

MoS Episode Transcript – Shishir Mehrotra

[Click here to listen to the full Masters of Scale episode with Shishir Mehrotra.](#)

GEORGE KEMBEL: We took the executives out, we took the red couches out to the parking lot, and we had red couch races. So two people would sit on the couch and two people would push them.

REID HOFFMAN: That's George Kembel, co-founder of the d.school at Stanford University. Couch racing may sound like a stunt from George's student days, but it's actually one of the many rituals he helped develop as a co-founder of the world-famous design school. And those couches were for more than just high-speed hijinks.

KEMBEL: An iconic part of the classroom is red couches on wheels, that you could circle up and have a human debrief, a very human conversation. Because you weren't behind a desk, you were more in a human setting.

HOFFMAN: George and IDEO founder David Kelley set up the d.school in 2003. Its aim: to nurture innovation and creativity across all disciplines, including high-speed furniture face-offs. The d.school's makeshift origins and entrepreneurial spirit were on display right from the start in their first digs, a trailer on the edge of the Stanford campus.

KEMBEL: You can almost think like, at elementary schools, when there's a space shortage, they just throw like a temporary single slung thing. It looks sort of like that, but imagine a lot older.

HOFFMAN: That far-out location gave them the freedom to try far-out things.

KEMBEL: Because it was on the edge of campus it was under the radar. And so not everyone was inspecting whether or not it was being done right, which allowed us to bend and stretch the rules to find new territory about how learning happened and how teaching happened.

HOFFMAN: Among the rituals they developed was their own spin on the graduation ceremony. There was no diploma.

KEMBEL: So imagine a little red pin about the size of a pencil eraser and it's made of silver metal, and inside the embossed red, each one has a symbol.

HOFFMAN: And there was no commencement speech. And no dean to give it.

KEMBEL: Everyone would stand in a circle and we would talk a little bit about what this medal of honor meant. And we pass out the pins but we say, "Don't put them on, hold

them." And you reach in and you grab a pin. We say it's like Harry Potter, like the wand chooses the wizard. You don't have to overly analyze it, you just reach in and you know you're going to get the right one.

And then you hold it until everyone has one. And then, because innovation is such a shared responsibility, we have everyone turn to the person next to them and then they pin each other. So, it's not like some status or authority imbues them with this type of commissioning. It's something that they self commission into.

HOFFMAN: It's just one of the many rituals the d.school established. Re-invented rituals, like the d.school's graduation ceremony, help define an organization's character and create a sense of community for the team. By codifying what the organization values, they also play a larger role than you might think in how companies succeed. That's why I believe you should purposefully design rituals that can evolve with your company. Fail to do this and rituals may emerge that hold you back.

[THEME MUSIC]

HOFFMAN: I'm Reid Hoffman, co-founder of LinkedIn, partner at Greylock, and your host. And I believe you should design rituals that can evolve with your company. Fail to do this and rituals may emerge that hold you back.

In a company, the processes you follow are like rituals. You have specific ways that you meet: all-hands meetings, standup meetings, an annual company picnic. You have specific ways you set goals and measure progress. You might have a favorite bar to go to when it's time to see a colleague off on a new tour of duty.

The right rituals in the right places will help you build your culture, cohere your team, and achieve your goals. Building your own rituals is as important as building your product. But if you aren't intentional about the rituals you create, you may find that rituals spring up on their own — like invasive weeds in a garden left unattended. And those unintended rituals can hold you back.

I wanted to speak to Shishir Mehrotra about this because it's widely known in Silicon Valley that he helped YouTube scale to what it is today. When Shishir joined YouTube in 2008, it had around 350 million visits per month. By the time he left, they had more than a billion. And Shishir helped to drive that growth with new rituals that kept the team focused on that audacious goal.

Shishir then brought his ideas about creating rituals to his new startup, Coda. Coda lets users create a completely new kind of document, with app-like elements. It's a bit like a mash-up of a text document, a spreadsheet, and your iPhone. We'll get to Coda a bit later in the show.

But first let's rewind a bit in Shishir's life. Straight out of MIT, Shishir co-founded Centrata, a cloud-computing startup. Then he joined Microsoft in 2002 and worked on Office, among other things. In 2008, Shishir moved to Google, taking on a role that's a bit of a head-scratcher. He was head of TV at Google. But very soon Shishir was working on Google's new acquisition. It was a deal that raised a lot of eyebrows.

SHISHIR MEHROTRA: YouTube was not obvious at the time. YouTube was, in fact ... many people looked at it as Google's first mistake. They'd just spent \$1.6 billion on a company that was known for grainy videos, big lawsuits, copyright issues, cat videos.

HOFFMAN: It seems hard to believe now. But at the time, the acquisition of YouTube was seen as Google's folly. YouTube had only just launched. And Shishir's move to YouTube was also met with raised eyebrows.

MEHROTRA: Most people thought YouTube's primary competition was a company called MySpace and a company called Flickr, and so the idea of me getting up and comparing YouTube to ESPN and Disney just sounded stupid and crazy.

HOFFMAN: Shishir sounded crazy to some. But he was right.

MEHROTRA: I ended up using this phrase that ended up being my calling card for the next few years, was that online video would do to cable what cable did to broadcast. Broadcast was three channels, cable was 300 channels, and my view was that we're going from three to 300 to three million channels. This is just history repeating itself.

HOFFMAN: To Shishir it was obvious that YouTube had the wind at its back. But that was not necessarily a good thing in his book.

MEHROTRA: When you have a tailwind, a couple of good things happen. You get this amplification effect. So everything you do all of a sudden just seems genius and better than you would have expected. The other thing you get is it covers tons of mistakes. When the wind's at your back, you sort of don't have to hit the inside straight in order to make things work.

HOFFMAN: There's a word for relying on your tailwind: coasting. Coasting: you just idle along doing the things you're doing because you seem to be winning. But meanwhile, your competitors are experimenting with new ways to do things and before you know it, they'll pull ahead. Shishir knew YouTube had to stop relying on that tailwind alone to keep ahead.

MEHROTRA: And once we realized that, hey, this tailwind, the tailwind we have is online video is going to do to cable what cable did to broadcast and here's this trend that we're riding, now we had to take every philosophy and every system and lean into it.

Tailwinds really matter and once you recognize it, you got to reshape your whole organization towards it.

HOFFMAN: However, some of Shishir's team wanted to follow the lead of YouTube's new parent.

MEHROTRA: The simple framing of it was you come to YouTube at the time and you search for something, we would return all the results we could on YouTube and that was that. If we had it, we had it and if we didn't, we didn't.

There was a part of the team that was very focused on, "Hey, we're now owned by Google. We should just give people the right results." "Modern Family" is hosted on abc.com, we should just tell people to go to abc.com.

The marketing and content partnerships team said, "Look, if you keep sending all that traffic off of YouTube, they're never going to come back, and we're never going to get that content on YouTube if we just direct people to it."

HOFFMAN: Shishir and his team took an in-depth look at the new rituals users were creating not just around watching videos, but around search in general, to work out how they should proceed.

MEHROTRA: And one of the observations we had was Google had a competitive property called Google Product Search. It started as a property called Froogle, and Amazon was kicking its butt and every logical explanation said that should never have happened. Google Product Search should obviously have won because it was a superset of Amazon.

It indexed everything on Amazon and the rest of the web. If you were ever searching for our product, why would you ever go to Amazon when you could come to Google Products? Or at least that was the theory, but clearly, even at that time it was obvious Amazon was doing better.

HOFFMAN: Amazon's approach evolved a centuries-old ritual – going to the store to buy goods. Sure, it was an enhanced, online, 21st century experience. But at its heart, it was consistent with a ritual everyone knew and practiced.

In contrast, Google's approach was out of whack with the shopping ritual. It gave people too many choices. It was too comprehensive.

MEHROTRA: Amazon focused on consistent over comprehensive and what did that mean in practice? It meant that when I bought something from Amazon or just when I went to the site, reviews were all structured the same way. I understood how the return

policy worked. I understand how shipping works, and yeah, it didn't have everything. It had a lot of things. It was close enough to having everything, but I would rather have something that I trust and is sort of consistent over something that's comprehensive.

HOFFMAN: Google was beholden to the search ritual. It was, after all, the thing that had made the company wildly successful. But trying to enforce that same ritual at Froogle had held it back. And Shishir believed it would do the same with YouTube.

The YouTube team decided against the search ritual of showing comprehensive search results. And to say it worked is an understatement. YouTube quickly cemented itself as the go-to site for videos – and not just grainy cat videos and copyright infringements. A whole new type of user quickly emerged – users who were making their own content and winning legions of subscribers. Shishir calls them “makers.”

MEHROTRA: Everybody's presumption at the time was the only way that you can build and make interesting content was to live in Hollywood, pay for very large budgets, studios, so on, and that's how you make content. And people really underestimated what this group of people would do.

HOFFMAN: The makers helped create a whole new set of rituals around how interesting, creative content could be made, distributed and discovered. Shishir and his team made sure they supported these rituals.

By 2011, YouTube already felt like they had won – no other video platform (at least in the Western world) could touch them. They were in danger of coasting.

MEHROTRA: We were still scaling really fast. But we were just kind of lost. You're out in front now and you don't quite remember, what are we doing? Why? How do we push ourselves?

HOFFMAN: To keep YouTube out in front, Shishir started to imagine an entirely new way of defining success for the company.

MEHROTRA: I have no idea if this is folklore or not, but I like it. Apparently there was some board meeting at Coca-Cola or somebody said, every single board meeting was, "Oh, we have X percent share versus Pepsi and it's 52-48 or so on." Went back and forth and back and forth like, is this really the game we're in? And somebody said, "Are we just competing for who can own the brown water market?"

HOFFMAN: In this telling, the board members were locked in to the ritual of obsessing over the brown water market share, and trying to get a few points up in the brown water market.

MEHROTRA: One of the board members said, "What if we thought about this differently? What about we thought about our goal as something like percentage of stomach?" And they ended up broadening their view to a whole lineup of drinks and now they make water and they make all these other drinks and so on and reshaped their market.

HOFFMAN: Breaking out of this ritual opened a whole new range of opportunities for Coca-Cola. And sometimes, breaking out of an old ritual that is holding you back is as simple as asking yourself: "Is this the game we're really in?" There's another question that Shishir asks himself constantly, which he took from Britain's Olympic rowing team at the 2000 Olympics.

MEHROTRA: They came up with this mantra, which was they would make every decision based on a single question, which is: Will it make the boat go faster? In every decision. So it was, "Should this person sit in the front of the boat or at the back of boat?" "Well, will it make the boat go faster?" "Should we have Italian for dinner?" "Well, will it make the boat go faster?" "Should we go to this regatta?" "Well, will it make the boat go faster?"

HOFFMAN: It seems like an obvious question to ask: Will this make us go faster? But sometimes we can focus on the wrong thing. Maybe you fixate on the shape of your sail, and end up neglecting the direction of the current. For YouTube, the fixation was the number of video views. But Shishir knew this metric had outlived its usefulness. He wanted to change the ritual of what they measured, and how.

MEHROTRA: I set this goal for the team that in four years we would aim to have a billion hours a day of watch time on YouTube.

HOFFMAN: If you're having trouble visualizing what this means, you're not alone.

MEHROTRA: And like many of your listeners, my team had no idea what an hour watch time was. At that point YouTube was dominated by view counts and that's all people knew was that video was watched a billion times, that's what people understood.

HOFFMAN: When it comes to old established rituals, people often follow them without question. Just like in families and communities, rituals are passed down in companies through the generations. Only rarely do we stop and think: How does this thing we're doing move me closer to my true objective?

It's a common problem. And I love the way it was broken down by one of our previous guests: [Shopify founder Tobi Lütke](#).

TOBIAS LÜTKE: I'm a very strong believer that all companies are part of some kind of a family tree of businesses. If you build a company in a place where a lot of people are

building companies and there's a lot of cross-pollination between people. Intel got started by people from Fairchild Semiconductors and every company influences each other in Silicon Valley.

HOFFMAN: Both Intel and Fairchild Semiconductors are part of Silicon Valley history and lore. But as Tobi points out: they may also be part of your company today. Fairchild introduced an iconic approach to measuring success: OKRs, or objectives and key results. And it stuck.

LÜTKE: Because of this family tree of companies, basically every company in Silicon Valley runs on something that looks like OKRs, or it's a Fairchild Semiconductor DNA. Right? This is a good organizational principle, as a good way to organize. But the problem is, it forces a metric obsession, which blinds people to larger opportunities. It's so easy to do the wrong thing by hyper-optimizing for one metric.

HOFFMAN: I love this idea of a “family tree of companies” – it explains so much of why we mindlessly adopt certain rituals. And why it takes a particular presence of mind to snap out of the spell.

As a leader, it's your job to know which rituals continue to hold meaning, and which should be cast aside. And if you want to establish a new ritual, you need to show exactly why it's important. This is what Shishir did.

MEHROTRA: At the time we were doing a hundred millions hours a day or so in watch time, and I rattled off a few other properties, Google.com was about the same, but it made no sense for Google.com because the goal was get on and off the property. Facebook was roughly double that at the time. But the big stat was television was watched about five and a half billion hours a day. So that was kind of the percentage of the stomach. What is the bigger picture that we're going after? And so we said, "Okay, that's our goal. We're going to get to a billion hours a day of watch time."

HOFFMAN: A billion hours a day. A bold objective that Shishir illustrated was important and inspiring. In fact, it inspired us to practice one of our rituals here at Masters of Scale. Occasionally, in the middle of an episode, we break into song ...

[“A Billion Hours A Day” song]

HOFFMAN: Now the overall goal was set. But Shishir knew that wasn't enough. He had to make sure the new ritual of checking success against this unfamiliar metric mattered to everyone across the YouTube team.

MEHROTRA: We had a bunch of other goals we could have set and so there's a bunch of teams there whose first question would be, "Why does that matter to me? Billion hours a day of watch time. Does that mean just the search and discovery team is all that

matters?" And I said, no, this goal actually reshapes how we think about the property more broadly.

HOFFMAN: But simply saying a goal is important isn't enough. You need to paint a picture of why the goal is important. And how your new strange rituals will get you there. So Shishir tried to project what it would mean to get to that goal of a billion hours a day.

MEHROTRA: It would mean that when YouTube got to that point, we would have about double the traffic of the entire size of the internet at the time. So I looked at my networking team and said, "Hey, this goal is not just for those discovery guys. You got to go rethink everything and rethink how we stream video and so on."

HOFFMAN: This wasn't the only ritual in tech company DNA that Shishir changed. Remember those OKRs – objectives and key results? They had made their way to YouTube as well.

MEHROTRA: For people who aren't familiar, this was built in the Google culture pretty early on, but it came from Intel. John Doerr brought it over as part of his coaching at Google. The basic idea is pretty simple. Every quarter you sit down and say, "These are our goals." At least at Google one of the common techniques was you're supposed to set your goals at the beginning of quarter, grade them at the end.

HOFFMAN: The established ritual was to review your OKRs at the end of every quarter. If you'd hit 70% of them, you were deemed to be on track. On to the next quarter. But there were two things in particular about this long-held tradition that Shishir questioned.

MEHROTRA: The cadence felt artificial. A quarter's a long time, especially fast-moving product. Think about the year's 52 weeks. Thirteen weeks is a pretty long period. Your ability to predict at the beginning of that quarter where you're going to end up is not particularly good.

Then the second part of it is the 70% rule. You say, "I want to aim for 70%." The spirit of that is really good. Stretch your thinking, aim a little bit higher and so on, is really good.

HOFFMAN: Shishir knew they had to let go of both these long-held rituals.

MEHROTRA: In practice what it ended up meaning is, you could set goals that were intentionally padded or unrealistic. In particular, when you had teams collaborating, they could make false commitments to each other.

It's the beginning of January and you say, "Hey, are you going to get this done?" You say, "Well, it's 13 weeks away. Maybe." The incentive is, "Yeah, I'll stick to all my OKRs." Then we'll get to week 12 and say, "I didn't do your thing, but I hit 70% so I feel pretty good about it."

HOFFMAN: It was a clear example of a ritual that on the surface seemed productive. But in fact masked a lot of wasted opportunity.

MEHROTRA: And so, we made two tweaks to it. We basically took that system, moved from a 13-week system to a six- and 26-week system. Every six weeks we did a version of OKRs.

It was only six weeks, and it was meant at 100% commitment. It was meant as, "We really expect you to do these things." Six weeks out is about the timeframe.

HOFFMAN: Note that Shishir and his team didn't throw out the OKR ritual entirely. Instead, they kept what was good about it, but updated it so they could reach their billion-hour target in that four-year timeline. And the six-week review for this ritual wasn't arbitrary.

MEHROTRA: Six weeks was picked mostly because that was the cycle it took to get to the app stores. A dynamic of YouTube that was a little bit different was that, the mobile-centricity of what we were building. In six weeks, you could predict. If I tell you this is going to be done in six weeks and I don't hit it, I screwed up.

HOFFMAN: Notice how Shishir and his team were tying their new ritual into YouTube's biggest area of growth: mobile. With this new ritual in place, the team was setting and achieving more ambitious targets in shorter time frames. And this meant there was more accountability. But they also wanted to make sure they weren't stifled by this new ritual. How to do that? With another ritual that keeps you honest.

MEHROTRA: Every 26 weeks, or twice a year, we would do much bigger planning, and there we would set much loftier goals. "Here's the big things we want to accomplish." But that way you got one period that was 100% commitment, the other period that was, "Go be visionary. Go think about things that are broad and open." And so we had to build new systems to do that and ended up with a very interesting network of spreadsheets to do it.

HOFFMAN: Setting up these rituals let the YouTube team develop a range of tactics focused on achieving that billion hour goal. They made it more likely that longer videos would be promoted in the rankings. They added more clickable links in-videos and autoplay features. They added a personalized landing page keyed to each individual user's interests. They worked more closely with the YouTube creators. And they most famously used AI to suggest videos to users. More users flocked to the site, and so did more content creators – making YouTube what it is today.

And of course, this had some huge downsides. The runaway success, particularly of Youtube's video suggestion algorithm, has also played a part in spreading disturbing and hateful material. It's something Shishir has thought about deeply.

MEHROTRA: So we set this goal, "We're going to get to a billion hours a day." And had this very big positive rallying factor. And everybody feels like that's a big goal. And if you ask anybody at Google in that period and said, "Hey, what are the YouTube guys working on?" They'd probably say, "Oh, they're working on this crazy billion hour thing." And it was good. It was well branded, it was understandable, it was specific. You could make decisions based on it, and so on. But it had an obvious flaw. Is it actually a good thing for people to watch a billion hours a day of YouTube? And we'd ask this question very regularly.

HOFFMAN: It's a question YouTube is still grappling with today. And it's a clear example of how quickly rituals can have unforeseen outcomes. And when that happens, it's time to reassess them.

There were other rituals that Shishir promoted at YouTube, including one I urge all startups to adopt. It was inspired when Shishir visited YouTube's office in Zurich. Typically on such a trip, Shishir would have a parade of staffers present to him. But this time was different.

MEHROTRA: The person that ran that office, this guy Oliver Heckmann, he said, "We're going to do it a little bit differently. What we're going to do is instead of Shishir sits in one room and gets lots of presentations, we're just going to walk around to different desks, and everybody is going to talk about what they're working on at their desk."

And the dynamic was totally different. All of a sudden I show up at an engineer's desk. They have 20 tabs open. "Here's the thing I'm working on. Here's what I've built." Because we're all standing around his desk, me and a bunch of the other leadership, we pay a lot of attention and we get real sense for how the team's working. The team felt much more involved in the process, and honestly it was significantly less prep for either side.

HOFFMAN: Shishir has expanded this dynamic ritual to his board meetings.

MEHROTRA: The idea of a walkabout board meeting I thought was interesting and I wanted to try it, and thankfully I had a board that was – including yourself – who was willing to try these crazy techniques, and it seemed to work pretty well.

HOFFMAN: Well, it's one of the things that I love about learning new things, and I thought that was something that I would then start nudging other startups that I work with, in that direction.

MEHROTRA: Yeah. It requires a dedication to transparency that is very high. I think it leads to significantly better storytelling. You're on show for your own company in addition to the board, and so I find it to be an amazing forcing function for the company to tell the

best possible version of what worked and what didn't work, not necessarily positive, but what's really happening on that topic.

HOFFMAN: These dynamic board meetings accomplish a lot. They make the board feel like part of the team. They connect the team to the board. They make the whole work seem alive, and that you're doing it together. Not just in this isolated discussion, reporting on governance in a board meeting, but in the actual work itself, in the actual development of these new rituals.

[BREAK]

HOFFMAN: Before the break we heard how Shishir reformed the rituals at YouTube, which helped the company smash through that billion hour target in 2016.

Shishir had become fascinated with the process of creating and scaling new rituals at YouTube. But often, new rituals were created and tracked using clunky methods – reams of confusing spreadsheets and bland documents that all too often slowed the new rituals down. This was the problem Shishir wanted to solve with Coda, the company he co-founded with Alex DeNeui in 2014.

MEHROTRA: The core idea of Coda, anyone can make a doc as powerful as an app, is based on this philosophy that most of the applications out there are built as one size fits all, and they end up being one size fits none.

HOFFMAN: There was another problem Shishir wanted to address.

MEHROTRA: Those documents hadn't changed in 40 years. There's a running joke at the company: If Austin Powers popped out of his freezing chamber, he wouldn't know what music to listen to. He wouldn't know what clothes to wear, but he'd know how to work a document, a spreadsheet and a presentation because they're all basically the same as they were in the 1970s.

HOFFMAN: That image – of a freshly defrosted Austin Powers being able to mail merge in Microsoft Office 365 – it haunted Shishir. So he asked himself a question.

MEHROTRA: What if we started from scratch?

HOFFMAN: Answering it led Shishir and Alex to their founding idea.

MEHROTRA: This sentence, what if anyone could make a doc as powerful as an app, clicked. At that point, I just couldn't stop thinking about it. Every other idea seemed small. A few people including yourself nudged me to, "No, no, you should really do this."

HOFFMAN: I remember that conversation.

HOFFMAN: Creating a Word or Google doc is a ritual repeated millions of times a day across the globe. But it's not suited to some modern problems. We've already seen how overhauling your existing rituals can benefit you. But with Coda, people could easily set up their own rituals suited to the precise aims and culture of their organizations.

MEHROTRA: Design your teams, your rituals, your systems. Design them like you design your apps. Think about every application has a set of incentives. It encourages certain behavior, it discourages other behavior. What do you want to encourage or discourage?

HOFFMAN: These are exactly the questions you should ask when you design rituals for your company: What do I want to encourage? What do I want to discourage? But you also need to ask: WHO am I encouraging? And who am I discouraging?

Company rituals can have the unintended consequence of EXCLUDING people. I wanted to understand more about how this happens. And so we reached out to Dr. Akhila Cadet, founder of the diversity consulting firm Change Cadet. And we started a conversation on how rituals can support a diverse organization.

AKHILA CADET: So in order to talk about how diversity, anti-racism works well in the workplace, you have to talk about how it typically does not work well.

HOFFMAN: Akhila helps companies root out rituals that exclude Black, Indigenous, people of color, women, and other underrepresented communities, like people with disabilities. Akhila has plenty of examples of companies with rituals that accidentally exclude.

CADET: And so an example I have of that is a client that I had a few years back, a big tech company. They were willing and ready to work on diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging, and of course this was before the murder of George Floyd. And so I came in and I do what I normally do, which is have a facilitated meeting or workshop with those who were involved leadership, or diversity committee, or a combo of those individuals. And so this particular group served as part of the diversity committee, and all of the heads of HR and people, so all the way up to global. The highest HR person was there.

HOFFMAN: This established company had already built up a set of rituals around their diversity efforts, which they breathlessly listed off to Akhila.

CADET: When they're telling me the things that they were doing and planning on doing, and what they thought was an effort to start or increase diversity in their workplace, they shared how they were doing a million things for Women's History Month. They were having politicians coming in, Olympians, panels, talks, food, meals. A whole month of

activities. And I was like, "That's great. I love that you're supporting women. That's fantastic. So what are you doing for Black History Month?"

HOFFMAN: Their response was unfortunately shocking.

CADET: And the highest level person said, "When's Black History Month?" I said, "Right now. It's February 8." And he looked at me and was like, "Oh, yeah. We don't have time to put anything together." And I said, "You have 20 days to put something together. Whether you have a lunch and learn, or you bring in a speaker. You could also bring in me to talk to your company." He's like, "Yeah, we can't do that."

And I said, "Okay. Well, this is where you're drawing the line for what diversity means for you. So you need to change your diversity strategy to say that all you really want to do is support women, and I'm all for supporting women. I'm a woman myself. But if you are saying that you want to work on diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging for everyone, then you have to do it for everyone. If you don't want to do that, be clear with your message."

HOFFMAN: This company had drawn a line around what diversity meant to them. And this was reinforced by a hollow ritual that paid lip service to the idea. That company had set up a series of processes that had the apparent aim of increasing diversity and awareness. But these processes had become embedded rituals that in fact held the company back from achieving those goals. At times like this, you might need someone like Akhila to show you how your rituals are leading you astray. But it's up to you to change them. And this isn't easy. Especially when it reveals something about yourself that you don't want to see.

CADET: When it comes to the idea of rituals, leaders have to get to the point where they brush their teeth, they put on their deodorant, and they understand their privilege, they're aware of their privilege. So they're actively checking themselves.

This is really hard for white leaders because they think and feel, and are always told that they're right, because of the power they have. Think about the CEOs, think about the VCs. It's a hard shift and a hard dynamic to have. But if they don't get to that place, they're further adding to systemic and institutional racism. So that ritual is brush your teeth, deodorant, aware of privilege. Self-check with privilege.

HOFFMAN: Once you have identified the rituals that are actively harmful, you can tear them apart and put new ones in their place. When it is an area as important as diversity and ending systemic racism, you should look to experts like Dr. Cadet.

And though you want to make sweeping changes, your new rituals can start out small. They will set the tone for how you intend to grow them. And that brings us back to Shishir – and a small ritual he's created to structure Coda meetings – with a special Coda doc.

MEHROTRA: One of the things we do is, inside of every meeting is done in a Coda doc, but there's a section of every Coda doc that's usually two parts. One is a Q&A section where everybody adds questions and then they up-vote each other's questions. There's another part that is what we call sentiment tracker. Where everybody has a space where they add, say we're trying to decide should we launch this feature? It says, everybody puts in one to five stars. I think we should or we shouldn't, and a little comment.

The key is, it's hidden from everybody else. In this meeting everybody does that process. Then we unhide it and we see, here's what everybody thinks. We remove a lot of groupthink out of that process. Then we go through the questions in order. If you think back to the incentives of most teams and meetings is loudest voice wins. In this way, you give a chance for everybody's voice to be heard.

It forces you to talk about the things that are most important. It also gives you a sense of accomplishment. You leave this meeting and you say, "We didn't answer every question, but we answered every question that had at least three up-votes."

HOFFMAN: You're actually really polling the room for the good ideas. Making sure the important subjects you get the wisdom of the team going, and that participation actually is to some degree, encouraged in the right way. Versus the, "I just feel vaguely disconnected and I don't know how to get my voice in here. I don't know if it's welcome." You change all that with the work process and with the tool.

MEHROTRA: That's right.

HOFFMAN: At the start of every meeting they open that document and start filling it out. Everyone knows what to do. But most importantly, everyone knows what they get out of this ritual. Rather than drudgery of the powerpoint presentation, this ritual brings excitement – and results.

For George Kembel, co-founder of Stanford's d.school, meetings are a prime example of places where we can establish more thoughtful rituals.

KEMBEL: How do you honor the human element as much as the technology and business element, and something as simple as a meeting? And we'll have what we call a check-in and a check-out, that's it. And it's not just like the icebreaker, like, well, how was your weekend? It's a little bit more like say anything, we recognize... Anyone comes to a meeting and they're carrying whatever they were carrying before, we don't know, it's like, their father just was diagnosed with cancer, or their kid was sick all night and they didn't get sleep, or their partner just got into graduate school.

It's literally like a minute each, you just say anything, just so you can arrive. And the safer the place you create, if you start to commit to creating a culture of emotional safety, and psychological safety, as some people might call it, then people are able to really put out on the table what's really there, and it honors that. And then, we'll do a check-out at the end of the meeting, we'll leave five minutes where like, okay, just say anything.

And it could be, "I'm excited about going for a swim now that I'm done with my meetings." Or it could be like, "I'm so energized about what we just came up with about implementing." It could be anything.

HOFFMAN: Another ritual that helps meetings along is one George calls "I like, I wish".

KEMBEL: It's almost like scaffolding for a way to give critique, because if you ask people, "What do you think?" Usually, two things happen: either they want to be nice, so they just give positive things that actually doesn't help. They're trying to be careful with the other human, to not be too offensive. So, you just get nice things and you don't really know what doesn't work.

Or they really go straight to the jugular like, "Well, this doesn't work, and that's stupid." And then, all of a sudden you get to the truth, but you can't receive it because it's not human. And so, we found, how do we actually create a safe place where you can get the real feedback? And so, we scaffolded that with a ritual of, I like, I wish.

HOFFMAN: But what about when our rituals – the ones that do work – are disrupted by outside forces? This is something that nearly every company has experienced as part of the Covid pandemic. Many have made the sudden shift to remote working without having the time to establish rituals around this vastly new way of doing things. This is something Shishir has thought about.

MEHROTRA: One of the common things you'll hear is, "If you're distributed then you lose out on water-cooler talk." My view of that is if your company is making major decisions and so on on water cooler talk, it's probably not that good, and lots of lots of bad behaviors can happen out of that. It means that presence and physical location and so on, all that starts to dominate decision-making, which exacerbates things like groupthink. And so the behaviors that you're forced to put in with a distributed team are a lot better.

HOFFMAN: Note that Shishir ISN'T saying that chatting with your co-workers at the water cooler or the coffee maker or in the corridor is a bad thing. Indeed, I'd bet that countless great ideas or breakthroughs have been made during these informal chats. But Shishir is pointing out that we can put rituals on a pedestal. And then use this to convince ourselves that making any change is too risky.

So how does Coda replace that watercooler ritual so as to maximize its good aspects and minimize the bad?

MEHROTRA: Humans need a certain level of mutual trust before they can give everybody the benefit of the doubt, and so you need to find ways to do that. Getting them together is a good way to do it. There's lots of other casual ways you can do it to just encourage people to get to know each other better.

A company we work closely with, called Zapier, has this tool that we've mimicked where they do this matchmaking process where you get a match with someone and you do a coffee chat with them. You just find ways to make sure people form bonds. The other one is it really pushes on over communication.

As an example, one of the things I do, I started doing at YouTube and I still do every Sunday night, I write a mail to the whole team. It's my in my own words summary of how I feel about what happened the previous week and what I think is happening the next week, often full of a little bit of personal take on things. "This thing happened, and I thought this was great, and I really want to celebrate it. This thing didn't," or re-contextualization of things. "Hey, we just had this major event happen. Here's what you should take away from it."

HOFFMAN: It's an example of how you can create rituals that reinforce company culture and identity as you scale.

MEHROTRA: Historical context is lost very quickly, and you just presume we've been there for a long time, everybody must know all these different things. And then the n-plus-first person that comes into the company has no idea about all those things. And I think it's a good example of a thing you should probably be doing even if you're not distributed, but if you are distributed, there's extra reason to do it.

HOFFMAN: Our company's rituals are vital to our success. But they can also keep us locked in the past. Which is why we need to constantly ask ourselves: What rituals are we following that are holding us back? And what new rituals can we create together that will be inclusive, empowering and keep us all accelerating forward?

I'm Reid Hoffman, thank you for listening.