

Ep.2.29 - Awenate Cobbina

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SPEAKERS

Announcer, Ed Clemente, Awenate Cobbina

- A** Announcer 00:01
Welcome to The Michigan Opportunity, an economic development podcast featuring candid conversations with business leaders across Michigan. You'll hear firsthand accounts from Michigan business leaders and innovators about how the state is driving job growth and business investment, supporting a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem, building vibrant communities and helping to attract and retain one of the most diverse and significant workforces in the nation.
- E** Ed Clemente 00:29
Hello, I'm your host, Ed Clemente. And today we're very fortunate to have Awenate Cobbina, he's the CEO for Bedrock Manufacturing Company. And I want to thank you, first of all for taking time to be here, I know you're busy guy.
- A** Awenate Cobbina 00:43
Thank you for having me Ed.
- E** Ed Clemente 00:44
No, no, it's my pleasure and you've got a really fascinating background, but let's stick with what you do for your day job first, right? Why don't you tell people what your company does, and so at least get an idea of it.
- A** Awenate Cobbina 00:58
Sure. So this being The Michigan Opportunity podcast, I will start with the company that we have in Michigan. So Bedrock Manufacturing Company is a holding company for brands and

licensed products. So in Michigan, we have Shinola, which is a lifestyle brand company based in Detroit, primarily known for watches but also makers of leather bags or bags generally I should say, jewelry, journals and supply and we also are licensor of the Shinola hotel in downtown Detroit. The second company is Filson. Filson is a outdoor apparel maker, primarily hunt and fish gear outerwear and, and and other apparel in Seattle, Washington.

E Ed Clemente 01:52

And is there a relationship to Texas as well? I thought you said one time he had some Texas connection too.

A Awenate Cobbina 02:00

The founder of Bedrock Manufacturing Company started the company in Texas but we mainly office out of Detroit and I spend a week a month in Seattle with our Filson colleagues.

E Ed Clemente 02:13

Hopefully you go there when it's not raining.

A Awenate Cobbina 02:16

It's funny I've heard so much about Seattle and rain and I had not been before 18 months ago. And it has rarely rained while I've been there. The first week I was there was 100 degrees. And because of all the rain, they did not have, they don't have air conditioning in most residential buildings and people were were up in arms because of the heat.

E Ed Clemente 02:40

It's yeah, I know. It's like people in the south when they get cold.

A Awenate Cobbina 02:44

Exactly. I went to Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia and people laugh in DC, I don't know how much you know about, well, I know you know you know a little bit about DC, but I don't know what listeners know about DC. But in DC when there's a snow everything closes.

E Ed Clemente 02:58

Oh yeah. They have no snow plows at all.



A

Awenate Cobbina 03:01

Exactly. DC doesn't know what they're doing, these people can't even handle snow. In Atlanta, I had a couple of college classes canceled because of hard rain. Freezing rain in Atlanta will close, will close schools and roads.

E

Ed Clemente 03:15

Let's mention that real quick because you went to Emory, but Emory is a very famous historical University in Atlanta. Is it in the city of Atlanta?

A

Awenate Cobbina 03:22

Yeah, Emory is in the city of Atlanta was actually found in a town called Oxford, about 45 minutes east of Atlanta, and then they moved downtown in the post-Civil War era. So it's been in Atlanta for the 150, 160 years now. And it is one of the top academic institutions in the South, as far as I can tell. And their main degrees are they have a strong medicine program. So Emory University, Emory Hospital System is one of the leading hospitals in the south, hospital systems in the south. And Emory also has a strong political science department, which is where I majored. And their political scientists often appear on CNN and Fox News and other stations.

E

Ed Clemente 04:15

And did that lead you then to go to, because political science a little bit, to Howard then?

A

Awenate Cobbina 04:22

You know, it's funny, I knew that I wanted to go to law school. And as you mentioned, I ended up going to law school at Howard. There's a variety of degrees that can get you to law school.

E

Ed Clemente 04:34

It's the ultimate liberal arts degree.

A

Awenate Cobbina 04:38

Exactly. This is between me, you and your listeners. I did process of elimination. So I went through and I said you know biology, no chemistry, no. Political Science, maybe economics, maybe sociology, maybe psychology, no philosophy, no. And I ended up with three. And so I ended up majoring in Political Science and I've never heard this term before, so I'm gonna I'm gonna coin it here. I double minored in economics and sociology,



E

Ed Clemente 05:11

I think economics, it's in everything.

A

Awenate Cobbina 05:15

Economics is in everything and I was always good with numbers even though a lot of people pretend to hate numbers or actually hate numbers, I was always pretty good. I preferred writing but I was never scared by numbers. And that's that's helped with business.

E

Ed Clemente 05:31

And, and Howard actually is probably one of the more famous universities in the country too.

A

Awenate Cobbina 05:37

Definitely it's one of the leading historically black colleges and universities in the country. Thurgood Marshall, former Supreme Court Justice was the first African American Supreme Court Justice and was a graduate of the Howard University School of Law. But they've had a number of famous, famous graduates from the law school, especially Vernon Jordan, who recently passed was...

E

Ed Clemente 06:03

UN, wasn't he? He was at the UN?

A

Awenate Cobbina 06:07

No, Vernon Jordan was a confidant of President Clinton, and was a famous lawyer and business person was at Lazard Fries the investment bank and Akin Gump the law firm, but he passed a little over a year ago, he was a Howard law grad. And believe, Judge Keith, Judge Damon Keith had a strong connection to Howard law as well and brought in a lot of Howard alumni to clerk for him

E

Ed Clemente 06:38

Thurgood Marshall did the Topeka case, right? [Yeah, yeah.] That was his first, he was pretty young right out of college when he did it too.

A

Awenate Cobbina 06:45

Yeah, exactly, Brown versus Board of Education, very prestigious jurist.

E

Ed Clemente 06:50

Yeah. So and then from Howard, I know, you said you worked in a law practice for a while, but how did you get involved with the Obama administration?

A

Awenate Cobbina 06:59

Yeah, so I realized in law school that I wanted to, I liked sports, politics and business. And since I was in Washington, DC, I took the opportunity in law school to work to intern at the National Football League's headquarters. And then in the second half of my third year to intern at the office of Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid. And after law school, as I was trying to decide what I was doing, I thought that I would go work in the Senate, and I ended up not getting a job there, but Leader Reid's office recommended me for an internship to the White House. And I ended up doing six years at in the Obama White House for what I started as a four month internship.

E

Ed Clemente 07:44

So I know it's, I don't have your resume in front of me, what do you do there again.

A

Awenate Cobbina 07:49

So I had three jobs. As I mentioned, I started as an intern in Presidential Correspondence. I was in the mailroom, reading letters and replying to letters on behalf of the President and Obama famously read 10 letters a day. And so that was the office that picked those 10 letters for him to read from the public. From there, I moved to the budget office, and I was in the Office of Management and Budget for a little less than a year when I got promoted to being the Chief of Staff for Legislative Affairs. And Legislative Affairs is the office that liaises between Congress and the President and also helps to arrange the Cabinet departments' interactions with Congress as well to make sure that the Executive Branch is not stepping on each other's toes. And so I did that for about two and a half years and my last few years was in the Chief of Staff's office, as a policy advisor. Essentially, the Chief of Staff at the time, Denis McDonough and the Deputy Chief of Staff, Rob Neighbors, I worked with them and was their eyes and ears on issues that were within my portfolio, including veterans, climate change for a bit and budget and fiscal cliff issues.

E

Ed Clemente 09:02

That's such a, I mean, I'm not saying you're really young, but it's such a great job to be so young, too. I mean, I just remember my staff used to have to deal with a lot of my hate mail, any elected official gets it.

A

Awenate Cobbina 09:17

I know, I shaved my head Ed, so you can't see the gray hairs.

E

Ed Clemente 09:22

Well, I know that it was it's just pretty interesting. I can imagine at the federal level, how much worse it is. So you mentioned in the NFL too your MBA.

A

Awenate Cobbina 09:34

I did. So in law school when I when I realized I liked sports and politics and business, I looked at sports jobs. And the first one that popped up was it was an internship with the National Football League and I applied for it and got an interview and through a crazy coincidence, I met a former NFL lawyer the day before my interview, he and I hit it off and he called his colleagues and said this, can you try to make sure this isn't just a show interview, can you give this guy a real shot and I happened to not mess up that recommendation and got the internship there. I stayed with the NFL my first two summers in law school, or my only two summers in law school. So I worked in what was the old Properties Unit, the intellectual properties part of the NFL had a company called NFL Properties and they basically negotiated the marks. So the league owns all of the individual teams' trademarks, and that's why you can see only see the televised games on national television because the league does all those deals on behalf of the teams. And the second summer I went back to the Management Council, which adjudicates the collective bargaining agreement for the league and did drug and conduct policy work and injury grievances for players that were injured and claimed that the teams owed them more money.

E

Ed Clemente 10:58

A betchya there's a lot of lawyers that work for the NFL.

A

Awenate Cobbina 11:01

A lot of lawyers will work for the for the NFL, as he as you can probably tell with some of the recent news.

E

Ed Clemente 11:08

Right. Right. Well, but I'm gonna ended on a positive note for you, did you meet any of the players, anyone you really liked?

A

Awenate Cobbina 11:14

You know, I met a couple of players but the what stood out to me was was really the owners, the team owners that came through and you're talking to people that, we don't think of it this way, this is essentially their second in some cases, third careers, right? And the players are on their first careers, players are coming out of college, and they're 19, 20, 21, 22 and they play for a few years, the average career in the NFL is only three and a half, four years. And then

some of them are Tom Brady, or a Matt Stafford and others, others go on and do other things. So that was very humbling to meet players that were still playing and to meet some players that have gone on to second careers. But then you look at the team owners, and they generally made a billion dollars doing something, right. Very few of them are owners by family, familial ties, and very many, many of them, you think of Jerry Jones, for example, or the Fords when they they bought the team, they built things right? They built huge companies like Ford Motor Company, or Jerry Jones had his oil company. [That's right.] And they've been very successful at it.

E

Ed Clemente 12:34

Yeah, you can probably pick up a lot of good tips to meet with these people.

A

Awenate Cobbina 12:38

Yeah, someone just getting started in law school and a number of them were lawyers earlier in their career before they started their businesses. It was it was interesting to see what the possibilities were from a business standpoint.

A

Announcer 12:50

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E

Ed Clemente 13:05

Let's focus back on your job a little bit because after the Obama administration, you went to the Pistons or no?

A

Awenate Cobbina 13:14

I went to the Detroit Pistons. I met a woman named Nancy Tellem, through the NFL actually, through connections at the NFL. And in our first interaction, she mentioned to me that her husband Arn Tellem was quitting his very successful sports agency and moving to Detroit to be Vice President of the Pistons and he and I might want to have a conversation. And so we did, and I think from his standpoint, it was early on in his tenure, and what I know now that I didn't know then is that when you when you're running a company, as he was as Vice Chairman, no one tells you what to do when you walk in the door, right? They all expect you to tell them what to do. So I think I caught him at a time when his schedule was relatively light and he thought that because of my Obama White House experience that I might have a good story or two and be able to fill an hour. But he and I hit it off and I started with the Pistons less than three months after our first conversation, and ended up staying there for almost six years.

E

Ed Clemente 14:16

Yeah, I just saw Gores speak at the Mackinac Policy Conference.

A

Awenate Cobbina 14:19

Yeah, it was it was a great, great speech, and Arn chaired it as the as the incoming President or now President of the Detroit Regional Chamber, and I think it was a fantastic event. Mr. Gore's his speech was was fantastic. And then some of the other NBA owners or sports owners generally, Stephen Ross spoke, Steve Ballmer was on a panel and spoke.

E

Ed Clemente 14:46

Who does Ballmer own again?

A

Awenate Cobbina 14:48

The Los Angeles Clippers, yeah former CEO of Microsoft, right, huge, company in Seattle. And so it was great to see some some people with Michigan ties that you don't normally see at the at the Mackinac Policy Conference engaging with the attendees.

E

Ed Clemente 15:04

Yeah and just as a plug for Ballmer, he's from Detroit, right? [Yeah.] He went to Detroit High Schools that near suburbs?

A

Awenate Cobbina 15:13

He did, I'm not sure which high school. He was from the area or from the city and the Ballmer Foundation is doing some good work in the city as well.

E

Ed Clemente 15:23

And then from there, you put the Bedrock, right?

A

Awenate Cobbina 15:27

Yeah, with the brief stop with the Biden transition.

E

Ed Clemente 15:30

Oh, wait, wait, yeah, I forgot. Sorry. When did you write your book too?

A

Awenate Cobbina 15:36

Okay. In the height of 2020, I got a call from some old White House colleagues that, one of which was going to lead the, at that time, formative Biden transition. So I signed on as the Director of Operations, effectively the COO and helped build it from three people when I joined to 3000, shortly after the election. And then we got him in the White House and then I joined Bedrock Manufacturing Company as the CEO here.

E

Ed Clemente 16:08

And, I mean, it's just amazing, because I remember that's the first time I'd ever heard your name is when you run the transition, just because of, I was, my cousin who, you know, Jeff Donofrio, and he's been a podcast guest as well. But yeah, I mean, he's the one that mentioned you to me the first time, that was the first time I heard your name. And we should probably take a moment out here to say your name is that normal American name we hear a lot. You're actually first generation sort of like I am, but your folks came from Ghana, right?

A

Awenate Cobbina 16:42

Yeah, we're both first generation from from different, different continents, but my family came from Ghana. My grandfather, on my mom's side was actually the Ambassador from Ghana to at different points US, UN, Canada, Mexico and Cuba. So my mom spent part of her upbringing in New York and DC because of him being ambassador and then the rest of Ghana. My dad grew up in Ghana and came here for grad school. So, for first generation and making sure to do well for all the immigrants to the United States.

E

Ed Clemente 17:18

Yeah, no, it's our country. I know that it's important because they know, they speak English, though you said, right? That's the language the official language of Ghana.

A

Awenate Cobbina 17:31

Yeah, obviously Ghana has tribal languages, as many countries do, and colloquialisms, but as a British colony, the language of government is English. And everyone could speak English and learn so in schools.

E

Ed Clemente 17:45

And, you know, you're, we're going to give you a few more questions, but I wanted to also put in a big plug for you, that you actually led the team to find Quenton Messer, and I just really think he was a great find. I just, even when I talked to him one on one, he's like a normal guy,

you know, kind of. But he's got so much energy too and it's one thing, everybody from the UP to Southwest Michigan, and everyone says the same thing that he's got a lot of energy. And I don't know how you guys found him, but you did a good job.

A

Awenate Cobbina 18:20

Listen, one of the hardest parts of chairing any board is finding a great leader for the organization. One that people externally will accept and that team internally, right, who has to work with him or her on a day to day basis, we'll accept. MEDC has been lucky to have over the years some great leaders and I overlapped with Jeff Mason for a bit before he retired. And obviously Mark Burton came over from the Governor's Office and is now in the private sector. So we undertook a search, nationwide search, to try to find the best person for us. And we had a lot of candidates that were in Michigan, some showed interest from outside of Michigan, some were economic developers, some were politicians, some were business people like it really ran the gamut. And we identified Quenton as someone who not only had the personality, to really excel in a new state, Michigan is is many different geographies and climates and types of people. And so you really need someone who's going to be accepted by everyone and not just a certain group. And Quentin is certainly that as you alluded to, in your opening, but also someone that knew the substance enough, and was proficient enough to really gain the respect of all of the staff at MEDC, many of whom have been there for 5, 10, 20 years, right? MEDC luckily, and this is a testament to the culture there, does not have a lot of turnover. And I believe that's because once people get there, they really enjoy their colleagues they enjoy do the work. They enjoy bringing good jobs to Michigan. And Quenton was able to embrace both of those things and really gain the respect of people outside and inside.

E

Ed Clemente 20:09

Yeah, even when I was in the legislature, Abby's thought the MEDC was the real place you could make a difference in the state for future generations as well as current generation, you know, and it's a rare opportunity. And it's hard, it's very hard to be in economic development, as a lot of these podcasts are all about, but it's also, you know, it's not as simple as people think, you know, and it's, it's way more complex. But at the same time, you know, he's a good skipper, I guess, or whatever we want to call him. Maybe, I don't know if he wants us to call him, to use a sports analogy, maybe he's a coach.

A

Awenate Cobbina 20:44

Yeah, listen, h uses a lot of sports analogies. [Oh, yeah.] I won't, I won't venture to, to try dabble in that. But what I will say is, I'm a fan of public service, right? And you've heard that from from my background, and Quenton is as well. And one of the harder jobs other than being the chief executive of the country, the state as Governor Whitmer is, but is to really help create an environment where businesses can create jobs, and people can feel visible economically, right? This is really about making sure that people have access to a middle class life if they want it and to jobs that fit their skills, and that businesses can create those jobs, either small businesses or big businesses. And so we we really need to applaud the MEDC, in my opinion,

because that's not easy to do. And we can, we can talk about what the right way to do it is and how our strategy lines up against other states and who we should be competing with, but overall, I think anyone would admit that it's a hard job, but a necessary one.

E

Ed Clemente 22:04

Yeah, and it's tough in today's world too, obviously, with all the polarization kind of things, but in general, I think he's doing a great job. And that, you know, I'm glad you guys found him. And I don't know if I said this, but you're also the Chair of the MEDC Executive Committee. And so not only did you just volunteer to do it, I think you and Jeff, [Noel], Jeff Noel, right. Yeah, I know you guys worked pretty hard on that, I remember your presentations to us.

A

Awenate Cobbina 22:32

Yeah, we have meetings every other month that are public. And we, with Quenton, we've made sure that we we have a clear strategy, we've tried to get alignment for all the local and regional and private economic development agencies and organizations such as the Business Leaders in Michigan, which are good friend and your cousin Jeff Donofrio leads. Jeff Noel was is a great, was a great Vice Chair he's since left the organization when he retired from Whirlpool. And I won't mention what state but he's a he's a competitor of ours as the leader of an economic development organization for another state. But we really have a good team and a great board. And from everyone from the from the team and MEDC to their leaders and Quenton to the board, is really committed to get this thing right and make sure that we are gaining population and gaining good jobs.

E

Ed Clemente 23:31

Yeah, and I just know like, like I said, it's when you're in a more public environment, and the weird thing is you had to do it during COVID. So you know, I can remember I when I was a legislator, I used to go to some of the MEDC executive meetings and there'd be like 10 people there, 20 some, and now you got like hundreds of people on these meetings now. [Yeah, yeah.] It's a whole different world.

A

Awenate Cobbina 23:50

You and I have had the privilege of meeting in person, Quenton and I did not have the privilege of meeting a person before we hired him. It was it was all over Zoom, which is harder. It's harder when you're getting to know someone, right? if you know someone already I think you can you can extrapolate their face and their mannerisms and their tone of voice but if you don't, or haven't met someone previously, it can become a little harder. And one of the things that we did throughout the search, not just with him, but with with other potential candidates was have more than one conversation right? You can't just have one via Zoom or via phone and really think you know someone. You've got to really dive a little deeper, let people get comfortable. Not everyone loves Zoom or loves Microsoft Teams or Google Meet, and you really need to find ways to try to replicate as best as possible the type of conversation you would have, if you're over a coffee or a beer.

E

Ed Clemente 24:45

Yeah, I just because we probably went off a little further than normal, and that's my fault because I'd love to talk a little bit about sports, but and Obama too. He's probably my favorite president. But you know I just think that, you know, one last question for you is, in your industry, do you see any future trends that might be affecting you somewhat? And, you know, what do you see on the horizon?

A

Awenate Cobbina 25:13

It's interesting, our businesses is unique in that we go, for the most part straight to the consumers. And so we have the macro economic trends that we're monitoring with the war in Russia and Ukraine, and how that might affect supply chain. I saw over the weekend and last week, the the escalation in around Taiwan with China, right, and how that's going to affect Southeast Asia. Europe is affected by the Ukraine thing. Inflation, even though some of those pressures seem not to be affecting jobs, the latest jobs report was was outstanding. Wages are creeping higher, but expenses are even higher. So we're paying attention to all those macro economic trends. The thing that we're really watching for, especially with consumers, is what is next? And next can be anything from, from a digital marketing perspective, how are people in taking information? How do we understand really what people's day to day lives are like, because we want to make sure we're doing that for our employees, but also for our potential customers. And as Shinola continues to expand, and this year has gone well for us, so we're pretty lucky. How do we really make sure that we keep Michigan and Detroit at the forefront, even as we're doing more and more business outside of Michigan, right? The first store was on Canfield Street and Cass in Detroit. Now we have four stores in Michigan, Great Lakes, Somerset Canfield and, and the store on Woodward Avenue at the hotel. That will not always be the case that we're going to be as focused on Michigan as possible, because as we continue to expand, we're taking Michigan and taking Detroit to all these other communities. We now have three stores in the Chicago area and we're considering whether to go international and there are other opportunities for hotel and we did the first one in conjunction with Dan Gilbert and Bedrock Detroit. So where are the opportunities and how do we how do we bring a sense of Michigan to other places so that people will come back to Michigan as well?

E

Ed Clemente 27:41

Well, I'm glad your minor in Economics paid off finally. [Finally, yeah.] I like to always throw my economics at people once and a while.

A

Awenate Cobbina 27:50

I overused that political science major and underused economics for a long time.

E

Ed Clemente 27:55

Well, anyway, I know we didn't get to everything, but you're a wonderful guest. Again, I want to

mention, Awenate Cobbina, he's the CEO of, sorry if I say it wrong, Bedrock Manufacturing Company, I didn't want to say the other one. And you're also the Chair of the MEDC Executive Committee, and you're a lot of fun, hope we can get you back sometime too.

A

Awenate Cobbina 28:18

Ed, thanks for having me. Having listened to your podcast and looked at some of your previous guests, it's an honor for me to have been invited and I enjoyed the conversation and hope to join you again soon.

E

Ed Clemente 28:28

You're a lot of fun too, so we appreciate it. [Happy to do it.] Join us next week where our guests will be Kerry Ebersole-Singh, she's the Chief Talent Solutions and Engagement Officer here at the MEDC.

A

Announcer 28:41

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