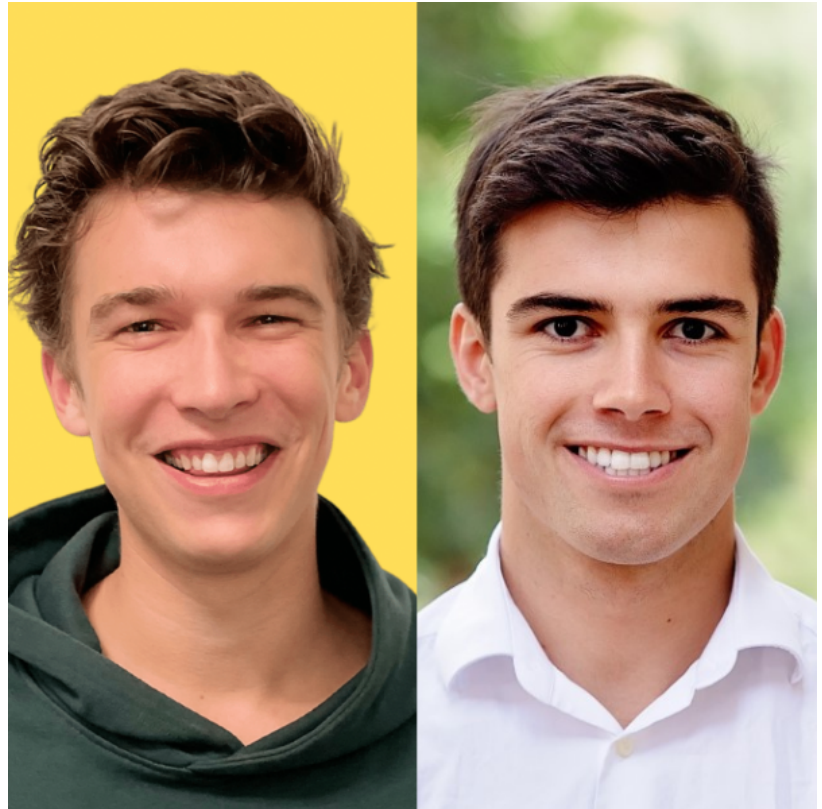


URL: <https://ecorner.stanford.edu/videos/students-solving-hunger-entire-talk/>

Ben Collier and James Kanoff are two co-founders of The Farmlink Project, a student-led movement that has provided over 100 million pounds of nutritious food to communities facing hunger in the United States. They started the project out of their college dorm rooms at Brown and Stanford University during the pandemic by renting a U-Haul truck to connect farmers with surplus to their local food bank. In this presentation, Collier and Kanoff share Farmlink's story and how they have led the rapidly growing nonprofit through successes and struggles.



Transcript

Narrator Who you are defines how you build. 00:00:06,420 (upbeat electronic music) - Welcome, everyone here, 00:00:10,620 from YouTube and the Stanford community, to the Stanford Entrepreneurial Thought Leader Series presented by the Stanford Technology Ventures Program, the Stanford Engineering Entrepreneurship Center, and BASES, the Business Association of Stanford Entrepreneurial Students. It is so great to have all of you here today. My name is Emily Ma and I am delighted to welcome Ben Collier and James Kanoff to ETL. Ben and James are two co-founders of the Farmlink Project, a student-led movement that has provided over 100 million pounds of nutritious food to communities facing hunger in the United States. They started the project out of their college dorm rooms at Brown and Stanford University during the pandemic by renting a U-Haul truck to connect farmers with surplus to their local food bank. The project became an overnight sensation, going nationwide with entirely volunteer-based movement of thousands of students delivering millions of meals to family that need, families that needed them the most. Today, in addition to growing their food program nationwide, they are now launching a fellowship described as Teach for America for our food system, placing the brightest young minds on the front lines of the food system to learn, grow, and create more efficient solutions for hunger and waste. The team has been awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, the Jefferson Award for Public Service, Forbes 30 under 30, a Pritzker Environmental Genius nomination, and so much more. Their work has been featured in "The New York Times," "Wall Street Journal," "ABC World News Tonight," and nearly every national television network in the US.

The Farmlink Project is now a rapidly growing team of 20-plus full-time employees on a mission to make the world's abundance of nutritious food accessible for everyone. They believe there will be a day in our lifetime where every person has access to food they need to succeed and want to be there to celebrate that day together. And I'm gonna editorialize for a moment. My day job is working at Google, and I'm doing everything I can back them from my day job at Google. So, huge welcome to Ben and James. Get on up here. (audience clapping) - The first thing we just wanted to say is a huge thank you 00:02:33,240 to Emily, but also to Tom, to Ann, to the whole Mayfield team, the ETL staff. This was the first class that I actually ever took at Stanford. I was, legitimately like the first class. I was a freshman, and I sat back there, never thought I would ever speak here.

So, I'm excited to share at least a couple thoughts along the way. - And I just want to specifically thank Emily one more

time. 00:02:55,410 She's one of Farmlink's biggest supporters and I know my mom is at home right now wondering why I'm not wearing a suit and Emily told me that I look way cooler gas station chic. So, that's what we're gonna go with today. But so, for today, James is gonna speak for most of the first half and I'll speak for most of the second. We'll probably interrupt each other a bunch. - A lot. 00:03:16,470 - But we're excited to share our story with you all. 00:03:18,570 - So, we're definitely not as wise 00:03:20,760 as most of the people who give ETL talks. So, we definitely are not gonna pretend to be.

Instead, what we want to do today is we want to tell you the story of Farmlink. We want to tell you how we went from driving a U-Haul truck to delivering a hundred million meals throughout North America and how we think we can get to a billion within the next 30 months. But more than that, I think if there's like one thing that we'd ask that you take away from this whole conversation, it's that, if a group of ragtag college students can put this together during the pandemic, whatever the thing is that you are thinking about doing, that you really, like, dream that you want to do, you probably can do it too. So, the theme of the presentation is to start small. So, with that, we're gonna start very small. (audience laughing) This is me. I'm the youngest of four from Los Angeles, California. I grew up looking up to basically two figures, Kobe Bryant and the Little Steam Engine That Could. I was also pretty dyslexic, and school definitely didn't come easy. Writing and reading were basically impossible.

And because of that, I ended up falling in love with film, because you didn't need words to really communicate how you were feeling. That love of film led me to take a year off where I worked on disaster response teams throughout the Middle East and Central Africa, largely responding to crises in Sudan or South Sudan and Syria. And I was the filmmaker. My job was to basically try to communicate what was going on so that it would make sense to people back home. And I've definitely learned a lot through this, and I won't have time to share a lot of those lessons, but I do wanna maybe pull out one thing, and this was in Sudan, and it's about statistics. When you hear that a million people are gonna face famine, it might make you feel numb, maybe even like hopeless, but it's probably unlikely that you're really gonna do something about that because of that numb and that hopeless feeling. But now imagine that there was just one kid here in the front of the room and they were facing famine. You and I and everyone in this room, we would get up and we would do everything we possibly could to save that child. And I think, in learning that, some people say it's like, what's the difference? And they'll say, it's the statistics, they're too inhuman. You can't really relate to them.

But I actually think it's something else. I think the difference is that the enormity of the problem can paralyze us into inaction. And maybe that would've been my conclusion from this year, like working as a filmmaker. But instead, I had examples where I saw the exact opposite. A group of students in Nicaragua, they were leading a revolution against a brutal dictator. And it had started as just a small group of friends and instead they were now leading millions of people and they were really like fighting and even dying for this big thing that they really believed in. The enormity of the problem didn't bother them at all. And I think, like seeing that, the reason I wanted to share this isn't just because, like, this lesson was impactful. The reason I wanted to share this is because, whenever you decide to go start something, a lot of the lessons that you're gonna take away, like the things that you're gonna really rely on in those hard times, they're not gonna come from an entrepreneurship class. They're not gonna come from a textbook.

They're certainly not gonna come from two 24 year olds who don't know a lot more than you do. They're gonna come from your life experiences and the things that really make you you. And so, with that, about 30 days later, I was a freshman at Stanford, which was a fun, like, what did you do on your gap year kind of conversation. But like a lot of the other freshmen, I was in Donner and I really wanted the same thing. I was really looking for a sense of community, a sense of purpose and a feeling of belonging. And I don't think I really even found that till maybe sophomore year, finally found, you know, a really good group of friends. We were getting close. It felt like I had a community, things were in place, and then the pandemic hit, and we were all forced to isolate, to leave our campus, and whatever sense of community that we had just started to find, it was gone. - And I think I can share that it wasn't just Stanford, 00:07:13,650 it wasn't just college students here, it was people around the world. I actually was in a position where, a few months even before COVID, I had a major reconstructive foot surgery, and I had been an athlete for my first couple years in school.

So, I was already looking ahead at the next couple years thinking, where was that sense of community gonna come from? What was my life gonna look like? And then COVID starts, and suddenly, we were all in that position. - Right, I like to say 00:07:37,590 that Ben started quarantining because of his injury months before anyone thought it was cool to quarantine. And so, during that time, I remember thinking and like, I talked about it, I was like, I don't even know if I wanna share this 'cause it sounds so naive and even misplaced. But I really thought that the pandemic was gonna bring people together. I thought that the partisanship, the divide, the hate, that that was gonna go away and people were gonna come together to help each other because that's what I had seen time and time again in a crisis. And instead, as we were like watching the world through our phone screen, it looked like we were seeing the opposite. The masks, the no masks, the debate, food supplies, hoarding, dwindling. It really felt like this like crisis was unfolding and it didn't seem like there was a lot that we could do about it. In addition to the health crisis that was unfolding, to make matters worse, there was also an economic one. First, millions of families were forced to flood a charitable food system that was never really designed for a crisis.

And at the same time that that was happening, farmers were being forced to throw away millions and millions of pounds of food every single day as a result of closures to schools, hotels and restaurants. Pictured here is a line at the Greater Pittsburgh Food Bank. I know it's a really grainy image, which almost even adds to the eeriness of it. The line stretched for

seven miles and blocked the freeway. Nearly all the families were turned away that day. Pictured here is a pile of onions where a farmer had to dig a ditch to bury millions of them because they had nowhere to go. And I think in seeing both of these problems sort of side by side, at some point, and it was probably just, right? Frustration and a little bit of naiveness, we said we're gonna do something about it. We said, we'll connect one farm to one food bank. We started calling hundreds of farmers, like, hundreds of them. And to our surprise, I don't know if it was maybe that the 30 or 40th we keep getting hung up on, but none of them had surplus.

- I mean, we had this list of hundreds of farmers 00:09:27,203 that we put together and we were just calling them one by one and it was, didn't pick up, didn't have surplus, didn't want to talk to college kids and, - Yeah, "Call back and I'll call the police." 00:09:37,347 It was not going well and maybe we're like days into this and I think at this point we've stopped going to class and it's maybe the 200th farmer that we call. In fact, I think it was the 201st farmer that we called. We picked up the phone and he says, "Hey, yeah, I have 10,000 eggs. I don't know what to do with them. If you can come pick 'em up, they're yours." We had no way to get this, but this was the exact item our local food bank was looking for. So, we rented a U-Haul truck, we drove to the farm, we put those 10,000 eggs in the back, and we literally like bumbled down the 405 freeway, honestly not trying to tip over. Like, I've never been honked at more times in my life than driving in this U-Haul. - I'm at home thinking about Aiden and James making omelets 00:10:14,400 in the back of their truck and it was not the start of a 100 million pound nonprofit. - No. 00:10:22,860 And we ended up delivering it to the local food bank and maybe that's all Farmlink would have been, but someone, I think it was Stella actually, one of our other co-founders, she started painting this bed sheet, and she wrote the words Farmlink on it, and we had this idea, we'll just, why don't we just strap that onto the U-Haul truck? And we took this photo, and the photo sort of became this like visual symbol.

We didn't need words to describe. It was like, oh, this is something to do with people coming together. We posted it online, and pretty soon, friends, and then friends of friends were reaching out saying, how could I help? Eventually, strangers were even reaching out saying, hey, I have a pickup truck, I'll go 10 hours anywhere, just tell me where to go. Pretty soon, we'd moved more food, and the news started covering this phenomena. We'd put up this clunky little website, and like, to our surprise, one day we wake up and we have thousands of donations from all across the country. I mean, five and \$10 donations, but at this point, it's like hundreds of thousands of dollars in our friend's bank account. And that's the public side of the story. (presenters laughing) But this is ETL, so we're gonna take you behind the scenes here for a second, because behind the scenes, if you're listening to anything I'm saying, this solution does not make a lot of sense. - No. 00:11:35,130 That is not scalable.

That is definitely dangerous. It is borderline illegal. - No, it's for sure illegal. 00:11:40,920 It's not, we can't do that. (audience laughing) - That's for the next presentation. 00:11:47,200 If it's not clear that this solution isn't exactly perfect, check this delivery that we tried to do of 40,000 pounds of potatoes. We put the pallets in the truck backwards, which meant, when they got to the food bank, we could not get the pallets out. The pallet jack did not fit underneath. So what did we do? We got a big rope, we tied it around the boxes, hooked it to another semi-truck, and tried to pull the pallets out. The box exploded, spilling thousands of pounds of potatoes onto the ground, which we then spent basically the next 10 hours picking up by hand.

I remember sitting in this pile of potatoes with my hand on my head and like honestly feeling like, I'm gonna throw up, because (audience laughing) you have all of these people who are counting on us and we have no idea what we're doing. We don't know anything about agriculture. We know even less about shipping and we sure as hell don't know anything about leadership. At this point, the largest thing that I've led is a high school football team to a two and eight season - I, (audience laughing) I led an improv group in high school and we didn't win anything, so. (audience laughing) - And that's the amazing thing 00:12:51,270 about a crisis is that you're way underqualified but it's better to do something than nothing in that situation. And so, at some point, we said, we just need to get going and we started to recruit a team. We called friends and friends of friends, and pretty soon, we were making sub-teams. The farms team would call farms to identify surplus. The food bank team would call food banks to figure out which food was needed where. And the deal team would do all the logistics.

So, they'd actually schedule with professional truck drivers to connect the farm to the food bank. - To be clear, we stopped driving U-haul trucks. 00:13:20,790 We started working with professional truck drivers and we were the ones coordinating point A to point B. - Which turns out is really, really hard to do. 00:13:27,720 And we called it deal team six because that team was basically up 24 hours a day coordinating trucks 'cause shipping never stops, which is a lot to ask, again, for students. Within a couple weeks, we were calling thousands of farmers a day, talking with hundreds of food banks, and coordinating a bunch of deliveries. And within a month, and we'd set like this goal, we were gonna say, we're gonna move a million pounds of food in a year. We'd moved a million pounds of food in a month, and I think we all started to realize that this was actually something much bigger and we really wanted to get to work. Now, people who were a lot smarter than us 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, say, a 10th of the world could grow hungry, while crops rot in the field. You might say, James, that is not a mission, that is a problem. And we never actually really had like very crisp words and maybe this is the whole dyslexic thing, but we couldn't get, like, 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 really, like, 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 we 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 like, it was like, wow, that's really serious. And then, you know, as school started to like catch up, we'd finished the summer, people started to say, you know, 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 paramilitaries, 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've started to think and maybe even feel bad about is like, is that too much to ask of somebody? Especially during, like a pandemic, you know? 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, like, 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 like the rest of our lives. So, that's what I mean by community. And again, like, 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 00:18:29,700 that comes up 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. 00:19:21,480 It was like late nights, the like early morning Zooms, the risk, 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. We don't know what we're doing. But at some point, there was all that magic, and you started to wonder is like, hey, when the pandemic ends, when people go back to school, is that the end of Farmlink too? Is Farmlink really just a pandemic story? You know, one that makes you feel good? Or is it something that could actually be much, much bigger? And so, we're gonna play a short video, and then Ben's gonna tell you a little bit more about that decision and what we went next. - Sure. 00:20:18,420 (dramatic music) - This was just a project to help our local food bank, 00:20:23,190 and now it's grown into something that has the capacity to feed millions of people every single day with dignity. But we can only do it if we can all work together. It's gonna take a movement of people. - Farmlink. 00:20:35,176 - Farmlink. 00:20:38,880 - Oh my god.

00:20:40,650 - I've seen food waste in my entire career. 00:20:44,132 And this group is tapping into something really

special. (reporter speaking in foreign language) Reporter Just this week, 00:20:55,010 more than 600,000 avocados distributed at FDR Park. Reporter 1 million pounds of food, 00:21:00,093 farmers and food banks telling them they are grateful. - People don't think students are really capable 00:21:04,343 of anything. "Oh, leave this to the adults." As of yesterday, we've saved 60 million pounds of food. (audience clapping) And I think what we really believed was that, in times of crisis, it's young people who step up to lead. - So, this was the decision we faced. 00:21:21,150 Are we gonna keep going? And from a mission perspective, the answer was clear. I mean, every year, one third of all the food we grow goes to waste.

In the United States alone, it's over a hundred billion pounds of food. And this isn't just a moral crisis. It's an environmental one. If food waste were a country, it would be the third largest emitter of greenhouse gases, behind only the US and China. But our goal wasn't to rescue 50 million meals or even a billion. Both of these are milestones. Our goal was to get to a day in our lifetime where everyone in this country has access to the food that they need to succeed. The meal gap in this country is about 7 billion meals. That's a number of meals we would need to end hunger in the United States. And we were far away off from 7 billion meals one year into Farmlink, but we saw a path.

We saw a path to meaningfully drawing down that number, to protecting our planet, and to offering a really valuable service to farmers at the same time. Even one year in, we were the best equipped team in the country to take a huge volume of surplus food and get it to communities fighting hunger, no matter what. And so, it felt like all of these pieces were there, and it was just an opportunity to put it together and to scale. But as James said, at the same time, in less than six months, our entire student workforce was gonna go back to in-person classes, 30 to 40-plus flexible hours of Farmlink time per week were gonna be five to 10 rigid hours. And what's more, our, you know, vibrant, in-person, our vibrant remote community, now had to compete against in-person ones. And so, it felt like we had this opportunity to address a systemic issue, but who was gonna do it? And that's really what we had to figure out. Now, we recognized that most organizations don't get to a point where they have to worry about their entire workforce going back to in-person Spanish class. (audience laughing) But it felt like we were getting to a point that many teams ultimately do, which is the feeling that, in order for us to grow, we needed to grow up. And to grow up, it, you read these case studies, and the same themes, they come up. James Competition has exploded.

00:23:29,490 If we don't bring on more experienced people, we're gonna lose the company. If we don't add clearer OKR practices, we're not gonna get anything done. And if we don't focus and pick the very few things that we're gonna be good at, we're likely gonna be mediocre at everything and we're ultimately gonna fail. - And all of these thoughts were running through our mind, 00:23:48,300 but growing up at the same time was scary. We were a bunch of students. I mean, the idea of a bunch of students growing up terrified us because, did it mean we were gonna lose the very thing that made Farmlink special, that made Farmlink Farmlink? I grew up a twin brother sleeping six feet away from Will, who's another founding member of Farmlink. And we did everything together. He was my first co-CEO, and when we were little, we were gonna do everything and anything. We're gonna be professional sport, professional athletes playing five different sports. We're gonna be musicians playing the piano and guitar and sing, and we were gonna be pilots and astronauts and chefs and teachers and Bill Nye the Science Guy and pirates.

It didn't, we were gonna be everything, but at a certain point, well, what's interesting about being a twin, first of all, is there was no just Ben or just Will. There was Ben and Will. We did everything together, and eventually, we had to stop doing everything together, a mile wide and an inch deep. We had to make choices about what to focus on, to pursue and love and excel at, and at the same time, what to leave behind. And these were the choices that made us Ben and Will. They were the things that helped us grow up and they ultimately shaped our identities. For that first year at Farmlink, we threw everything at the wall and we just tried to see what stuck. But for us to really grow and scale, and we needed to focus, and we needed to grow up. For James and I, this meant we faced a lot of unpopular decisions. Even if it felt right or obvious to us, we were forced to do things that required ending projects or introducing change or saying no, and that was new.

And at the same time, this wasn't just a choice. This was an urgent matter of survival. Our students were going back to in-person classes. We didn't have a team that was gonna allow us to keep growing. So, we felt like we had to make a decision, which was, after a year plus of hundreds of students working harmoniously to build this project together, we had to bring on our first paid hired experts to help us grow. And this decision sent shock waves 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 and As was gonna make it any better. And we would do these surveys, and some of the things we heard, you know, they, James "They're even hiring experts to replace us. 00:26:13,410 Our sacrifice is not good enough for them." Ben Or? 00:26:17,010 James "Leadership has decided to stop paying farmers 00:26:19,350 and instead pay themselves." Ben I think the one that stuck with us the most though, 00:26:24,630 James You're gonna take the thing that I love so dearly 00:26:26,010 and you're gonna destroy it.

You don't even really know what Farmlink is." - "You don't even know what Farmlink is." 00:26:35,010 That one cut deep because we weren't sure, and it stung, but we 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 fundraised 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 were 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 change as 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. - Let's go. Co-CEOs. 00:28:49,980 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's 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 nothing. 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'd always finish 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. 00:30:31,740 Like, probably the worst decision we made in all of Farmlink. - I mean, broadly, even more broadly, 00:30:36,990 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. So, today, we are still here. We have recently, with the help of 700 teammates, delivered our hundred millionth meal to a community fighting hunger. And we want to do a billion more in the next three years. But that's, again, just a milestone. We believe that we can get to a day where everybody in this country has access to the food that they need to succeed and we want to be there to celebrate that day together with our whole team, with our students, our farmers, our supporters, our donors, you name it, anyone who made it happen. James and I were co-CEOs for a year and a half. That year and a half was incredible. I feel, - We fought a lot.

00:32:05,520 - I feel eternally grateful for the lessons 00:32:07,380 that I learned in that year and a half, but he's right. We did fight a lot and we disagreed a ton. We would spend hours in countless debates every single week where we'd go back and forth about anything related to Farmlink, but we would always duke it out long enough that we would emerge aligned, each of us feeling clear on and more confident in our choices. And for that to work, we practiced radical feedback, and for that to work, we practiced radical acceptance of that feedback and it was a huge learning experience. But while we did fight a lot, we never disagreed on the importance of our community, the values that had gotten us to where we were and the north star of where we were pushing towards, and one commitment superseded all others, that as much as we disagreed, outside of our one-on-ones, we would always have each other's back. So, James, this past March stepped onto a position on our board. To nobody's surprise, he started another company, and he is working to increase carbon in soil around the world with farmers to fight climate change. - And Ben has now stepped to be the sole CEO of Farmlink 00:33:17,130 where he's leading this team in this mission in ways that I honestly never thought would've been possible. - And despite the change, 00:33:24,420 we still talk nearly every day, and it really does feel like, we still are each other's co-CEOs. As we continue to have this relationship, we remind each other of the lessons that we've learned over these years working together.

And we'd like to finish by restating two of them for you guys. The first is, start small, as small as connecting one farm with one food bank, because if we'd started any bigger than that, we never would've made it off the ground. - Yeah, and the second is that teams will join 00:33:58,320 for the mission but, at the end of the day, they're gonna stay for the community. So, focus on it. - Thank you so much. 00:34:05,640 It's an honor to be here and we're excited to continue this conversation with you. (audience clapping) (audience cheering) - Good to have friends in the audience. (laughs) 00:34:36,845 (audience clapping) Thank you. - New way to start a violent frenzy. 00:34:45,459 (audience clapping) - Thank you to the 40 Farmlinkers in the

crowd 00:34:49,833 who started that standing ovation.

- Good to have inside people on the job. 00:34:54,030 (audience laughing) Audience Member Hi, thanks so much for joining us today. 00:34:59,670 I had a question on building your community based on, like the community that you built to help you, not from the student perspective but the people that you were getting feedback from and like having that sound board option with. I'm curious to hear just like, how many people did you talk to? And how was that process of reaching out? I mean, we are eternally lucky to be in a community that is very open to that, here at Stanford, and has a lot of expertise. But how did that start off? And what insights do you have in terms of that process? - That's a really good question. 00:35:30,570 Yeah, so if you know nothing, which we definitely didn't know anything, and if you don't have a community of people who know a little bit more, and you can't ask them, it can be really, really hard. And honestly, I wanna say is, like we are like ridiculously fortunate. So, right? I had taken this class. I knew professors at Stanford. I knew people who had done this, like people like Emily started reaching out and we were getting really good advice and help like from the very, very start.

And I think that's like one of the most fortunate, privileged, whatever you want to call it, it was really lucky. And I don't think this would've happened without it. I think the second thing is is that, when you sort of have a story where it's like sort of underdog trying to do something that's good, everyone wants to help. And so, it never felt like, when we were reaching out to ask somebody, it was like people would jump, people would reach out to us to ask to help. And I think there's like something to be said about that, when you're particularly young and you're starting something, people are gonna want to help you. And so, it's really good to just reach out directly. Audience Member I have a question 00:36:32,190 about the co-CEO situation. So, we started a new department of bioengineering here, and we had co-chairs of that. I was one of them, and I was advised by a dozen people, "You should never do that." (presenters laughing) But it was the best thing we did because of the partner I had. But we kind of divided up responsibilities a little bit.

We did some overlap but it seems like you guys did everything together. Is that right? Or did you kind of divide? How did it go? - We definitely did a lot together, 00:37:07,020 but there was always a clear captain and we've used that word specifically within Farmlink forever, the idea that diffusion of responsibility, especially when you've got a hundred students working on it with no titles, with no accountability when it comes to pay, all remote, you need accountability. We had captains. So, even if 20 people were working on a project, there was one person who was responsible for getting it over the finish line. I also think, the co-CEO really worked for Farmlink because we did it at a time when Farmlink needed alignment more than it needed anything else. And for James and I to be co-CEOs, it required us to either completely abandon the co-CEO partnership and make decisions solo, which would not have lasted long, or ensure that we were truly aligned on the decisions we were making. And so, we talk about the going back and forth. I mean, we ended up making a mission statement for Farmlink two years in, and James and I spent probably 30 hours talking about one sentence. And I think that the commitment to getting in the weeds until we truly felt like we were exactly in step, that was the necessary level of care that we needed to bring into these decisions at that time. That's a good question, thanks.

Audience Member Great job, first of all. 00:38:21,600 I have a question about unpopular decisions. I think that's a really interesting concept and something that leaders have to make. They have to make a lot of unpopular decisions. And I'm curious what you've learned about how to best make and facilitate unpopular decisions in an organization. - Can we talk about paying for food? 00:38:36,450 - Yeah, that's a great example. 00:38:38,850 - Any Farmlinker here, there are a few, 00:38:42,390 knows that about a year in we stopped paying for food, and for the first year, people were donating to Farmlink 'cause they wanted us to get money to farmers and then cover the transportation to get it to food banks. But about a year in, we recognized a lot of food banks actually pay for food and we were not getting food that was otherwise gonna go to waste. We were getting food that other food banks would've gotten. And so, if we were gonna actually collaborate with and be alongside all of these hunger fighting charities successfully, we couldn't be fighting for costs with them.

And so, instead, we said, we can still help farmers a ton by not paying for food but covering the transportation, saving them time, getting them tax benefits, and ultimately, getting that food to people. - And so, I think this is the lesson 00:39:20,520 about unpopular decisions, is that it doesn't matter if it makes sense or not. If people are not a part of the decision, they're gonna hate the decision. - Yeah. 00:39:38,250 And I think that there's definitely something to that. Like, sometimes, the actual right decision is very, very clear. And if you don't actually bring people in and have people, like if you do it in retrospect, like in retrospect, we hosted town halls, all-hands, and it's too late at that point. Like, the line has been divided. You need to do that work upfront before you actually make the decision. So, I think, if I learned like anything, it's that, if you're gonna make an on unpopular decision, do the work upfront to build a coalition around it first.

- We gave the space for every single person to weigh in, 00:40:09,540 share their concerns, and we actually had a list of all the reasons people thought it was a bad idea and all of the answers to them. And eventually, it worked. But it took giving everyone the space to actually feel like they were heard before we could get there. Audience Member Hi. 00:40:25,380 I think everybody in Stanford knows how busy their schedules can be, whether that's with like schoolwork or organizations and clubs. And I was just wondering how you were able to manage your work-life balance, especially putting so much time and effort and passion to one project while also like going on the course load of school, or was that very like facilitated by, you know, you being able to like work on things during the pandemic? - Yeah, so, I think the short answer is, 00:40:50,583 is there was no work-life balance. Like, I don't know, I probably, if the classes were pass, fail, if they weren't I probably would've failed all of them at that time. I ended up, again, dropping out to focus on this. I think, when you're starting something,

particularly in those like early days, if your time commitments are split, it's like, I don't know, some people who are maybe really organized, they could do it, but like for the rest of us, like it's too hard. And I think it's actually like so relieving when you actually can just focus on one thing, and we were finally able to do that for Farmlink.

Like, again, I mean you can see it in the stories. Like, there wasn't a balance. This is what we were living during the pandemic. It was like the only thing that we really thought about. But I honestly, like people will, you wanna say, do this, it's like, I think if we didn't do that and if we weren't living this, I don't think we would be up here talking to you today. Audience Member Hi. 00:41:45,466 Could you maybe talk a little bit more about your thought process on building a self-sustaining business model for the long term? - Sure. 00:41:55,080 We came up with a strategy that was like three points, super simple. It was drastically increase the amount of food going to people instead of landfills. Prioritize community, prioritize partners who make that food so available that it's no longer seen as food assistance.

And then make this strategy financially sustainable at scale, which is kind of a small bullet, considering that's your whole question. But as a nonprofit, we really felt like, okay, we cannot rely on farmers' goodwill. We need to provide something that is actually value add for them. And so, we didn't try and become a better option than Whole Foods or a better option than even selling their extra fruit to a juicer. We said, anywhere you can go make money for this food, go make money, when you have nowhere else to go with it, then we can be helpful to you. And so, I think understanding our place in that order was really important. And then that means that the only cost we have is overhead, but then it's transportation and logistics. And so, it's like 3 cents per pound. And what we've spent the last couple years doing is researching projects that could maybe draw that down. You know, we looked into stuff like a tax program where we can help farmers access their benefits and then we take a small percentage of that to cover the transportation and logistics that we're supporting them with or the carbon program.

- Yeah, and the other thing that we looked into quite a bit, 00:43:06,750 and I think there's actually now like a company that's spinning out to do this is, - There is. 00:43:11,850 - There is a company. 00:43:15,210 It's quantifying the methane emissions that are avoided. So, when you prevent food waste from going to landfill, you're preventing a lot of methane emissions, and you instead get it to people. If you could quantify what the benefit of that is from a GHG perspective, you could generate a carbon offset, and that could really fund this work to scale it up. And so, we set out on a project to do that for nearly a year and a half, and now there's actually a team, it's too much for Farmlink to take on, but there's now I guess like the startup that is doing just that and Farmlink and all the other food rescue organizations can benefit from it. - I think the theme of that 00:43:44,790 that's most important is we define where our values would let us go before we worked on those projects. So, the tax program, we only do it if we can add more value to the farmers. The carbon offset program, we only do it if we can add more value to the food banks that we're working with. And so, it allowed us to kind of hold onto what we felt like was Farmlink while still pursuing something that was gonna help our long-term financial outlook.

Audience Member Hi, James. 00:44:09,330 The community that Farmlink built was such a unique experience, even being there briefly. I'm curious, in your next venture, how you think about trying to recreate that sense of community in like a tactical way. Like, what things can you do, absent the mission being important, build that sense of community for everyone else in this class who might be trying to do that? - Good luck. 00:44:38,470 You want to start to look forward and sort of build something new. And I think that's been a really interesting process in starting this new company, and it's more on the startup side. It's like a venture backed thing. And so, there's a lot of pieces that are different than that. That's different than a bunch of college students in the middle of a pandemic all working together. But there's still some themes that I think you can pull out, like your mission being clear, I think someone said this to us, you need to overcommunicate your mission by a factor of 10.

- Yeah. 00:45:09,090 - And so, that means you're probably talking about it daily. 00:45:11,400 You wanna be talking about your values daily. You want to be, again, creating an environment where people are working to like put the group first. And I think, if you can do some of those things, like that's kind of three small things, you can start to get that. But I also think it's super unique. Like that's kind of hard to do if it's like Uber for dog walking, you know? It's hard to create that kind of environment. So, I also think you kind of gotta match, like, the like intensity of the community with the project that you're actually working on. But that is a good question. I don't know.

If anyone does know, please come find me after. It would be very helpful. Audience Member Thank you very much 00:45:47,520 for your presentation. It was very, very inspiring, and I was wondering, like you tackled a real problem for real people with real material, and you went through fundraising to scale your solution in order to help more people to, like to get this solution globally, to the United States and maybe abroad probably, I don't know. And I was wondering what your perception of the investment politics are around here, like where a lot of funds go to a lot of companies that tackle maybe less necessary problems. And what would be your message to entrepreneurs who want to do something about society and social issues? Yeah, more like this. - I'll just at least caveat it 00:46:39,330 to say that we're so unqualified to answer that question and there's much smarter people who will come to ETL who will have a more thoughtful answer. What I think I can say is, like as someone who's trying to build businesses that do do things like that, that might not be like traditionally venture backable, would probably go back to like the same lesson of start small. If you actually do something and you actually show that it has value, it's a lot easier for people to give you funds. It's a lot easier to say, hey, this thing works, and we want to do it a bajillion more times than it is to say like, you have a 40 page pitch deck, like promising them this thing is gonna work.

And so, if you are able to like sort of hack together the thing that you want to do, like what is the U-haul truck equivalent of like the social thing, if you actually do it, you actually show that it adds value and it can be a business, then I think you can unlock those funds. But it's a little bit harder to do like just from like the pitch deck. - I'll try and add. 00:47:36,570 I think there's an, I don't wanna call it the ethical way to enter a space, but we started Farmlink with, we didn't build an app, we didn't invest in technology. We were on a Google sheet that sucked for a year and a half and we just called hundreds, thousands of people to ask questions and to learn. And I think, entering any space, there are people that will have been there for a long time, that have learned a lot, that have tried a lot, that you can stand on the shoulders of, if you enter with a learning mindset, and within the space that we operate in, I've had dozens of people come forward and saying, we're building an app, it's gonna connect farmers with food banks directly. It's gonna be great, and no farmer is gonna use your damn app, because no one, 'cause they're all 65 and, that's not true, but a lot of them are, and we figured that out within five days of not even succeeding with what we were trying to do. But because we called them and we asked, and I think that we're all young and it doesn't even matter. When you're entering a space, you are a learner. And we've always had that learner mindset at Farmlink.

I think, if you enter whatever space it is with that and then show you've done your work to understand, you know, those who came before you and what you can take away from them and here's how you're adding to it, I think that shows value in and of itself. Emily Well, with that, one more huge round of applause. 00:48:53,565 How about that? (audience clapping) (upbeat electronic music)..