

Wolf Ruzicka

Never the Easy Way Out

Wolf Ruzicka's father was what you might call the opposite of a helicopter parent. For several weeks one school year, his father asked him if he wanted to go to school each morning. As a result, Wolf was almost as likely to be found at the pool as in the classroom. Looking for ways to inspire a love of learning in his son while widening his horizons, his father sent him to study in Peru at the tender age of 13. And two years later, his father handed him a month-long unlimited train ticket to go explore Europe.

In a time before facetime, cell phones or text messages, Wolf's only safety net was a valuable black opal that his father entrusted to him. "He said, hide this gem, and if you get into any trouble, take it to a jeweler," explains Wolf. "Whatever they give you will be enough, don't haggle, just go to the airport and fly home."

Wolf looked at a map and determined that he would begin at the southernmost station, in Morocco and travel to the northernmost station in Norway. However, as soon as he arrived in Marrakesh, his plans changed. He fell in love with the city, and so, month after month, he stayed. His train ticket long since expired, Wolf knew he had two options to get the money to travel home. The first was the easy way out. To sell the black opal and fly home, as his father had told him he could. But, determined to demonstrate responsibility and resourcefulness, Wolf instead began looking for ways to earn the money for the trip.

He was living in the house of a Moroccan friend, Omar, and Omar owned a rug shop nearby. He sold high-quality Moroccan Berber rugs, brought in across the desert by traders on camelback. Wolf spent a lot of time in the shop, drinking tea and conversing with the German tourists, and he began to realize he could add real value to Omar's business. "I trusted Omar and I

knew the quality of the carpets," recalls Wolf, "so I invited German tourists into the shop, explained to them that I lived with Omar, that I swore by the quality of the carpets, and because of that one factor—a German sitting there drinking tea with the customers—revenue went up! So I began working on commission for these wonderfully rich rugs. That was my first sales experience!"

Three months later, Wolf had finally earned the money to buy himself a ticket home. He was able to return the black opal to his father, who smiled at his ingenuity and work ethic. "He said, 'I knew you could do it.'" remembers Wolf, smiling. "To be able to experience that yourself, without going through the easy exit door, but actually fumbling through the fog by yourself is quite enriching."

This sense of responsibility to others has pervaded Wolf's career, and he even remarks that that responsibility is what pushes him to work harder and do better, day after day. "Even on a bad day I have to get out of bed, because I owe the people around me," explains Wolf. "I owe them my hard work, my ideas and my entrepreneurialism. I owe the company, the customers, my family, and, hopefully, even the wider world. I want to leave something behind. I don't want to leave this Earth one day without leaving something in the fiber of these people or these companies. I want to leave a little bit of a fingerprint."

There's no doubt that Wolf is leaving a large fingerprint at EastBanc Technologies, a cutting-edge software development company that works on solving problems no one else can. Located in Georgetown, the business had only 35 employees when Wolf was brought in as the CEO in 2006. In 2013, he was promoted to Chairman of the Board, and today, EastBanc Tech employs around 200 team members in three offices worldwide. Along with their Georgetown



headquarters, EastBanc Tech also has an office in Lisbon, Portugal, as well as in Academy Town, the Siberian town where the branch of the Academy of Science is located, and where EastBanc Tech recruits much of its talent.

Thanks to their recruiting at the Academy of Science, EastBanc Tech boasts a roster of scientific heavy hitters, with astrophysicists, mathematicians, and rocket scientists on staff. When Wolf came onboard as the CEO, the company was gravitating to more basic tasks, but that quickly began to change under his leadership. "Nobody can solve the kind of problems we solve, and nobody can solve them as simply, because simplicity is an expression of genius," reflects Wolf proudly. "When I was brought on, the team was completely mis-deployed in IT staffing types of engagements with large companies, where all their skills and experience were not really applied to their fullest. Any type of company can do that."

The types of projects EastBanc Tech worked on began to change drastically. Wolf knew his team was smart; he knew they were wasted on basic projects that didn't require their deep scientific and technical expertise. So they began building software products for their customers rather than just servicing software projects, creating valuable Intellectual Property for themselves along the way. "It's a very different mindset," explains Wolf. "When you go into a software development project, your incentive is to get as many hours out of the customer as you can. But if you build software products, the incentive is, get the product to monetization as fast as you can."

EastBanc Tech has worked with a variety of global corporations, and has been particularly recognized for its work with the *Washington Post*. In fact, the *Post's* technology is now so good, competitors have started licensing the software from them, and *Fast Company* even remarked that the *Post* had become "a software product company that happens to have a newsroom." "When you look at their website, you're looking at EastBanc Tech's JavaScript," explains Wolf. "Behind the scenes, there's a product called Arc Publishing, which is a content aggregation and distribution machine. It's easy to get to where you want to go without too many clicks. They're able to generate revenue from this software product we built with them."

Nowadays, EastBanc Tech places a premium on invention and ingenuity. During

Wolf's tenure, they incubated a software product company called APIphany, only to get a cold call from Microsoft. "They said, 'Can I send a team of techies to Georgetown to conduct due diligence?'" remembers Wolf. "And I said, 'Due diligence? Why?', and Microsoft said, 'Well, because we may want to buy it.'" EastBanc Tech did end up selling APIphany to Microsoft. Today, APIphany is called Microsoft Azure API Management and is a fundamental part of Microsoft's cloud offering.

The success of APIphany was the catalyst for Wolf's promotion to Chairman of the Board in 2013. Since then, Wolf's role has been to sniff out new opportunities leading to intellectual property, maintain and expand relationships, join other boards and inspire the incubation of ideas. Wolf notes that he sits on five boards at the moment, detailing his passion for some projects in particular. He sits on the Investment Board of the Center for Innovative Technologies, which he describes as almost a "shark-tank-like" setting, where he and other board members listen to entrepreneurs' pitches, then select promising projects to receive funding. He's also a Board Member of the Scandinavian software company, Questback, helping them expand their feedback management system into North America with clients like New York Life, while modernizing the technology stack.

But though this punishing line-up of duties might be plenty for most people, Wolf has still more on his plate. He's an honorary board member of Halcyon House, a social entrepreneurship incubator in Georgetown, where entrepreneurs come from all over the world to refine their pitch, work to receive grants, and receive advice from old hands like Wolf. He is also an angel investor in several promising young firms, including his wife, Barb's, start-up Koolooks, and a robotics company called Transcend Robotics, the development of which Wolf personally had a guiding hand in.

After receiving a call from a customer at Capital One noting that a certain software engineer always seemed exhausted on the job, hoping Wolf may be able to mentor him, Wolf offered to help. "Phil Walker comes into my office with a backpack," Wolf recalls. "He opens it up, and there's a robot. He said, 'That's why I'm so tired! This is my passion!' He was up every night building this machine." Phil had seen the failure of robots at Fukushima, and wanted to design a more

durable robot that could survive under extreme circumstances. Wolf gave him his first tranches of investment, on the condition that he worked to get revenue commitments instead of raising the \$1.5 million Phil estimated he needed in start-up capital. Phil was skeptical of generating revenue on the strength of his prototype alone. But Wolf encouraged him. Over time, Phil reported back that less and less capital was required due to more and more potential customers' commitments. "He's never had to raise money again," Wolf proudly reveals of Phil. "Now he has revenue, his robots are used by SWAT teams during life-threatening situations, detecting rock shifts in mines to prevent trapping miners underground. I believe he's sold robots to NASA. He's saving lives, making money, and I'm just so proud of his accomplishments."

Wolf considers his notorious work ethic and stubbornness as the legacy of his parents. Wolf grew up near Nuremberg. He was the lower-middle class child of a German mother and a Czech-immigrant father, who had lost everything during the expansion of the Soviet Union. His mother never finished high school, growing up in postwar Germany. She ran a cheese and delicatessen shop. Wolf was never without a candy bar or sweets. "We were poor," Wolf says, "but I was spoiled. I was an only child, and I could get whatever I wanted within reason. I had my own bedroom—the biggest in the house!" Still, Wolf remembers hauling coal up five flights of stairs at a young age to heat water for baths since no hot water came out of the taps.

As a kid, Wolf thrived in school, despite only showing up on occasion, and was even more committed to basketball. At the age of 12, he recalls a punishing routine of two-hour workouts and training five days a week, two matches every weekend, and 10-mile runs every Friday. He considered his athletic activity to be his top priority until, early in high school, he suffered two debilitating injuries in a row, and saw the relative insecurity of an athletic career.

Wolf's father's decision to send him to Peru was not one he consulted Wolf about. Instead, Wolf was told he was taking Spanish lessons, and three months later, he was told to pack. "I said 'Pack for what?'" remembers Wolf, laughing. "He said, 'Oh? Did I forget to tell you? You're going to study at the German school in Peru!' I hated him at that point. He drove me to

Frankfurt Airport and I couldn't get myself to even utter one word. I probably didn't even say good-bye to him. I flew there upset, but I went through an unbelievably eye-opening time and came back a completely different person. I was so grateful!"

Peru was violent at that time, and although Wolf lived safely in a nice area, he was exposed to things he'd had no idea about in his bubble back home. He began to see he'd lived a sheltered life in Germany. One incident affected him most of all. Getting out of a car with his host brother, on their way to see a movie, Wolf actually stepped on the body of a dead man, who had just been shot. "Your life changes immediately," says Wolf solemnly. "That's when I started to remind myself that I really have no problems. When people ask me how I am, my standard reply to this day is, I don't have any problems. Even if there's an issue with work, or so, I really have nothing to complain about."

When he returned to Germany, Wolf had a newfound appreciation for the privilege of education and substantial time abroad. After his trip to Marrakesh, Wolf studied in France, England and in Australia. And this time his father surprised him with a brief check-in in Sydney. "We were eating breakfast, toast with vegemite, and there's a knock on the door," remembers Wolf. "It was my dad! He didn't even come in. He had been studying the aboriginal culture and wanted to go on a Walkabout. He just asked if I was okay. To me, that's perfect parenting—move them out of their comfort zone, but always make sure they feel secure in their explorations. That's what that moment symbolized for me."

After high school, Wolf went on to study business at a prominent German business school, but was soon disillusioned by the curriculum. After his first semester, his mother eagerly asked him what he had learned, and he began running through the "7 P's of Marketing," informing his mother she needed to think about Price, Placement, Promotion, and so on, before his mother interrupted him. "She asked me, 'This is what you learned in a semester?'" he laughs. "'Wolf, this is common sense,' she told me." Thinking that another business school might hold the key, Wolf studied some time in Japan and even snuck into classes at Columbia University before deciding real world experience was the way to gain expertise in business. He completed his MBA over the course of seven years, all the while

picking up jobs and internships at Mercedes-Benz, Lufthansa, Japanese organizations, Roland Berger & Partner, and many others.

After graduation, Wolf took a job with the exciting American firm MicroStrategy. "I came in so naïve," remembers Wolf. "I was excited, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. We were growing the company like gangbusters. I got in early—long before the IPO—had my stock options and so on. We grew from 200 employees or so globally to 2,700. Then in 2000, the bubble burst. All my naïveté thinking that this could go on forever, that becoming a multi-millionaire was so easy, came to a crashing halt."

Still, Wolf was not one to go for the exit door; he stubbornly decided to stay with the company until it either completely died or until it was healthy again. He went through terribly difficult times, laying off hundreds of employees, many of whom were personal friends, many of whom he'd himself hired and mentored. He promised himself and the business that such a thing would never happen again.

In the aftermath, MicroStrategy needed someone to go to New York and help revive the flailing office and convince customers to stay. Wolf's boss and mentor, Eduardo Sanchez, pushed him to take the gig, reminding him that without knowing sales first-hand, a businessman really knows nothing. Wolf's first customer meeting did not go as planned. He got up at 6:00 in the morning, rode the train two hours to Long Island only to be screamed at for two hours by an incensed client. But Wolf's strength is his patience. He was shocked, but he didn't take anything personally. He wrote down the complaints carefully and began addressing each issue over the next several months. One year later, the customer called to offer him more business. He'd been so impressed with Wolf, he wanted to spend his leftover budget on MicroStrategy. But Wolf didn't take the money. His responsibility to the client compelled him to tell the truth. "I said, 'You have everything you need with us,'" says Wolf. "'You should invest it with a database company.' And that honesty, that comment, created my most loyal customer."

Wolf was working 24/7 to help rehabilitate MicroStrategy when the birth of his son, Lucas, finally got him to slow down. He realized he'd been on his Blackberry throughout the birth, and that this crystallized a severe need to

reprioritize. Just before the birth of Siena in 2005, Wolf took a six-month long sabbatical to fully appreciate and prepare for the moment. During this time, he got a fateful call from EastBanc Tech's founders, Anthony Lanier and Stanislav Arseniev, asking him to help evaluate the business. Quickly, this turned into a wholly unexpected offer—the CEO position.

Since his epiphany during the birth of his son, Wolf never again let business come before family. He keeps tattered handwritten notes from his children folded up in his wallet and considers them his prize possessions. And where his wife Barb is concerned, he can hardly sing her praises enough, cataloguing her strengths as a partner, as a business woman, as a step-mother, and as a person. "We're more aligned than I ever anticipated," affirms Wolf. "I married her for her core values. She's very nurturing, a bundle of energy, such a firecracker, such a creator of ideas! She paints, she beads necklaces herself, and she's so creative all while creating a business with probably two hundred thousand members, growing by hundreds every single day!"

Their home would not be complete, however, without their rescue cats and dogs. Barb has such a soft spot for animals, Wolf never knows when another new pet is going to unexpectedly poke its nose around the corner. In fact, that's exactly what happened a few weeks ago. "I can't put my foot down, there's just no way," Wolf laughs, his voice both resigned and full of affection. "She plays such fun tricks on me. Last Sunday, a new dog smelled us eating brunch and just like that, pokes her head around the corner. Barb had been hiding her since Friday!" And although Wolf takes all his responsibilities seriously, there is only so much one man can juggle. "Sometimes, I can't keep them straight," confesses Wolf. "Just don't ask me to spell the names of all of our rescues!"

When it comes to being a leader, "I have to get out of the way of my team and the customer," Wolf exclaims. "We have smart people and they can do anything they set their mind to accomplish. But when they have a rough day I want them to call me when they feel under attack. I've had some scary moments in my life, and I'm not afraid of anything today. I want to take the brunt of any attack or arrows from a customer. I am here to support them. My priorities are my family, my employees, and then my customers. The right

thing to do is to support my teammates. And if I do that well, our customers will know they are a priority.”

To young people entering the workforce today, Wolf is tempted to tell them to follow their passion. But his passion was basketball as a young person and he knows that would have been foolish advice to give him. Rather, “Try to find an interest,” Wolf encourages. “Be interested in something. And out of your patient involvement in interests, passion may arise. And then follow that passion.”

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