

Jason Touray of Black Unicorn on company culture and how to start it right

What drives entrepreneurs? Money? Respect? Adoration? For whatever reason, when an entrepreneur goes out with their MVP, ensuring its success in the market can take up a lot of their thinking space over, say, having a considered 360-degree strategy regarding their staffers. That's not to say founders don't care, but that laser-focus, and being lean, can make it an added challenge.

Hiring, benefits, career development, culture. If you're working within the field of startups then you're probably no stranger to crudely wrought workplace customs, knowing that whilst you are likely foregoing concrete structure (and boundaries, perhaps), you're probably in the best place to enjoy an exciting career of innovation. No fusty old corp. for this cool cat, buster! And startups are generally understood to be the vanguard of innovation; all great news for society, where it seems daily there are new startups and their propositions out to solve our myriad problems.

Recently I visited Idean's Pi People event, where Glyn Britton, Chief Customer

Officer at Bionic, outlined some of the notable solutions offered by the startup realm. One such example being Beam (covered by us earlier this year), which helps crowdfund training opportunities for those without permanent accommodation. A startup solution to answer the issue of homelessness that the government has yet to resolve. Big up the startups.

And, if startups are providing the frontline solutions, then Black Unicorn are there to help them mitigate their own challenges. Seemingly not a day goes by without a startup being hung out to dry in the media for their cultural deficiencies. Rather than vilify this, Black Unicorn wants to help address the positive change necessary for companies that are otherwise single-minded in their success trajectory. As a guardian of good company culture, Black Unicorn knows you can do both. Maddyness caught up with founder Jason Touray to understand the challenges startups face, and how they can be overcome.

“We’re a startup that co-builds other startups, pushing the conversation forwards in terms of what workplace culture means and how it works. And challenging it first of all. Does it work? We don’t think it does, and we mean to fix it.”

Simple enough, but by no means easy, nor comfortable, even. Jason recognises that there are trickier conversations to be had, but that if startups really want to offer the consistently purposeful and enviable culture that secures and retains great talent, then status quo is the enemy.

‘We work with companies to get them to the right place. By being honest, progressive and moving things in the necessary direction.’ Jason maintains that it’s a constant battle, where workplace culture is tied to culture at large, so it’s non-stop work to ensure the needle only moves forward, and not backwards, ‘getting us closer to where we want to be.’

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things in the necessary direction.”

Depending on your experiences, you might see this as a lofty dream: it can feel like society isn't quite *there* yet on inclusion. Maybe you've a boss whose Axel Arigato trainers don't hide their Victorian mores so well. But how can any company that's starting out, no matter how backward- or forward-thinking, establish a workplace that makes room for a varied team and is empathetic to it? An environment that improves your bottom line. Do you have the time and the focus to really get it right? Jason has a plan.

Black Unicorn project manages the People team touchstones of hiring, acquisition and recruiting. 'We map out the culture journey for companies, so helping them to create their cultural mission statement, keeping it on brand, tracking the process.' By tracking the process, he explains, it's about the ongoing story of any one hire's experience, including off-boarding or 'becoming an alumnus.'

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Following his Law degree, Jason 'dabbled' as a corporate solicitor, before joining the world of startups, including at a recruitment firm, at WeWork (a startup at the time), and at Casper mattresses. The legal and recruitment experience that made Jason so desirable a hire to these companies (and HelloFresh, Hobbs and Glossier, whom he was courting before cementing his desire to start out on his own) is the same USP that he offers now at Black Unicorn: that he 'gets' talent, but not only from a culture perspective. He gets the legal nuts and bolts and can help chart policies that don't get you in trouble with the law.

Trouble with the law is at one end of the scale, but there are also pitfalls for someone emotionally invested in their company, for whom hiring is a growth solution. When it works. 'It can hurt when you're a CEO and you want to make a hire.

“I’m Quentin Tarantino, I’ve written Pulp Fiction. Why wouldn’t you want to be in my film?”

Perhaps the resolution for this, then, is building a wider culture strategy, so your successes aren’t pinned on a Colosseum-like fight with competitors for the single best talent. Steering a true course based on your own principles, and bringing on types of people that want to help you win.

‘Your responsibility is to conceive of and build a brand that serves all your staff. It’s something we need to do as a coalition. You have to work with progressive people to have the right vision and, whilst our hearts are often in the right place, perhaps we need the right people to help us execute on this.’

From the beginning, of course, the HR question is there. If you’re founding a company, then you’re hiring yourself to take on that challenge. ‘The first HR person at every startup is a CEO.’ As CEO you’re not just hiring for yourself, but bringing people together who are themselves trying to find their way in the workplace. ‘The biggest thing I always say to founders which is key (and I’m trying to do this myself as well), is ‘get out of your own way.’ Don’t make it about your own ego.’

It’s true when Jason says that people want to build exciting companies: we all want to be part of something that trips the light fantastic, something full of promise that with good work can make good on that same, or similar, promise. Developing a proposition together.

“Just add the best value and do it in a fair way, and they will come.”

Wherever you are in your career, think about those who have made pains to bolster you on the way. Perhaps there aren’t all that many, perhaps you could be that person to somebody else. ‘A lot of us could have benefited from people who put an arm on our shoulder, and who had a contemporary perspective on what the workplace is like and what personalities there are.’ Some of us are lucky to have mentors, friends, colleagues and bosses with whom we can have constructive conversations to navigate sometimes turbulent office life.

But what if guidance isn't readily available to you? There isn't always someone to encourage your interests, your focus, let alone your career. If you're just starting out, you may be after some (or any) kind of job but it might not be a given that you've thought long and hard about the criteria that means you accept the job: Jason wants to help build a 'coalition' with his clients to ensure that they come out of the right side of this thinking. And to encourage a conversation where people can hold their seniors to account.

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'You need to create a space where people have psychological safety: where they can be their full selves and not be afraid to get creative. As a founder, don't be afraid to get creative, too: build great things that challenge you.'

"It's all well and good, wanting to build a more inclusive workplace, but if you're not prepared to examine and challenge your own attitudes towards inclusion, then it makes it more and more challenging for you to actually make the change that you say you want to make."

'Things are getting more fractured, not necessarily in a bad way, but in terms of what our identity looks like and that plays into culture as well. We're still working to manage an antiquated culture that doesn't serve us in the modern era, and we need to be brave enough to come together and decide what culture will best serve us going forward.'

One of Jason's big recommendations is to adopt a mentality of being of service. 'Your job is to make your team as successful, happy, engaged and enfranchised

as possible. At Black Unicorn, I want us to cultivate a community of people that can feel seen by an increasingly no-bullshit, authentic approach. I want us to be supportive in helping founders and potential founders who don't easily get funding, and who don't easily get access to the resources they need, to be successful in this.' And with this, supporting, too, those looking to find jobs at these value-backed companies, alongside the existing teams.

For all of the insight that Jason and Black Unicorn help companies uncover and for which they then provide constructive direction, though... for all of this bipartisanship, even... he admits he's 'very much someone who's protective of underdogs.' I can't help but feel, though, that what he really means is that he's not bystander to overlords. That, actually, what he's making pains to achieve is a level at which we all contribute our best for the brands that want the best for us in turn. It's a business case, after all, because a happy team will put more effort into your company's growth than they put into polishing up their CV.

If you want to retain or attract staff with a culture to be admired (or if you're the one polishing up that CV) then visit [Black Unicorn](#) to see how they can help.

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