



The importance of culture as you scale

Canva co-founder and CPO, Cameron Adams, shares his thoughts on the importance of culture and how it is the driving force behind Canva's ability to be a force for good in the world, especially one that is in the grips of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Every assumption we've ever made about running Canva has been challenged in the last couple of months. Running meetings. Setting goals. Product roadmaps. Onboarding newbies. Supporting parents. Even going for coffee.

The world has been upended since COVID-19 first emerged five months ago and it has been an incredible challenge for businesses of all sizes: from corner stores to corporations. Since we took the step of going entirely remote to #stopthespread we have been on a steep learning curve of how to collaborate with 900+ people all around the world who had no idea at the start of 2020 that they'd be working from dinner tables, ironing boards and corner desks for more than three months. (Six months? A year? Who knows?)

The one thing I take solace in – and have taken solace in every time we are met with a challenge at Canva – is the people we have with us on this journey.

Canva's ethos is very strong on its sense of belonging and inclusion – here's a little video we pulled together to showcase all that we stand for at one of the company's quarterly events, the Season Opener.

When I look at how Canvanauts act, how they selflessly prioritize their colleagues and our community, how they swarm around problems, how they think creatively; I am extremely proud.

Within 24 hours of announcing that everyone would be working remotely, teams all across Canva had made it a reality. And not just a functional reality, an enjoyable and productive one. Clarity was given on all the tiny minutiae of working from home – mobile internet allowances, lunch stipends, flexibility for parents juggling at-home kids. Teams adjusted their cadences for video meetings and online collaboration. Our in-house gym went virtual with daily video training sessions. Partnerships were made with mindfulness apps to support our mental health. Our kitchen converted all the produce slated for company lunches into meals that could be shipped to those in need via charities.

And all this was done organically, driven primarily by individuals working at the grassroots and coming up with the ideas and solutions that could make it all viable.

Every person that joins us on the Canva journey has a unique and powerful impact on where we – as an organization – go from here. Needless to say, our strength is in the type of person our culture attracts, who rallies around Canva's mission, and who is empowered to pursue that mission through a multitude of avenues. That well-articulated culture has burned brightly for a while now and is, for me, the ultimate sign of our success. But it wasn't always that way.

Back when we were a small team, eight people all sitting around the same table, I remember reading advice to entrepreneurs about "maintaining culture" and scoffing. We were a tight-knit team, building an amazing product. Culture was the last thing we needed to focus on building. But whether we knew it or not, we were building it anyway.

"When they started out, our co-founders believed that they were creating a great product. Then they realized that they were creating a great company that creates great products. Finally, they realized that it was most important of all to create a culture that enables the creation of a great company that creates great products."

— David Noël, Soundcloud

Creating a culturally focused company from its very inception would be an interesting experiment, however, the genesis of most startups is in solving a problem or building something that you desperately think should exist. Your focus is on that and that alone.

But through the process of making a product or harnessing technology you are intrinsically imbuing your organisation with a culture: the natures of the people that you hire and work with, the decisions you make, the shorthand you use to collaborate, the choices you make in your product and your roadmap... they are all imprinted with your cultural fingerprint. And it's that fingerprint that expands out like the rings of a tree to form your organization as it grows.

Set crazy big goals and make them happen At Canva we never shirk from a challenge, and we take great pride in tackling things in a way that others would be intimidated by. It's the foundation for one of our six values: Set crazy big goals and make them happen. This value is talked about a lot to make sure people understand the process by which we set these big goals and the expectations we have that people will try to use this process in every aspect of their work. But it's also lived a lot by setting crazy big goals ourselves as leaders and then pursuing them with all our heart. The perfect example of this is the way that we went about internationalizing our product.

Canva's six core corporate values.

'Be a force for good' and 'Empower others' - making the world a better place through positive actions, inclusion and diversity.

'Pursue excellence' - maintain a high bar for ourselves and the people we work with. Continuous growth and development. Lead by example.

'Be a good human' - valuing good communication. Being open, honest and constructive: individually, within your team, across the company, and externally.

'Make complex things simple' - always aiming for the most simple, pragmatic and effective solution to any problem. Think of the user.

'Set crazy big goals and make them happen' - set ambitious goals, prioritise, hustle to execute and celebrate success!

In 2015 we had achieved great growth as a design tool, but that growth had been restricted to people who could speak English. Our product was in English, our emails were in English, our templates were in English, even our marketing was all in English. We realized to grow a truly global product and to fulfil our mission – empower the world to design – we needed to move beyond this mono-lingual view of the world and make a product that was truly accessible by everyone in the world.

We did a tiny bit of benchmarking with tech companies that had come before us, like Facebook and Google, and saw that they'd taken almost 10 years to become fully internationalized products. We decided we could do it in two. So we set ourselves the goal of being in 100 languages by the end of 2017.

The cross-team collaboration required to achieve this was mind boggling. Not only did we have to deal with the technical aspects of serving different languages in different parts of the world, we also had to setup a translation pipeline that would automatically do this any time someone wrote a piece of text, get our email engine to do the same for any of our communications, and then start serving Russian design content to Russians and Portuguese design content to Brazilians.

We didn't know how we were going to do it all when we started, but after taking the first few steps we learnt from our stumbles, iterated and adapted along the way.

On December 24, 2017 we published Canva in our 100th language.

Canva has over 100 languages – including five right to left scripts such as Hebrew and Arabic.

An example of the many languages used on the Canva platform.

It was a time for massive celebration. Internally, we designed our own beautiful mural on one of our office walls – with the word 'creativity' in all one hundred languages.

Members of our team each doing their part in creating our very own mural celebrating Canva in over 100 languages!

Putting resources into such a crazy big goal is not only about calculating the return on investment, it's also a huge signal culturally about what we value and what we're striving to achieve. As you grow there's a real balance you need to achieve by showing examples and giving people a deeper understanding of the 'why'. Actions may speak louder than words, but it's important to back culture up with examples and communication, so that people understand expectations, can express them to others that come into your tribe, and also demonstrate them so newcomers see them in effect.

We didn't codify our culture into our six values until about four years into our journey, but since then we've seen how massively valuable it is to have that shared understanding of what everyone at Canva believes in and how that shapes our decisions moving forward.

Our values are at the heart of everything we do. They're the spirit behind every action and intention here at Canva, helping us to create a workplace where everyone can thrive. No matter what someone's role is, where they're based or what their goals are, our values act as a universal guide to help our teams do the best work of their life at Canva.

So much so, we created our very own Culture Book, which highlights how we strive to live by our values, and paves a way for new employees to feel at home within our organization straight away, so they're ready to take on the world with us.

The team developed a Canva Culture Book, primarily for new starters so they know what our values are, and how each member of our team strives to live them daily.

A lot of the Canva culture you'll see talked about in the press revolves around the shiny things – free lunches, a gym, extra-curricular clubs – but it's not until something like COVID-19 hits you begin to see the real culture of an organisation. It's in those moments of crisis and stress, when everyone is reacting reflexively and having to make their own decisions, that you witness a person's – or team's – true colors.

By the end of our first day of remote work, everyone's 'Be a good human' side had come out: Slack channels had sprung up to share WFH information, people were offering cars to move desks and chairs, our coaches had swung into full support mode for anyone experiencing mental stress, and our People team had reached out to ensure the safety of anyone travelling overseas.

We're all team players. We keep our minds open, our intentions kind and our actions respectful. For us, this is what being a good human is all about.

By the end of the second day, everyone was exemplifying how we strive to 'Be a force for good'. We were reaching out to our community, figuring out who was hardest hit and who needed the greatest support. We were scrambling to find the best content for teachers who needed to teach remotely for the first time. We were helping out businesses who couldn't afford to keep their doors open. Our kitchen staff kept busy and started pulling together meals for those in need.

[Side note: you can read more about the initiatives we have in place whilst we're working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic [here!](#)]

Every single person who works within our organization – and the culture they collectively create – becomes part of our story in making a positive impact in the world. So whilst we don't have our shared lunches or our rooftop yoga sessions anymore (and who knows when we'll get them back), after seeing our team swiftly move into WFH mode since the start of March, it's easy to see how the culture we nurture and are so proud of, trumps any of those superficial perks.

Listen to Cameron share his thoughts about the journey of building Canva and where the company, and its culture, is headed from [here](#).

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