EPISODE 133: JOSH JACKSON – PEOPLE, STRATEGY & LEADERSHIP

Ken White
From William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, this is Leadership & Business. The podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world. We share the strategies, tactics, and information that can make you a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host, Ken White. Thanks for listening. SAIC, it's a premier technology integrator headquartered in Northern Virginia. The organization solves the nation's most complex modernization and readiness challenges across several markets, including defense, space, federal, civilian, and intelligence. Josh Jackson is Executive Vice President and General Manager for SAIC Solutions and Technology Group. He leads 3,000 of the organization's 23,000 employees. In his almost 20 years with SAIC, Jackson's had some interesting leadership experiences. He visited William & Mary and met with business school students last month. Afterwards, he joined us to share his thoughts on leadership, strategy, and how to hire professionals who possess character, competence, and grit. Here's our conversation with SAIC's Josh Jackson.

Ken White
Josh, thank you for sharing your time with us. You had a busy day today. I appreciate you sitting down with us.

Josh Jackson
Absolutely. I'm happy to. And I've had a great day interacting with the students. It's been a lot of fun and energizing. It's just great to be on campus.

Ken White
Yeah, it's nice to have you. It was fun. I sat in on one of the sessions where you were with a big class of undergraduates. What's your impression of the students?

Josh Jackson
I'm impressed. They seem thoughtful in their questions, right. Just by virtue of being at William & Mary, it's the top of our country. And that's part of our future. And it's exciting to see their vision for where they want to go and how they think about the world. It was it was energizing.

Ken White
I think one of the differences in today's student versus maybe 20 years ago, a lot of these students are on track. They want to be leaders when it was as soon as possible want to lead something. I really want to make a difference. When you first got out of college with your engineering degree, leadership wasn't necessarily something you had in mind. How did you get into leadership and leadership roles?

Josh Jackson
Right. Right. Now, that's a good question. So I love engineering. I thought I wanted to be an engineer my whole career, right. And build things and engineer things. And when I was working on a submarine design project, my team leader asked me if I wanted to lead a team that was growing. And I said, sure, why not? He said I think you have the capabilities to lead a team. And it was then that I got hooked on leadership and seeing something that was accomplished that was much bigger than myself and accomplished over time and how it fit in with the bigger vision. And ever since then, I've been hooked on this building teams and leading teams and seeing things come to fruition. It's a lot fun.

Ken White
I often ask our guests this growing up way back when would friends and neighbors and relatives have said that's a leader in the making? Would they have seen it?

Josh Jackson
I don't know. I think I was hyperactive as a kid, and I broke a lot of things. So engineering came naturally. And I think that some would say they saw a spark of leadership, but it was something that I'm an introvert by nature. So I love small groups. So it was something that I had to work on consciously to develop some of those leadership traits. But I love it.

Ken White
What makes a good leader in your mind?

Josh Jackson
I think it's someone that understands and can articulate a vision for the future that's bigger than the current state and rally a team of individuals that may or may not be part of their formal organization to achieve and accomplish that.

Ken White
How do you motivate? I mean, you have different types of people who require different types of motivation. How do you approach that?

Josh Jackson
So I think you have to get to know the individuals on your team. And it may be your team that is in your organization, or it may be a team that you're pulling together from multiple functions to solve a problem. So building the team is always step number one, right. Understanding how each other works, how each other thinks, and embrace the diversity and the chaos that comes with that early on. And encourage that dialogue so that when you really struggle maybe in midway through the project or the initiative, you've built that level of trust amongst the team members.

Ken White
That takes time to get to know the people.

Josh Jackson
Yes.

Ken White
How do you balance that while trying to get things done?

Josh Jackson
So I think it's a matter of investment, right. And it's not unlike engineering, right. They say that you know, investing an extra hour in engineering, something will save you three hours in manufacturing. I think of it the same way with teams, right. Investing that extra hour upfront to build relationships will save you three hours or triple-fold later on in a project or an initiative.

Ken White
It's interesting when you mention that the thought came to mind. Engineers often make the greatest MBA students. They just I think they think alike. What is it about that? Because you have your engineering degree. Later you went on for your MBA, and it worked for you. What's the connection there?

Josh Jackson
Right. Right. Great question. I think at this point in my career; it would not be safe to walk on a bridge that I design because I've been away from it for so long. But what the my undergraduate in engineering gave me was a sense of how to solve problems, right. Complex problems and how to approach a complex problem. You know, not only with math but also with looking at it from an interdisciplinary perspective, right. And that's not unlike business problems that we have today, right. You're solving problems to achieve an outcome. And now you have to do it with people and resources and functions instead of, you know, math and science.

Ken White
Oftentimes in business, as the leader, you've got to make a decision. You don't have all the information you need or the time. Is engineering different? Do you often have the information, or are they similar?

Josh Jackson
They're similar. Many times you have all the information. And many times you can do a very analytical, methodical, and the clear choice pops out. Many times you don't have all the information, especially if you're engineering something new that's never been done before. You're not going to have all the information. And what I found in my leadership experiences that you have, sometimes you have all the information, and sometimes you don't. And it's a matter of trusting your team and your people that have done some of that homework and done the analysis to present those results.

Ken White
So the you trust them. How do you trust yourself to pull the trigger?

Josh Jackson
So over the years, you have to build kind of a, you know, heuristics that you can rely on to make some of those decisions. So there's a pattern recognition that you may have seen before so you can put eight of the pieces together, and maybe there's two that are new. And then the next time you encounter that similar problem, you have nine of the pieces instead of all ten.

Ken White
You mentioned the students earlier today. When you hire people, you you've three characteristics you look for. I thought this that was interesting. Share with our listeners what were those three?

Josh Jackson
So I look for character, competence, and grit. Character is kind of fundamentally being a person of integrity. Competence is not that they have a superior IQ, but they deliver on the results and the goals that they've set forth. And lastly, grit is just right, the ability to persevere through multiple challenges over a long period of time to achieve an objective. And it seems like all three of those things are almost innate in an individual or something they want to develop. Many of the other things and attributes around business acumen and skills you can train and equip and coach.

Ken White
Yeah. How can you figure whether or determine, whether or not a person has the characteristics in an interview setting?

Josh Jackson
So I ask them the questions about, you know, situations and where they've applied some of those things and so put them in a situation and ask them to. How did they how would they navigate it? Right. And maybe describe a time when they've persevered over multiple years to achieve a goal.

Ken White
We'll continue our discussion with Josh Jackson in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at William & Mary School of Business. The best businesses and organizations in the world invest in educating and retaining top employees. While many of those businesses call on William & Mary's Center for Corporate Education to create and deliver customized executive education programs. The programs are designed and taught by William & Mary's top-ranked MBA faculty. If your organization wants to educate and retain its top people, contact the Center for Corporate Education, or visit our website at wmleadership.com. Now back to our conversation with SAIC's Josh Jackson.

Ken White
When you mentioned grit, I think resilience and we've talked about that quite a bit on our podcast with various leaders, and one of the questions that comes up is, is that in us, or do we have to learn that?

Josh Jackson
Yeah.

Ken White
How is that with grit and resilience? Does that come through time? Or do we have that inside us?

Josh Jackson
I think it's both. I think there's a certain amount that, you know, you're a gritty person, or you're not. And it probably has to do with your, right, your upbringing and maybe experiences. I think it is something that you can establish and develop more maturity over time in terms of your grit and your ability to persevere. But I think it's something that you're that you have and that you can almost measure.

Ken White
So you pay attention a great deal to the people side of things, but also to the strategic side as well. And you talked in class today about a four-level diagram in terms of strategy and love to walk through that. At the bottom, you have team culture and the plan. What what's that all about?

Josh Jackson
So when you think about building a strategy, it starts with that, you know, kind of the vision. But the foundation really is the vision, the culture and the team, and the plan, right. The team, meaning the people that are actually going to execute the plan, to deliver the strategy, deliver on the strategy and the culture of your organization and the culture of your customers that you're attempting to serve. And then the plan itself, right. That's the those are the foundational kind of elements that you have to build upon to achieve that vision.

Ken White
So is that a starting point?

Josh Jackson
Yeah, I think it's a starting point. Right. And you have to have all three of those ingredients in my experience, if you lack any one of those, right. You're building on a very shaky foundation.

Ken White
Yeah. And then the next step, you have frameworks or the tool kit.

Josh Jackson
Right. So I look at business tool kits, right. And everything from the McKinsey 7s models to sophisticated metrics and other tools and templates, right. You're building out a toolbox of tools that you, as a trade business tradesperson, can apply to solve problems, right. And you need to know what tool to use when. And so building on that foundation, you and the team, right. Have to pull out those tools and use the right tools at the right time to get the job done.

Ken White
And that leads to execution.

Josh Jackson
Right. And then which is kind of where we fall short a lot of times in strategy. Right. Because it's fun. It's fun to build the strategy. It's fun to build this shiny PowerPoint presentation that looks nice and has your vision stated in your plan stated well. But at the end of the day, you have to deliver on the strategic plan that you've put forth, and you have to measure people against that plan.

Ken White
Sure. And then your final stage was vision.

Josh Jackson
Right. Right. And that's really the final state, the end state. But it's also the starting point. Right. Because you need to start and motivate your team and build the plan around that vision and your end state.

Ken White
Are you seeing corporate vision? Does it matter much when you're out there, when you're hiring when you're interacting with people are people looking at the vision today?

Josh Jackson
I think people want to work for companies that are purpose-driven, that exist for the long run, that don't exist just to make a quarterly profit or a revenue target but exists for some purpose. And at SAIC, we're fortunate in that we serve the federal government, and we do a lot of cool and interesting things that are serve important missions. And really, that's what we're all about. Right? We wake up every morning thinking about how to solve these, you know, seemingly intractable problems and helping our customers navigate through that. And that's exciting.

Ken White
You mentioned, take a step back. You mentioned PowerPoint for a moment. You're not totally on board with PowerPoint.

Josh Jackson
No, I think I think it often is a crutch to summarize things that don't need to be summarized. And just like NASA found with the Challenger disaster, that oftentimes you can gloss over details that should be looked at. So I'm not to the Jeff Bezos Amazon, no PowerPoint ever. But I think it's a good practice to force leaders to articulate their ideas in words, in paragraphs and words, rather than summarizing them into bullet points.

Ken White
Yeah. You mentioned strategy is not about. Is about what you're doing, but it's also about what you're not doing and what you've stopped doing. How do you communicate that to the team and the importance of that?

Josh Jackson
Yeah, that's a critical part of the overall plan, right. When you build a strategic plan that's going to execute to the vision, it's great to talk about all the things you're going to do. But inevitably there's got to be a handful of things and maybe more than a handful of things that you're going to not do or stop doing. And it's important for your team and

your enterprise to know those things as well. Otherwise, you're going to lack focus on the executing part of your plan.

Ken White
Which means you've got to communicate that. So communications are a big part of your job.

Josh Jackson
Absolutely. Yeah, I feel like communication is probably the main purpose of my role as a general manager at SAIC. I'm communicating the strategy and vision and intent to my team. I'm also translating up and across the organization on a regular basis. And that's a big part of what I see my job as.

Ken White
As a leader and in the world you live in. What do you see coming down the pike? What what's were the next five years, going to be looking like what should we be thinking about?

Josh Jackson
So I think in the next five years, complexity and connectedness of the world will only continue to exponentially increase. And I think we have to embrace things like AI machine learning as not only as technologies but also within our cultures and organization and adopt those in different ways. Otherwise, we won't be able to handle the complexity and the connectedness that we find ourselves in. Not only from a business perspective but just from operating in a global economy.

Ken White
And as you mentioned, in making sure everyone on the organization is on board, making it part of the culture.

Josh Jackson
Right. Right.

Ken White
You mentioned earlier today about culture at SAIC. We talked a little bit about diversity. You say it's not necessarily D and I, sometimes I and D.

Josh Jackson
Right.

Ken White
Interesting. Can you tell more about that?

Josh Jackson
Yeah. So we created an inclusion and diversity strategy and a council that includes the CEO and key leaders to drive that strategy across the enterprise. But we intentionally put inclusion first instead of D and I. And the reason was that we felt like if we created an inclusive environment where people could bring their whole selves to work and felt like their opinions were valued and not only valued but heard and considered, then diversity will be an outcome of that. And then an outcome of that diverse environment and team are better business results, better business decisions. And the science is pretty clear on that. Right.

Ken White
Yeah.

Josh Jackson
Research has shown.

Ken White
And better culture.

Josh Jackson
Right.

Ken White
Yeah. Full circle.

Josh Jackson
Yeah.

Ken White
Right. Some of the students asked for advice. Well, what kind of advice did you give young people, youth starting off on their career? Going to get a degree soon. What kind of oh, what kind of information and guidance can you give them?

Josh Jackson
Yes, I think a couple of things. One is right. Ask for a mentor early on in your career. Right. And provide them with your perspectives on where you want to go in your career and offer to help the enterprise and organization wherever you happen to be. And then give back. Right. Everybody has an opportunity to mentor somebody no matter what

their level is in the organization. So it's that flow that I would encourage anyone, especially getting into a career, to have. Look for mentors as well as look for people to teach something.

Ken White

That's our conversation with Josh Jackson. And that's our podcast for this week. Leadership & Business is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the William & Mary School of Business. The Center for Corporate Education offers customized leadership development programs that help organizations develop and retain their best people. To learn more, visit our website at wmleadership.com. Finally, we'd love to hear from you regarding the podcast. We invite you to share your ideas, questions, and thoughts with us by emailing us at podcast@wm.edu. Thanks to our guest this week, Josh Jackson, and thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White, wishing you a safe, happy, and productive week.