

URL: <https://ecorner.stanford.edu/clips/creating-an-open-and-honest-culture/>

Claire Hughes Johnson, corporate officer and advisor for Stripe, observes that companies with inclusive environments, where everyone shares ideas and asks questions, can help create space for healthy debates and difficult conversations as well. She shares an example from her role at Stripe, including her strategies for creating a culture where people are comfortable with putting hard questions on the table.



Transcript

Audience Member So you mentioned, 00:00:03,600 under one of the operating principles, about the importance of open and transparent communication.. So one, I would love for you to just unpack that a little more of how to encourage that.. And then even moreso, how do you feel about kind of the culture in tech? Is it becoming more difficult to do that, maybe with sensitivity? Yeah, around that.. - Yeah.. 00:00:29,070 I think that, so transparency actually was, when I first started at Stripe, I thought it was one of the core company values because if you might have read about this, Stripe had this thing where all the emails in the company were copied to everyone.. So everyone could read everyone else's emails.. You can find it on the web and read about it.. And it was not actually, though, because transparency was the value.. The value was, let's optimize global decision-making over local optima, right? So the more information we share, the more context people have, and also it was also a mutual learning thing, which is on newer employees, and it was a little scary I'm gonna be honest with you, but we would be sending information to customers, to prospects, and engineers would be reading the email and bomb in directly to the employee and say, "Hey, you were a little bit wrong "about how the product works." And it didn't always play out beautifully, but it was actually in the interest of let's get all our knowledge as fast as we can, transparently on the table, right? And so I'm not a transparency for transparency's sake, but what I think you're describing is a sort of, how do you make sure you have a culture of an open, honest dialogue? And what's really interesting to me about the other part of your question is like, "Well, everyone's sensitive "and we're all gonna get canceled "if we say the wrong thing." Actually, the most inclusive environments, the environments in which I think people of very different backgrounds thrive, are the ones in which you can have the conversation, as long as everyone's participating, right? So your leadership and management practice is, how do I get everyone in this room? One, are the right people in the room to make this decision or to hear this information? And two, how do I get them all included and engaged? And if someone's not saying something, it is a problem.. And I think that the actual problem is too often people are uncomfortable saying the thing..

And the best teams are the ones that actually can put the hard stuff out there and have a rational.... Sometimes those are difficult conversations where you're agreeing to disagree or someone has a worldview that you don't agree with.. But if you think about everyone in this room, which team would you rather be a part of? The one where there's energy and ideas flowing in the room, even if they're tough, or the one where people don't talk because they're not all comfortable.. I think we know the answer to that.. And so your job is to, how do I set that environment? - How do you do that? 00:02:53,481 Just because of

how.... (Presenter laughing) How do you ensure that people stay connected and don't cancel in the wake of people expressing the thing that they're right are feeling that they're scared to? - Right, so I mean there's like 00:03:05,790 several different layers to that and the number, so there's a company level layer, which is how do you onboard and set norms and culture and foundations on the way in and set expectations.. For example, again, I just refer to my own, like Stripe as you can imagine, has millions of businesses using our product.. Not every business on Stripe is a business that someone who works at Stripe might believe in or might even actively really not like that business.. We are gonna tell you in the interview process, and on your way in, you will find some of our customers that you will love and you'll find some that you really don't love, and we support all of them.. And if you have a problem with that, like, you know, let's talk about it now because we wanna set the expectation that users first, which is our primary most important operating principle, is in fact real..

You will have to put a user first that you might not actually agree with, right? So what is setting expectations and talking about it and anticipating we're gonna have hard conversations.. We're gonna have moments where something's in the press and people in the company are like, "Why do we do business with that?" Right like you gotta be ready for that and you gotta set the tone.. And you've gotta also have a dialogue.. Like, we have what is still a weekly meeting where the founders take questions and people are allowed to like put that stuff out there, but let's talk about it internally.. That's our other expectation, not externally, right? And then there's the team version, which the book has a lot about, which is how do you really get people checked into conversations? Again, set expectations about engagement and then say, "I'm gonna give you all, "I'm gonna go around and have everyone share their idea." Or "Everyone I want you to share the question "that you're not asking," right? Like there's really easy tactics as a manager to get the stuff on the table.. But if you don't employ them, they will not come naturally to your team...