

Wichita Chamber Business Accelerator

Episode 122

Darrin Teeter

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Don Sherman: [00:00:00] Welcome to another exciting edition of the WCBA Powered, of course by Evergy. First, thank you for listening. Don't forget to like us. Love us share us. We truly appreciate you checking us out in the house today. E. [00:01:00] Fiber dynamics.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: That's right. Friends, we are here with Darrin Teeter. How are you?

Darrin Teeter: Doing well. Thank you.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Yes,

we're excited to have you here today.

So tell us a little bit about who you are and what you do.

Darrin Teeter: Darrin Teeter.

I own and steward a business called Fiber Dynamics here in Wichita. We've been in business about 32 years, going on 32 years.

Don Sherman: Whoa. 32.

Darrin Teeter: Yeah. Yeah. And we specialize in designing and building advanced composite structures primarily in the aerospace and defense industries. We've been exposed to a lot of different industries, but most of the products we make are things like very complex wind tunnel blades for 400,000 horsepower wind tunnels propeller blades, landing gear.

Do some local composites work for Textron, but most of our customers are across the nation.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: That is awesome.

Don Sherman: Impressive.



Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: So 32 years. And just maybe so the [00:02:00] listeners can understand composite what does composite work? Isn't that just material, the type of material when you combine stuff together or

Darrin Teeter: yeah, that's correct.

We're dealing, you know, think of carbon fiber type materials and things. You're seeing a lot pretty common place at this point in the game. But focusing more on structural type applications. There's a lot in sporting goods and all, and we've certainly had a stand at that doing bicycle parts and all.

But we specialize in a bit of a unique process. We're more kind of an injection molding type process. But to make very structural complex parts.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: So

You've been doing this for 32 years

Which means like, you started this at like five years old.

Darrin Teeter: Hardly.

Don Sherman: early

Darrin Teeter: but

it was you know, before I was old enough to know any better, you know, I know it wasn't possible.

yeah, It would've been about 25, 28, something like that when I started. So yeah. But yeah, I'll be turning 60 here pretty soon. So that's a.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: What made you decide to get into this industry?

Darrin Teeter: You know, I've always been pretty [00:03:00] hardwired to be entrepreneurial and and I've al always had a passion for things that go fast and supercars and things like that.

That was kind of my passion. It maybe initially led me into this. You know, my path was, I feel like, was pretty well guided. And I had been introduced to composites in a small aircraft mod shop that I worked at in my hometown of Johnson City, Kansas. Out west way out west, almost

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: City, Kansas,

Don Sherman: Johnson City,

Darrin Teeter: Yeah. It's almost on the Colorado line due west of here.

Being a, being kind of a nerd and uh, engineering geek you know, wasn't it was a challenging environment to, we tend to be pretty resourceful. I learned to be resourceful growing up on a farm and but being introduced in composites out actually out there and then getting a job at Beech Aircraft as a composites metal bond analyst on the Starship program.

Learned a lot there. Then I had an opportunity to be the composites lab manager at National Institute for Aviation Research, and that's before their, that's when it was [00:04:00] just starting up, so that's before the building and all that. So I think I was the first full-time non-faculty employee at NIAR. There may have been some others, but at least in the composite lab, I was. So, out there I was exposed to a lot of different manufacturing processes and a lot more about the industry. And thought it would be a good idea to, to jump off the deep end and quit my job with a new baby and my new wife and a new house.

And that's the best. Yeah.

\$13,000 in the bank.

you know,

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: no, that

is, that's,

yeah, that's, can you. But that's what

you have

to do. And it paid off in spades.

Right.

Darrin Teeter: It's been a challenge. I mean, there's been plenty of near bankruptcy experiences, you know, mostly due to my own and inexperience and learning things the hard way.

But I mean, the Lord's been good to me. So that's all I

Don Sherman: 32

years.

Darrin Teeter: Yeah. Yeah.

Don Sherman: Wow.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: That's the testimony right there.

Don Sherman: It is. Really, it
is.

Thank you.

You kind of mentioned it about everything.[00:05:00] \$13,000 in the bank, new wife, new kid, but yet you jumped into the entrepreneur waters.

What made you say, this is it, despite I got this going on, but this is what I need to do now.

Darrin Teeter: I just, you know, maybe I was just too impetuous and again, too dumb to know any better.

But I was just hardwired to do this. This is what I'm passionate about is the creativeness, the inventiveness. And I felt like that was the I wasn't gonna be able to achieve that, on a, with the corporate constraints. And little did I realize that how constraining owning your own business really is.

And you know, I think the biggest surprise is that, just now feel like I'm. To the point where I thought it would've been in, in less than 10 years. So, you know the great things you want to do, but the reality is you have to be, you have to be good at. Almost everything, especially until you really build, are able to build that team that can start shouldering a lot of the loads.

So you gotta be good at hr, you gotta [00:06:00] be good at finance, you gotta, you know, you got all the other aspects of running a business. Compliance, everything else is really overwhelming. So it can be very discouraging to not be able to realize your passion in business because of all the other things that are involved.

So, it's a, it's a challenge.

Don Sherman: Yeah.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: It's a thing.

Don Sherman: And it's a great story and I mean, I'm glad our listeners can hear it from

you. I

mean, you're telling

it

like it is. And

so let's talk about this team. Well, let's talk about your company. Fiber dynamics, how many folks

Darrin Teeter: you.

got? Let's see.

We're, I think. Four more start yesterday. So that's good. We are what's a, we're at about 75 ish, somewhere in

that, that range.

Don Sherman: employees.

That's

Darrin Teeter: huge. Yeah. Which

Don Sherman: Oh my God, that's

Darrin Teeter: huge.

A far cry again from where I thought we

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: were, that is amazing.

Don Sherman: great Wow. 75 employees. So what kind of of culture are you trying to have at your, business?

I

mean you got 75 different individuals.

Darrin Teeter: and that's the hardest thing to me. Really my mission is [00:07:00] really to serve

God and serve people.

Okay.

So the people are really the only thing they're gonna last, you know, the only thing they're, you can take with you, I guess, so to speak. But all the rest of it's gone. So, you know, if people are really the most important thing, how do you build that culture and.

You know, really serving others is really the main tenant of our core value. And, you know, the other ones like in integrity, humility innovation, fulfillment continuous improvement. Part of I think a big one there is fulfillment. How do you create an environment and a job and more than just a job?

I mean, a family experience A work environment and a path to understanding how your job can be, get you to, to your dream. I guess I'm inspired a bit by one of the books. Remember it's Matthew Kelly, or not the Dream Manager. Might've been Timothy Keller. Yeah. The Dream Manager.

But all about how you know, it's so many of us. We maybe thought we were going to be a, an astronaut or a, an NFL football [00:08:00] player or something and those dreams. Then you end up getting a job and you end up kind of stuck in a rut and you just, you live paycheck to paycheck and everything, but.

How can you help people realize that job is a path to, you know, help them dream again, how can you help people inspire them to and not inspire? But I mean, it takes a dedicated effort and we're not there yet. But, and that's kind of the point of a dream manager, I guess, is having someone who's kind of life coach, being a life coach to them and helping them understand what would you like to do?

Start with something small. Is it getting out of debt? Is it buying a house? Is it putting your kids through school? Maybe it's just taking a vacation. Maybe it's off to another career path or something that you really do want to do. Yeah. How is this job a way to achieve that, you know, and how does it have purpose and meaning, so,

wow.

So that's kind of the path that we're striving is and those are our internal customers and I do think of them as customers we're to serve. And then our external customers too. We're all out to serve them too, too, so,

Don Sherman: well,

I think I know how I see success as an [00:09:00] entrepreneur with you.

I mean, 32 years.

75 folks are depending on you and your business acumen to fund, I mean, fund their living.

How do you

Darrin Teeter: define

success

Well, it, again, it is the people people are the most important things. So being successful with people is also, that's the hardest thing to do. And I am one, I know how difficult I am to.

Nice.

And, you know, I acknowledge we've failed miserably on so many occasions, but you just, you know, you get up, you dust off and you just keep trying to build a better system and build to build that culture. And, you know, you just can't let it get to you. You just gotta get up and do your job.

Don Sherman: Wow.

This is good info for business owners or folks who want to hang their own shingle.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: E Yeah, I agree.

I was just trying to go back. You, mentioned, you know, building a culture and vacation. You let your employees take that cuz Don won't let me take a vacation and I'm just trying to have you [00:10:00] give him some words of inspiration.

Darrin Teeter: We

Absolutely.

In fact, you know what? We've been able to reduce turnover. I think we were in about. 35% a quarter down to, I think we're sitting around 6% or something, you know. But really the team we've got has done a fantastic job of helping me to realize some things I just couldn't figure out on my own.

And you know, one of the things we're doing is You mentioned time off. We keep in increasing benefits and of course in this environment it's a, it's challenging. You gotta increase pay, you

gotta how do you do that? You know, you have to move up the food chain a bit and you have to make more money to be able to provide those benefits.

So, you know, we're trying to achieve that from the top end, but it, at the bottom end things we were able to do that.

I think have been really instrumental are going to a four day work week four tens.

For production workers. They've, they really have appreciated, you know, having that, not that, I mean, that working six or seven days a week [00:11:00] mentality is just, horrible.

I don't think we've worked a a Saturday now for a year. Wow. It's been, it was April

of last year. Yeah. And

you know, Friday becomes a new Saturday, but then that still enables to, and it's kind of every other Friday it seems like we're, we've got a few people in and that type of thing. But and then for salaried employees that schedule didn't work cuz we kind of have to have the office manned and have some capabilities.

So we've done like a nine 80, so every other Friday, half of the team has off. Okay. So they work a few extra hours during the week and get it done, but then we keep, we're adding more, more paid time off and things like that where we can more benefit. Just improving benefits all the way around is kind of what you gotta do.

And our recruitment, our retention and everything has really skyrocketed. And

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: That's awesome that, you know, that's really important. Because people are trying to figure out how do you get that work life balance and how

do you get that employee satisfaction, right? Mm-hmm. So that they can feel empowered and happy while they're at work [00:12:00] and not burnt out

Darrin Teeter: when

they

get

to

their families.

right. right. The culture you know, you can't have an environment with just a lot of yelling and screaming and all that. I mean, it really has to be a very patient, educational, thoughtful process where you're really, truly, you have managers that

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: care about

people.

Well, friends, we're gonna go hear a word from our sponsors, and then we'll be back to hear more from Darrin and fiber dynamics.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Welcome back friends. We're here with Darrin Teeter and Fiber Dynamics. Just learning a little bit more about his story and it [00:13:00] has been fascinating. He took the leap of faith. Yep. And opened his own business, you know? And that's really awesome. So from western Kansas to Wichita and now you decided to open up your business and stay in Wichita.

Why Wichita?

Darrin Teeter: When I was leaving my hometown town and trying to. Get into engineering. I, I think I was, I was lured more towards the mountains being about midway between Wichita and Colorado Springs area and all. But it was just I would just say my footsteps were guided to here. And fortunately so, you know, this has been a fantastic community.

The aerospace environment the opportunity to learn the things I have has been amazing. But the people here are fantastic. I get to travel a lot of different places. Some of them have really nice weather and you know, more exotic and that type of thing. But when you talk to the people it's, yeah, it's the same.

It can either be a grind or a blessing, just depends on what you really make it. So,[00:14:00] no, been very blessed to be here and it's a great great culture, great environment.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Yeah.

So wichita, you know, You, the work that you do, I would imagine the Wichita ecosystem has been pretty strong and helpful for you.

Darrin Teeter: Yeah. It's we've been a little challenged. We are, we've been tied pretty strong to general aviation for quite a few years. And that tends to run in a cycle up and down there. Textron's been our primary customer for a long time and been fantastic to work with.

And you know, we're really honored to be blessed by that. But but it is, it's a little challenging when you just about get on your feet and you know, you're going strong. Then there's another

downturn. So getting diversified was, is very important struggle for us. But to do that, you have to develop the capacity to do it Correct.

As well. Correct. So, that's been the focus for a long time. And I think we, I feel like we've got that figured out now with, you know, being on time with with our customers and even with a lot of supply chain and covid issues and everything else, it's, [00:15:00] you know, we've certainly had challenges, but but we're working really hard to make that happen.

And now I feel like we're very much diversified. Not exactly where we want to be, but we're working that pretty

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Mm-hmm.

you diversified in what ways?

Darrin Teeter: When I started out.

initially my first job, and it went like nine months without a paycheck.

And then landed first customer, which was Rand's Aircraft in Hayes, Kansas. And Randy Schlitter out there was was very kind and generous and gave us, put food on the table for us and helped us out a lot. Wow. But we soon after that, we landed a deal with Cannondale Bicycles to develop a really complex bicycle component.

They said, great. We want a a thousand a month. And I'm a little 50 by 50 building out in Valley Center, no capital or anything else. We put it together and got ramped up and built about 13,000 of those. I think we were the entrepreneur magazine. Oh, wow. 31st fastest growing business in America or something like that.

So we went from like \$30,000 to 1.5 million dollars, like fairly quick.

Don Sherman: When they said, when they asked you to do a [00:16:00] thousand, tell me your answer, say,

yeah, we

Darrin Teeter: can

Don Sherman: that.

Yeah.

No

Darrin Teeter: problem. That's what I would've done.

Yeah, no problem. I mean, how hard could it be? Right? How hard could it be?

Don Sherman: Oh, it's, yeah, that's entrepreneurship 1 0 1. Yeah, we can do that.

Darrin Teeter: We had 32 people on three shifts and I was working all of 'em in this little building. And my wife was helping out on, she was working and she was helping out with the books and everything. In the evenings. It was it was crazy.

But so, and then one day that just stopped. We went from 95% of our customer base was with them. We were not well diversified. We didn't working with Textron, you know, they've been 80, 90% and that's had its ups and downs too. But we got into more military drone space general Atomics.

We've had a long history working with them on the Predator program, building landing gear, and a lot of other components.

But still our customer base could count most of our customers on one hand. So, they were, and they consumed most of us. [00:17:00] Now we're getting out there. We've developed the capacity.

You know, we've been selected as a authorized fabricator for the second largest material supplier and the largest US based material supplier hel in the advanced air mobility in UAV markets. And that's generating a lot of opportunities. Cool space.

Yeah. Yeah. And I probably drifted from the original

No, no, that was

Don Sherman: it. No,

Darrin Teeter: but getting diversified.

I mean, in order for us to get diversified, we had to learn to be as good at operations production and, you know, delivering to the customer and meeting all of their needs as we were at making really cool science project, r and d type products, you know, so our, we've been very good technically, but the other side of it is just a whole different ballgame and you gotta have the right people to make it happen.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Yeah.

Yeah. So you've been a part of the chamber for how long?

Darrin Teeter: Oh, gosh, off and on, I suppose. I [00:18:00] haven't been as involved as I should because I get so busy with work and everything. But certainly been involved with the community for quite a number of years.

I can't say maybe 20 ish

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Yeah. That's, a long standing. And

would you say, and you know,

I may be biased on this, that, this chamber

Darrin Teeter: podcast

is

like

the

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: coolest

thing you've ever

Darrin Teeter: done.

Absolutely. I will say there was another chamber event that I participated in, which was a small business awards few years ago, and got selected as a finalist and some definitely some tough competition. But I found that was really a growing experience for me. I mean, most things that are painful are growing experiences, but that really helped us, helped me to actually sit down and really better think about and formulate what our culture was.

You know, what it was, how we were really gonna focus on people. So it's a good experience. Anytime you can get involved in something like that, just say, you know, how hard could it be? And put your you're at in the ring. Yeah.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: be very rewarding.

A lot of people have said that, that process
[00:19:00] really

makes

you think

differently about your business.

Darrin Teeter: It does.

Yes

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Cuz you're does,

in it day to day, but then when you have to sit down and go through that process how long and maybe you. You may not wanna share, but if you do, like how long did you sit there and look at those questions and be like, wow, okay,

Darrin, sit back and look at this

Darrin Teeter: from

a

different

vantage point.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: What

was

that like?

Darrin Teeter: I had formulated over the years a lot of, I had a lot of documents, I guess in my folders about what I wanted to achieve with the culture in the in our mission and all. But really having to boil it down and our team had really. I got them involved with it too. They have to be on board with it or it's meaningless if it's all just in my head.

So they were, they were very instrumental in helping me to sharpen that. And I think there were quite a number of people that bounced that off of, I mean, you need to get advice from a lot of places as sometimes getting it outta your head

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: is a tough

Darrin Teeter: So,

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: And last question that I have before I turn it over [00:20:00] to Don is, can you share with our listeners where do you draw your

Darrin Teeter: inspiration

from?

Well, really just my mission is being a steward of the resources I've been giving me. I mean, God is my chief inspiration and I rely heavily, I mean, my faith is a huge part of of this journey. I feel like this is my job and I'm trying to do it with excellence to the best I can.

So, so I do try to spend time in the morning you know, in prayer and reading the word and as much as I can. I'm so a d d it's really hard for me to focus, and I do listen to a lot of books mm-hmm. and things like that, so

Don Sherman: Excellent. And I'm gonna take time do a, a chamber PSA here. I mean, you learned a lot from Darrin about ups and downs of business. And I've always been taught, and I think most entrepreneurs have been taught no customers should be more

than 10%

of your revenue.

And he showed that what

happens

when

it goes up into,

I mean,

so, and that's why he is trying to diversify. So listen. [00:21:00]

Darrin Teeter: Take

Don Sherman: heed to that, what can happen. But he's managed to do it 32 years. Yeah. And figured it out. But that's when you start a business. Do not have one customer be more than 10% of your revenue. PSA over Now let's get to what's next.

You been doing this for 32 years.

You've

been,

think very

Darrin Teeter: successful.

What's

next

on

the Well, it's really expanding. I mean, I've always had a vision of us being kind of a company of companies, you know, companies developing product lines and processes and things that maybe have a greater life than just building contract parts, four parts. And I say just building, that's a huge endeavor in and of itself, but

You know, we have developed some very unique processes to build some really cool parts.

I think a big initiative that we're working on right now is a program called Blade Works joint venture with Naar and and a and p technology as well as [00:22:00] some others to develop. Propeller blades and other rotating structures, but primarily for the this advanced air mobility air taxi market.

And you consider you got maybe 40 blades on an aircraft and they want to build thousands of these per year. That's hundreds of thousands of blades. So, so developing those processes to achieve what we were doing back in the bicycle parts today, you know, those high volume type processes, but with aerospace quality standards, which.

is, a huge, huge slowdown. I mean, that's, that's the breaks and the others acceleration. So, and, and I know that the industry is really struggling with that. You know, how do you achieve the rates that you need to and all, and how do you implement automation? and I think automation improves the quality of the work as well.

So that, that's kind of the journey we're on now is the automation and then commercializing some of our products that we use and processes we use for manufacturing as well. So.

Don Sherman: Awesome. Well, like I said, you're [00:23:00] very, you're a successful

entrepreneur

and we just

appreciate you

being on the show.

You got

Darrin Teeter: anything else? E

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: I don't, I

think

it's time.

Don Sherman: It's

time. You've dealt with Ebony long

enough.

You get to be rewarded.

We're going to do that word association.

Uh, I'll give you one word.

You gimme one word back. It's not wrong cuz it's your word. Are

you

ready?

Darrin Teeter: I'll give it a shot.

Don Sherman: That's all we ask. Leader.

Darrin Teeter: Leader. Leaders just doing what you're really called to do. I think being good at whatever it is you're doing.

Don Sherman: Okay.

Success.

Darrin Teeter: Stewardship.

There

Don Sherman: There you go. College.

Darrin Teeter: WSU.

Don Sherman: Failure.

Darrin Teeter: Challenge.

Don Sherman: Entrepreneur.

Darrin Teeter: Challenge

Don Sherman: I I concur with that. Yep.

Wichita.

Darrin Teeter: Amazing.

Don Sherman: Vacation.

Darrin Teeter: Relax.

Hero. I'll just say Jesus.

Chamber.

Lots of good words pop up for [00:24:00] sure, but I'll just stick with supportive.

Don Sherman: Family.

Darrin Teeter: Very important.

Don Sherman: Fun.

Darrin Teeter: have to say challenging again, challenge.

Don Sherman: I hear ya. And last but not least, and you gotta tell the truth about this Beverage.

Darrin Teeter: Ooh. Just plain old unsweet tea for me.

Don Sherman: Okay. There you go.

Excellent. Darrin, man, we truly appreciate you being on sharing your successful entrepreneur story.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Yes.

Don Sherman: Thank

you.

Darrin Teeter: Yeah, thank you so much.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: It's been a wonderful

treat,

Darrin. Much success

to you

in the coming days and coming

years. Friends,

if you would, please make certain that you like this and share it with all of your friends and your circle of influence, and let us know who you wanna hear from

next

Till next time.

Don Sherman: Peace. [00:25:00]