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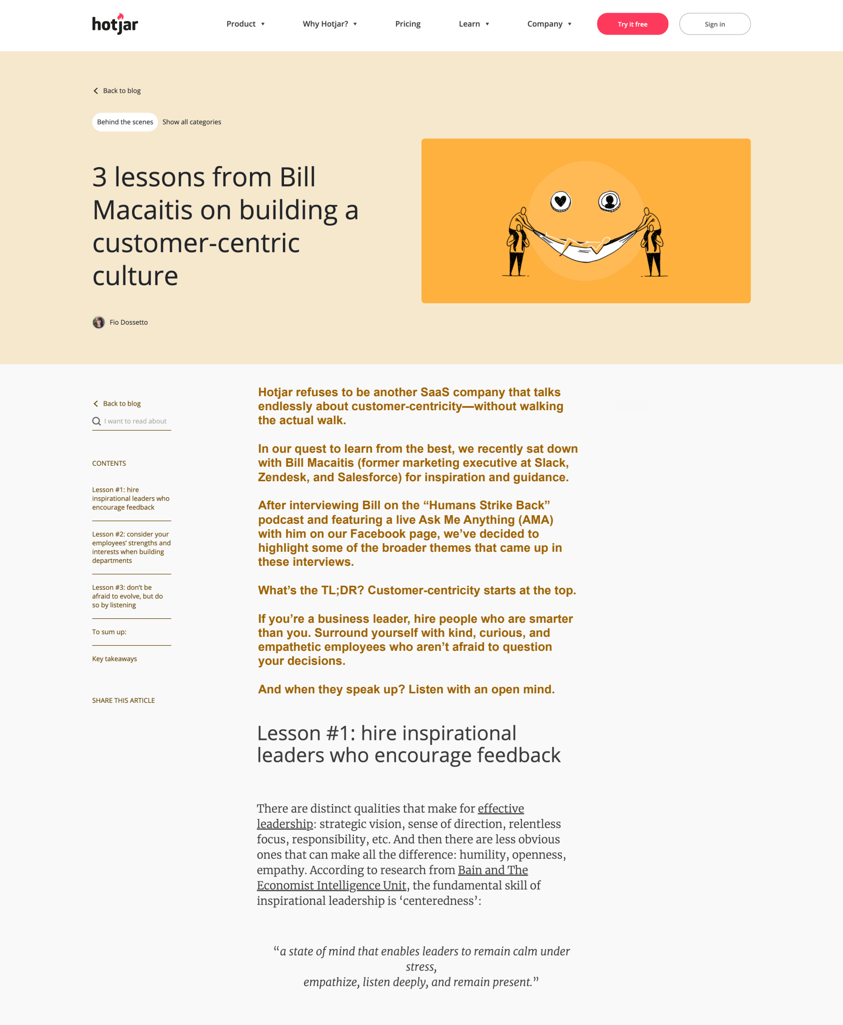

3 lessons from Bill Macaitis on building a customer-centric culture

Fio Dossetto

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Hotjar refuses to be another SaaS company that talks endlessly about customer-centricity—without walking the actual walk.

In our quest to learn from the best, we recently sat down with Bill Macaitis (former marketing executive at Slack, Zendesk, and Salesforce) for inspiration and guidance.

After interviewing Bill on the "Humans Strike Back" podcast and featuring a live Ask Me Anything (AMA) with him on our Facebook page, we've decided to highlight some of the broader themes that came up in these interviews.

What's the TL;DR? Customer-centricity starts at the top.

If you're a business leader, hire people who are smarter than you. Surround yourself with kind, curious, and empathetic employees who aren't afraid to question your decisions.

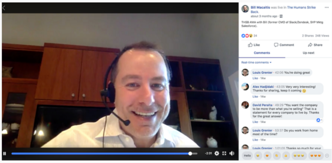
And when they speak up? Listen with an open mind.

Lesson #1: hire inspirational leaders who encourage feedback

There are distinct qualities that make for effective leadership: strategic vision, sense of direction, relentless focus, responsibility, etc. And then there are less obvious ones that can make all the difference: humility, openness, empathy. According to research from Bain and The Economist Intelligence Unit, the fundamental skill of inspirational leadership is 'centeredness':

> *"a state of mind that enables leaders to remain calm under stress,*
> *empathize, listen deeply, and remain present."*

Throughout his AMA session, Bill demonstrated what 'centeredness' looks like when he spoke of how lucky he was to have worked with and led amazing people in his previous companies. But he also made the point that **leadership skills are less something that is given, and more something that can be improved.** So if you're not exactly the Dalai Lama of business management, fear not: Bill recommends the Manager Tools podcast as a first step towards starting to hone your leadership skills.



Bill Macaitis was live in The Humans Strike Back.
about 3 months ago
THSB AMA with Bill (former CMO of Slack/Zendesk, SVP Mktg Salesforce).

Louis Grenier · 42:06 You're doing great

Alex Hadjidaki · 43:05 Very very interesting! Thanks for sharing, keep it coming 😊

David Peralta · 49:29 "You want the company to be more than what you're selling" That is a statement for every company to live by. Thanks for the great answer!

Louis Grenier · 53:37 Do you work from home most of the time?

Louis Grenier · 1:01:06 Thanks so much for your

BILL MACAITIS DURING HIS FACEBOOK AMA WITH HOTJAR

Anyway: because 'centered' leaders are big on empathy and listening deeply, they tend to **facilitate an environment where thoughtful, intelligent feedback can be exchanged freely within teams**—so individuals feel heard and supported, and in turn manage the customer experience with the same level of care and understanding.

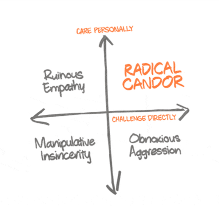
Let us give you a practical example of what this looks like at Hotjar.

Our team is big on feedback, from product-related feedback to team retrospectives to one-on-one growth discussions. During our recent winter retreat in Chamonix, leadership organized a workshop for the entire team on how to give and receive better, more productive, feedback. In preparation, we were asked to read the book Radical Candor, whose techniques are meant to "help you and all the people you work with do the best work of your lives and build the best relationships of your career." Sold!

RADICAL CANDOR
HOW TO BE A GREAT BOSS
WITHOUT LOSING YOUR HUMANITY
"WILL HELP YOU INSPIRE TEAMS TO DO THE BEST WORK OF THEIR LIVES" SHERYL SANDBERG

THE HOTJAR TEAM READS RADICAL CANDOR IN CHAMONIX, JANUARY 2018

The principles behind Radical Candor are relatively straightforward. As humans, we often care *without* challenging, which leads to 'ruinous empathy' and bad ideas, or challenge *without* empathy, which results in 'obnoxious aggression' instead. The worst possible scenario is when we do not challenge people directly and we also don't care about them—that causes 'manipulative insincerity' and lands us straight into trouble. Hopefully, that's not a place you and your team visit often.



CREDIT: RADICALCANDOR.COM

Radical Candor happens when people develop the ability to challenge ideas, concepts, proposals, etc. directly and productively *while* demonstrating personal care for the person they are giving/receiving feedback from. **When you create an internal culture where people truly care for one another, this attitude naturally gets passed onto your customers, too.**

Much like inspirational leadership, Radical Candor and deep, personal care are skills that can be developed over time. Ask anybody at Hotjar, and they'll highly recommend that you give it a try.

Lesson #2: consider your employees' strengths and interests when building departments

Creating a culture based on feedback and care also has an impact on the way your teams and departments are organized.

According to Bill, there is a danger in putting rigid, logical organization charts above an employee's interests and strengths. He suggested thinking of it like a sports metaphor: just as a good basketball coach adjusts their strategy based on the players' strengths, smart business leaders aren't afraid to build a 'funky' org chart if it plays to the strengths the team members.

"It makes your org structure a little wonky," Bill admitted, "[but] I think it's much more important than having people do things they're kind of so-so with."

Plenty of studies out there, including this 2018 one by Harvard Business Review, support such an approach. There is also enough data to show that happy employees make *better* employees, are more successful at problem-solving, and—importantly—**get more done for a company and its customers.**

OUR TEAM IN MALTA, JUNE 2018, DOING WHAT WE LOVE—PROVIDING TOP-NOTCH CUSTOMER SUPPORT!

Once again, being employee-centric naturally enables customer-centricity, even if it means letting your team members move to another department or even a different company. According to Bill, **doing right by your employees isn't just the right thing to do: it's a long-term strategy for success.** In the long run, you'll get better work from them, and more significant innovation, if they love what they do and find it challenging enough.

Lesson #3: don't be afraid to evolve, but do so by listening

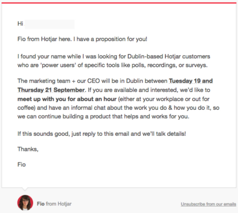
Based on Bill's experience, what made a company like Salesforce successful over the years was its **ability to evolve and stay ahead of the times**—sometimes successfully, as happened during the No Software era, and sometimes with a few hiccups as he discussed during his interview on *The Humans Strike Back.*

As the market changed and competing CRMs rose and fell, Salesforce leaders experimented with different approaches. **Did employees always appreciate these shifting priorities?** No: the constant change to meet new market conditions was both what employees loved and complained about the most. The two camps had equally strong (and mutually exclusive) opinions about the strategy—but **Salesforce kept conducting end-of-year employee surveys (see?, more feedback!)** to make sure everybody had a chance to speak, and built an $8.4 billion company in the process.

How much and how often you evolve will depend on your organization, your market, and your culture. And **that's where your ability to listen to customers and prioritize their needs plays a crucial role.** To know *what* to change, Bill recommended focusing on metrics such as Net Promoter Score® (NPS), looking at customer pain points, and finding answers to questions such as:

- Why are customers frustrated?
- Why are they refusing to recommend certain companies (including yours) to their friends?
- What would win them over?

You can do it through different methods—sending out a survey, conducting phone interviews, even meeting up with your customers in person. For example, this is an email we sent out last year to meet some of our users 'in real life' and discover more about them:



Hi [redacted]

Fio from Hotjar here. I have a proposition for you!

I found your name while I was looking for Dublin-based Hotjar customers who are 'power users' of specific tools like polls, recordings, or surveys.

The marketing team + our CEO will be in Dublin between **Tuesday 19 and Thursday 21 September**. If you are available and interested, we'd like to **meet up with you for about an hour** (either at your workplace or out for coffee) and have an informal chat about the work you do & how you do it, so we can continue building a product that helps and works for you.

If this sounds good, just reply to this email and we'll talk details!

Thanks,

Fio

You'll also find more practical examples of how to talk to your users in this blog post we published recently where Moz Founder Rand Fishkin talks about marketing and customer feedback.

To sum up:

A customer-centric culture is one that puts not just its customers, but all of its people first. Customer centricity begins with your internal customers—treat them right, and they'll go the distance for your clients. Inspire your leadership team and give them the tools to inspire their people, and you can rally them all around a powerful mission. But don't be afraid to reshape that mission as you learn more about your customers and what makes them tick.

OUR TEAM IN MALTA, JUNE 2018

Key takeaways

- The most inspiring leaders have a quality of 'centeredness' that allows them to remain "calm under stress, empathize, listen deeply, and remain present." Remember that leadership is a skill that can be improved over time, and you can be(come) a great leader, too, when you put in the work required
- Encourage Radical Candor across your team. Bonus points for organizing a Radical Candor workshop like we did at Hotjar: it really helped us focus on the dos and don'ts of giving feedback—and it took just half a day!
- Consider your employees' strengths and interests when building your org chart: a happy employee makes for a happy customer
- Make sure everyone understands your company's mission, but don't be afraid to continually evolve and adapt it based on the market and your customers' needs

Further reading

If you enjoyed this post, take a look at Bill's thoughts on how to succeed with customer-centric marketing in a previous blog post inspired by Bill Macaitis' episode on The Humans Strike Back and his AMA.

Net Promoter, Net Promoter System, Net Promoter Score, NPS and the NPS-related emoticons are registered trademarks of Bain & Company, Inc., Fred Reichheld and Satmetrix Systems, Inc.

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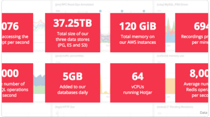
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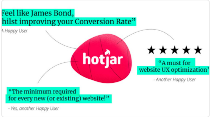
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