



Stanford eCorner

How Do You Scale Eccentricity?

James Freeman, *Blue Bottle Coffee*

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Video URL: <http://ecorner.stanford.edu/videos/4040/How-Do-You-Scale-Eccentricity>

James Freeman of Blue Bottle Coffee discusses the dilemma of preserving the quirkiness and personality of the company as it scales. He explains how the inefficiencies and eccentricities that helped Blue Bottle stand out and succeed are just the type of issues that would be targeted by "pedigreed" executives that the company will inevitably recruit as it grows.



Transcript

- There's a composer named Brian Eno, has a great line. "Any constraint is part of the skeleton that you "build the composition on, "including your own incompetence." And I, that really struck me when I read that. I think he's very smart and good writer. And the first 10 years of Blue Bottle, the formative first decade you could say, were really built around my own incompetence. My failings around not being capable of making certain compromises, not being too devoted to efficiency, the quirks of my taste, the insistence on finding an underlying narrative around everything we were doing, about having a deeply personal level of control over, hopefully what is a charmingly didactic tone of voice. All of these eccentricities and missteps kind of became sort of our founding path. And they filled our shops, they made us interesting to guests. And so the question, you know, we're facing, I'm facing and those of us at Blue Bottle who are working on growth are facing is like how do you scale incompetence, how do you scale inefficiency. (crowd laughing) You know that's a real challenge for me. As we add smart, accomplished, pedigreed, experienced people to our growing business there's a temptation to do the things that smart, accomplished, pedigreed, experienced people do them.

Which is to say not the way I'm used to doing them. And so that's my quandary, you know, how do I make a case for the illogical, how do I advocate, how do I be an advocate for the incompetence that got me here talking to you at Stanford University without fatally hampering the financial or operation success of our business? Charting a path forward that improves the experience of our future guests, but still keeps this, this idea that everything is not perfect in terms of the functioning of the business, that it should not be perfect. That perfect is, that sheen of perfection is one step away from premeditation. Which is one step away from staleness.