

Mike Merrill:

All right, Dennis, welcome back again. Uh, I think we can wrap it up on this one, but you've got such a great list in your book, and we really haven't given those enough time in our conversation, so I felt like, uh, episode three was in order. So you ready to go through the 52 items in your book and talk about your favorites, maybe elaborate a little bit more?

Dennis Doran:

Whichever ones you like, whichever ones you like. They're all interesting.

Mike Merrill:

Sounds awesome. Well, let's just start with it all starts with you. What does that mean? And why is that a part of, uh, one of your bullets?

Dennis Doran:

It's kind of the anchor principle for looking at, ah, your qualities as a person. These things I call soft skills and trying to benefit from understanding them. Um, and so the first thing, in order for you to be able to improve how you interact with your environment, your workplace, your family, your community, uh, you need to understand things about yourself. Uh, and so it really does start with you. Um, if you understand both what your strengths are, which are the positive qualities, and also what your weaknesses are, the opportunity there is to build a foundation that's going to help to contribute to pretty much every interaction you have with people can be better if you understand what they see and what they hear, uh, in you. Again, that's what it boils down to, because you could describe yourself in an honest way using a variety of words. And if you were to poll, uh, a few people that knew you really well and say, give me a list of ten things, and five of them are qualities that you thought were really valuable, and ask them, pick five of these that you think are things that you see in me. I can

almost guarantee you that they're going to pick several of the ones that you said were among your top ones, along with some other ones. Because, again, if you've been in a relationship with a person for a while at work, where you see them every day, or in a lot of social settings, then they're going to have seen you and heard you over a period of time. Uh, and so they're going to have a view of what kind of person you are. Uh, it does start with you.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah, that's a great one. I think, uh, looking inward before you look outward is my takeaway from that.

Dennis Doran:

Good way to say it. Yeah, better than the way I said it, actually. So maybe we should change it.

Mike Merrill:

Well, your next edition. Go ahead and update that. Um, what about the other thought you talk about? I am who I am, and there's not much I could do about it now. Or maybe not.

Dennis Doran:

Right. Yeah, the maybe not part is the important part. The one thing that people, ah, fail to understand is how they have developed over their lifetime. Uh, is a day-to-day experience. Gained things learned, witnessing things, feeling things, all that kind of stuff. Um, and that's how you become who you are at whatever point in your life that you want to take a snapshot and say, who am I? What do people see in me? What do people like about me? What are the things that cause me difficulty? What are the things I do really well? Taking stock in yourself, uh, which, again, starts with you. But the idea is that, um, you may not like some things, but, um, you say to yourself, I'm 50 years old, I'm just not going to do it. I'm not going to work on

that, because I just don't want to. Uh, that's not a good idea because particularly if it's something which you come to learn, uh, if you've done the honest look at yourself you've come to learn has been a drag factor on some of your relationships with other people, uh, has caused difficulty in different circumstances, then you've got no choice but to figure out, uh, what it is that I need to change about myself and go about changing it. Again, most importantly, and I say this in a lot of different places, most importantly, this is not, uh, a self improvement project idea. This is about improving self. But you don't improve yourself by yourself. Again, that's not a mishmash of words, but it's a really important concept. Um, again, my generation, um, the idea that I'm going to engage a coach to help me improve myself so I can be more productive, effective, uh, be a better leader in my organization. No, I'm 50, 60 years old. Nobody's going to coach me. Well, that's exactly what they need, because, again, it's hard, uh, and again, this also has its roots in some other aspects of life. But it is hard to take a look at yourself honestly, uh, and put words put, uh, it on paper, but enunciate the words that describe things about yourself that you know are things that people have difficulty with, that gives you the opportunity not to look directly in the mirror and say that these are things about myself that I don't like. But to look in the mirror in exercise, which is an honest exercise. Say, these are things that I've gotten feedback about from people. That's one of the better, if not best, assessment. Um, uh, frameworks are referred to as 360 assessments, uh, where you're the subject of the assessment, and you get reports or feedback from people who you work for, people you work with, people that work for you, customers and other people. And they all evaluate you. And then the results are compiled. They give you a 360 snapshot of you. And so you hear the good things, you hear and see the bad things. And those bad things are very hard to take at times. But if your attitude is, uh, that this is important, because I want to either continue to enjoy progress in my life's journey, or better yet, I want to improve my opportunity for greater success by having a positive impact on people as I progress up the ladder in an organization. Uh, then I need to work on these things. Even if I say I don't want to, I've got to change my mindset. My mindset has to be, I can not I won't.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah, I think the phrase that keeps ringing in my ears is, uh, the mentality that you can't teach an old dog new tricks. Like, I'm past my ability to learn. And that's just never the case.

Dennis Doran:

Right, right. And actually, that's one of my other thoughts later in my list. Yeah.

Mike Merrill:

Um, I found it interesting you said a self improvement project. And I've heard that before. I probably use that phrase, but in my mind, when you said that, I thought, you know, a project gets finished, a project gets completed, then you move on and you do another project. And I feel like self improvement is a continual process. It's not a project. It's something that we should always be working on. And it might be in one area or another, but the effort and the intent to progress should never be diminished.

Dennis Doran:

Yes, that's a fair thought that projects have ends. Uh, this is an ongoing project. Uh, it may have what it can have and should have, uh, in order to make it a manageable, uh, activity. Uh, is it should have, uh, time frames. Uh, so there should be a plan that says, uh, here's how I'm going to go about working on these different things that I've identified that I need to improve upon. So it should have time frames. There should be some accountability. And that's why, again, you don't put the plan together and say, I'm going to execute it myself. I don't need any help. Somebody has to hold you accountable to it in a positive, constructive, supportive way. But you need somebody to do that. Um, and then there are going to be milestones. You accomplish a series of step, you have an opportunity where there's a milestone and you can assess, where am I now? Uh, and just assess progress. Uh, and if progress has been good and you've gotten some additional feedback from people, including the person who's helping you with your process or project, um, then there's an opportunity to celebrate. Say, you know what, let's go have a soft drink together, because

I didn't know if I was going to get here, but here I am. And I feel the difference. It's making a difference. It's a good thing. I want to celebrate and then I want to move on and do some more stuff to improve myself.

Mike Merrill:

I love that you're talking about getting, uh, that feedback. So feedback, it means that they're actually looking for validation or maybe corrective behavior or a, uh, gap, maybe a shortcoming. And then if they're looking for that, then they should be open to it. And if they're open to it, uh, then that means there's an opportunity for change. Which means, I know it's one of your other bullets. I don't always have to be right. I don't have to melt. There's more than one way to do these things. And the way I've been doing it may not necessarily be the right one for this situation.

Dennis Doran:

Exactly. Having an open mind is an essential behavior for individuals who are interested in progressing, taking on more responsibility and organizational structures. Being a good to great leader, uh, you have to be willing to listen. You have to be willing to say, yes, I've done it this way for 25 years. Uh, but this 26 year old showed me a different way of doing this. And the old me would have said, thanks a lot, get back to work. But the new me tell me more. Um, and there's so much right about that. There's nothing wrong with it. There's nothing wrong with thinking that someone else again, this is one of those things that makes leaders not great leaders. And that is that they don't listen, that they think or they really believe that they're the smartest person in the room. Uh, and when they walk in the room, what they fail to notice is how much oxygen has been depleted in that space when they walk in. Uh, again, and there are those kinds of leaders and people when I talk about leadership and I talk about that phenomenon, they will kind of shake their head, say, you know what? Yeah, there's this one guy who's a division vice president. And now that you say it that way, when he comes into the room, everything changes, and not in a good way. So, yeah, we're talking about human behavior. Uh, and a lot of people some people have taken time to learn as much as they can about it. I try to learn stuff all the time, but I don't know much. I don't know enough. Um, but again, ah uh, one of my other thoughts is, uh, common sense is not that

common. Uh, and that's one of those impediments, again, to think that this is a good way to do this and it makes sense. Uh, and someone say, no, we're not doing it that way. Um, there's a lot of that going around. And again, I have to toss a lot of I should have done a generational identification of each of these thoughts as I put them together. That would have been an interesting maybe I'll go back and edit the book or something. But that's just one of those things. Again, all these ideas and these expressions all just speak to how we behave. Um, and also suggest that there are different ways to behave. And all we have to do is have the willingness, uh, to acknowledge that some things can change and go about changing them.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah. You've got one of your other points and I've got a little more thought on this too hardworking is much more than just working hard. And you hear people say, I like to work smarter, not harder. And all of these things are situational like. If you've got a pile of bowlers to move, there's a smart way to approach that. Um, where do you start in the pile and where are you putting them? Um, is it on a trailer or a truck or where's that park?

Dennis Doran:

Are you moving it?

Mike Merrill:

There's some logistics there, but at the end of the day, there's 114 bowlers to move. There's just a lot of work to be done. So you can sit and analyze until you're blue in the face. It's not going to move those rocks. So there's a place and a time when you just need to get stuff done. And then there's another time when strategy maybe is the paramount priority. So I think, uh, maybe expand on your thought with hard working is more than just working hard. What does that mean to you?

Dennis Doran:

Well, it means that, uh, you understand that it's not you alone. We don't work in an industry where I may literally, for a day or maybe for days or weeks, literally work alone. But I'm part of something. I'm part of a

natural working group. Uh, I'm part of a team. Again, the vast majority, uh, of, uh, trades contractors, uh, particularly when you get into the finishing trades, are small shops. Uh, again, in peak season they may have 20 guys. In the wintertime they have four or five. Uh, um, and they're very sensitive to the idea that we need to do everything we can to work well together. Uh, it's not to say that there are five or ten different ways to do this. There may be the best way to do it. Um, and that best way is typically not going to be just a pure back breaking exercise. So there is a need to talk among the group of people and say, joe, how do we do this? And Joe says, Well, I would do this, this, or this. And then you're off to the races. Because you're not a singular entity in the construction industry. In every place, you're part of something.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah. Seeing if you have those other, your top ten priorities in place, where you have integrity and honesty and you're trustworthy. Uh, and you have those leadership soft skills dialed in and you're a great communicator. And your team knows that. I think two things can happen. Number one, you're going to take the time to explain quickly why, although I know this isn't the only way, this is the reason we do it like this. And it's because of A, B and C. And so this may not be as fast as this other thing. It's really important we do this because we've got to be mindful of these other things because something else or someone else down the line is going to be impacted. And so we have to approach this in a very specific manner. And here's why. Then your team is they know why. They understand. They know that you're not an idiot, uh, you're not blind. You do know what's going on. But instead of allowing the pushback to happen, having the argument, telling them to just shut up and do what they're told, or managing it in that other way where you're out of integrity and you don't have that EQ, uh, bam. You can avoid a whole myriad of issues and disgruntledness and frustration and anger. If you would take 15 or 20 seconds to just explain a little bit of the why while you're talking about the what?

Dennis Doran:

Yeah, you should write a book. Uh, no, because you touched on, um I was just thinking about one word in my head while you were talking and then you

started saying it, uh, and you said it several times and you said Why? That's one of the questions that my generation, uh, at times is impatient about answering that question for, that millennial or that gen z. Um, they give the direction and that's the end of it. And if the person says, well, why are we doing it that way? Don't worry about that, just do it the way I said to do it. Um, but if you just adapt and adopt the old phrasing, which fits, and it can fit in a positive way, which the old phrasing is measured, uh, twice, cut once, uh, so answer the question, why? Um, make sure that take the time to make sure there's understanding because in all likelihood that's going to eliminate the possibility for in the worst case scenario, a safety incident, uh, uh, in a more average scenario just is not getting done right. Uh, at the end of the day, the result is not the proper result. You can eliminate those things by taking a know cutting twice, don't cut know. Rather, don't measure once, measure twice. So make sure they understand. Bob, uh, explain to me in your own words how we're going to go about moving that pile of so Bob is expected to be able to explain it. He may parrot back what you said to him, but at least it means that he listened to it. And oh, by the way, we haven't talked about this just as a general thought, but I'll throw it out there now because it's so friggin important. The most important part of the process of communication, the one that people have the hardest time being good at, is listening. And particularly if you're certain personality, uh, styles or behavioral styles, listening is virtually impossible for you to do. You know it's important, but the way your brain is wired, it just makes you nuts.

Mike Merrill:

But the servant leader recognizes and, uh, I've been guilty of it in my life as a parent, especially, or as a boss. I know my father was really good at this one, but I told you and the finger wagging and it's like, uh, actually a servant leader who's in touch with him or herself recognizes the responsibility falls on them, that the message is received and received properly. And so in sales, we always talk about tell, show, tell. I'm going to tell you what I'm going to tell you. I'm going to show you what I told you and then I'm going to tell you what I showed you. There is a receipt. Like in text or email, you get a read receipt. I have acknowledged that the message has been received. Now, uh, the question is, did they understand? Did I articulate it properly so that the message was conveyed appropriately, so that

two people understand the same thing in the same manner? And man, you'll have success when you do that. And just to back up to something you said and I said this as a builder, and I've said it my whole career here in our software company. I don't, like, measure twice, cut once. It's a waste of time. I measure once and I cut once. I have a method in which I measure appropriately. And it's math. It's the same every time. I just have to do it right the first time. And I think there's an opportunity that if we sharpen these soft skills, if we sharpen our approach, if we sharpen our method, that we go about these things, man, we will save a lot of time taking extra measurements and, uh, potentially causing additional confusion. Wait, was it this? Was it? Sometimes too much information is actually part of the problem. Too much follow up can be part of the problem. Effective communication means if you have clarity.

Dennis Doran:

At the beginning, then you're not going to have to at the back end.

Mike Merrill:

You never have to go back.

Dennis Doran:

Yeah.

Mike Merrill:

Why? Uh, the information didn't change.

Dennis Doran:

Agree.

Mike Merrill:

It had a hard landing or a crash landing instead of a soft landing. Uh, that's what the definition of communication is. You telling me doesn't mean it's now my responsibility. You might have dropped the baton as you were trying to hand it off. I never got it. I got to have it in my hand. And when I do that, I can take responsibility for that. But until it's there, that's your job.

Dennis Doran:

Mhm, yes, absolutely.

Mike Merrill:

Um, one other thing. Uh, you had, uh, one of your bullets that I really wanted to talk about. It's a large industry, right. Um, or it's a small industry, whatever it is. Right. And no matter what industry, it's about relationships. Let's talk about that.

Dennis Doran:

Yeah. Again, I've been part of and worked for companies in the industry that are a handful of people to hundreds of people. Um, and when you think about what's important, uh, to be successful, uh, uh, in this generation, in the previous generations, and the future generations. The uh, thing that's the most important in business is to be able to build relationships with people over a long period of time. Ah, which takes a focused effort, uh, from the very beginning to the very end. Um, the payoff is significant. Uh, if you're one of those contractors that has a, ah, pretty long roster of repeat customers, uh, that means two things about your company. One, uh, that you don't have to bid work all the time as a practical matter, because you're probably doing more negotiated work with those long standing customers. Um, and maybe three things. Second, uh, that you're sustaining a reasonable level of profitability, not maybe as much profitability if you did a bunch of one off projects in one year that had some really good margins in them, but nonetheless, profitability. Um, and the third is you don't have to spend as much money on marketing, business development, um, you don't have to find new customers. You just take care of the ones that you have so you can pick and choose the ones you want to do business with rather than be forced to bid. Everything that comes out gets tossed over the transom. Um, that's a much better place to be, uh, than having to chase everything that's going on. And all it requires you to do is to build that relationship, have good mutual knowledge of yourself and the customer, uh, and build on that, uh, so that they trust you. Uh, if you do that, then, uh, those are the companies that get through the hard times, the ones that have customers that find a way, even to the point. So well, listen, why don't we have, you got six guys, uh, that you're thinking about laying off. You may be able to use them, but if you send them over, I'll have them

do some stuff reorganizing our warehouse. I'll just pay, uh, uh, straight wage for those guys. Just something to keep them busy.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah, it's beautiful. It really leads into the last point I wanted to discuss, m, and one of your other bullet points, um, you talk about the only thing that you get to take with you to your grave is your reputation and that's exactly what you're talking about there, right?

Dennis Doran:

Absolutely. Again, because again, we really are, we're not different. Um, but it feels more like uh, a very small community, uh, in construction. Uh, yeah, it's broken up into regions and cities and markets and segments and all that kind of stuff. Um, but uh, it is smallish in terms of the culture. Uh, and at the end of the day, uh, the company has been around for a long time, um, when their owner, if it's a family owned company and we have a lot of them in construction, when those generations transition, ah, again, they remember the dad and uh, they loved the dad. They respected the dad. He was known for this, that and the other thing, uh, uh, when he came to the end of his life, uh, people remembered who he was as a person in the construction industry. Um, he got to take that with him, but also probably left a nice measure of those same qualities with the people that came behind him.

Mike Merrill:

Well, and that just goes back to the integrity and all the other things that the trustworthiness and all the other points that you make where you leave that lasting legacy. And I, uh, know as a general contractor, I was always looking for the best deal, the subs that would be most reasonable. This the other thing, uh, getting started because you're running on tighter margins, you're trying to get your footing. But at a certain point, I think the wise contractors learn to forge those relationships with subs they can trust that fill out that list that you've got, um, where they're trustworthy and they have integrity. I know they said they're going to be there, they will be there. If they're not, something really bad happened and they're going to work twice as hard to make it up and make sure that it doesn't impact you or the other tradesmen down the line after

that. Because they value that relationship and that opportunity. Because they don't want to have to bid new work either just as much as you do. I don't want to have to go find a new plumber next week. I just want the guy I can trust.

Dennis Doran:

Wilfred people say that the industry has gotten more and more cutthroat, uh, as each generation has passed. I don't think that's necessarily true. Uh, the types of competition have changed dramatically. Um, but at the end of the day, if you've got a great relationship with a company, if you're the GC working for the owner, or if you're a trades contractor that works for the GCs, if you got great relationships, they're developed over a long period of time, um, they'll pay more for you. Now, it's not going to be like 10% premium, but they won't try to squeeze that last nickel or dime out of you because you're not a stranger. You're someone that they know, someone that they trust, someone that delivers great quality work on time, on budget and safely.

Mike Merrill:

And if you are a joy, I mean, truly, uh, that's a real thing. I've seen it, I've lived it. If you're a joy to be around, to work around to work with, to collaborate with even though you're the electrician and he's the plumber and a lot of projects and some companies, those guys are at each other's throats. Stepping on each other tenor and the this and the that, and you're cutting out my stuff, and I got to fish my wires around. If you're a joy to work with and around when problems come and you solve them quickly and quietly, man, you're going to create opportunities for you that you won't be able to catch up to all the work. And then in the end, when you do charge more and the contract is willing to pay more, the contractor also can charge more because his projects are done right, they're done safely, they're on time, they're on budget. That integrity is felt throughout the entire organization. And you're passing that well constructed, well built, properly, uh, put together structure to your client and, ah, they're going to have less maintenance issues. I mean, just over the course of time, I think those slivers that fester and become a big problem to lead to amputation aren't going to impact you. Well, another great conversation. Uh, I think we did, uh, a pretty good job over a few episodes, encapsulating a lot of the goodness that

you had to share from your books. I hope it's very appealing and, uh, something that, uh, the listeners want to check into. Why don't you just recap, uh, the name of your book and maybe where they can find it. And, uh, thanks for sharing all your wisdom.

Dennis Doran:

Yeah, the title of my book and also my podcast is Softest Steel. Uh, you can get it on Amazon or just about any other online bookseller, uh, that you can find. And the podcasts are available on all the major platforms as well. And I'd be delighted to, uh, see my book being sold to people. But most importantly, at the end of the day, I didn't write the book for sales. I wrote the book because it was a way for me to convey my message. Uh, uh, that's been my focus since that point in time. My last thought, if I could, is just a takeaway from folks. And I've talked throughout these episodes about, again, understanding yourself and be able to put words to both the good things and the things you can work on for yourself. I highly recommend that for any of your listeners that they seek out, uh, anyone. There are a number of different kinds of assessment instruments, uh, that you can go online and take an assessment, or you can buy a booklet and take an assessment. Um, there's one suite, uh, of assessments that are referred to as the Disk Profile. Uh, and it gives you feedback on your personality type, gives you descriptive words, helps you better articulate who you are. And I describe that assessment, along with another one on emotional intelligence, as gathering some facts about yourself, inevitably. And every time I've used these instruments, and I've been using them for 20 years in a class setting, there might be one person that wants to push back, say, I don't know if that really describes me. I said, well, did you show it to your spouse, your girlfriend, your significant other? Said, yeah. I said, what did they say? Oh, they said, It describes me perfectly. I said, who are you going to listen to? So again, learn about yourself and use some of these. Instruments to help kind of fill a folder, if you will, of facts about yourself that are actionable, uh, that you can use in order to try to improve yourself.

Mike Merrill:

That's, uh, beautiful. Love that. Thank you for that. Uh, also additional insight and, of course, encourage listeners to check out the book and the podcast, Soft as Steel. And Dennis, been a pleasure having you on and looking forward to catching up again down the road. We'll have to do this again.

Dennis Doran:

We will, absolutely. Thank you, Mike, for inviting me.