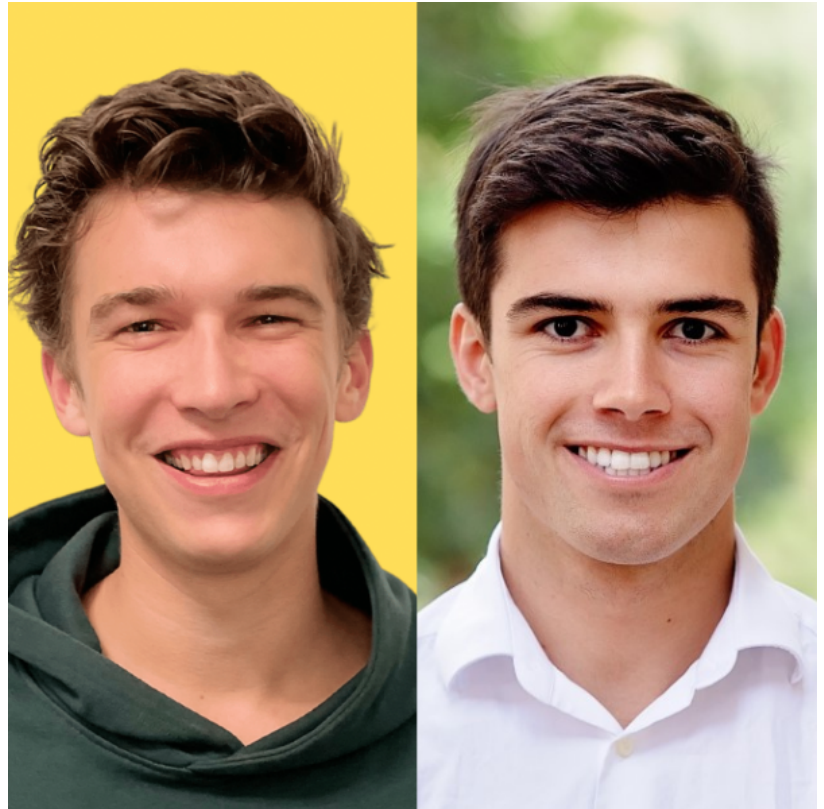


URL: <https://ecorner.stanford.edu/clips/mission-values-and-community/>

James Kanoff, co-founder and board director of the Farmlink Project, explains how the nonprofit's founders established Farmlink's mission, values, and community as the project grew. Co-founder and CEO Ben Collier tells a story illustrating how early Farmlink fellows were dedicated to their mission and each other.



Transcript

- People who were a lot smarter than us 00:00:03,293 started to tell us that as you start to grow your team, a lot of the things that kind of go unsaid, you actually start to need to define.. The three things they told us that were really important was mission, values, and community.. So I wanna talk to you a little bit about each of those.. The first is our mission.. You might read this, and say a 10th of the world could grow hungry while crops rot out in the field.. You might say, James, that is not a mission, that is a problem.. And we never actually really had like a very crisp words, and maybe this is the whole dyslexic thing, but we couldn't get, this is our mission.. But instead everyone on the team, they knew exactly why they were here and they knew why they were doing was contributing to solving that problem.. And I think at the end of the day, that's all you want a mission to really do.. The next thing that became really important was values..

When you have a large team that's growing, again, a lot of the unspoken things you actually need to define because new people are gonna bring different experiences to this.. I won't talk about our values because they're pretty specific to FarmLink, but I did wanna pull out two because I think they're really helpful for any team that's just getting started.. The first is scrappy, which is basically think U-haul truck.. That's a scrappy way to start getting things done with limited resources.. And then doer.. In a time of crisis, you don't have time for words and reports, think tanks aren't gonna help during a crisis.. You need people that have an action, like a bias towards action and having a whole team saying, Hey, these are the things that are most important when you're thinking about your work.. It allowed them to get a lot done.. At this point, we'd moved maybe 10 million meals.. And I said there was one other thing that I wanted to talk about, which was community..

And I'm not sure I really understood what community meant until the first thing I started to see was that students started quitting their internships and saying, I'm just gonna work full-time for FarmLink.. I don't care if I'm not getting paid.. I'm just gonna drop everything and this is what I'm gonna do.. And then it was like, wow, that's really serious.. And then as school started to catch up, we'd finish the summer, people started to say, I'm just gonna drop out of school too.. I'm just gonna work on this.. I can't imagine anything that's more important.. And to me, that's when I started to like first understand what community was.. So what do I mean by community? You guys remember those students that I was talking about in Nicaragua, the ones that were leading that revolution.. So there was a moment that I think helps explain what community was..

At one point they were barricaded in their university, they were surrounded by para militaries and they had all joined this thing for the mission to create a free Nicaragua. But in that moment, they weren't fighting for some abstract sense of mission. They were fighting to the person, to the left and right of them. They were fighting for each other and they were putting the group first. And I think that's actually what community is. Community like from a very evolutionary sense is putting the group first. And you and I and everyone you know, we all evolved from tribes of humans that put the group first. The tribes of humans that were full of people that did not put the group first, they didn't make it. And so what you're left with is a lot of people who want to put the group first. But in modern life we get very, very few chances to actually do that.

And I think what was happening was FarmLink was giving people finally one chance to do that. And people were taking it up. At least the students were. At some point I started to think and maybe even feel bad about is, is that too much to ask of somebody? Especially during like a pandemic, everyone is really struggling. They have other commitments. And even if we're not literally asking if it's the norm that people are doing, are you sort of allowing that behavior to happen? And we started to look at this and Sebastian Junger, a journalist who really studies this, he writes that humans actually don't mind hardship. In fact, they thrive on it. What they mind is not feeling necessary. And modern society has perfected the art of making people not feel necessary. Well at FarmLink, you were very necessary, you were a part of a group of a hundred people that was trying to prevent hunger from spiraling out of control and everyone was gonna be there for each other.

Once you were on a team like that and you have that feeling, it is impossible to go back. I promise you. And sometimes I joke with Ben, I think we're gonna be chasing that feeling for the rest of our lives. So, that's what I mean by community. And again, you can do a lot with a strong mission, with good values, but if you unlock a community like that, I think that's when really amazing things can start to happen. - James, there's one story that comes up 00:04:33,900 from that that I think is worth sharing, which was at the end of 2020, we did a ceremony to just look back and say thank you to everyone who was a part of that first eight months. And one of our fellows, Joe unmuted, and he is the most vibrant, uplifting person we'd ever had on the team. And he said, I think not many of you know this, this might come as a surprise, but a couple weeks before I joined FarmLink, my dad passed away due to Covid. And he said in a time where he didn't know where to turn, FarmLink was the only thing that kept him going. And I struggle to talk about it two and a half years later, but in the moment everybody just kind of broke into tears.

And it was, I think a lesson that everyone there was doing what we were doing for people like Joe too. - Yeah, 00:05:24,802 it was like late nights the like early morning zooms, the risks, reward the up the down. We were doing this for the mission, but really at the end of the day, we were doing it for each other. And about a year into this, the team had accomplished, this is all students, all volunteer. They'd accomplished a lot. They delivered 30 million meals throughout North America. They'd raised millions of dollars, they'd partnered with some of the largest companies in the world. They'd literally put up like billboards in Times Square. And believe me, Ben and I have nothing to do with this. (Ben laughs) We don't know what we're doing.

But at some point, there was all that magic and I started to wonder is like, hey, when the pandemic ends and people go back to school, is that the end of FarmLink too? Is FarmLink really just a pandemic story? One that makes you feel good? Or is it something that could actually be much, much bigger...