



Stanford eCorner

Thrive Through Radical Transparency

Justin Rosenstein, *Asana*

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Asana Co-Founder Justin Rosenstein articulates how his company builds a culture of empowerment through a commitment to transparency inside the organization. Rosenstein also touches on the benefits on making decisions as a collective of peers.



Transcript

So, when we have board meetings, at the end of every board meeting - first of all sometimes someone from the company is just invited to come to the board meeting who isn't on the board, just so they can actually participate and enjoy the process and learn from it. But regardless, we always take really copious notes and then send those notes out to the entire company after the fact. We have a weekly planning meeting that includes me, Dustin, our head of engineering and our head of business. And there are certainly some things like HR issues where it's not our prerogative to share that with the whole company, not going to share salaries, that's really their personal information to share. But for almost everything else, again, we take copious notes, send those notes out to everyone in the company, and sometimes it starts a dialogue where people are like, actually, you know, I think that decision you made, you know, you should consider this other option. Sometimes we either engage in dialogue or sometimes just say we can't respond to every single thing, but for the most part that creates this really collaborative process where people can have a lot of trust that we are thinking about the right things and making the right decisions. And so the effect of that is, you know; one, trust, and I think this sort of has a lot of value kind of in and of itself. I think one of the coolest things that you get from this kind of radical transparency is that - it means that people are empowered with enough knowledge that they don't have to be micro managed and told this is exactly what you should do and this is exactly how you should do your job. You couldn't even micro manage people at the level of detail required. Like, even when you are writing an individual if statement or making an individual decision about some cashing scheme or certainly all the time the little product design details, there is understanding the bigger picture, understanding who is the customer, how are we trying to serve them, what are the market conditions we are under, what are the ways in which we are trying to advance our brand.

It can go down to the tiniest little decisions, and so by focusing more on providing people with context about their work, context about the overall goals of the company, context on our values and how we think it's good to make decisions, rather than trying to control people's actions and control people's decisions, we find that that leads to then being able to be much more effective and not surprisingly it means that we can hire people who are much more seasoned and senior who are excited about - who are more excited about contributing in a way that respects the fact that they are peers. In fact I lied, there's a fourth value and that's the fourth value. Company as collective of peers. We make a point - I think one thing to point out is that I think in the last maybe 10 years or so - this is a pretty recent phenomenon even in Silicon Valley, maybe even in five years, there has been this real fetishization of entrepreneurship. In fact we have people like Paul Graham who are bordering on telling people you are a chump if you go and work for another company. I think this is really ludicrous. Sometimes the most leveraged way to impact things is to start your own project, but a lot of the times there are just so many great ideas out there the opportunity to play a big role in making those things a reality is just as interesting, and we are all visionaries if we have environments that allow us to come together and collaborate. And I can see how people have come to this conclusion because traditional companies are run in this way where there is a really strong two class structure where you have the visionaries on top making all the decisions, and sometimes their peons going out and executing. But we have the privilege of we are able to

hire just extraordinary people who definitely could be running their own companies but instead we have come together and created this kind of super group. And so, one example of a practice we used to try to respect us as a company of peers is roadmap week.

So every basically quarter - we divide them into episodes instead of quarters. We do kind of an episode of this is what we want to accomplish in the next few months or so. At the end of each of these episodes we have a roadmap week where the whole company more or less stops doing normal work and instead everyone is in a bunch of different committees. So you just have one week of meetings all day, or for all week. What's nice about this of course is that we have a lot fewer meetings than during the rest of the quarter. So, it's again this sort of rhythm of concentrated meetings and then concentrated fewer meetings. And in these committee meetings we'll have a committee about mobile, and our mobile strategy, we'll have a committee about our values, we'll have a committee about how we are going to expand the design team, we'll have a committee about the recruiting team, and sometimes these committees consist of the people that you would expect of, sometimes they consist of people who are, you know, someone in the customer support team who has read all the mobile complaints and so wants to be in that meeting so that they can be the voice of the customer. And those committees are given again a lot of context ahead of time on overall values and how we kind of broadly see something like mobile fitting in with our strategy, but it's up to the committee to reflect on where are we now, where could we be going, what are the different options, what are the pros and cons of those different options. Given those pros and cons what is our evaluation of how we should step forward, who are the right people to work on this, what are our requirements, what resources do we need, and they just put forth this plan for the next quarter for what we should do. Sometimes there will be, you know, all the committees will have more work than we could possibly do, so we have to sort of cut things a little bit.

But, in general, those committees are not really are making the decision. In theory Dustin or I could override them and say, no-no you've missed the mark entirely, we should do this other thing. But that's never actually happened. We really trust people to just make the right decisions, collect input from the right people within the company and then we go forward with those as the plans of record. So that's, I think, a much better situation for everyone.