

Gensyn Design - Create Together Podcast

Episode 1 – Evan Wood – Transcript

Steve Franks 0:00

Steve, welcome to the create together podcast. Create together is brought to you by Jensen design. We are of strategy and an innovation consultancy that facilitates companies to be more creative and collaborative. I'm your host, Steve Franks. Every episode features the conversation with a leader who embodies the values of great leadership and great strategic thought. Today, our guest is Evan wood from Fort Wayne metals. Let's all welcome Evan so Evan wood of Fort Wayne metals, thank you for being here, and welcome to the create together podcast. Appreciate it. Looking forward to it. So you're here because when we watch your career, we notice that you kind of fit the mold for someone who exemplifies and does both leadership and strategy, because that's kind of what we talk about here in this podcast. I want to basically go over here to another window. Give me a minute. There we are, and I want to, I want to say that on your LinkedIn, the first few words that describe you are telling culture driven, strategy focused, results oriented, helping organizations scale. And there's a bit more, but we're going to stop there, because that says a lot. Tell the world just a little bit about who you are and what you do and how you've gotten here.

Evan Wood 1:48

Yeah. So my current role, by title as vice president of people and strategy, that describes a lot in the sense of how I view leadership, people and strategy. So I'm sure we'll dive more into that, but that's kind of our whole point. Yeah, so we'll circle, we'll circle back on that. But I arrived at Fort Wayne metals because they became my largest client. So I always thought I was going to be a professor. I grew up in it. My dad was, you were for a while, and I was for, I was tenured professor for 10 years. You are Dr Wood, by the way, right? I did the PhD that was required to be tenured and grow up in that field, but I never wanted to be one of those professors. So I weighed until I had been in a senior leader role. And I also wanted to have multiple industries, so I had done retail, financial services, it and logistics, ultimately reaching a senior level role with a Norfolk Southern oak company called Trans works. That was a cool company, by the way, they did a lot of neat stuff. Yes, remnants of it still exists today. Princeton TMS downtown, Fort Wayne was still was purchased out of trans works, but I then started teaching for 10 years, and I I loved the classroom. I never got used to the pace of universities. It was too slow for me. So I started doing a lot of coaching, consulting work like that. And it got to the point, especially as I taught in the MBA, that I had decision makers in my class. So they would call me up and say, Hey, that thing you did with us in class. Can you do it with our company that grew to the point that I had to make a decision, will I consult more or say no to more projects, because it was now going to interrupt

Steve Franks 3:32

teaching as as a as a recovering entrepreneur coach, let me just say that's the best way to start a business. People come and ask you for things we like to buy this from you. Yeah. Okay,

Evan Wood 3:44

yeah, that was it. Made the transition to hanging out my shingle and going independent pretty easy, because I already had a book of business started, so it was very low risk. I did that for about two and a half years, but I found out that I'm bad at business development because Fort Wayne metals ultimately said open checkbook. We're going to take as much of you as you can. And I started spending more time here, less time out selling. They wanted to hire me. I wasn't sure I want to get the freedom anyway. Two and a half years into having my own shingle, they did hire me. We worked out on arrangement, and I've been here since 2016 I'm always in leadership people and strategic roles leading to this current one.

Steve Franks 4:26

I mean, that's a that's a dangerous combination. I mean, you're a great leader at the same time. I've always described Fort Wayne medals as like the company everybody should want to work for in Fort

Unknown Speaker 4:38

Wayne. We think so.

Steve Franks 4:40

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Well, I do not disagree with that. I think that's spot on. So leadership and strategy is what this thing is all about, and this is what we like to talk about. So tell me just a little bit about I know we could go all academic and and say, how. You define leadership. What does leadership mean to you? Evan, there

Evan Wood 5:05

is zero in the root word. But I used to like to study root words, whether it was Latin or not. But I do think I would say, we will go academic. Then, no, I don't. This is actually humorous. I do think it's interesting that the three letters that start leadership and the three letters that start learner are the same, even though they have no root meanings. But to me, leadership is about continuous learning. There. There's not a set right leadership style, because I believe we are all innately born with certain characteristics. Some of us are introverts, some of us are extroverts. Some of us are creators. Some of us are really refined executors that know how to get stuff done, but maybe don't create the big there's lots of makeups, and so there's not one right leadership style, because what's right has to be right for who you are, but you have to learn. So you have to learn, and for the moment, right? And for the moment, the moment always changes. I have to know the situation. I have to know the people involved. I'm constantly learning those things. And so to me, the ideal leader is one that's continuously learning all of those factors, not just content, but who's going on, what's going on, what's the context that exists and and then adapting, making decisions and communicating.

Steve Franks 6:24

So I like how that that starts in your mind as a very people oriented thing. Well, I wasn't. I'm going to learn every technique there is under the sun about leadership. I'm going to learn what's going on in my environment. What are my people doing? What are my people thinking? What do they want to accomplish?

Evan Wood 6:44

It's the biggest risk I think companies make as they promote the best. And we've really focused here. So we're an engineering technical company.

Unknown Speaker 6:54

When you say that, when you say that's a mistake, tell me what you mean by that.

Evan Wood 6:58

You can be excellent something. You can be the deep subject matter expert. That doesn't mean you can lead the same people, so I may know the most that does not equip me to be the best leader. Both are important, a good leader that understands people and a great technical skill knowledge, whatever that is, but they aren't the same, and too often companies equate top knowledge, top technical, as next in line for leadership.

Steve Franks 7:26

I'm grinning because I had this exact conversation with a friend of mine last night over dinner who was extolling to me the DIS virtues of someone who's really good at their craft, but but

Evan Wood 7:41

can't wait, right? And that's okay. You need both. I think the best leaders, best organizations, put people in their highest and best use, meaning they identify what's needed and they find the best fit.

Steve Franks 7:53

Fit. Yes, good word. I love it. So, all right, you can laundry list this out, if you like, but tell me what you think the important qualities are that a leader has to have. I'm going to start you off because you already mentioned it

Evan Wood 8:09

curiosity, curiosity the you don't learn without asking lots of questions, lots of good questions. And in particular, this happens to be a kick I've been on for the last few months. Leaders Ask questions. They don't know how to get the answer to not even that. They just don't know the answer. They don't even know how

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they're going to get there. But they ask them anyway, as a result, their listeners. So leadership only exists with people. That's crazy, and that's that's a profound statement, that there's more there. That's, yeah, leaders only exist with people. There you go. You may lead in your community, you may lead in your organization, but leader exists with people, which means if I'm curious and I'm asking questions, I don't know how to get the answer to I'm engaging people that I do can help in that, and so I need to listen. So I think leaders are curious. I think they listen. I also think they're, they're risk takers. May not be big risk, but there's no such things as perfect information.

Steve Franks 9:14

They're they're willing to not be perfect. They have to be. That's the definition of a mild risk taker, huh? Yeah,

Evan Wood 9:21

at a minimum, they're a mild risk taker. They they are willing to say a decisions needed. I've asked all the questions I can think to ask. I've listened to all the information people I can ask. I'm making this decision. There's some risk in that. Agreed outside of that, I'm sure I could laundry list a whole lot of other characteristics, but again, but that's the core, right? All those start to become innate characteristics. Some people are soft spoken. Some are going to lead out with lots of charisma. Neither is right or wrong. That's probably more rested in personality. You know? I guess if I were to say the last. One leaders are committed to putting people to the best fit of their highest and best capability. I want to put you in the best position to succeed. Nice. I had a professor in college, probably my favorite professor at Purdue Fort, Wayne in my MBA. He's now at Columbia. And he said this, he asked the whole class, what's the definition of an organization? And everyone said, some version of a group of people that come together to achieve a common goal. And he goes, every textbook you read will say that, and it's completely wrong. It's a group of people that come together and the belief that achieving some common goal will help each of them accomplish their wants and needs. And the easiest way to see that as I don't work for free, so me taking a salary, theoretically, is at odds of the company maximizing its shareholder value. That's true now that's a fair exchange, least The company currently thinks that's a fair exchange. But I don't work for free, so that's just an easy example, but me working and achieving our common goals, serving our customers allows me to achieve some of my wants and needs, and a leader identifies what those are and fits people

Steve Franks 11:15

as you developed as a leader, and you've been doing this for just a little while. You're clearly not even close to as old as I am, but you've been around a little bit, doing some stuff,

Evan Wood 11:26

like, closer than you think. I don't know about that.

Steve Franks 11:32

How did these concepts, these values, carry, about leadership? How do they develop? It's a tough question. It

Evan Wood 11:39

is a tough question, and not to get too academic, but my career, I think, mimics something the Center for Creative Leadership developed as the way we develop. They call it their 70/20, 10 model, 70% of how I developed was in the fight, doing the work in the mud, right? I always say every good leader has been punched in the mouth at least once. You've had those tough things happen.

Unknown Speaker 12:06

Pass the mike tyson test, yes, you had to figure out how to get

Evan Wood 12:09

through. 20% of that was other people, good mentors, people. I could bounce ideas off, ask questions. I could learn from, I even learned from the bad people. I could see how things played out. Only 10% was and I do

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read a lot. Back when I was teaching, I used to read a book a week. Now I'm about a book every two to three months, but I read, I did classes, I have a PhD, did my master's, yada yada. But that formal kind of learning, traditional learning, is maybe 10% of that development, but the bulk is being in the fight, trying things out, seeing how they work, asking questions about it. I

Steve Franks 12:48

actually see a parallel there between the way I operate, because over initially, over time, I learned a lot more from others in books and college and so forth. And then once I started really doing work, it became clear to me that that's where I learned the most. So good, good insight. Very good, very good insight. Well, leadership sometimes has like an application within companies, and we want companies to be successful and and we want to do this thing called, have a good strategy. So how about that for, like, a little segue into another part of the conversation. So the word strategy appears on your title here, right? Yeah, responsibilities, so, so I'm going to assume that you're an expert in strategy. I just want to see the look on your face. I

Evan Wood 13:43

don't know if I don't know how many people are truly an expert, but, but their skills

Unknown Speaker 13:49

tell me how you what what strategy means to you. I want

Evan Wood 13:52

to go back, because I mentioned this before first, and then I'll answer that question. Good. Why people in strategy, the bulk of our economy. And all the organizations I've worked with in the past are full of knowledge workers. Our manufacturing operations is still knowledge work, which means people, which means I can't create a strategy outside of people. Our competitive advantage is our knowledge and our knowledge worker and strategy. So that's why people and strategy are together here. VP of people and strategy is they don't exist separate from each other. That is our number one competitive advantage, which then leads to, if that's our number one competitive advantage, what is strategy? To me, strategy is the art of uncovering your competitive advantage and maximizing it. Now there's lots of other conversations trade off decisions and contexts. And you know, where do we sit in the political environment, the social environment, the economic environment, all of those. But those are really tools to say, how do we best put our competitive advantage on display in the market to then create the value? You proposition for customers. And no matter what anyone sets out as their goals, I've always been swarmed by Peter Drucker's definition with the purpose of a business. The purpose of the business is to create and keep a customer profit. All other metrics are a score card of how well you're creating and keeping a customer to buy product. And so that strategy at its core is, how are you developing and utilizing your competitive advantage to create value for a customer? And we do that through people, self, people and strategy are together.

Steve Franks 15:33

So it's interesting how it all comes together in a circle. I mean, we're we have people that are working on creating the best form of solutions for needs that other people have. Yes, in in the circle continues,

Evan Wood 15:47

and if we do our job here at four point models. But I also believe this is true for especially in all business to business. I even believe in business to consumer businesses, if we do this, well, we're helping enable someone else's success. There's a person at our customer who's trying to launch a product, deliver a product, solve a problem, if we do our job well, they're successful.

Steve Franks 16:12

I think that's more important than most people understand. I think a lot of people think no further than what crosses their dock, right? But then again, and I don't want to make this about Fort Wayne medals particularly, but that's a great example. It's like Fort Wayne medals will make physicians heroes, yes, Fort

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Wayne medals will allow people to live that otherwise would have died. So that's that's pretty darn important, huh?

Evan Wood 16:46

It is not our tagline. But you remember the old BASF commercials, we don't make the and they'd show some product. Yes, we make it better. Yes, I've loved that tagline, not just because that's how they marketed, but to me, that is at the essence of what we exist to do, and

Steve Franks 17:05

so strategy all evolves from that nut of creating an experience for other people. Yes, of all the techniques that you were exposed to, you did an MBA. You were exposed to all sorts of management related strategy techniques, what spoke the closest to, and we serve the people really well.

Evan Wood 17:30

You know, I had a finance concentration of MBA, me too. None of those classes I do not subscribe to, which is tricky to say. I do not subscribe to creating shareholder value as a focus. I do, as I said before, subscribe to that as Drucker. And so he is the most influential author to me. I think I even you're looking at my bookcase, I think up there as the essential Drucker, unless it's at home. It's a collection of his best writings, and as he talks about and it's timeless. He has things written in the 60s. He has an article in the 70s on entrepreneurship that you might have sworn was written yesterday. It was timeless work, and his concepts around how to think about your market, your customer as the purpose of your business management by walking around was his. But that really wasn't about just walking around. It was, why do you walk around? It was to listen, to understand the people who are best equipped to solve your problems are the ones doing it every day. There you go. And so it was people on both ends, and so Drucker was the most influential in my MBA journey. Cool, cool.

Steve Franks 18:51

You. One reason I asked you to join me to do this is that when I think of you as a leader, I think of you as a leader, not only in this corporate setting, in this building where we're at today, in this office where we're at today, I think there are aspects of your life where you lead outside of that, and I don't necessarily mean like, like board seats, sure. So I want to talk about an area that you profoundly lead in, and that is advocating for accessibility. Yeah, can you relate that? I'm sorry I just hit you out with a with something you didn't expect me to ask. That's great, but consider that in in the context of leadership and the way that you advocate for that being a form of leadership, what do you see it that way? I

Evan Wood 19:48

don't know if I see it as leadership, but I see I have access to different people, different organizations, different rooms that I can have a voice in. Yes. Yes, and I do see it as a responsibility to speak for people that are in those rooms at the time and have don't have the same access. Maybe

Steve Franks 20:08

that's the difference leadership responsibility, where's the line get drawn.

Evan Wood 20:14

But I also see it as not just that. So when we talk about disability, you know, quick version as my daughter's an above an amputee. She's 15. Her amputation started at the age of seven. In those eight years, we've been exposed to a myriad of organizations, a myriad of individuals with all sorts of physical disabilities,

Steve Franks 20:37

and in front of the people that are listening, just, you just have to know that is he, he may say it later, but his daughter is a much better athlete than I have ever been in my entire

Evan Wood 20:47

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life, and me as well. Fun. Little side note her, she played her first varsity volleyball game as a freshman in her prosthetic on Saturday, first home game tonight, but she's also officially been invited to play for the team USA under 21 Paralympic volleyball team in Chile in November. Neat, so selling in multiple areas, but what I've witnessed in that community is, if you ever want to see a group of people that are resilient, adaptable, but willing, almost without limit, to share knowledge, resources, information. The amputee community is that and so one of the reasons I advocate and speak up is we're missing out, like they represent everything an organization wants. They practice this on a daily life. And so you get together and things, I don't I'm not an amputee, so I can help my daughter, but I can't speak exactly what she's feeling. And people, hey, when you're playing with your prosthetic, if you try this, this might work, but if you do this, or here's how you ought to talk to your prosthetist things, we don't know that that's the conversations they have all the time. And I want

Steve Franks 22:09

values that would be just as important here at Fort Wayne medals as they would

Evan Wood 22:13

on the unique ways of solving problems. Coach Steve Florio is the women's head volleyball coach at PFW. He's the one who got us connected to USA volleyball because on the side he is a development coach for the men's national Paralympic volleyball team, and he saw our daughter at one of his standing volleyball camps and called us, and so him and my daughter, cool side gig, by the way. Oh, really, he's a fantastic individual. He and my daughter spoke to 200 of our leaders here at Fort Wayne medals a few years back. I think she was nine or 10 at the time. And one of the questions that was asked related to, hey, you have arm amputees. You have leg amputees. Some are below knee. Some are above knee. How do you adapt the skill, whether that's setting, hitting, serving? How do you adapt the skill for the disability or capability of each individual? And he says, You ask questions, you see what they can do, the goal is still the same, so you have to get the ball over the net in whatever form. So the skill needs to still be performed, but it needs to be performed best. And that really spoke to me about what we do with leaders. We have big, tall, hokey guys, and we have little, petite people. We have, you know, really loquacious ideasy people, and we have really minute, focused, detail oriented. How do I do that? And so I say back on your original question, on I say there's a responsibility, but I also think it's a necessity for the organizations, for our communities, to invite this type of diversity in. It's not diversity for diversity sake, it's diversity for enhancing the whole filling in gaps that we're missing.

Steve Franks 24:06

We actually talked about that in the office this morning, between three of us at Jensen, we were talking about the fact that, you know, we, we facilitate that actually, yeah, we're not the consultants that come in and just point a finger and say, do that. We facilitate. But if we don't bring a big group in, we're bound to miss good ideas. Yeah, we know that. I think that's a leadership concept. That's, that's, that's really important. I think a lot of people feel an ego boost to I'm a leader. I'm going to be a leader. That means I must decide something. I'm a strategist. I must decide something. And I think you're spot on when you say it's all about learning the best we can from other people, seeing how they do it.

Evan Wood 24:55

Ram Sharan, who's another great author, has a book the leadership path. Mike blind talks about you go from leading self to leading others that are doing the task, to leading leaders to leading divisions to leading the enterprise. But the hardest transition is when you go from leading people that do tasks, because some leaders make their departments or whatever they're leading look great, because they can just run on the hamster wheel really fast, and they can catch up and do but the second you now have to lead leaders, and you're a step removed from the test you what got you there will cause you to fail, because you can't do enough you, and if you're bound by being the smartest in the room or the most talented in the room, or know the best in the room you now. What got you there causes you to fail. It's not just you can't keep up, it actually causes you to fail. And that transition is where a lot of people trip up in their career. Is making that mental shift to I'm not the smartest, I'm not the best, nor should I try to be very

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Steve Franks 26:02

good, very good, which, which kind of leads me to what will probably be the always the concluding question on this Podcast, the podcast is titled, create together, and that's the tagline Jensen has used forever, since before I was there, for sure. So in the context of leadership and strategy, to you, Evan, what do the words create together mean or imply?

Evan Wood 26:29

Yeah, I think it's part of the definition of strategy. So what that implies to me, when we talk about create together, I'm creating my strategy, sometimes indirectly, sometimes directly, with my customers. I'm creating it with my competitors, because we all exist in the same ecosystem, and we strive to be a good fair strong competitor. We value good fair strong competitors, because they bring a different solution. We're a premium price product. There is a market for quick, cheap products. That's not us, but we do it with our people. So I have one perspective, but I have segment directors, I have quality people, I have regulatory people that you know, I don't know all the FDA requirements, but I'm glad we have them. We have to meet them, so we do that together again, probably more indirectly, by our knowledge of what they are, but it's we don't want to cross them. And so create together. Is to me about all those stakeholders, all of them being considered, all of them having a voice into what's our competitive advantage that we're going to highlight to capture the create the value proposition that our cult customer ultimately purchases?

Steve Franks 27:50

I love it. Evan, I'd like to say thank you. I appreciate it. This is this has been fun, a fun chat. I hope you enjoyed it, and for you out there listening, just keep waiting. There'll be more bye now you.