Beyond the Spreadsheet with David Hartmann, CEO

Helena Carmel (00:04)

Picture this, a young man growing up in Germany. He's good with people and with computers. Plus he's a creative thinker. One day at a local festival, he spots an opportunity. People are scrambling for parking, willing to pay a premium. So what does he do? He grabs a vest, stakes out an empty lot, and starts charging for parking on the spot.

I tell you this story to illustrate the kind of ingenuity that comes naturally to today's guest. David Hartman, founder of The SilverLogic, knows how to grow an opportunity. David's come a long way from parking spots, building a custom software empire that's been on the Inc.. 5000 list of America's fastest growing private companies for five years running.

I'm Helena Carmel. And today we'll talk about intentional hiring, growing through the pandemic, and the brilliant reason that no employee will ever ask David for a raise again. But before we officially welcome our guest, there's someone else in the studio today. Sean Lichterman, a regional director here at Capstan, is making his Beyond the Spreadsheet debut. Welcome Sean.

Sean Lichterman (01:27)

Thank you for having me. I appreciate that.

Helena Carmel (01:30)

We are so happy that you're here.

Sean Lichterman (01:34)

Well, yes, thanks for having me, Helena. And as well as thank you, David, for joining our Beyond the Spreadsheets podcast. I'm really excited to be speaking with you, David. For one, we met at the Inc.. 5000 conference, and we'll talk about that a little bit later here. As Helena kind of did a quick synopsis of your background, I was just blown away. That's what blew me away when we met. And I knew I had to have you on this podcast, and we had to get your story out to the audience and the masses. So David, just really, thank you for joining us today.

David Hartmann (02:05)

Yeah, thanks for having me and really great title for a podcast Beyond the Spreadsheet. Love it.

Sean Lichterman (02:11)

Right, right. Well, so let's dive into it a little bit more, right? Let's expound on your background a little further. Did you always know you're going to be an entrepreneur? mean, hearing that story of finding an impromptu parking lot, charging money is quite the story. Did that really kick off your entrepreneurial spirit and drive? Where did all that come from?

David Hartmann (02:34)

Both my mom and dad have companies and so does my younger brother. So I think to some degree it runs a little bit in the family, but I've also just from young age on always looked for opportunities of where is there an opportunity to make money? And as for the parking lot, I did actually get authorization from the lot holder and lot owner and I paid him commission on the parking. I didn't just stake out just a random piece of grass [laughter].

But I've also like I've just always looked -- be it be tutoring through college, be it collecting things, be it doing odds and ends work -- like wherever I saw an opportunity I thought, *Hey, there's something that someone needs that I can do*. I started pretty early somewhere in like eighth grade. So I started making websites and that was I think the very early stages of building software, which then I sooner or later traded in for actually building applications, learned how to do iOS apps and leveled up my game that way. And that was the infancy of the server logic TSL.

Sean Lichterman (03:42)

Wow, you found opportunities and then took that into kind of developing your true passion, right? It sounds like, you know, getting into technology and then, you know, taking that even further now to what you're doing today at The SilverLogic. There was another story, I remember you and I talking, you know, prior to the podcast. And I think this is really going to play into The SilverLogic as well, but. You helped your mother automate a business, And you were a little kid, I think, if I recall that.

David Hartmann (04:12)

Yes. Yeah, I was, was youngish. I think that was one of the key parts that inspired me for doing more and more automation because I saw her every weekend doing a lot of copy and paste between spreadsheets. And I was like, *what are you doing all day? This seems really tedious. Let me see*. And then I took a look, I wrote a Python script, probably took me an hour or two to write the script, which then executed in seconds and did all the day-long work that she was doing. And it was really, it was like from inventory on Amazon and syncing it with local inventory, but very tedious copy and pasting that a little script could do so much smoother and nicer and quicker and free up her time so she can work on other stuff. And I figured, all right, *I'll do this as a favor for my mom, but probably other people see enough value in this to actually pay for it*.

And that turned out to be very true that it's just such a great field -- automation, business automation, to work in, because it's so valuable to everybody involved because we can do things that have a very fast return on investment.

Sometimes, if you build an entirely new product, you need to get that to market, validate the market, find customers and all of that. But for automation, it's often so fast that we'll make a script, we'll make a tool, we'll make an integration and it saves people time and money right away or relatively shortly after. That’s just been really great and rewarding when we built those, those type of tools.

Sean Lichterman (05:48)

I'm sure, yeah, that sounds very rewarding. know, kind of hearing that story, you were in essence, Chat GPT for your mom before even Chat GPT came around, right? Helping her automate her business [laughter].

David Hartmann (06:06)

Yes, yes. now, nowadays, this is a little easier. She could have probably been like, *Hey, ChatGPT here, take this sheet and this sheet, merge them together*. And it would be easier back then. But I was a monkey writing a script [laughter]. It's a great new era for any type of automation because everything can now be so much more accelerated leveraging AI.

Sean Lichterman (06:14)

The key things I heard in there, obviously, you're a full-fledged entrepreneur. And I've worked with many different individuals. And I think the difference between an entrepreneur and wantrepreneur are those who have a vision, who want to help, but then also see the benefit in how to maximize and turn it into something that's profitable.

And I think that's definitely what we see from your early on stories of *I found a problem, I wanted to fix it, I helped my mom with it and then realized, all right, the first one's free, mom, but I'm gonna start charging others on how to make their process more efficient*.

So, let's talk about when you actually now went full scope, created a business, The SilverLogic. Let's talk about the early years developing this in the dorm rooms.

David Hartmann (07:19)

Yeah. So it started during my college time, sophomore, junior year in college. And one of the key pieces there was learning iOS development back in, I mean, this was now 12 and a half years ago when iOS apps were really brand new. And that was one of the key parts that I was able to contribute because now I knew not only how to make websites and web applications, but also apps. And that was a very popular piece 12 and a half years ago. Now still people want apps, but now things have shifted a little bit. Native apps aren't as popular anymore. But there it was really good to have this unique skill that people were looking for.

And where we started the company with websites, then adopted iOS apps and building apps and did a lot of work for startups and later on at some point pivoted that to more business-focused automation because we just saw -- I still love startups, love working with them. They're really creative, awesome solutions -- but we just shifted as a sustainable business. The main part of the business shifted to automation, because that's where we can have that very fast impact on a company to build some tool out that that just makes their company better.

They don't need to find market fit anymore. They have that, but they may be using pieces of paper to do what they're doing, or they might be using a bunch of spreadsheets. That's why I love the title *Beyond the Spreadsheet* [laughter] -- we're going so many times beyond the spreadsheet.

Part of my standard pitch is that I'll obliterate, we obliterate the 27 spreadsheets that rule the company, which is so true. So many people smile when I say that because they know those 27 spreadsheets and be it that it's a couple more or less, but they know there's a set of spreadsheets that really rule the company and make up whatever they do on a day to day because that's what drives everything.

Sean Lichterman (09:02)

Yep, yep, exactly. And when you were in the kind of those early years, advancing from the dorm, did you did you start as The SilverLogic? How did the name come about? What does it mean?

Helena Carmel (09:30)

Yes, what does it mean? We're dying to know!

David Hartmann (09:35)

Yes. We wanted *logic* – it sort of made sense because we're doing software. We're building tools and they're all logical. And then we wanted to put some value attribute there. So we figured, *okay, let's, put some precious metal in front of that. And what, what choices do we have? We've got like bronze, silver, gold, platinum. Bronze seems a little cheap. Platinum a little pretentious, gold cliche. So silver seems pretty nice. So how about silver?*

Sean Lichterman (10:31)

I love it, that's a great story.

David Hartmann (10:34)

You know, possibly people expect more of it, but that's the story and, and later on a PR firm tried to really put some story behind the name. Yeah, because *silver has these pure attributes*. They wrote up a whole little thing. I was like, *You must've been on some good stuff when you wrote that up, right? I'm not adopting that as our story. I'm sticking to my original story.*

Sean Lichterman (11:02)

I think the original story is the best, yeah.

Helena Carmel (11:04)

I you would have been with Patrick Mahomes when he was naming his children. I just read an article about him and it's making me crazy. He named his children Golden, Bronzey, and I forgot what the oldest one's name is. And I'm like, these are not names. And I wish you would have been there to be like, *A little pretentious, Mr. Mahomes* [laughter].

Sean Lichterman (11:31)

Should have went with Silver, Sylvester or something, right? Not as pretentious, but also not as... as cheap. Right. Yep. Well, I appreciate, you know, the humor that you find in your origin story, especially the name, because, you know, sometimes when we see these names of companies and where they're starting from, there's always a story. And I like this one where it's most simple and organic form.

David Hartmann (11:37)

Not as an actual name. Let's use actual names.

Sean Lichterman (11:59)

Let's kind of fast forward, right? So, we talked about real quick, we met at Inc. 5000, right? And you have been there five times and nominated five times. Let's talk about your road to Inc. 5000.

How did you come across it and what things led to keeping you there and continuing to grow?

David Hartmann (12:31)

Yep. So I found out about it from one of our clients. walked in their office and I saw the nice plaques that were there prior three years of joining or being listed on the Inc. 5000. I was like, *Oh, that looks cool. Let me see. Do I qualify and what do need to do?* And then I figured out, *Oh, cool. Yeah, we do qualify. should, we should participate in that*. The first years of TSL were a sort of slower start just because I was still in college.

In the early years I was doing my Master's, first my Bachelor's, then Master's. I was a graduate Teaching Assistant too. So when I wrapped up with that I really felt almost like, *It's vacation to just work and not do all the other things such as teaching and Office hours and all that*.

Helena Carmel (13:15)

Okay, I know I said I was gonna be quiet, but you were a student, you were a freaking TA at the same time and you were building this business simultaneously.

David Hartmann (13:29)

Yes, it was a lot of very sleepless nights and I passed out in class. It was a time that I was really happy when it was over.

Sean Lichterman (13:39)

Where do you get your energy from and can you bottle some of that? Cause I need that in my life.

Helena Carmel (13:39)

Yeah, can we buy it?

David Hartmann (13:44)

You know, people ask me that and the weird magical part is all I drink is water. I have had one cup of coffee in my life. And that was like a tiny espresso shot in Cuba when I was on a coffee plantation with my dad and my brother. And they were like, *No, David, you're in Cuba with us on a coffee plantation, you're drinking one cup and boy, that kept me up for a long time*. I was out on the market, I was in a little plaza at 3 a.m., still on my laptop. I'm like, *This is great I don't know when I'm going to bed, but I'm just awake*... [laughter]

Sean Lichterman (14:21)

So you still have that one cup of coffee just running through you to this day.

Helena Carmel (14:24)

I was just gonna say, *and he never slept again*... [laughter]

David Hartmann (14:28)

Exactly, At some point I was like, alright, we're driving again at like 8am, I'm gonna take some melatonin because otherwise this is not happening.

Sean Lichterman (14:38)

So I appreciate you kind of talking about the getting to the Inc. 5000, how you found it, part of it is growth. So we talked about The SilverLogic. You found an opportunity. You found a way that we can market this to the masses and turn it into a sustainable business. But now when you're part of Inc. 5000, you kind of have to switch gears and now prioritize growth in building, creating a corporate culture, hiring people. Which one was harder?

David Hartmann (14:46)

Yes. Both are hard. But we haven't actually, the marketing to the masses is something that we're working on now, 12 years later. Just now, with our 12th anniversary, we hired for the first time a sales and marketing team, because we've built the business really just on referral. And I've been out there and I go to events and I'm sort of the de facto sales team historically. It was just a lot based on referral because we did great work for clients and they loved whatever we did and then referred us.

And also the relationships that we've had were all founded to be very long-term. So we didn't work to, *let me build you this thing, deliver it to you, it over, goodbye*. But rather, *What can we do to help you grow and thereby as you grow, you might get hungry for more and more software* and more and more automation because most companies, once they taste it, they're like*, yeah, let's automate this thing and let's automate that*. And that's actually been one of the foundational things that allowed us to have this really fast growth necessary to continue making on the Inc. 5000.

Sean Lichterman (16:22)

So, how do you go *control copy paste* and find talent that has the same mindset and drive as you? I feel like that's got to be tough, What do you develop to kind of find those individuals?

David Hartmann (16:33)

So for finding them a big piece that we've realized over time was that referral is a really good friend, not just for getting clients, but also for getting talent. And it really became, I think the last years, it's probably somewhere in the 90, 95 % of new talent that we acquire comes from referrals, if it's not even almost all. And I make for our state of the company once a year, I make a nice visual of a little chart where it shows where everybody the chains of referral.

So in earlier days, we had some number of engineers and then we had someone that had a friend and that friend was a really, really social engineer, very social butterfly engineer, let's call it. And he referred probably somewhere around 15 people to TSL. And that was in a time when a lot of companies were struggling hard, like right around this COVID time, like 2020, 2021, when a lot of companies were struggling to find any talent

And we saw, *all right, cool, these are a lot of talented friends*. So I hired a bunch of them because they're all very talented. And then it continued. So it wasn't just that first stop, but the friend had friends and those friends had more friends and those friends had more friends. And I think the longest chain is like five or six hops now from the original person that we hired, we recruited from somewhere to then the referral chain. It goes like five or six deep, but also branches out because someone may refer another two people or three people.

Now when I when we want to hire, we just post it on our Slack general channel and say, *Hey looking for this in this position* and then the internal machinery goes to work and sees who knows someone that's in that position.

I just had someone yesterday, we needed some like sort of account manager or client management position for some, for one of a prospect we're working on. And do you know, a couple hours later, I had resumes in my inbox. So that's been something that's really powerful because the thing aside from that it's a good source is also that now I have people *vouching* for these folks. *I'm not going to make a referral that's going to look make me look bad sometime later.* So that's been a really nice system to get a lot of people and then we have other fun systems to retain those people in the company.

Helena Carmel (19:14)

Plus, your team knows your culture. They know who will fit in and they know who will work.

Sean Lichterman (19:21)

I think exactly, you kind of touched on both points, right? The referral system's not only just for gaining clients, but also finding great talent. And it's really that word of mouth. Individuals who enjoy working at your company are going to express that to their network, which then ultimately finds you qualified candidates. So I'm sure that saved you a lot of time, invested money, and even headaches for trying to find individuals who are even maybe a cultural fit that maybe have the skill set to work at your company.

So I think that I appreciate you sharing the secret sauce because it's kind of easier said than done I'm sure But to hear that you have those long chains of people five or six deep... Teeing off what Helena said, you know looking at your website, Most companies have an About Us section and you guys have a “Meet the Family” section. To me that speaks volumes about your culture.

So let's talk about that for a quick second. So you've got a great network to find qualified candidates to work with you, but now how do you retain them? How do you keep them happy there? Especially when you've gone through these hard years like COVID, right? And you still made the Inc. 5000 List.

David Hartmann (20:39)

A core piece is our culture and how we just treat everybody, how we work together. And through the referrals, people get a head start in knowing what it is. It's not just that we pitch it, but they already know someone that works there and that can vouch for and says, yep, that is, it's, it's not just some hollow words they say during the interview, but this is the case. This is what day to day looks like. So it makes recruitment a lot easier because they have already someone and sometimes even multiple people because those networks overlap and then they might have three friends that already work at TSL they know there is a really great culture.

In the very early years I had a really type of dreadful conversation where team members would come to me and be like, *Hey David, Could I come to your office? Can I, can I speak to you in your office? Do you have a minute?* The conversation after that, usually not a fun conversation for either party *[laughter]* because there's usually it's one of two topics. And I usually pause at that point because everybody can guess what the two topics are. It's usually either, *Can I have a raise?* or, *I'm resigning to go somewhere else because they offered me more money*.

So as an early founder, this was really discouraging. That was not a fun conversation.

And awkward and neither party really likes that conversation. I mean, I know very few people that are like, *Ooh, I'm excited today. I'm going to ask my boss for a raise*. That's not how those usually go.

So instead I realized, *Look, one day everybody will ask me for a raise. Either that or they will resign to go somewhere else to get more money.*

SInce that is happening naturally at some point, I thought, *Why don't I get ahead of it and define parameters? What makes it worthwhile for me to give that type of give a raise, to promote them, give them more responsibilities?* So I defined what are those value points and came up with this milestone system -- What is something that attributes enough additional value so that the company can afford giving more money to this person?

And that's how our milestone system was born. And it's really transformed that now, instead of being this confrontational piece where it's one side against the other, now I rather have the discussion of, *Right, what are you really passionate about? What do you want to achieve in the next three years? What do you want to learn, level up? Where do you want to go? What skills do you want to acquire? And let's see which of those overlap with what TSL has as a vision and where we're headed as a company.*

And where can we align? We publish every year when we make our vision traction organizer, we also publish as part of the three year picture of that vision, what roles we will be adding to our org chart over time so that people know, *Cool, these are roles I can grow into*. So we don't need to hire someone in three years for that role from the outside, but there might be someone in the company -- and this has happened a number of times -- that may raise their hand and say, *Yeah, I'd love to step it up and go into that role*.

And it was really important to also set up milestones *within* a role because a lot of companies only focus on promoting people from one role to the next. But oftentimes my software engineers, they don't need to necessarily switch roles, especially they don't need to become managers in order to make more money. They just can be better engineers and make more money. Cause that's a very dreadful thing for a lot of engineers is that they have to become a manager and possibly go outside of their realm of competency or preference because not everybody likes it -- some people love managing people. Other people do not. And that's something that was really important for us that we define the system where here are skills you can acquire to be more valuable to the company and thereby make more money, even if you want to remain an individual contributor.

And then aside from that, there are paths of where you can possibly switch areas and change roles and see what you can do and what roles are there in the future. And that's how you can also grow. And that has made for us such a tremendous difference.

And I think our retention rate is somewhere around 96%, which is for any company pretty unheard of, but especially for a tech company, it is crazy to have that high of a retention because but it just, speaks a lot to a lot of alignment that we can work really well together and that there's this alignment of, *What are you passionate about? What do you want to achieve? And what are the company goals? And let's find the alignment so you can achieve your passions while also helping the company grow.*

Helena Carmel (26:15)

I just wanted to make clear to the listener, everything is super transparent. Everything is on a digital platform. People can see in front of them what they literally need to accomplish to, know, quote unquote, level up. So there's no questions. You see where you are, you see where you're headed, right? Like, and it's all merit based. So it's very empowering.

David Hartmann (26:36)

And that was an important piece for me to make it very merit-based and not time-based because a lot of systems are, yeah, stick around for two years and you'll get a raise. Maybe. But I have people who are rock stars, and they will have made it and they will have gotten four raises in the first or second year. And they might be $5,000 raises each, but that still adds up to something really juicy and nice over time.

And because I'm very passionate about this, we also made it available to the public. So you know, for listeners who want to check it out, it's waystones.io. The term milestone was a little overpopulated on Google. So I picked “waystones.” And we published it. You can get access for free to it and try it out, play with it, build those journeys out and pathways of how employees can, can learn and level up.

Sean Lichterman (27:34)

And at a 96 % retention rate, I'd say a lot of people should be flocking towards that. I think it speaks volumes -- rather than waiting for these individuals coming to my office, you know, to have that dreaded conversation of, *I have a raise or I'm going to go somewhere else*.

You said, *Hey, here are the metrics that we can put in front of you that you can start kind of be the purveyor of your own destiny, so to speak, at TSL*. And now you're kind of in charge of your own metrics in hitting those items. Rather than it being subjective, which I think we find in a lot of turnover places, you have these written out objectives for these individuals where they can hit it within their timeframe.

So I think that's fantastic that you took that approach to kind of take out that ambiguity between corporation and employee and said, *Here's how I really want you to thrive and here's the ways that we can do it together.*

Helena Carmel (28:49)

it's a win-win. It's a win for the employee. It's a win for the company. Everybody's doing good, you know? All boats are heading in the same direction. So it's great for everybody. It's transparent. It's motivating. More firms should take this model on. I think it's fantastic.

David Hartmann (29:08)

Yeah. And the win-win is really valuable because it creates such good alignment between what is valuable for the company and what is passionate for the person, the employee. If they can do more of what they're really passionate about, also their work product and their enjoyment, their happiness goes up so much more.

Helena Carmel (29:32)

Morale must be through the roof over there, David. Seriously, I just picture everyone just whistling while they work, you know? Just, tra-la-la, *Monday morning, can't wait to get back to my desk*, you know?

Sean Lichterman (29:37)

Yeah. That's a great environment to have individuals whistling while you work. Let's turn it into the growth side now. Now we're going to focus just quickly on the pandemic. So to give our listeners a little bit of background, so you founded in 2012, became profitable seven years later, and then bam, the whole world kind of comes to a stop, 2020, COVID. But somehow you're able to see past all this noise, the disruption to the market, and you continue to have growth. But what are some secrets on how you grew under pressure, especially when the whole world seems to come to a halt?

David Hartmann (30:32)

Yeah, on in these March days, early March days when I think March 17th is when sort of the world came to a halt. I did have with my leadership team first a brainstorm and sort of war gaming. *What are we going to do now?* And we made different paths and we explored, *what are our options?* And we said, *Okay, and we made our list of if certain things fall apart, what cuts do we need to make? Who would we need to let go?*

But we also said, look, we have some reserves... What are our other options? And I really, we, we waited a lot and we said, look, we, we do have pipeline because I went, luckily I went gangbusters before on, the sales and networking side. So people had seen me everywhere. And once COVID hit and networking was suspended because I'm -- let's be honest, virtual networking is only so good. the, real in-person stuff is just, it's, it's very different. You can't have the side conversations. We wouldn't have met if the Inc event would have been virtual, we wouldn't have like stood at a table outside before the gala together Sean. So those are just things that are unique and only possible but so I went really hard on the networking right before for a while and so for me I was like wow this is very relaxing what am I gonna do all day now...

And as we were making this war game that we said, okay, we have enough pipeline. So for right now, I mean, our options are cut people, cut salaries, meaning decrease people, decrease pay, or we came up with option three of just, all right, we're going to suspend all vacation. Because well, let's be honest, who's gonna travel anywhere? You can't travel anywhere. It's blocked. So you're just gonna sit at home and not work. That's not that valuable. So let's do that. If we can survive with it, we're just suspending all vacation and let's actually get production as high as possible while all of our clients are still in business and while companies have money.

And that actually worked out pretty well for us because as businesses shut down, a lot of business owners had a lot more time to focus on internal processes and improvements so that they could actually have the time to see, *What do I need to do and how do I make this process better?* And that really helped us make it through this COVID time. Businesses that had enough run rate, they could focus now and really focus on *how do we emerge better from this*. And we were a big part of helping them go figure out *What is that better*?

And it obviously had helped a lot that Uncle Sam sponsored a lot of things and there was a lot of liquidity in that people had this money that they didn't really have before. The PPPs that just help people make it through and allowed folks to make investments into improvements to emerge stronger from the pandemic from where they were before.

Sean Lichterman (34:26)

Wow, yeah. it sounds like for most other companies, this was kind of their pivotal moment of let's take a look internally.

I think it's a big moment when you can say we've got some good pipeline we can set back on, but then also what's some of the low hanging fruit that we can potentially cut some expenses to make sure that the company still has cash moving to the business. like you said, right, hit that low-hanging fruit with the vacation, because no one can travel, can't utilize it. But at least people's pay isn't being cut, you don't have to decrease the employees as well.

David Hartmann (35:13)

Yep. And that was it. I think also meant a lot to my team that we managed to carry everybody through the pandemic. And it's just, I rather had us stick together and stick through the tougher times. And I think I saw that in repayment afterwards that we still didn't have much turnover after the pandemic and after unemployment went to all-time lows in the last few years, that people also then like we stick together through the good and the bad times.

Helena Carmel (35:45)

I’m getting a little misty. That's just so nice. It's just so, so nice. Genuinely, really. You know, I interject with one question too. You guys are like a family. You're very, very close. Everybody trusts each other. Everybody refers to everybody. Everyone has each other's backs. But you're also international, right? You've got people like in multiple countries. How do you keep it feeling close? You know, with all those remote hybrid folks?

David Hartmann (36:14)

It helps a lot -- through having Slack similar to Teams, it's, it's just having immediate like chatting with each other makes us feel closer. But also we have a daily standup because we follow scrum throughout the company. It's a project management philosophy or methodology. And because we see everybody, everybody syncs up at 9 a.m. Eastern every morning. So that keeps everybody together. So in their in their distinct teams, and if you go if you're on the website on our About page on the Meet the Family section, we even show, here's the different teams and all those the teams they pick some funny name for themselves like a Bravo, Dune, Groot, Loki, Mars.

And each of those teams syncs up every morning at 9 a.m. And most of them have camera on and see each other. And it makes to just be a lot more connected than if you're just working away on your thing by yourself. And in addition to that, we did manage for our 10 year anniversary, we managed to get everybody together in one place, which was a really special and memorable moment.

Sean Lichterman (37:38)

Did you all meet in South Florida or where was it?

David Hartmann (37:42)

No, we actually flew everybody out to France, rented a castle for nine days and...

Sean Lichterman (37:46)

Wow.

Helena Carmel (37:47)

SHUT UP

David, are you hiring?

David Hartmann (37:51)

We had a very special time there. Had a private chef that cooked for us, did like a vineyard outing, to Paris, did some paintballing competition, but also lots of team building exercises. We introduced Scrum at Scale. We did workshops that were created by our team for each other so that we had workshop sessions that we did in the mornings and then team building in the afternoon So it was a really phenomenal time.

I'm from the sort of genre that I don't like traveling a lot for a few days. So if I'm going to France i'm not doing a 10 hour flight for like a day or two. So I may have gone a little wild by making it nine days, but it was it was a very special time to be all together and it was just great to see everybody in one spot and we had people come from Guatemala, from the US, from Canada, from Brazil, Paraguay, Germany, Poland, Bangladesh, Portugal. So we had this variety of countries all coming together and obviously Portugal that was just a hop skip, like a little quick train ticket

But from further places, it was a lot a lot more complicated and it was a fun time. Big shout out to our operations manager that coordinated all of it with me and to to get just all of that organized but it was a phenomenal event and now the goal is if we hit certain numbers, we'll do it again. Not the same place because we've outgrown that -- we were 60 at the time. Now we're 80 people and there's not enough beds in that castle anymore, so we'll find another spot next.

Helena Carmel (39:37)

Wait, David, I'm sorry. Did you just say castle?

David Hartmann (39:44)

Yes. So for the nine days we rented a castle that we all stayed in. So everybody could sleep in a castle and roam the castle grounds during the day. We did a lot of exercises like under the twin oak tree, we had movie nights in the tunnels of the castle. We did like pizza nights one night in the castle ovens, team building in the Orangerie. It was great to just really use the different spaces. And one of my goals was just to really be together. I had had another retreat with my CEO group not too long before and we were in a hotel and we were so dispersed because all the different rooms were in different places. So we really wanted to have a place where we're all nice and together.

We were looking at a bunch of AirBnBs in Orlando and then one of my team members was jokingly, like, *David, why don't we rent a castle*? And I was like, *That's freaking crazy, but I like it. I like it. Let's look.* [laughter]

And then we looked and for the size we're at, we only found two castles actually that are size-wise big enough that we can fit, you know, 60 beds is a lot of beds. It's a lot of things. But we found two that actually had enough space for all of us. And then we picked one that was nice, relatively close, like two hours away from Paris and had a really wonderful time there.

Sean Lichterman (41:20)

I think I hear a new side venture for corporate retreats gonna come up pretty soon for you. This sounds amazing. And Helena and I are now, we're both gonna RSVP for the 15 year anniversary, wherever it may be in the world. Just know we're ready and available. We'll see you guys wherever that's gonna be. [laughter]

Helena Carmel (41:36)

Wow, that's a hard act to follow. I'm glad we only have another question or two because I need to process this. I did not have *castle in France* on my bingo card for this podcast.

Sean Lichterman (41:59)

I think that is the key, the secret sauce to growing a great company and creating a phenomenal culture. That in itself right there, we can end the podcast. This is all you need to do. Get Waystones and take your team to Paris, a castle, go paintballing and it'll be magnificent. Yep.

Helena Carmel (42:15)

Yeah, reward hard work. Reward hard work with fantastic experiences as a team. It's fabulous.

All right, but what else would you tell an entrepreneur who's listening right now, David? I feel like you left a lot of important tidbits along the way. But if somebody's listening right now and they're like, *My gosh, in 10 years I want to be David Hartman*...

David Hartmann (42:39)

I think a key point -- and I mentor a number of startups through different programs, such as here locally, Tech Runway and the VMT. One key piece I tell a lot of folks is surround yourself with peers because there's a lot of difficult sort of thoughts to go through as a CEO, as a founder, as an entrepreneur that you may not be able to share with your employees. And sometimes not even with your leadership team because it's that that owner position, CEO position is just different. And I found a lot of value in being in my, in my Vistage group. I'm on another CEO round table with GrowFL and that has been in the Edward Love Foundation. And those have been really valuable because oftentimes I treat them pretty much as my own board of advisors sInce we're privately held company and I'm the sole owner.

We get together, meet and I can bring up issues and even though everybody's in different industries, it is really good to see all different ideas and how people treat these type of issues. Just because I'm in technology and someone else might be a financial advisor in construction or in manufacturing, we all have really many similar issues. And that's something that I found incredibly helpful because why figure out all of these things just by myself if there's other folks out there that I can ask for help.

Sean Lichterman (44:22)

Yeah, you kind of strike something there, right? Sometimes being the leader, can be lonely, right? All the weight's going to fall on your shoulders, but you found a network that you can really work within, kind of work out some of the internal issues and problems that you may not be able to stress to your company or employees. So I think that that's also probably good just for your own mindset to get that off, but then also get engaging feedback on whether my decisions are right on track or I'm sure they'll hold you accountable too.

David Hartmann (44:52)

Yep. yeah, they do. We follow up on those issues and just, it's the variety of ideas. And sometimes maybe half of the ideas aren't necessarily a fit, but there's some nugget in there that I always take away from it. I'm like, *Yep, didn't think of that*. And instead of it taking me a lot of trial and error, it's a much better shortcut.

Sean Lichterman (45:14)

Yeah, exactly. Well, we do have a little bit of time just to wrap up here, but you've given a great look into who you are as a person as well as your company TSL and then some of your methodology and how to grow a fantastic company and keep the culture high and alive. I'm sure no one's going to guess this, but you love escape rooms. Something we talked about offline, but

Do you find any similar skill sets between business world and escape rooms?

David Hartmann (45:44)

I would say, yeah, I love problem solving. All sorts of problem solving. Be it human, be it an escape room, be it business. I just, I love sorting things out. So I think escape rooms give me a great place to just get a lot of problems that I can quickly solve and they're all the great thing is they're all solvable. So many problems in business, they might just not be a nice, smooth solution. An escape room, at least they have beautiful solutions. And I've done, I think now probably somewhere in the high 30s, 40s, different escape rooms and in different cities. Whenever I go to different places, like I've done it in DC, in New York, in Vegas but also in Costa Rica and in Frankfurt.

Sean Lichterman (46:34)

What's your best time completion?

David Hartmann (46:37)

I don't usually track those times as much because I often pick like, *What's your hardest room? Let's do that one*.

Helena Carmel (46:45)

Have you ever been stumped is the question. Have you ever not escaped?

David Hartmann (46:51)

I there's been one where I think we didn't, which is so sad because I had such a perfect streak and then we were, we were off by I think a minute and it was just so sad. We were so close.

Helena Carmel (47:01)

Still, one out of forty?

David Hartmann (47:12)

But it's oftentimes it's also my wife and I just do them by ourselves and the the rooms might be intended for like a group of four or five six and there's just the two of us

Helena Carmel (47:19)

My god, she's a genius too! Wow.

David Hartmann (47:25)

So it's been, they're really fun. And I think the correlation it has to business is that, mean, business only, we're presented with lots of fun, or not so fun problems on a constant basis. And for me, it's nice to then use my brain on some puzzles that are very solvable that might have these optimal solutions. yeah, it's a fun hobby.

Sean Lichterman (47:54)

That's phenomenal. So keep the challenges going.

David Hartmann (48:00)

And I think a key piece that I'm realizing as we're talking about is that I do a lot of things that are, that take a lot of attention because in an escape room for an hour, you're very, or I am at least very immersed in what's going on there. So I'm not thinking about all the other problems like *business things or, I need to, you know, resolve this thing, or maybe I have a lawsuit going on or have this client pass through, or I need to close this deal*. All of that is gone for an hour because I'm very focused on this, on whatever puzzles I have front of me and it’s very therapeutic.

Another thing I really recommend highly for entrepreneurs is going on nature trips. So my wife and I, also, we both work in the business and we go on, usually national parks, on a trip once a year, at least where we really disconnect as for one to two and a half weeks of really just being out there in nature, usually intentionally pick a spot where reception is really crappy so that I cut myself off intentionally [laughter].

We called it the “Trees Tour” we went from Yosemite to Sequoia Kings Canyon and Joshua Tree that a whole trip there or another time we went to the Amazonas for a couple days and that was the most off the grid I've ever been because there was not even a anything near a bar I think the closest it was like three hours away was like one bar of reception so but it was a great time to really disconnect and I read *Profit First* during that time while I was there in a hammock and being eaten alive by mosquitoes. It's, it's a great time for reflection.

One of our favorite places has been, the Smoky Mountains, North Carolina area. And we just went again last year and it was great time just for reflection, reading, like listening to audio books while hiking, reading on the in the Airbnb and listening to podcasts and just doing a lot of reflection on what the next steps are and what improvements we can make. I really can recommend because it's such a good time to reconnect for one with your spouse, but also just have time to think about the business without sort of all the day to day noise.

Sean Lichterman (50:32)

Yeah.

Yeah, that's a good point. I appreciate you sharing that with us. think your next corporate event might be Escape from Alcatraz, kind of entices that both escape room, we're out in nature, it's a national park, how do we get back to the mainland? Helena, do you want to take us out?

Helena Carmel (50:38)

Thank you so much for joining us, David. And if our listeners do want to get in touch about career pathing, about custom software, or they just want to talk escape rooms with you, can they get in touch, David?

David Hartmann (51:14)

Yes, for sure. The website is tsl.io. My email address is almost as short. It's dh@tsl.io. And yeah, reach out to us. And on social media, we're at The SilverLogic as our handle. So you can reach out, email us, email me.

Helena Carmel (51:31)

Amazing and I'll never forget it now that I know why it's The SilverLogic. I'll never forget it. We'll put all that info in the show notes to listeners.

David, thank you so much for coming on. Sean, thank you for that insightful interview. When you said that leadership is lonely, it just struck me. I was like, yes, I bet it can be lonely. So full of insight. And David, such a pleasure really to hear about everything that you've accomplished how you've accomplished it, the sensitivity and the human side that you bring to the world of tech. And I mean, the French Castle. I mean, come on... [laughter]

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