

Metigy podcast



Mastering leadership and culture transformation with Hiam Sakakini, The Culture Equation

Daren (00:04):

If you have a small business and this small business has employees, how deeply have you thought about their happiness. As a small business owner, this can easily get missed while you focus on your product, your service, operations, marketing, sales, legal, finance and so much more. To find out why employee happiness, leadership and culture should be a top priority, you should listen to this episode of Forward Thinking. Hey everyone, I'm Daren Lake, the audio content manager here at Metigy. Welcome to Forward Thinking, a podcast by Metigy. In this series, we speak with inspirational business owners, brands and marketing experts to learn from their experiences on the frontline and uncover what it takes to build a world class business.

Daren (00:52):

If you've ever wondered what great companies do differently than the rest, then you've come to the right podcast episode. While working across 13 countries as a senior leader at Google, Hiam Sakakini mentored thousands of Google managers and watched the company grow from 21 billion to 110 billion in revenue. Now transforming company's culture as the CEO and founder of The Culture equation, Hiam is able to mentor scale up that a pre or post series B. Hiam has plenty of valuable knowledge to drop for business leaders and motivated workers who wish to incorporate more value to their teams in their own company and across industries. A few things you'll learn in this episode, what the hiring process of Google can teach your business about leadership. Practices your business can do to keep employees happy. What working across 13 countries can teach you about working with a diverse culture. Tools that can help you prioritize tasks in your startup, and much more. Let's get into the chat with employee number four slash Metigy's head of content, Brendan Hill and Hiam.

Brendan (01:55):

Hiam, welcome to the show.

Hiam (01:56):

Thank you for having me.

Brendan (01:58):

So super impressive profile, early employee at Google, all the way back in 2007 and something that caught my eye on your profile was that you love discovering what companies do differently from the rest. So was this something that you learned at Google and other companies that you've worked at?

Hiam (02:15):

Yeah, I think so. I think when I left DHL, which is a company I worked just previously to Google, I decided to apply for kind of my top 10 companies that I'd like to join and Google was actually only number seven or eight. Nobody had really heard of Google. In fact, my

father said Google schmoogle who calls our company such a silly name. And it was a lot of banks that were at the top and some well known names, like for example, Chanel. And I remember going through an interview process for all of them around about the same time, I applied for them all at the same time and then I started interviewing. And the thing that stood out to me about Google was the, first of all that interview process, really was so different. And really to me at the time, quite strange, because they were asking me very much about my philosophy, my views, my attitude, my motivations, and just a sliver about my experience, which was the 99% of all the other interviews.

Hiam (03:13):

It was a long process, much longer than the others. Probably three times longer. They really to make sure they had not just the right fit for this job, but the right fit for the company. And then they had multiple layers of sign off and really interesting. So that peaked my interest because I think if it wasn't even for that interview process, I don't think I'd have been that interested. It was just another .com, it was just another internet company and I was just kind of mildly curious, but that interview process really stood out to me. So I think in terms of what do the best companies do differently from the rest? The very first thing is I think they really hire right. And they pay attention to that hiring process and they hire more for attitude, motivation, culture fit than they do for skills.

Hiam (04:00):

Skills are very important, but they're not the be all and end all. And they're not hiring for just the right, that particular job that's open now, they're thinking about future jobs for this particular person or will they enjoy career path with us? What kinds of things could we see them doing in the future? And do they have leadership is a big one for Google. Everyone was hired in a quarter of the hiring process, an interview process was around your leadership style, even though you might not be hired immediately for a leadership role. So that was really interesting.

Brendan (04:33):

Something else that's interesting on your LinkedIn profile, speaking of leadership, I see that you managed over 1000 different managers at Google while you were there.

Hiam (04:41):

Well, no, I didn't manage them. I was doing leadership development for managers. So helping managers to lead really, really well in a company that was growing super fast. Which really meant that if you wanted the opportunity to be a manager, it was coming at you pretty quick. But usually this is a kind of a pitfall that most companies fall into is that they hire, or they promote somebody into a manager role because they have exceeded expectations. So if you're in sales and you want to be a sales manager, usually they'll hire the person who is constantly exceeded expectations. And so they've hit their target, every quarter. Does that necessarily mean you're going to be a great manager?

Brendan (05:24):

No.

Hiam (05:26):

It could. Yeah, but not necessarily. So I think one thing I realized over that time, especially in that leadership development type role was that we've got to think differently about how we promote people into managing other people. What are we looking for? What kinds of things make a great, great manager or great leader. And thankfully working at Google, they actually did a lot of research around this. And they published that and it's all up there and anyone can have a look at what was termed at the time project oxygen. So there are 10 great traits of top leaders and managers that you can look up. But the first one, if you're interested is they are a great, great coach.

Brendan (06:09):

Okay. So, yeah. So in what ways would they coach?

Hiam (06:13):

I think what's exciting about coaching being the one attribute of great leaders is that it flips the whole thinking around autocratic leadership to more servant leadership. So you are somebody who doesn't have all the answers. The company is moving at such a rate that it's going to come up against challenges that we've never were faced before. So the only way of overcoming those challenges is through your people, not moving your people around like pawns, but actually working through them. And the only way you can do that is ask them questions.

Hiam (06:49):

So when they come to you with a challenge, rather than give them what you think is the answer, you ask them the questions that help them to come up with the answer themselves that helps them feel more empowered. It helps them come up with answers in the future without even coming to you. It frees up your time for more strategic things. And to be honest, it helps them to then approach other people in the same way, whether it's when they might have to answer customers with specific challenges, they might take a coaching approach, which would result in a deeper relationship with their customers. That's a good knock on effect.

Brendan (07:24):

And I mean, businesses, these days, there's so much focus on acquisition of new talent. So, I mean, you worked a lot with culture at Google as well. So I mean, what type of areas did and practices did you instill to make sure the staff were happy and you didn't have to waste time hiring new staff and that continuous influx of newer trainings and everything like that.

Hiam (07:47):

Look, I think if you were to wait your time, you always will wait your time more on hiring again. And I think that is the secret sauce in terms of hire right. And then a lot of things you don't have to remediate later. And I think the other thing, and in terms of culture, which was really interesting for me was the onboarding process. And I think that's kind of folklore and I see that in movies like the intern, everyone's wearing their crazy hats and going through this ridiculous onboarding process, but it was really where you felt the culture in the most acute

way. And you should feel your company's culture in the most acute way at the very beginning. This should feel different. There should be a different vibe. It should be something almost tangible. I see culture as kind of your autoimmune system. It fights the bad things that try and attack an organism or a thing, which is your organization and it allows good things in. So if you set that culture up right from the get go, you don't have to worry later on in life.

Hiam (08:54):

Things that might enter that are kind of not right, will eventually find their way out, much faster than if you didn't set up this wonderful culture at the very beginning. And culture doesn't have to look like Google, everyone that puts time and effort and intention and good intent into their culture, it's their culture, it's very unique to them and it's great for them. I think in the absence of doing any of that, you have nothing, you have no personality. The organization doesn't feel welcoming, it just feels kind of haphazard, people aren't really sure where they're going, what they stand for, why they're there, they're questioning whether they even should be there and it doesn't feel good. So I think putting time and effort into your culture, your values, your purpose, what you stand for, what you're there to achieve and helping people to really get to grips with that at the very beginning of their career with you is time well spent and invested.

Brendan (09:50):

Yeah. I think one of the best examples that I've seen, all of those different things executed is Zappos, the shoe company in Las Vegas. So I went on their tour. I mean, they say that it is harder to get into Zappos than it is to Harvard now. Yes, this is, so I mean, they have lots of great initiatives. How can small and medium businesses in Australia pick up on these great examples of the Googles, the Zappos. What can they do to motivate and keep their staff happy and improve their culture?

Hiam (10:23):

I think again, first and foremost is really put time and effort into thinking about this. This isn't just something you do as a once off, when you set up your company and you kind of write your constitution and you think these values up and you put them down on paper and that's it. It's actually something that's baked into your strategic plan. It's not a footnote. It is core to your strategic plan. So front and center, because it underpins everything. Strategic plans will last maybe a year max, the way things are moving so fast these days, but culture lasts forever. So put time and effort an intent into designing it and then sustaining it for the long term.

Brendan (11:05):

I guess another good example is Virgin. So Richard Branson developed the culture early on. And to this day, you get any communication from Virgin, it's all in that same brand and tone. Yeah.

Hiam (11:12):

Yeah. Even small things like that. Developing that internal brand, thinking about your internal, almost it doesn't have to be the exact same setup as your external brand. You can have an

internal logo, you can have your internal kind of brand guidelines, templates and communication guidelines, things that you use internally. Obviously an intranet is ridiculously important and so many companies forget this step. How you use an internal system to communicate with your ever growing employer or employee base. Yeah.

Brendan (11:46):

Interesting. And so you worked over 15 different countries during your time with Google. What can we learn from, obviously we've mentioned big examples from the United States. What can smaller, medium businesses in Australia learn from your insights to, I guess, all the people that you worked with overseas?

Hiam (12:06):

Well, it's interesting. We're moving into a time now where you can do so much with a diverse workforce that's scattered across many locations, right?

Brendan (12:16):

Distributed. Yeah. I was just listening to Matt Mullen, we talk the CEO and founder of WordPress and Automatic, has over 1000 staff all distributed, no head office.

Hiam (12:27):

No head office. Yeah.

Brendan (12:28):

It's crazy.

Hiam (12:28):

So at the end it becomes even more important, I guess, to think about that culture, because it's not going to be contingent on this vibe that you get from an actual office space anymore. So your virtual walls are probably your communication channels and things like that. But also I think culturally diverse teams, just knowing a little bit about, and asking about the different cultural nuances of the people that make up your team. I think that was interesting for me, having a team of people, I was based obviously in Australia, but there was people in my team from Japan, China, India, and yeah. There's certain things that you can and should do for different cultures to make them feel welcome and to make sure that their views are heard and perspectives, so that was something that was interesting. So that's something to take time to do as a leader, if you've got a diverse workforce that's scattered everywhere.

Brendan (13:22):

I know that's another area you're passionate about is diversity in the workplace. Can you touch on why that's so important to you?

Hiam (13:29):

Yeah, definitely. Diversity can mean so many things. I think we overuse it in terms of gender, sometimes. Obviously it can relate to age and I think now we have more people reentering the workforce after they retire because yeah, we're living longer. And I think that's something

to think about. And we've got people who are also now coming into the workforce earlier, because there might be skipping uni and not finding value in that typical traditional university education. So this huge breadth in terms of age range in the workforce, that's diversity, but one area I'm particularly passionate about is around people, the disability, whether it's physical or neuro. And I really feel like we're missing out on a really talented pool of people, again just because maybe they couldn't physically get into a building or it's very hard to adapt for their needs.

Hiam (14:27):

But now again, with technology they can dial in or VC in from anywhere from their. So I think we really should be thinking more about this pool of people who have been neglected, who have been marginalized. One in five people in Australia have a disability. And less than 50% of them have a job, but they all have incredible talents. And as well as those, for example, on the autism spectrum, I think that the rate of employment for them is even lower and yet look at what they can do when it comes to technology, big data, software development, testing. They're just such an overlooked population. So massively passionate about that. Give a lot of my time to this particular area.

Brendan (15:13):

Amazing. And can you tell us more about remarkable, the project that you're involved with?

Hiam (15:17):

Yeah. Remarkable is an accelerator program that's focusing on tech startups in the disability space. So helping again, people with disability to be more socially included, whether that's from a physically getting them into the workforce or society or just enjoying more experiences. So using technology from a number of different angles. And what I do for remarkable is I offer my time to mentor a startup, one startup for each round. So I can help them in a more tangible, useful way than just popping in and out every now and again.

Brendan (15:57):

Yeah. Awesome. Another interesting thing that I saw on your bio is that you like to talk about mistakes. So obviously, it is a bit of a cliché as well that mistakes are the key to our success, but a question that we like to ask people on the podcast as well is what advice would you give to your 20 year old self? So what mistakes have you made in the last few years?

Hiam (16:22):

Yeah, I think 20 year old self would be around. I think not saying no when I was in business as in, I would have so many great opportunities that I found it very hard to say no's. But I wasn't being very mindful of literally my capacity to deliver. So instead of saying no, I should have said things like, great, do you need this right now? Or could we schedule something in the not too distant future to deliver on this project? Or I should have spaced things out rather than just saying yes, yes, yes, yes, yes to everything and being extremely excited about what that could mean for my career, but it eventually meant burnout. Yeah. So I think just being a little bit more careful about my energy and how I was spending that, not necessarily my time, but my energy.

Brendan (17:14):

Right. And how do you prioritize tasks now? Obviously you are running an early stage business. There's so many opportunities. It's hard to know where to focus. Do you have any filters or any procedures that you use now?

Hiam (17:28):

Yeah, I mean in a brand new business, again, I think it's really important to just kind of bring the tools I used from my previous corporate life into startup. And that is just really good planning. Setting things up quarter by quarter, figuring out what my big goals are doing. The typical planning and execution as you would in a larger organization, all be it a lot faster because startup life is particularly fast. So yeah, that's definitely one of the filters I would use. I love using new tools, for example, simple tools like [inaudible 00:18:04] really have changed my life. Just being able to use those type types of dynamic tools. Yeah. I've got a great virtual assistant now that helps take away all the administrative load.

Brendan (18:15):

Interesting. Tell us more about your virtual assistant. Where did you find them?

Hiam (18:19):

Through a company called virtual hub. Yeah. And they help connect and match you with the right person for you and your business. So interview, process, and then you can have them for a half day or a full day, five days a week. Worked out quite well.

Brendan (18:36):

Excellent. Another question that we like to ask our guests, Hiam, is if you were given Aladdin's three wishes with Disney rules, what would you wish for?

Hiam (18:49):

That one was confusing because I was thinking about whether I wanted personal wishes or more from a professional workplace perspective. I'll give you both. On a personal, I have two, I am in the process of moving house and if I had Aladdin's wish, I would wish that somebody could just come in, pack everything up, move everything for me, do all that heavy lifting and unpack and have it all just perfectly put away in the new house because I'm dreading this. But from workplace perspective, I guess back to truly inclusive workplaces would be something I would wish for. And another thing I guess going back to of the kind of the gender point is true parody. So fair pay and you know, for the same role based on whether it's male or female, everything is the same. So I think a hundred years I think is what we're projected to wait for that. I think it can be done sooner. I'm hoping.

Brendan (19:51):

Yeah. Amazing. And are you a big reader Hiam?

Hiam (19:56):

I do read quite a bit, but not in the last two, three months. I haven't picked up a book at all. I have to say. Yeah.

Brendan (20:04):

Any books that you can recommend from the last couple of years to our audience?

Hiam (20:07):

Oh the last couple of years. Yeah. I mean there's everything that I learned at Google is beautifully summarized in the book work rules by Laszlo Bock.

Brendan (20:18):

Oh, yes. They may need to read that.

Hiam (20:18):

It's a good one. Obviously one of the things that as a game changer in the workplace is Carol Dweck's growth mindset. So that's another one I would highly recommend. One that I've found particularly interest is Dan Pink's latest one when, which is an interesting one. And that was more from the perspective of starting my own business.

Brendan (20:43):

And so you have got a new project underway. Tell us a bit more about that.

Hiam (20:46):

Yes. So the culture equation is the business I've founded. It specializes in culture change. Yeah. So if you're looking for easy tips on building a thriving culture that will sustain lots of changes, then sign up to the culture equations newsletter.

Brendan (21:08):

Amazing. Speaking of changes, I know you have some views on the future of work. So can you tell us your views around the future of work? I mean, small, medium businesses listening right now. What are their businesses going to look like in 10 to 20 to 30 years?

Hiam (21:26):

Oh, look, I think it's going to be probably smaller organizations doing a lot more with a lot less. And that's where technology seems to be coming in, in terms of being able to automate easily repeatable tasks. And that means as human beings, what we're left with is what computers and software can't do. And if you think about that, then human beings are uniquely placed to solve problems, really complex problems. They are uniquely creative and they are uniquely social. And so I feel like if we want to future proof ourselves, these are sort of areas that you need to make sure you focus on as you develop yourself. And that's something that I'm pretty passionate about and sort of the work that I do now is how to help human beings and organizations really future proof themselves for any business, because these are transferable skills, they're not just for one type of organization. And I think one of the biggest mistakes you can make is just honing your skills in a particular, say technical field and not focusing on these powerful business skills around creativity, around problem solving and around social networking and building relationships.

Brendan (22:51):

Interesting. So with the rise of automation, do you see people focusing more on areas that they're passionate about and that will stimulate more creativity in the workplace?

Hiam (23:03):

Yeah, I think so. I think that's what we're all seeing. Aren't we, we're seeing this huge trend and I don't even think it's a trend, I think it's here to stay around people looking for purpose in their work. Knowing that their skills are transferable, that means that they can move very easily from one industry to another or from one job to another. So what's got to be, the differentiator has to be somewhere that they can do great work, that is going to have an impact. And that's what people are realizing more. So businesses are realizing they're going to have to answer this call and they have to articulate what differentiates them in the market. Are they just about profitability and growth or do they have something more to offer and what is that and how do we articulate that?

Brendan (23:50):

Interesting. And have you got any stories that you can tell us from some of the companies that you're working with at the moment, after they've been through your different processes, what kind of changes are they seeing in their business?

Hiam (24:03):

Again, it's down to that really powerful storytelling and articulating what you stand for. So I find that the best place to start with any organization, small, medium or large is articulating your vision, what you stand for, what you want to achieve, what you can offer people who are going to come on the journey with you, the values that you, and by values, we really are about the behaviors that we want people to sign up to. When they come into our organization, those unique behaviors that will allow us to achieve that common goal together. So there's a lot that companies can think about as they set up themselves for the future.

Brendan (24:42):

So going down to a more personal level now, what's in your current business black box? What problem are you currently struggling with?

Hiam (24:51):

In my current business black box? Well, from a product perspective, it was the not knowing how to rapidly build great leaders that made me jump out of Google and into my own business. It was something I was allowed to experiment with at Google. I was given great leeway and in trying things. And then what I realized is traditional leadership development doesn't develop leaders. And why? I feel like it's too fluffy, people are put into a room and they're given an agenda and modules and everything is very nicely laid out for people. And that's just not the reality when it comes to leading in the crazy, volatile, ambiguous world that we're in. So I realized if you really want to create great leaders fast, you need to put them through real experience. You need to contextualize that experience. So help people to understand how they can bring that back to their real world really, really quickly.

Hiam (25:56):

Give them lots of opportunity to network because I think, great leaders just have a great network. And they need to build that fast outside of their internal corporate bubble. So that's something I've been figuring out. And then on top of that, how to make it not just an in person, in a room type of experience, but blend it with a bit of online, offline coaching, team coaching, how to drip feed the right information at the right time. I'm probably on halfway there in terms of figuring it out. But I really feel like, it's something worth doing and worth doing well. It's kind of my black box, but it's when I'm really excited to crack.

Brendan (26:40):

Interesting. And obviously with any business black box, you're going to look at tools for solutions. Have you come across any tools? Under a hundred dollars that have helped you on this journey.

Hiam (26:52):

So my own business under a hundred dollars, I'd say zero has been the best tool.

Brendan (26:56):

Yeah. I use zero too, life saver.

Hiam (26:56):

Yes. Life saver. Absolutely. Yeah, definitely.

Brendan (27:03):

Awesome. Moving into the more abstract questions now. Thank you for all the great value that've provided to the audience so far. So we've got a few more questions before we wrap up. So first question, if you could have a billboard that all business owners would see, could have text, visuals, anything you want, where would you put it and what would it say?

Hiam (27:28):

Oh, wow. That's a really great one. Where would I put it and what would it say? And it could be a billboard, look, I had a internship in times square. And at the window that I had, looked over times square. I think, if there's anywhere to have a billboard, it has to be times square in New York. That's like the billboard-

Brendan (27:49):

Exposure.

Hiam (27:50):

Yeah. In terms of what would it say? Look, a kind of a mantra that I live by, especially when I'm making decisions that seem counterintuitive is you can buy every thing in life except experience. That's something you have to earn. So that's my mantra that I might throw up there on that billboard in the middle of time square.

Brendan (28:12):

Amazing. It's going to help a lot of people. All right Hiam. Thank you so much for coming on today and all the value that you've provided the audience, you can find all of Hiam's resources at metigy.com/podcast. And there is one final question that we like to ask every guest, it's a bit creative. It's a bit abstract again. Are you ready?

Hiam (28:33):

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Brendan (28:34):

So you're on the first flight to Mars with Elon Musk and the first settlers of all the SpaceX Starship Rocket. What business do you start when you land on Mars and how would you promote it to the new Marshians?

Hiam (28:46):

No, just to confirm when you get to Mars, there is no way back, right? Everyone who's-

Brendan (28:52):

One way ticket.

Hiam (28:53):

It's a one way ticket.

Brendan (28:54):

That's up to you.

Hiam (28:54):

I don't know. I believe so. Is that not the deal, I thought people are actually booking their trips or not their trips. They actual, that's it, they're going to Mars, but they can't come back. I don't know. But in terms of what kind of business or something would I set up out there? I just can't do without food and coffee. So it would have to be a Cafe.

Brendan (29:13):

Mars's first cafe.

Hiam (29:14):

Maybe. Maybe Marshians like food and coffee.

Brendan (29:19):

Smashed avocado on Mars.

Hiam (29:20):

Maybe. Who knows. Flat white, strong and equal. Yeah. So maybe that's something that will bring us together with our hosts on Mars. Maybe they'll like our type of food, and maybe they could have their own menu and we could have our own menu and try each other's out. I don't know.

Brendan (29:38):

You're already building that culture on Mars.

Hiam (29:41):

Let's see.

Brendan (29:44):

I love it. So Hiam, I really appreciate your time today. Anything you'd like to say before we wrap up and how can people get in touch?

Hiam (29:50):

Yeah, definitely just follow us at the culture equation. We have social media set up on Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, and drop us any types of topics that you'd like us to focus on. And we will definitely be looking forward to answering those questions and topics in future newsletters, potentially some podcasts.

Brendan (30:12):

Oh, very exciting.

Hiam (30:13):

Of our own.

Brendan (30:13):

Very exciting. I look forward to listening.

Hiam (30:19):

Thank you.

Brendan (30:19):

All right. It's been fun. Thanks for coming in.

Hiam (30:19):

Thanks.

Daren (30:22):

From Metigy, You've just listened to Forward Thinking. Again, I'm Darren and Metigy hopes we helped you find more insights and tips into your business. To find out more about Metigy and get a listener exclusive three month free trial, visit us at metigy.com/podcast. And while you're there, go and check out some more episodes. If you like what you heard, please

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