URL: https://stvp.stanford.edu/clips/origins-of-the-friction-project

Bob Sutton and Huggy Rao, Stanford professors and authors of "The Friction Project," Share why they wrote their new book. After writing their first book together, "Scaling up Excellence," they heard from people who said they loved the message, but it was difficult and exhausting to get anything done in their companies. Sutton and Rao began exploring this problem.

Transcript

   - I'd love to kick it off with you sharing your origin story 00:00:07,323 of this venture of the Friction Project.. - I love the fact where you described the book as a venture, 00:00:14,880 I would modify it just a little bit.. It was more of an adventure for me.. I mean, truly, it was something we sort of got into without frankly a lot of forethought in that sense because we'd written a book called "Scaling Up Excellence".. How do you spread goodness in an organization? How do you take a venture from the startup scale and scale it up so that it becomes big and better as opposed to being dumb? And as we were presenting the material for, from the "Scaling Up Excellence" book, we discovered that the top echelons of leadership in a company or the senior echelons, they really loved the message.. But as we went lower down, people loved the message, but their love for the message came with a perennial lament.. And the lament was, it's really hard to do anything or get anything done in my company.. I'm going to give two bookends, just to give you a sense of what we encountered.. I remember Bob and I asking an executive, a seemingly innocent question, "Where do you work?" And the guy looks at us with a glint in his eye and he says, "I work in a frustration factory." I'm just like man, how does this guy go to work in the first place? And then there's another young woman whom I can never forget, and she was kind of describing how she poured herself at work, doing busy work and largely inconsequential work.. And she said, "I go home and all I've left are scraps of myself for my family." That was like a blow to the solar plexus I'd say..

   And that's how we said, "Hey, we really need to understand friction land in organizations." - So I would add to that, I think there's 00:02:12,990 also some personal elements, this I'll get to in a second, but our book, our 2014 book was on scaling up excellence.. And then we hang out with folks like Chris Yeh of "Blitzscaling" fame and venture capitalists like Ravi here, their dream is scale baby scale, let's make a unicorn.. And there are various organizations since, like I've been in the Stanford Engineering School for 40 years.. I've seen a lot of startups come and go and I won't mention Google, but let's take Facebook, which actually I worked with them.. But when they had between 200 and 400 people, I wasn't of much help, but I had a lot of fun.. And now they're like kind of a big dumb company in a lot of ways.. And so what happens in the process since we're interested in scaling, is that as organizations get large and complex, it's very hard for them to create places where it's still easy to get things done.. And yes, we're not like, this is really important 'cause there's some people who say, kill the bureaucracy, the bureaucracy must die.. That's not us.. Our perspective is a great book called "Hack Your Bureaucracy"..

   I think that's all our perspective, that as organizations get larger, more complex and older, they do need more process..

They do need more specialization.. They really do need hierarchy, but some are better than others.. So that's sort of the personal part is that leading at scale was something that a lot of organizations, in my case you did more stuff with Salesforce and I did more stuff with Microsoft.. Those are example of organizations where leading at scale is important, leading something big.. And then let's get personal.. Since we're at Stanford University, since I have been here 40 years, things are so much harder to get done here than when I got here.. It's just absolutely unbelievable.. And one of the things that makes it harder, and I think many of you have probably seen the numbers at Stanford, we have, it depends how you calculate about the same number of administrators as we do of students.. It depends how you count..

And of course administrators have to justify their existence.. So what they do is they create things for us, the students and faculty to do and for one another to do, to justify their existence.. And to just give you like kind of a little number, when I first got to the School of Engineering, which now has about 20% more tenured track faculty than it did in 1983, there was only one person in the whole school named Ken Down who was a finance person or a money person.. Now to survive the bureaucracy, everybody needs multiple money finance people just to fight back, just to get stuff done.. And so they create work for one another and for us and I think, I'm not saying that there's too many of them.. I'm saying it's a symptom...