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Deep Thought About Values

Stewart Butterfield, *Slack*

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In conversation with venture capitalist Andrew Braccia of Accel Partners, Stewart Butterfield explains how Slack determined its corporate values, which include empathy, "craftsmanship tempered by playfulness," solidarity and a sense of thriving through purposeful work.

Transcript

Let's talk a little bit about the culture of Slack. Where obviously, in Silicon Valley there's a large emphasis on diversity and empathy and transparency and authenticity and all of those things, which are all buzz words that are easy to say but hard to practice. So talk a little bit about your thoughts on that. I would be happy to. So actually, here's another factor that I think helped in the success was that by the time we started to work on Slack. That was, again, early 2013. All of the four co-founders had worked together for at least 10 years. And at this point, one of the co-founders I've now worked with for 18 years. So there's a very, very high degree of trust and understanding of people's capabilities and knowing how to work with these people that was the core of the team. And in addition, we had been through this traumatic experience.

So there's eight people who made the transition from Glitch to working on Slack. And going through trauma with a group of people is the best bonding experience you could have. And we had worked with them for several years. So that makes a really big difference. It also instructed the kind of culture that we wanted to have. And we made some really great early hires. And a lot of those decisions in the early days, you don't have enough information to make the decisions properly. It could be this, and it could be this. And so after some consideration. And by the way, John Doerr once gave me some, I think is really good advice.

If a decision is really, really hard to make, then it probably doesn't matter. Because if it's that close, it doesn't matter. And sometimes you're right, sometimes you're wrong. We were right many times. We got a couple of great hires. Our chief of staff for engineering is a guy named Nolan Caudill, who wrote this great piece when we were about 30 employees, about building the kind of workplace that we would want to have and identifying at that time three traits that we would look for in people. And one of them was empathy. And that was something that was at the core of the company in the beginning. Just from my perspective, it's very difficult to design something well if you don't have any empathy for the people who are using it. In fact, empathy is probably the most important skill that a designer can have.

Because if you can't step back from your own emotions and your own ego about how the thing should be and your idea versus somebody else on the team's idea and really put yourself in the shoes of human being who is going to be using the software, then it's-- I don't know. Your chances of success are coin flips. Another one was curiosity. And another one was diligence. And those have morphed over the years. And actually on our day two of onboarding for new employees, it's the CEO welcome. And I start by telling them, we had a management off-site to discuss corporate values. And then wait for the groan. And what came out of that was empathy as expressed by courtesy, expressed through courtesy. And you can be courteous without being empathic.

A lot of psychopaths are super skilled at being great with people and not having any empathy. Craftsmanship tempered by

playfulness. And playfulness in this sense doesn't just mean silliness or whimsy. Although I think we got away with just enough of that in the brand to be accessible to people and authentic. But playfulness in that sense means willingness to improvise and be creative and to try to anticipate what other people are doing. If any of you have ever played team sports or played improvisational music, you'll know that attempts that you make to both act in a way that's going to be helpful to your teammates or your fellow musicians while simultaneously anticipating what they're going to do and paying attention to what they're doing now. And that's the kind of playfulness that we mean. And then the last one was-- and this comes straight from the philosophy degree-- is thriving, which is really because, when we said flourishing, everyone thought we meant like this. Aristotle's Eudaimonian ethics discuss this kind of happiness that one gets from fulfilling their purpose, irrespective of what the purpose is. So doing the thing that you're meant to do.

In the sense that a knife is meant to cut things. And so a good knife is a sharp knife. He does get into a little bit what Aristotle thinks that people should do. But that's irrelevant. There is a feeling that you get when you're really engaged in something. Sometimes people talk about the flow state. And when you're doing the thing that you're meant to be doing, that's incredibly valuable. So the last set of values. Thriving both in ourselves and in others. So the last one is solidarity.

And that's very strange as a list of values for a high-tech company because most lists of values are like excellence, integrity, I don't know what else would be on that list. But they're completely generic, and people forget them the day after they have their new employee welcome.