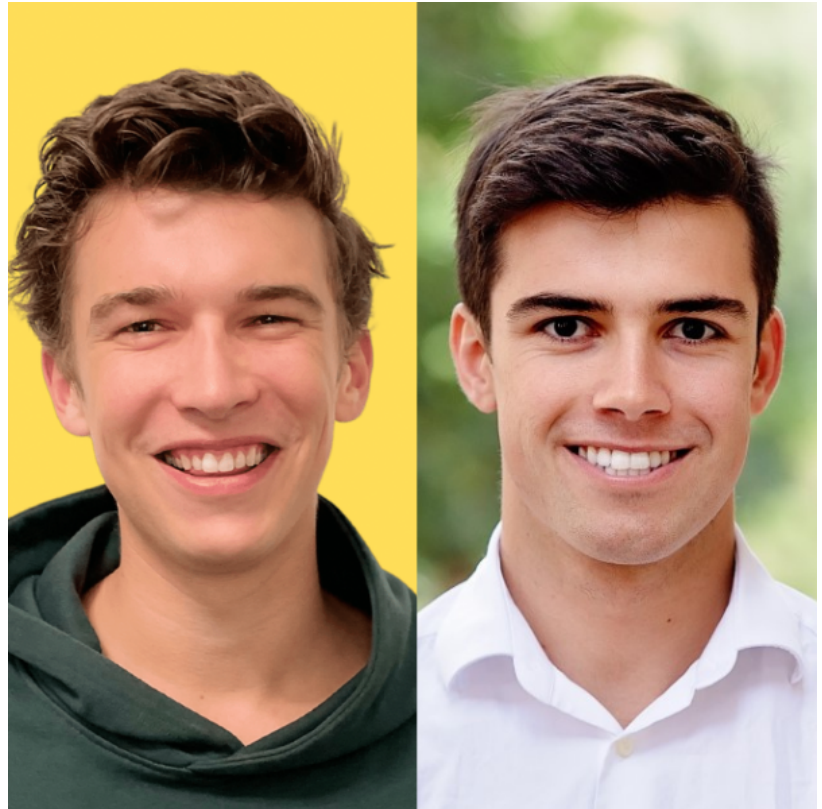


URL: <https://ecorner.stanford.edu/clips/nurturing-culture-during-growth/>

Ben Collier, co-founder and CEO of the Farmlink Project, shares how the nonprofit struggled internally after bringing on its first paid employees. Collier and then-co-CEO James Kanoff decided to go back to their basic values and get volunteers and employees alike engulfed in the project's culture.



Transcript

- After a year plus of hundreds of students working 00:00:06,150 harmoniously to build this project together, we had to bring on our first paid hired experts to help us grow.. And this decision sent shockwaves through the organization.. It was unpopular to say the least, and we understood why.. But it felt like no amount of town halls or Q&As was gonna make it any better.. And we do these surveys and some of the things we heard, you know, they.. - They are even hiring experts to replace us.. 00:00:33,000 Our sacrifice is not good enough for them.. - Or, leadership has decided 00:00:38,820 to stop paying farmers and instead pay themselves.. - I think the one that stuck with us the most, though.. 00:00:42,840 - You're gonna take the thing 00:00:45,570 that I love so dearly and you're gonna destroy it..

You don't even nearly know what Farmlink is.. - You don't even know what Farmlink is.. 00:00:53,854 That one cut deep because we weren't sure, and it's stung, but felt like we had no other choices.. And so in that fall, we brought on expert hires to help us scale our food recovery program and fundraise proportionally to match that growth.. And I'll tell you now, it was one of the best decisions we've ever made.. By the end of 2021, Farmlink was growing in a tremendous way.. We'd rescued over 50 million meals, we'd fundraise over 10 million.. These new hires were helping us realize wins that our inexperience just prevented us from seeing.. But it felt like we were falling apart.. For James and I, that transition school year was brutal..

For the full-time team, we couldn't provide the accountability they needed to do their jobs, but for the students, we couldn't provide the leadership or autonomy that they'd once felt.. And many of those students had become our best friends and they were leaving, graduating, burning out, or just returning to their in-person communities.. We understood why.. Meanwhile, our full-time team didn't feel like a full part of the culture that had flourished with just students.. So we started talking to leaders who said that when they scaled, when they grew, they went through a similar experience.. Many of them lost the team and traditions that they'd once built with.. One leader even said that this was a necessary evil on the road to scaled success.. And we hated that idea.. I mean, maybe they were right though, or maybe we're just making the wrong decisions.. They sure as hell were unpopular..

But what do you do in that position? Well, we knew that we had to make hard and frankly, unpopular decisions, but the way we were doing it was alienating our team and leaving them feeling left behind.. Our students felt completely boxed out..

And for Farmlink to succeed, it wasn't about just getting more meals to people.. We had the opportunity to create a team of thousands of lifelong Farmlinkers who each believe in systemic changes, they go on and pursue their own individual incredible careers.. That's what's gonna create real change.. And we were losing it.. So at this point, James and I decide to become co-CEOs.. - Go, CEOs.. 00:03:07,530 - Which we can talk about more after the class.. 00:03:09,540 Because the reality is it wasn't a leadership change that Farmlink needed..

We needed to get back to our basics.. And that was culture, values, and community.. We'd always felt that Farmlink culture was something that each individual needed to co-create.. Nobody could just be a consumer of our culture.. So how could James and I, two people amongst hundreds, possibly figure that out alone? We returned back to the roots of our philosophy that we know, and we turned to the team to ask them what to do, and here's what they told us.. Build one house, not two.. Students joining Farmlink went through a rigorous onboarding process.. It took weeks, and by the end of it, they would emerge not just knowing how Farmlink worked, but how Farmlink felt, how we wanted them to feel and how we wanted them to make others feel.. The keystone of it all was our end of week all hands meeting.. You'd join with energetic music playing, you'd go into breakout rooms where we'd ask ridiculous questions that would bring everyone together..

We'd come back out and share updates and celebrate milestones.. And it always finished with a performance or a share back, or a poem.. Or once, a grandfather of one of our students came and sang a sea shanty back when sea shanties were cool, during that 10-day window.. And that hour has been the most energizing hour of my week since April 2020.. But when students went back to in-person classes, we couldn't find a time that worked.. So we moved it to Sunday and we made it mandatory for students and we made it optional for our full-time team.. James, why the hell would we do that? - That was a really, really bad decision.. 00:04:51,300 Like, probably the worst decision we made in all of Farmlink.. - I mean broadly, even more broadly, 00:04:56,095 we thought that the expert hires, they didn't need team building with the students, that we were helping them focus, but they needed to be engulfed in that.. And we learned that all of our students, they took time to learn the little things that made Farmlink special while our expert hires did not..

And once that changed, things started to get better.. I mean, finally people saw each other's value and our expert hires were able to develop and work with the incredible students that we've always had on this team.. Ultimately, these hires, they bring an incredible amount of knowledge and experience, but they're joining our team, and it had to be that way.. And that's what helped, that's what's helped it feel like we're still holding onto that spark today...