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INTERVIEWER:

Today's topic was, "If your organization were running absolutely perfectly, how would you know?" I thought that was an interesting question. What do you think is the way you would know if your organization was running perfectly?"

BENSON:

The way I would know would be if I could just sit back and relax every day and not have to do much. But in all reality, how I would know is that I would have very satisfied customers. If somebody were to bump into a stranger on the street and say, "Hey, who do you know could do market research?", our name would automatically surface to the top. I would know we were running absolutely perfect if we had satisfied and engaged employees that were performing their job duties without necessarily coming to me with their questions or challenges, and that overall the operations would be running smoothly and efficiently and I could be working and focusing on the pieces that help us to continue to grow, not only from a revenue but mostly from a profitability standpoint.

INTERVIEWER:

It's interesting that you make the comments about what you would be able to do differently, i.e. focus on some of the more bigger-picture growth, strategic types of things. Although you didn't say, I'm presuming it's because you wouldn't be distracted by lots of little distractions, problems, questions. Employees would take their own initiative and do things like that.

BENSON:

Absolutely. As most entrepreneurs know, we tend to get caught up in the daily minutia and down into the weeds and the dirt of what we need to do. A goal of most entrepreneurs and CEOs is to be working on the strategy at the high level and guiding the vision of the company. So many days that piece gets interrupted, so it does cause us, a lot of times, not to focus on where we would really like to focus and to utilize our strengths.

INTERVIEWER:

What do you think the key elements of a high-functioning organization are?

BENSON:

I think it goes a little deeper than that because I do think that the skill set of the employees is critical, having the right people on the bus in the right seats. I think a lot of it too is the personalities and knowing how to deal with the personalities of the employees and having the employees work collaboratively as a team. That's all very important as you continue to grow the company. A lot of times we don't always focus on the employee personality piece of it and their performance level.

INTERVIEWER:

What role do you think the human capital aspect plays?

BENSON:

We've learned over the years, and as we've grown we thought that an employee could pretty much be plopped into any position at any time and perform at a high level. We learned the hard way through some fast growth years that that just wasn't possible and it wasn't the most effective use of our employees' time nor their skill set. It caused a lot of frustration for the employees. We learned the hard way. We had to take a step back and look at the employees skill set and the position – even if we thought we were assisting and benefiting the employee by giving them the opportunity to perform in a different, maybe higher level, position. But at the end of the day, if they weren't qualified or the perfect fit, they became frustrated and it wasn't a good fit for them or the company. So we learned that we needed to identify the position first and look at the qualification and skill level of the employee and see if they were a good fit.

If they weren't, then we had to make the decision that we needed to go outside the organization to recruit and hire, that it wasn't always best to promote from within.

INTERVIEWER:

On the technical qualifications, if there's a certain skill set that's needed, they have to have that. What about all the intangibles?

BENSON:

A lot of times the intangible pieces are a little bit more challenging to evaluate and to monitor. But we did have to take that into consideration as well, and I think the intangibles a lot of times are their personalities and their willingness to work outside the office or their ability to do a little bit more of a technology piece that they weren't as excited or engaged about. I think the excitement piece of it has to come along with those skill sets.

INTERVIEWER:

Is the excitement because the work is exciting or you just make sure to get people who are naturally excited?

BENSON:

I think it has to be the excitement that they like what they're doing, but it really comes down to job satisfaction. I think that they have to feel that they're contributing to the organization and contributing to the projects, and that makes for an overall better employee satisfaction all the way around.

INTERVIEWER:

Would you say – looking at that match between what you call the job satisfaction – that's something that high-performing organizations have as a hallmark?

BENSON:

Absolutely, and that the more engaged and satisfied your employees are, the more they show dedication and a willingness to stretch and to think outside the box. And then, that does create better customer satisfaction and just overall corporate growth and profitability because you're not retraining or you're not constantly trying to put out fires for problems or issues that may have occurred in their performance of their project or their job.

INTERVIEWER:

You talked about how you learned over time, trying different things. What's your overall approach? How are you monitoring your progress in getting better at these things organizationally? How are you deciding to employ a different strategy going forward every time you're trying to improve?

BENSON:

We no longer go with the shotgun approach of trial and error. Now we really sit down and look at our needs on a project or needs from a corporate standpoint. We have spent a lot of time developing our position descriptions, the job requirements and the skill set required for the employees. We have a better recruiting and interviewing process that we go by. And then once we engage with an employee and go through the hiring process we have a more rigorous training process that we put them through. First to learn about the corporate structure as a whole and then it becomes more project-specific. So a lot more process and systematized hiring process and procedures.

INTERVIEWER:

How do you connect all those dots? You've got an overall corporate strategy and all those things you mentioned are very detailed pieces. How do you connect all of those down to the employee knowing what they do and how that fits into the corporate strategy and how that's measured throughout whatever your review cycle is – quarterly, annually, whatever?

BENSON:

We've spent a lot of time, once again, in developing the performance metrics that we measure all of our employees on, establishing their goals and their objectives from the first day that they're hired. Then we sit down and do quarterly reviews because it's so important that we give constant feedback to the employees and that they give us the feedback as well. If we are missing our marks either way we can make a rapid adjustment rather than wait for an annual review. If things have drifted too far off your path or the course, it's a little bit harder, sometimes a lot harder, to correct and get the employee re-engaged. By that time you could have lost some momentum with your projects or your customers.

INTERVIEWER:

So you're keeping a pretty close eye and steering frequently, instead of realizing, "Oh my gosh, it's the end of the year and we're way off course"?

BENSON:

Yes, absolutely. We have found that we've had a couple of years of very rapid growth, and because of that we needed to pay very close attention because we are a service organization. It's our reputation and the quality of our deliverables that are on the line, so it's all dependent upon the employees that are working towards those deliverables. Our employees really are our assets.

INTERVIEWER:

Lots of people say that. You're talking about specific ways where you're working with that capital base – human capital – to maximize the performance of the company and profitability and growth?

BENSON:

Yes.

INTERVIEWER:

What did you take away from today that you're going to do differently? Any ideas where you can say, "I'm going to try something new"? We're going to get back together in six months.

BENSON:

Yes. I have a lot of ideas that came out of today. One idea is the shedding, of taking away things that we do. Just because we do them and we've always done them it doesn't mean that we should continue to do them. I'd like to look really long and hard at some of that because entrepreneurs have trouble delegating, and we certainly don't want to delegate things that could be shed. We don't want to delegate, so we need to shed some of those things before we delegate. So then we could be delegating the most critical pieces that would be most effective for our growth, not only as an individual, as a CEO, but also from a company perspective. Going through the whole shedding process would be one of those. The other – and this is something that we've been working on – would be reaching out to our customer base and making sure that we are hitting the marks with our deliverables so that we know that we're providing the value that they are expecting and that they're paying for, and that we can constantly work to improve our service level and our deliverables, and having a more standardized approach to gathering that data and having some metrics that we can go back and measure by.

INTERVIEWER:

Do you do that now at all, in any form?

BENSON:

We do that now, yes, but we'd like to do it in a deeper, more personalized fashion than what we're currently doing, and also have it done from different people within the company. I feel that if I go in and meet with a customer they may tell me one thing, but if I send a person that they have worked with in the past on the contract, they may tell them other things that they wouldn't necessarily share with me. I think we need to mix it up and to have more of a corporate representation on those debriefings with the customer.