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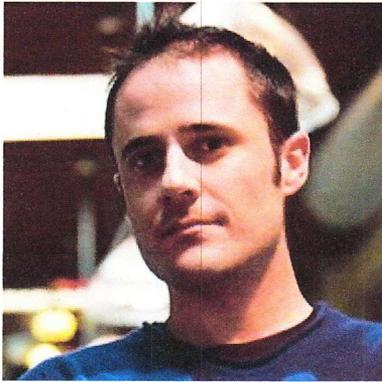
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## Tech Blog

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### Evan Williams on building a company mindfully

February 22, 2013 8:36 pm by April Dembosky



Twitter co-founder Evan Williams is building his current start-up with a completely different business – and spiritual – structure in mind.

The freewheeling, non-hierarchical organisation popular in Silicon Valley technology companies is not the order of the day at Obvious Corporation, the re-launched incubator and web publishing platform Mr Williams founded with comrades Biz Stone and Jason Goldman in the pre-Twitter days.

“People romanticise start-up culture,” he said, speaking at the Wisdom 2.0 Conference in San Francisco on Friday. “People think: Freedom! No job descriptions! Damn with the rules! Actually, it creates tons of anxiety and inefficiency.”

This time around, Williams founded his company on the principles of “holacracy,” a concept he admits is hard to describe, but aims to make the implicit explicit, creating clarity and transparency about who is in charge, who makes what kinds of decisions, and what the process is for making changes.

Holacracy is rooted in mindfulness, says Jonathan Rosenfeld, an organisational psychologist whom Mr Williams has hired to consult with the company in establishing its business culture. For example, he explains, if someone in the company raises a new idea, you might have an immediate reaction that you don’t like it. At Obvious, he is training people to look inside themselves before they react – do you not like the idea because it could truly harm the company, in a data-proven way? If so, speaking up is advised. Or, do you not like the idea simply because it is scary, in which case, objections should be minimized.

“People are really challenged to ask, ‘Am I being aspirational in my decision-making, or fear based?’” Mr Rosenfeld said. Such self-reflection leads to more open dialogue, and thus, theoretically, a more innovative company.

The rhetoric was welcomed at the Wisdom 2.0 conference, where teachers and students of meditation and mindfulness far outnumbered hoodied tech geeks tethered to their laptops.

About 1,700 people gathered this weekend to discuss the role of ancient spiritual teachings in the technology industry, in an effort to bring awareness and thoughtfulness to the fast-paced, highly analytical product development process that has produced so many addictive gadgets and games.

At Obvious, Mr Williams is trying to do this by carefully forming the management principles of the company, but also by providing space for employees to take time away from their computers.

Twice a week, the company offers a free, guided meditation session in the office. It is optional, but the goal is to tap into the findings of various research studies that show that people are less stressed, more creative, and more productive when they take this kind of time away from the daily grind.

“You can’t force people to be mindful at all, as it turns out,” he said, drawing laughter from the audience. “I think you can make it easier to be mindful... If it’s on your calendar, and there’s a room over there to sit in, and there’s someone there to guide you, you’re 10,000 times more likely to do it.”

Mr Williams said he has been thinking about the concepts of mindfulness for a long time, but a more regular practice is a more recent development.

“I grew up in the cornfields of Nebraska,” he said. “There weren’t a lot of Zen Centers around.”

But after the “crazy as crazy gets” years at Twitter, and decades spent “head down, working constantly, computer brain,” he was inspired to do things differently. While the young 20-somethings at Obvious are usually not the first to line up for the office meditation sessions, Mr Rosenfeld said they are learning from an example set by their older co-workers.

At a recent company retreat, meditation and breathing workshops were followed by games of flag football.

Mr Williams said the practice was way too early to quantify any direct impact on the business. For now he is relying on scientific studies and his own experience.

“I evangelise this because, dudes, this makes me smarter and happier and more creative,” he said.

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