



Stanford eCorner

The Reluctant Culture Czar

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HubSpot Co-Founder and CTO Dharmesh Shah recalls how the software company began working on its culture only after its importance was explained to his fellow co-founder by other CEOs. Shah says he reluctantly agreed to lead the effort at HubSpot and soon realized how much teammates cared, based on their emotional responses – often negative.



Transcript

^ HubSpot in our first three years, we're about nine ^something years old now, we did not use the ^word culture at all. And I know this because, neither my co-founder or I, we don't have phone calls. I don't have phone calls generally at all, as it turns out. I'm quirky that way. So everything we've ever said to each other has been late-night emails from 11:00pm to about 2:00am. We have these long thousand word emails that go back and forth. So I look back through the archives like oh, when did we first start talking about culture? It was three years in, so we didn't do it. Then this happened. So my co-founder and CEO of HubSpot went to a CEO Group, which the easiest way to think about it is a group therapy for CEOs. So they all go in and they talk about issues of the day, which is super useful, I highly recommend it.

At this particular session that he went to, the theme was culture and we were still in our early stages and so he had some, I don't think I can reveal the names, anyway, but he had some high-falutin CEOs in his group. Brian's reaction, my co-founder, was like, "Well culture?", he had that last excuse was like, "We don't have time for that, we're trying to build "this business, we're building the product, we're "trying to get customers, we're doing all these things. "Who has time for culture?" And they beat him up over it, they were like, "No, you do not understand. "Your job is a CEO. "This cannot be any higher on the priority list. "It should be number one. "You should do it." And so, Brian nodded his head, got through that meeting. Then the next meeting that I had with him, over beers, ^he's like, "Dharmesh, I've heard this culture thing ^"is really, really important. ^"Why don't you go do that?" Now that presented a problem because on the extrovert to introvert scale, I'm like way over there. Like way, as possibly, like over there.

And so, it's not that I don't like humans, there are some that I do like hanging around with, that's my wife and child, a gratuitous photo of the children. So then it's like okay, Brian's busy, he's doing other things, all he's really asking me to do, what I thought my mission was going to be was, well we have a culture, I just need to collect some data and ask our employees what culture is, what they think about it, do they like it or not. It's a data collection kind of like, write down and be the scribe for the culture that already exists. Not pleasant, I'd rather be writing code, but okay fine. I'll take one for the team and within days this was my reaction, like this is the worst possible thing I've ever done to myself in the history of me. It was so bad. It was bad on so many levels, it was crazy. I'll give you one anecdote. I started sending emails around saying, "By the way "I'm working on this thing, I'm trying to figure out "culture at the company", and then I got these flaming responses. And I'm used to flaming responses from HubSpot employees telling me I'm an idiot for many different reasons, but this one was particularly acute and hard to take.

They were like, "Oh, so now we're talking about culture. "Next it's going to be posters on the wall." This is the first step down the slippery slope, and then this is the one that killed me. It's like, this is not the company that I thought I joined. It's like, you're killing me here. All I asked you was are you happy or not, what do you think, it's like wow. And people have this very

visceral reaction when you start talking about people issues and culture.