front of my production facility and never looked back. We've been in retail only ever since.

Mike Paton:

That's crazy. That first location I know is one of the untraditional locations. Tell us more about that, how that materialized and describe that location and how has it manifested itself as you've grown.

Billy Friley:

Absolutely. One thing entrepreneurs don't spend enough time talking is how much luck's involved in their success. I'm going to tell you again that this felt like it was just meant to be. I decided two months into building this business plan that I need to start looking for production facility, and I knew nothing about commercial real estate or anything. But I told myself, "Every single morning from 9:00 to noon, you're going to drive up and down the streets of Calgary looking for for lease signs."

And on the first morning I did that, and I was drive up and down 10th Ave. I just had a good feeling about 10th Ave. 10th Ave dead ends at Fourth Street in a big cul-de-sac. No one ever goes down there. It's right on the edge of downtown so it's centrally located but kind of spooky. I was getting car sick, and I pulled into a little parking lot beside a pink single-story stucco building to pull into their stall and rest my eyes. And when I opened my eyes and looked through the rear view mirror, I looked at this building. I looked at the corner, which looked vacant, and I said, "This is where my ice cream shop's going to be. I can feel it."

I walked in, and I talked to the secretary. I said, "I'm looking for about 1,500 square feet. Looks kind of like your back end is not being used. Can I speak with the landlord?" She gave me the number. And as it turns out, there's 1,495 square feet of space available. Two months later, I had a 4-page lease agreement. Which if you know anything about commercial leases, it's the world's shortest commercial lease agreement.

Mike Paton:

Yes, yeah.

Billy Friley:

This turned out to be an amazing experience, an amazing location. People to this day don't understand it, especially people in the real estate building. It is beside an engineering company. There is no other

retail around. It's a dead end part of the downtown for ... Yet, within about a year and a half, we had lineups of 100 to 200 people walking out the door.

Mike Paton:

Yeah, it's a speakeasy. You have a ice cream-based speakeasy.

Billy Friley:

Yes. And you were seeing this happen all over North America. I mean, this was the ultimate symbol of pushing away from big box, suburban, megadevelopment shopping. Which is not only do we want to see something in the urban core, we want to think of it the way you might be walking down an alley in the early 1900s in Paris, the tiny, little corner nooks and crannies of a city that are producing gold, right?

Mike Paton:

Yeah.

Billy Friley:

And that's what it came to be. If you actually look at it, a cul-de-sac, which is where four of my locations sit now, a cul-de-sac is incredible because it forces the traffic to slow down. We had incredible views of downtown. We had a sense of being gritty and urban, and there was the juxtaposition of that with the quaintness and innocence of ice cream. There was unlimited parking. We're a very car-focused city. And it all just came together. I had built this thing that within kind of two or three years, almost is a little bit iconic within the city which is such a short period of time in which to create legacy. But, that's what we did, and it funded the growth for my other businesses. It was incredible.

Mike Paton:

Fascinating. Fascinating. Great story. Thank you, Billy. Now, four locations, 100 employees? Do I have that right, roughly?

Billy Friley:

Yeah. We're building our fifth location in October. That was my dream. That was my 10-year vision. And if all goes well, we will accomplish that dream about five months ahead of schedule.

Mike Paton:

Wow. That's awesome. That's awesome. And all locations in Calgary?

Billy Friley:

All in Calgary in just kind of these really cool neighborhoods that kind of define the energy of the city. They just kind of all protect downtown like a moat. I've got angles everywhere, and I'm really proud and excited of what Village has done to transform these neighborhoods as well.

Mike Paton:

This sets the table so beautifully for the conversation we're going to have about leadership because you described yourself as somebody who never saw yourself as a team member, much less a leader, and you have been soul searching your whole life. A light bulb went on, and all of a sudden you wake up and

you've got four locations, and a fifth one on the way, and 100 people working for you, and you've become an iconic Calgary brand, and you're a leader. And so that's what I want to talk about for the rest of our time together. What have you learned along the way? What do you think you still have to learn? What do you wish you knew 10 years ago before you started this journey that would've made the journey easier, if that makes sense?

Billy Friley:

Right.

Mike Paton:

So, let's start from scratch. What do you think naturally you found are some of your best leadership management capabilities? They're just natural. They come naturally to you. You don't have to work at them. Can you think of any attributes you've got that your people really respond well to?

Billy Friley:

I'm going to say, first of all, that I am not a natural born leader, that this has been an uphill battle from day one for me and not something that's come naturally to me. I can't remember who it was, and I should find out this quote, but it's something from Roman times, like Marcus Aurelius or somebody said it. It's like, "You shouldn't want to be a leader. You should be compelled to it." I think some of us just have certain talents and skillsets that land us in positions of leadership.

Often, people looking to be leaders are looking for power. And that in and of itself is just corrupting. But, I think what he's also saying is that if you find yourself in this position of leadership that it is actually an incredible blessing, and it's also an incredible burden of responsibility. Having said that, some days I'm better than others at embracing the responsibility.

But the way I got here was because I'm very driven. I'm very passionate, very focused, and that people want to follow that. We need those people in society because they're the people that are kind of paving the path forward. But, it puts them in positions of control and leadership, and that's a whole nother skillset that I'm still trying to learn.

Mike Paton:

Got it.

Billy Friley:

But, I think, talking to my staff and getting a little bit of feedback, I mean, I think what they experience is somebody who at the end of the day knows where he wants to go. That might be half the battle right there of being a greater leader.

Mike Paton:

Or more. Or more.

Billy Friley:

Yeah.

Mike Paton:

My sense in the brief time we've known each other is that you're also not even remotely interested in showing up as anybody other than the person you actually are. There's no guile or intent to deceive. You're just Billy, and you're always going to be Billy. I find that that is something people who are looking for leadership appreciate.

Billy Friley:

Absolutely. And that certain versions of Billy aren't that ... aren't always that enjoyable to be around, but it's real. I think that that's part of the DNA of our company.

I remember when we first started hiring people, and of course, I was ... Up until 50 people, I was the guy doing all the hire. I remember I would ... Because this concept of hipsterism was really, really involved, that 2005 to 2015, let's say, and I'd lecture. I remember most of my people that worked for me said, "You know, you didn't even ask us any questions in the interview." I just lectured them on hipsterism stops at the front door. This isn't going to be a place where we're too cool for school and there's a bunch of attitude. I just would monitor their response to it.

I think there's an earnestness that I've always tried to breed into the company. I just like that. I wanted to be cool. We'd blast rap music, dude, at like mach 10. Or 100 decibels would be a better ... All night. We are cool. These ice cream shops are about the hippest ice cream shops I've ever seen. But, there's an authenticity to the staff. And at the of the day, they might be bopping their heads to some pretty gangster rap, but they're sweet as honey. That's always been the idea since day one.

Mike Paton:

That's cool. That's cool. You've made it clear that you have a lot of work to do here, so give me two or three things you think you need to do to become a better leader than the person you are today?

Billy Friley:

I have to become more concerned with developing other people's talents. I think in some ways I've always, since day one, been in survival mode. And when you're in survival mode, you're thinking about number one. I think that business is stressful enough itself, and I think I'm prone to having an anxious mind. I think one of the things that causes me to be successful is also really causes me a lot of struggle, which is that I'm constantly accessing the landscape for landmines. I'm constantly trying to figure out no matter how remote the possibility of that thing happening in the future, that I'm prepared for it.

That kind of creates a bit of a scarcity mentality and a mentality of fear, which kind of puts me on my heels. What I'm finding is that when I'm in that space, that headspace, it is hard for me to have much energy to focus on the needs of my key employees. And the more I can spend focusing on developing them, on giving them the comfort and the security that they're looking for from their leader, the stronger we are as a company. But, it's hard to see that when you're constantly evaluating the forest for something bad.

Mike Paton:

What are you doing to recognize those moments faster and work yourself out of that sort of rut of scarcity, worry, anxiousness? How do you cope with that when you notice it's happening?

Billy Friley:

Therapy, meditation, because, ultimately, it's a battle with the mind.

Mike Paton:

I believe I'm paraphrasing. I heard Brené Brown interviewed on a Wall Street Journal podcast a couple weeks ago, and I think she said that she's had the privilege of working with thousands of great leaders in her life and she's never met one of them not in therapy, which is a pretty powerful statement. But, I think it's helpful for everybody listening to remember that we're all human beings, and we are all flawed, and there's all ... All of us have improvement to do, and it's really tough to do it on yourself without somebody else's perspective involved.

Billy Friley:

Yeah. And I think that a lot of the qualities that ... Since those of us who are at the top to the top are accompanied by a lot of suffering in the mind, and I don't know if you can have one without the other. Usually, it's a type. Usually, there's tendencies towards OCD-type thing and that passion and that drive and that energy comes. It comes with some other stuff.

I mean, that is part of the battle, and I think it's that personal battle that if we can overcome it teaches us to be better leaders. Because as we find empathy for ourselves, a lot of us wear pretty thick armor. As we find empathy for ourselves, as we learn to forgive ourselves, as we learn to know ourselves more deeply, then we can start to truly become phenomenal leaders of others. Because we use those skillsets to tap into the leadership and management of the people who need it.

Mike Paton:

That's right. That's right. And you have to quiet the voice in your own mind in order to hear the voices around you as your organization grows. It's the bigger you get, the more people there are to listen to, and pay attention to, and value, and express appreciation for. And the busier we are here, the less time we have and the less capability we have for all that other stuff that's really important. Really good stuff, really-

Billy Friley:

Not to mention you really ... The business is not always in crisis mode. At the beginning, it often is. But if you don't allow that, like you said, there's a lot ... You need to start spending a lot more time with your people as the organization grows. And as more people need that pat on that shoulder, you need to spend more time understanding what each person needs, means you got to spend less time focusing on what you need.

Mike Paton:

That's right.

Billy Friley:

If you don't let that happen also ... One thing I'm also noticing is I don't want my relationship with my business to be the same forever. I'm kind of getting bored of being the big guy at the helm using brute force to push us through stormy waters. We're not there anymore. So, the real joy, I think, and I'm not there yet, but the real joy, I think, will be spending less time focusing on myself and spending more time focusing on developing my people.

Mike Paton:

Well, and I think we've been talking about this from the standpoint of self-awareness and self-evaluation. And what I say a lot is it's really difficult and patently unfair the journey we ask entrepreneurs to go through. You succeed because you're determined, and a rugged individualist, and fearless, and you're going to prove everybody wrong, and you by need have to learn how to be great at everything your business needs with no training. You finding a commercial lease space and ... There's so many funny stories about people learning how to be great at something they have no business being great at from scratch.

Then, almost immediately, when you're initially successful, you start transitioning to this place where you have to quit doing all those things and trust other people to do them well, and you've poured your whole life into being great at a bunch of stuff you have no business doing. Well, it's just unfair. So if you can get through that transition without some psychosis, you're stronger human [inaudible 00:27:37] that's ...

Billy Friley:

Yeah.

Mike Paton:

You know?

Billy Friley:

Yeah, that's a good point.

Mike Paton:

It is the great challenge. And there's so many great leaders in the world that have made that transition successful, but for every one of them there's a million who have failed. And I think that's what we all forget. Not all of us are the Jeff Bezoses and Elon Musks and pick your name. There's a lot of failure in this journey, too, and it is normal to worry that you're going to end up one of those people, for sure. For sure.

The people around you, as you've started to grow to the size you are now, I'm guessing you've started to rely more heavily on other leaders and managers. What are the attributes you're looking for in people you trust to lead and manage in your organization?

Billy Friley:

Oh, man. One of the coolest things that's ever come to fruition is this ... You're told business book after business book and seminar after seminar, it's like truly great leaders surround themselves around people who are smarter than they are. Oh, man. Dude, that first time you feel that and you're like, "Oh, this is leverage. This is what it feels like." It's like you put rocket boosters behind you.

I have that in a particular person who's the head of my operations. He's been with me for seven years, and he's grown up with the company. He's just one of those guys that's been able to fire himself into new roles as we've had to grow. And he's had to evolve the way I've had to evolve from the company. But, he has very different skillsets than I do, and he is a true manager of people. Where he may not have quite the vision that a typical leadership role requires, he has these skillsets that just blow my mind.

His name's Miu. Some of the things that he does is he knows exactly when to speak and when to stay quiet. I don't know if I'm ever going to learn that. It is amazing. He just knows when it's time to take control of the situation and to use a firmer voice to guide his staff. He knows when to let go and let them take the reins. And that's one of the neatest things that I've been able to watch.

He is a natural manager, but he takes it very serious. He's a studier of management philosophy, so he really treats management like a science. That's where you see, I think, of an athlete, a pro athlete, which takes natural skillset and combines it with a heck of a lot of studying and hard work. This idea that people are natural managers, I mean, this is definitely it. But what I've seen is a guy who's kind of 40% of the way there naturally and has put in a ton of work to get 100% of the way there.

Mike Paton:

That's great.

Billy Friley:

One thing he does ... He's amazing. He teaches our staff, including me, how to have crucial conversations. When he's presented with an idea, a lot of people come across those concepts around crucial accountability, crucial conversations. There are wonderful books written about that. He's the kind of guy that then takes it and implements it permanently and repetitively into the structure of the company, and he's building skillsets in our staff.

He teaches staff how to confront their colleagues in a way that doesn't cause everybody to go into fight and flight, get into a defensive mode of conversing. He's just amazing. And the consequence is team health, just incredible team health. The more I get into this, the more I realize that our fantastic managers, about 80% of their job should be spent on team health. Because they don't need to be doing the physical work of the business. That can be done by the people who were hired to do that work. What they need to be doing is working on team health almost all the time.

Mike Paton:

Well, and that's a very difficult transition to make as well from one where when people aren't doing things, you can point to generating revenue, or growth, or some result to one where the impact on results are a little more squishy. Putting a premium on leadership management and team health when you're resource constrained and you're growing a bootstrap business is really hard to do and requires a tremendous amount of courage. I commend you for recognizing that at this stage in your journey. Keep doing it.

Billy Friley:

We've seen nothing by results by focusing on team health. I'll always think about that when I heard about the only difference between Apple and any other company in the world is people. It's not like they have some secret sauce that they found on ... that an alien brought. I know it sounds crazy or whatever, but it was just a group of heads that got together over here and group head that got together at Dell and at Microsoft and all that kind of stuff. It's like, that's all you have. Your only long-term sustainable competitive advantage is your people. That's one of the first things I learned, and it's a simple lesson. I maybe have even picked it up. I wonder if I even picked it up from Get a Grip. I can't remember where I got that line from, but I have never, never let go of that. I said, "That is the only thing that keeps us on top, end of story, is our people."

Mike Paton:

Specifically team health. I think that's the thesis of Lencioni's book, The Advantage, is that the only sustainable competitive advantage is your team is healthier, not smarter but healthier than the competition. Because they can steal your smarts. They can't steal your health.

That's a nice little context for this thing. When I'm interviewing a guest with lots of frontline employees creating an impression that's going to make or break your business, I always want to spend a little time on hiring secrets because the labor shortage and the ability to attract and retain great people is causing a lot of worry in the minds of entrepreneurs right now. What are you doing that's helping you win that war besides what we've already talked about?

Billy Friley:

My answer for people who are looking for inspiration is going to be frustrating because it's like, "Oh, geez. How do I even start?" But it's everything. And once you get it, it's self-perpetuating. What I mean by that is ... And it's not everywhere in our organization, but it is in certain leadership roots through our organization. There's this natural production of bench strength that's happening internally, and there is nothing more rewarding than knowing that you can hire internally if anybody leaves from middle or upper management and fill those seats with fantastic people. But, that comes from so many things. It comes from creating a really healthy work environment where people feel supported, and inspired, and they're pumped about your vision and your core focus, and they're pumped about your BHAG, and they feel like they're learning a lot in your organization. And the organization is successful, and they're seeing the growth, and they're seeing that success not erode, the quality and the character of the business itself. All those things happen.

And I can't say what's the secret sauce. I think it's working diligently to create a business where your staff are your customers and your job is to make sure that you have 100% customer satisfaction guaranteed. And that's what we're working towards, my staff are my customers. It's not my customers that are my customers. My customers are their customers, but I have to focus 100% on my own staff and making sure. Then, they want to be part of the company.

We have very little turnover. Even our frontline workers, like our scoopers and stuff like that, the turnover is ... I don't have an exact number, but many, many, if not the vast majority of our scoopers stay for three, four, five years.

Mike Paton:

That's amazing in-

Billy Friley:

It is amazing.

Mike Paton:

... your line of work. That's for sure. Just summarizing. When you create a culture where one great person wants to work, that great person attracts other great people. That's what you mean by self-perpetuating. Great people attract other great people. Average to below average people who are just marking their timecard, they attract other people like them as well. So, it's a tough choice. Make the right choice. Then, cater to great people. Run a company that great people want to work at, and you will find and retain them, period.

Billy Friley:

And we find that especially in our sector, the sector that we're hiring, that it is doubly important because I don't really need to hire that many hard skillsets. So, it's really hard to hire externally when really what I'm looking for is culture fit. For me, it is doubly important that we are building a roster from within because it is just so hard in a couple 30-minute interviews to get a sense of whether someone's going to fit in or not. And in the absence of needing to hire for certain specific hard assets, oh, man. That just makes your job three times harder.

Mike Paton:

Yes, it does. Yes, it does.

Billy Friley:

Yeah.

Mike Paton:

Yeah, it's tough enough. Well, I'm glad. I thought for a minute there you might say that the real key to finding great people is just telling them for an hour how you're not going to cater to hipsterism, which, for the record, I would be happy to stand in for you and do any time you don't want to run the interviews anymore.

Billy Friley:

It wasn't an interview. It was a lecture-

Mike Paton:

Yeah, it's a rant.

Billy Friley:

... followed by a job offer.

Mike Paton:

It's a rant masquerading as an interview. I love it.

Billy Friley:

You can imagine my surprise when I was told that ... when I was asked by my EOS implementer how much time I spend speaking in the room. And then told that a great leader-

Mike Paton:

All of it.

Billy Friley:

Yeah. So, I've had a lot to work to do over the years.

Mike Paton:

Oh, that's really good. That's really good. All right. Go back to tasting the ice cream for the first time and hatching this plan in your own mind, you're going to reembarc on this journey again. Of all the lessons you've learned over the course of the last 10 years, what's the one piece of advice you'd extract from that timeframe and serve it to yourself on a silver platter 10 years ago? What do you wish you had kept top of mind this whole time?

Billy Friley:

That's a really hard question, and I suck at it still. I wish I spent more time celebrating. I have no pictures of my original staff. There was no moment. I don't have very many pictures of us in our tiny first office. I know that sounds like nothing, but it's important. When you're in the process, you have to take a step back. I mean, it develops a certain appreciation and a certain gratitude that I never allowed myself to feel. I think that created some bitterness that I've had to deal with as I'm approaching 10 years in the business where without the moments of celebration, even with all the success, it starts to feel like a grind. I don't have all these milestones to look back on.

I think that not only would it be nice to have had some memorabilia and some great memories that I'd built along the way of celebrating the success of Village it would be nice to look back on, I think that it would've given me a healthier relationship with my business along the way as well. So, I don't know. That's a strange answer.

Mike Paton:

It is a unique answer, but I love it for that reason because it is true of ... One of my clients has struggled with this for years. Their code name for celebrating more is more cowbell from the famous Saturday Night Live skit.

Billy Friley:

Yes.

Mike Paton:

I mean, I want to say somewhere in the neighborhood of 70 or 80% of my clients put that on their issues list fairly regularly. It is a very common weakness of people who are constantly focused on the gap between where they are today and where they want to get tomorrow is they don't celebrate the progress they've made along the way because we're just too busy. There's work to go do. So, you're not alone. And I'm really glad you shared it, Billy. Really glad you shared it. That was great stuff.

Billy Friley:

Oh, and I one more thing. It's okay if somebody's not working on in the organization. It's okay. Let it go. Let them go. It's better for everyone.

Mike Paton:

And you hold onto it because you feel guilty about it or you don't want to ...

Billy Friley:

Yeah.

Mike Paton:

Yeah, I get you.

Billy Friley:

Just let it happen.

Mike Paton:

Yeah, that's good stuff. Thank you. I can almost hear Chris Jones talking in the background right now.

Billy Friley:

Yes, yes.

Mike Paton:

Last thing I want to ask ... Because, literally, I could keep talking to you for a couple hours, and I know our listeners could listen for a lot longer as well. But those who want to go learn more about you or your company, what's the easiest place to find you and the organization?

Billy Friley:

Absolutely. You can call me at my cell at (403) 419-5648. Always happy to chat with anybody who feels inspired by anything that was said today, wants to learn a little bit more, wants to share something, some tip that they have for me as I go through my journey. My email is B-F-R-I-L-E-Y @villageicecream.com. You can find us online @villageicecream on Instagram. You can send a DM, although I will have to get that forwarded to me. Then, also, you can find us at villageicecream.com on the website. The website has quite a bit information about our business and what we're all about. Any one of those four ways, happy to connect.

Mike Paton:

That's very generous of you. I'll put all that detail in the show note and just urge people to dig in and get to know you because it's been an absolute pleasure having the conversation. This podcast is all about making us as leaders better every day. You've contributed to me being better. I just want to say thank you one last time, Billy. Appreciate you spending time.

Billy Friley:

Thanks, Paton. And thanks for letting me a part of this. I know I am under no obligation to say this, but the EOS program has changed my life and has made running my business infinitely more fun, and gratifying, rewarding, has made me a better person, has made everyone on my team a better person. So, I'm really happy what you guys are all doing. I'm so thankful that you guys exist. You guys taught us how to run a business.

Mike Paton:

Thank you. That's very rewarding. I know Gino himself will be thrilled to hear that message as well, so thanks a lot.

Billy Friley:

Come for an ice cream.

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Mike Paton:

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