

The Space Capital Podcast s01e21 – Space Talent

Justus Kilian with Aaron Zeeb Transcript

We have a really special episode for you. My colleague, Justus Kilian, will be leading the conversation today. Justus is a principal at Space Capital and the brains behind our free career platform, Space Talent. He'll be speaking with Aaron Zeeb, who has an incredible background leading talented teams at Google, SpaceX, and now his own, uh, company, Safire Partners. And he's also an operating partner at Space Capital. Justus and Aaron, over to you.

Justus:

Yeah. Thanks, Chad. Um. Great to be here today. Today we're gonna be really digging into the role that talent plays in successful startups. For decades, companies, like Google, Apple, Microsoft, have been competing for the world's top talent. And the rise of venture backed startups all the around the world have driven the competition to an all-out battle for great hires. Why? I mean, simply put, the talent within an organization turns dreams into reality. The best founders quickly learned that the pathway to success is surrounding themselves with great talent. Um. The battle for top talent now extends beyond just tech, and it touches every major industry looking to innovate. That's why we launched Space Talent, a free career platform that helps all entrepreneurial space companies. Make it easy for talent to find their companies and find a career at the intersection of space and technology. So, we'd encourage you, if you're curious, um, visit Space Talent dot org, and take a look around. But to dig into today's conversation, um, we have Aaron Zeeb here with us today, um, to touch on some of these matters. So, Aaron is an operating at Space Capital. He has more than twenty years in recruiting. He spent the last five years as a partner at Safire Partners, working with executive level searches for venture backed growth companies, with an emphasis on hard tech and, in particular, space systems. Um. I think most relevant to the conversation, uh, today, will be the six years that he spent at SpaceX, helping grow the company from just over three hundred employees to more than forty-three hundred employees. And he also did, uh, a couple tours of duty at Google post their IPO, where they were having massive growth, going from eight thousand to sixteen thousand employees. So, there's a lot to dig into here, and I think a lot for us to learn from Aaron. So, I'm super excited to have him with us today. Aaron, how's it going?

Aaron:

Great. Yeah, thank you for having me. Uh. It's good to reconnect with you guys, you and Chad, both. It's a little bit of a strange time. But, uh, yeah, I'm happy to participate in this, and super excited with what, uh, Space Talent has to offer the industry. So glad to be a part of this.

Justus:

Well, your journey is an incredible one. And I know there's a lot that we can learn from it. So, let's- let's just start out with a quick, easy one and get the ball rolling. So, um, where did your interest in space come from?

Aaron:

Yeah. Uh. Very good question. And, you know, it started early in life. I was fortunate to grow up about thirty minutes outside of Dayton, Ohio. Um. Which, if you're familiar with the area, that's where Wright-Patterson Air Force Museum is at. And my grandfather used to take us there as kids, me and my brother. Probably the Air Force Museum fifty different times as a kid. Um.

Almost a weekly activity, certainly a monthly activity for us. We did the air show every year. They did the local space camps. Um. So, you know, we'd go through the museum all the time. Um. You know, it's kind of the classic story of my grandfather, you know, of the greatest generation. You know, he's ninety-seven-years-old, still around, soon to be ninety-eight-years-old. Grew up during the Great Depression, earned a Purple Heart in the Navy during World War II, uh, during the invasion of the South of France. You know, he'd tell us all sorts of interesting stories growing up, and those stories make a huge impression on you, uh, particularly at the age. Uh. But one of the biggest stories, or the biggest, you know, memories that I have from those times, he had this picture hanging on his, uh, his wall of his office of this guy jumping out, uh, it looked like he was free-falling from space. Um. And I asked him about it. Um. This was before, you know, I can even remember really. But, you know, he told me about this project that this US Air Force was doing back then. When he got out of the service, um, you know, it was kind of during the Cold War, they started doing a lot of high-altitude, um, testing, a lot of high-altitude spy shots. My grandfather got into, uh, that side of the industry. He started setting up complex camera systems. Um. And one of the projects they were doing was called Projects- Project Excelsior. Um. US Air Force wanted to test, because as planes flew higher and flew faster, what the effects on pilots were at that altitude, particularly if they had to eject at that altitude. Um. So, he teamed up with a guy named Captain Joe Kittinger, and they started to do these experiments in, I think, 1959, 1960, uh, where they would send him up in a helium balloon and he would jump out. Uh. It progressively got higher and higher and higher, and eventually he ended up, Captain Joe Kittinger, jumping out at a hundred and three thousand feet. Uh. I think he reached speeds of six hundred miles per hour. Um. But it was literally, you know, my grandfather and this Captain from the Air Force, and a handful of other people that were building this gondola, you know, building the camera systems. You know, like really scrappy, really iterative, and super dangerous. Um. But it was so interesting to hear these stories and then get to see, you know, this actual hardware in the museum thirty miles from where I grew up. Um. Just, you know, it left a huge impression on me to see what these guys were doing, and how much they were really pushing the limits. Um. Just literally the right stuff. These guys were insane.

Justus:

So many of the stories I hear, um, of people getting into space begin with some, you know, whether it was a rocket launch or, um, you know, the vision of what the Apollo missions were able to create. I mean, you were really deeply connected in the early days of that. So, um, exciting to hear that story. So, shifting a little bit now to your career. So, um, I know you did your undergraduate down in Texas. And, you know, you started your career sort of in the early 2000's. And I know at that time you were considering Aerospace Recruiting. Can you tell me a little bit about what the landscape looked like at that time, and how you ended up out in Los Angeles?

Aaron:

Yeah, absolutely. Um. Yeah, I got out. I was fortunate to graduate before the dot.com bust, um, right during the height of the dot.com boom. I actually started working in 1999 before I graduated Dallas. At that time, um, not a huge tech community, but it had a telecom. Which was the underpinnings of the Internet era and huge investment. Um. So yeah, I got out. I was actually a Computer Science Major in college, knew I didn't want to do that long-term, uh, switched to Business, wrapped up. And, you know, I had a couple of mentors at the time that said, you know,

uh, "You should get into technology sales." And so, I knew I wanted to work in technology. I didn't want to be an engineer myself, exactly, but I wanted to do something associated with it. So, I got out and started doing recruiting. Um. And because of being in Dallas, Texas, we started working with a lot of telecom companies. So kind of learning, you know, these hardcore infrastructure projects that were the backbone, you know, of the industry back then. Really laid the foundation for a lot of the application layers that came later. Um. But, you know, the dot-com industry in 2001 just took a huge hit. The entire industry collapsed. All these companies that were hiring like crazy just shut down almost entirely, and it almost happened overnight. Um. The byproduct of that was, you know, here I am in recruiting and none of our clients are really hiring. Um. The industries that started to hire back then were the dot- or the, uh, aerospace industries. So, we pivoted. Um. We started working with, you know, more of the legacy providers, um, you know, Lockheed Martin, Bell Helicopter being, you know, two core clients of ours. So, I was excited to kind of get back into that space. And, you know, I didn't know much about it. I hadn't really been introduced to that space. I was all about technology when I got out. Um. So, you know, we went for our first client visits, and I remember walking through the halls of some of these companies and, you know, some of these were top secret projects. So, you know, legacy buildings with no windows. You know, literally everything was a cubicle but they weren't like the low office cubicles, they were like these ten-foot tall, you can't see other people's computer screens. So, it was just very awkward, and very uninspiring, and very drab. And, you know, I just think most of the people we were placing back then. And this is 2001, 2002 time period, we're still working on mainframe technologies, cobalt programming, uh, Assembly, Fortran, you know, just very legacy technologies, and it just was like, "Alright. This isn't interesting." I knew, at that time, it became very obvious. Like, the industry had started to recover after a couple of years and, you know, the growth was in California, and I knew I had to go west. So, that's when it really kind of hit me. You know, I said, "I've got to come out to California and work for, and associate myself with, these really innovative brands."

Justus:

Yeah. It makes a ton of sense. So, you head out to California, you're looking at what the opportunity set looks like, and you end up at Google. Uh. You know, just this little company. You know, just went public. You know, um, changing- changing the Internet and changing the world. So, um, what brought you to Google, what was your role, and can you tell us, you know, sort of what the environment looked like at that time?

Aaron:

Yeah. Absolutely. So, that's, yeah, it's kind of mid-to-early-2006. Um. I was fortunate, I had a friend of mine, a former coworker, that got a job up in San Francisco, and she referred me over and said they were hiring a ton of people. Um. And I said, "Great. You know, I want to come out there." Uh. At that time, I really, you know, wanted to be in Southern California. I had visited California a few different times. San Francisco was great, um, but I, you know, just felt more of a connection to Southern California. I think part because, you know, it did have a pretty strong aerospace base, and I had, you know, visited here previously and so it had more of a connection with me. But- but yeah, I showed up. At that time, um, you know, SpaceX- or, excuse me, Google was public. And, you know, they had gone public in 2004. So, you know, a tremendous amount of growth. I think it was the year prior, maybe that same year, when they submitted their first application and became, you know, Forbes top company in the world to work for. They had

their free lunches. You know, these awesome amenities. They really defined themselves on the strength of their culture. Um. And it was a great environment to work for. Um. When I joined, they had about eight thousand people in the company. Um. They had just acquired two companies in Southern California, uh, Applied Semantics, which became AdSense, and Picasa, which is now Google Photos. So they had about a seventy-five person team down here, and I joined. And, you know, it was awesome to see from the inside. Um. The strength of their programs, the strength of that brand. Um. I think at that time, we were getting a resume every one point two seconds or something. It was- it was insane. Um. Yeah. It's, uh- It was an awesome part to be- Or an awesome experience to be a part of.

Justus:

So, um, Google, you know, there's a number of, you know, sort of famous HR changes that they made and innovated that have been broadly accepted across sort of the technology landscape. You mentioned, you know, meals. Um. But I think, you know, from a talent management perspective, and how they defined great quality candidates, and sort of the whole process there, you had a front row seat to, sort of, real innovation in, um, people management, recruiting. Um. You know, probably one of the most innovative companies in that time. So, what did it look like behind the scenes?

Aaron:

Yeah. Uh. [laughs] Yeah, I mean, I give them a lot of credit. Um. They invested heavily, Larry and Sergey, and knew how important talent was to the long-term success of an organization. If I've learned anything about twenty years of recruiting, um, you know, working across Google, SpaceX, and now hundreds, if not thousands, of startups over the years that I've seen, um, working at Safire it's, you know, the importance of talent in terms of success. And to attract these folks you gotta really have, you know, the best benefits, the best amenities, but it really comes down to, you know, hiring the best people. The best people want to work with other people that share that same types of interest. You don't want to be all similar, you want diversity of thought and perspective, but, you know, at the end of the day, you want to work with people that are driven in the same- same way and, you know, have the same initiatives that you do. Um. And that's the recruiting machine that Google built. Um. You know, they optimized every inch of it. You had teams of sources, you had, um, obviously, this amazing employer brand externally. You had the process that was refined down to the nth degree. I think six months before I joined they were doing like fourteen interviews per person. Uh. But they were collecting all this data, analyzing this data. And what they realized is after four interviews, you've optimized the decision process. You know exactly if you're answered or asked the right questions, got the answers the right way, documented them appropriately, and gone through a structured format, that that should be enough to make a decision. They did a lot of testing, a lot of optimization, a lot of experimentation. And then they put a very structured process against that. They didn't negotiate offers. You know, here's the best offer, here's what we benchmark again, here's what we feel is fair. Um. The problem with that is, for a recruiter, is, um, it was great to watch, it was really boring to be a part of. Um. You know, what I learned later, um, from Elon, he has a phrase that process becomes a substitute of thinking. Um. I would come in every day, I'd have twenty to thirty new resumes in my inbox. I'd schedule interviews with each of them. I'd go through a set list of twelve questions, and I'd document those questions. I'd set them up for interviews, rinse and repeat, and move those people through. Um. It was great to watch and understand how to

optimize all of that, and it worked incredibly well for them. In two years, we went from eight thousand to sixteen thousand employees, you know, with- with a pretty efficient recruiting team and process. But, you know, I just didn't feel challenged in the day-to-day, uh, exactly. So, you know, that became a struggle for me on some level.

Justus:

So, you decide to leave on of the world's top tech companies to go and join Elon on this crazy journey called SpaceX. You know, they had just three hundred employees, they hadn't launched a rocket yet. I mean, there's so much here. Like, tell me everything. [laughter]

Aaron:

Yeah. You know, I knew I had to leave. Obviously, you know, with that strong of an employer brand, it's a really hard decision to make. It's not, you know, a decision that I made lightly. Um. But I was- I was curious. And, you know, I was fortunate to have somebody from SpaceX reach out to me. Um. And, you know, I'm in a happy situation. [laughs] Even though I wasn't necessarily challenged, you know, my perception of aerospace was Lockheed, Bell Helicopter, you know, Fortrand, cobalt, eighty-foot cubicles, slow-paced, drabby offices, no windows. And, you know, Elon, at that time, you know, he wasn't a household name. This wasn't even a guy, you know, I did some research and, you know, he was the guy that got removed as CEO from Paypal. Um. He wasn't the guy that he is today. Um. Certainly not, you know, the seventh richest man in the world. Um. So I turned them down. And fortunately, the recruiter was smart enough to say or, you know, maybe aggressive enough to say, "No. No. No. This isn't that. I get it. Trust me. Come here, spend twenty minutes. I'll give you a tour. If you're not sold in twenty minutes, you know, I'll let you go." Um. So I said, "Great. You know, I'd love to see some hardware again." And, uh, you know, they were just right down the road, about twenty minutes from the office. Drove down there, met with her, toured the, uh, the factory. And I was- I was hooked. It was exactly like what I envisioned my grandfather telling me about what they were doing. It was small teams of people, super scrappy, super iterative. The factory was right next to the engineering office. Everything fully integrated. And, you know, and I could see immediately, even with that little dose of experience that I got earlier in my career, why they were different. Um. I had no idea that they would be as successful as they are today, but I knew I had to be a part of that. And yeah, I, uh, I fell pretty head over heels, um, in that twenty minute time period.

Justus:

I mean, anybody who's stepped foot on the floor of SpaceX, like you just see a fundamentally different way of solving problems. I mean, it's just- it's mind blowing to, you know, uh, be a part of. So, um...Okay, so you had to, you know, going from a big established organization to a lean startup, um, you know, what was Elon bringing you on to do? What was your, sort of, agreement and, you know, what did you spend the next six years building there?

Aaron:

Yeah. Uh. Well, back in those days, everybody actually interviewed directly with Elon. This is something that Larry and Sergey tried to do for a long time. In fact, you know, one of the things I learned from Google was, you know, how involved founders need to be in the process. And, um, you know, at that scale, Google had Larry reviewing kind of Excel spreadsheets of people, um, massive amounts of data. But Elon, um, was still very hands-on when, would interview

everybody directly. So, I was fortunate to get to sit down with him. Um. And, you know, it's obviously, at that point, I'm geeking out on SpaceX, a little intimidated, you know, having just got the backstory on him, his ambition, and what he was trying to do. But yeah, I got to ask him that same question. Um. You know, I said, "Hey, you know, you're from Northern California, you built this hugely successful company. You know, why are you doing this in Los Angeles?" And his answer was, you know, "LA has the highest concentration of aerospace talent in the world, and some of the best." Um. And I said, "Great. You know, my understanding is you're hiring me from Google to bring people from outside the industry." Uh. And he said, "Yeah. Absolutely." Um. And I, you know, his thinking was so spot on with this, he said, you know, "We have the critical mass of aerospace talent. My goal is not to be, you know, the next big aerospace contractor. We need to diversify. We need to get more people thinking about the space industry that aren't currently thinking about the space industry." He was talking to me, at that point, on some level I felt, um, you know, that was the impression that I had. Um. Nobody's doing anything interesting in this space. If you look at it, and again, this is, kinda, 2008 time period. The best employees were at Google, were at Amazon, starting to be Twitter and Facebook but they were still early stage then too. Um. So, you know, he said, "We have to be able to attract these people." Um. And that's, you know, really what got me interested, and that's what, you know, my edict was. I joined the avionics and software team, and the whole goal was to bring people from Google and, you know, those types of companies into SpaceX, to get them to consider space as a career.

Justus:

I mean, how did you do that? [laughter] What- what tactics did you, you know, deploy that made that possible?

Aaron:

[laughs] Yeah. Um. You know, I- I think a lot of this kind of came from Google. Um. You know, the foundation was, again, the best people want to work on the most interesting projects. Um. But the problem was nobody considered aerospace. You know, it's a long backstory, a lot of describing why SpaceX is different. So, it was kind of an incremental process. You had to find the people that were passionate about hardware that are a little frustrated by those environments. Start with them. Start with the people that can be your advocates and convince them that it was the right thing to do. Um. But, you know, at the end of the day, you had to build a bit of an employer brand. And that's what we realized early on at SpaceX, was, you know, we have to differentiate ourselves on the basis of our mission. This is something that Elon brought. It was hard to do back in 2008, to say, "Hey, we're this small startup company. But, you know, our goal is to make life a multi-planetary, you know, civilization. We want to colonize Mars." It's a pretty audacious thing. You don't want to necessarily lead with that conversation. But the best people are attracted by, you know, really hard challenges. And, you know, that's what we really tried to set up. That's what we tried to enforce. And, you know, that's what incrementally worked the best. Um. And then, you know, more broadly, we had to kind of really dissect. Elon's philosophy was, again, the best people worked on the best projects at the best companies. And more importantly, they were the people leading those projects, really the people consistently promoted. So, we had to go out and find those projects across all industries, find those people, and really hone in on them and crafting that message. So that's what we did.

Justus:

Well, we couldn't agree with that reality more. And that really aligns with the way, uh, that we've set up Space Talent in the way that we, um, you know, believe the future success of, sort of, entrepreneurial space will take shape. We need more people with incredibly diverse skills that are working on the hardest problems coming in, taking in key roles in leadership, and really taking, uh, entrepreneurial space to the next level. So, you've done it. It's really great to hear that, uh, you know, it was possible, and that Elon, uh, you know, set that vision and sort of laid a foundation for the rest of us. So immediately following SpaceX, then you decided to spin out, with your own firm, Safire Partners and become an entrepreneur. What was that like?

Aaron:

Yeah. You know, it's kind of, I think every five or six years of my career, I've tried to take a step back, and kind of look at where things are going, and reevaluate. At that point, you know, I was lucky to catch Google during a period of incredible growth. You know, it was incredibly, I would call myself, lucky to sort of stumble into SpaceX at that time, and realize like, "Hey, you know, the landscape is changing. There's some really interesting projects." And, you know, as great as Google was, you know, is ad tech really, you know, the thing that's gonna get me out of bed in the morning? But it felt like, at the same time, catching lightning in a bottle. You know, catching SpaceX and Google was probably rare. And furthermore, like, I felt like I could offer something to these earlier stage growth companies. Help them, you know, build a foundation of talent. Because that's, again, the most important thing towards building a successful organization. And I wanted to see, you know, what were the commonalities across these companies? What did each entrepreneur bring? Was there common modes of success and common modes of failure? So, um, yeah, I partnered up with my business partner, Todd Gitlin. Um. He had started Safire, great firm in Southern California, but was really looking to grow. Um. Focused on executive recruiting within venture backed startups. So, you know, we did early stage stuff, and the early day seed and the Series A. You know, it's a little challenging at those stages. A lot of times you've got first-time founders, you're really educating them. We really spent a lot of time kind of helping them think through, you know, how to hire the right, you know, founding team. How to, you know, those first ten engineers lay the foundation of these companies. Um. So, to do that, at scale now, cause we've across, you know, hundreds of companies. You know, our core focus markets are Southern California and New York, Denver, Chicago, Atlanta, Austin, Silicon Valley, Seattle, um, so just to- to touch across all the core markets across a variety of spaces at the earlier stage, and just kind of see things at scale. And at those- level of repetition has just been incredibly enlightening. I've really enjoyed it.

Justus:

And you've continued to sort of build an expertise in, you know, hard tech and, you know, space systems. So, are there any examples of fun, exciting projects that you continue to see innovation that, you know, the industry is still, you know, is the innovation still happening?

Aaron:

Yeah, absolutely. You know, I think if you step back - and this is hard to do early in your career - just kind of look at things at a macro level. You're focused on two years, you're at a fast-moving startup environment, nobody's thinking beyond six months. But, you know, really reflecting back at the early stages of my career, you know, Dallas, Texas, the telecom market, you know, you're

laying the pipes in the foundation for the Internet Age. Um. Then, it kind of moved to the applications layer, then it moved to, you know, now the cloud. Um. I really see the next evolution of the technology market being, you know, hard tech being space systems. You know, I think it's interesting to kind of see some level of saturation over the last few years. A lot of on demand companies, a lot of d-to-c companies. I think what we're seeing in the venture communities is a greater emphasis on, you know, health tech, a greater emphasis on space tech. And the implications of these are far greater for society, but all the things that preceded it were necessary for us to get here. Um. Looking at some of these projects that have, you know, EV to autonomous cars, autonomous planes, point-to-point transportation. You know, all of this stuff, transfer to renewable energy sources. You know, greater economies of scale in terms of, uh, the efficiency of our healthcare system, the identification and treatment of diseases. These are all going to be hugely impactful. So, you know, and again, working at SpaceX, you know, a product launch there versus any other place, you know, watching real hardware is something more tangible. It's something like that's just special to be a part of. So, I've always gravitated towards those more hardware-based projects, and those hard tech things that are really going to be, in my opinion, the next evolution of this economy, of innovation in the world.

Justus:

What an incredibly rich story. Thanks for sharing that. So, I'd like to circle back on a few sort of points that you made that really stood out. You know, first, starting with Google. You mentioned that the company had this ability to really understand the difference between good and great, and you had sort of a front row seat to that. You know, sort of being behind the scenes. Are there any insights that you can share with us to help us better understand that?

Aaron:

Yeah. Absolutely. You know, I don't mean to sound critical of their process, I actually think Google has an amazing, um, you know, talent attraction process. And you gotta look at the ten years of their average employees in this market, it's, you know, it's reflective of what they've been able to build. But for me, again, the learning was the opportunity to really... As a recruiter, you're often removed from, you know, the decision-making process, how that conversation goes. At Google, they had these things called hiring committee. And before anyone got hired, the committee, which was comprised of some of the hirers, some of the best engineers. And the recruiting team would get to sit down and collectively, kind of, review the applicants. Where do they go? You know, what was their career like? What's some of the personality, background, and how'd they do on the interview? You know, at that time, Google was heavily focused on academics, pedigree. I think they have transitioned off of that a lot, but it was interesting to be in those- those meetings, be a fly on the wall, hear how engineers were talking about what's a good answer, was that a fair question, can it be asked better or was that actually, you know, interviewer might rated that as a poor answer but it's actually- might have actually been a great answer to a question. So, just the rigor that they put in that process, the focus on data, and repeatability, and how to improve that process. You know, contrasting that with SpaceX I think is interesting. Elon was really less concerned about academic pedigree. You know, his major metric that he evaluated everyone against was, "I need to see evidence of exceptional ability." And that can come in all forms. That can come in where you went to school and how you did at school, but, you know, that's a small piece of it. More than likely, it came from, how'd you get hands on experience? How did you apply that experience? Was that self-initiated? You know,

what were the outcomes of these things? So, you know, it was interesting to see kind of how they had the same qualities, but how they went about, you know, Google and SpaceX, evaluating those - at least at that time - slightly differently.

Justus:

That's really interesting to hear. How do you get at this idea of just, you know, really differentiated or great, you know, people? Two different approaches, both have been very successful at that. So, I mean, Elon has, you know, been incredibly successful at building a brand, um, with both SpaceX and Tesla. Um. He's built incredibly great teams, scaled those teams up. How do you think he's been able to consistently inspire and retain great talent?

Aaron:

Yeah, it's the common thread that, you know, all- all talented people I think, you know, the best people in the world not only want to be challenged, they need to be challenged. Like, they just don't do good at treading water. They, you know, need people to really push them. And, you know, I think there are very few entrepreneurs on the planet who will push you as hard as Elon will push you. But also, his thinking, in a way, that is two to three steps ahead of everyone else, um, which I think is also important. You know, it's the definition of a leader. How do you inspire? How do you create an environment where these people could be successful? And Elon, you know, it's his superpower on some level. He thinks big, sees the problem, breaks things down in very- in a first principle, systematic process, and then creates a vision against that and challenges those people to deliver against those project goals and deliverables in ways, you know, that they have probably never challenged. But it also gives them environment, removes the bureaucracy, um, to be successful. And, you know, that's the main sort of ingredients in that soup to attract and retain those people. It's not for everyone. And, you know, I remember the early days of SpaceX, we had a lot of people from traditional aerospace companies at that time, and, you know, they were- they were used to getting every other Friday off and they weren't used to working sixty or eighty hours a week. And, you know, at that time, we thought things would calm down eventually. We always, there was a saying, like, "Just wait. Eighteen more months. Once we Falcon 1 to orbit. Once we Falcon 9 to orbit. Once we get Dragon." You know, everything became at this next milestone things will return to normal. Eventually we changed that message cause, you know, the reality was, you know, we want to do something that's incredibly hard, but also incredibly rewarding. And that's not for everyone, and that's okay. So, the message became, you know, SpaceX - and this is something that Elon coined and something we used in our recruiting pitches - is SpaceX is the Special Forces. You know, we do the job that others think are impossible. We operate in small teams; we give you a lot of responsibility. We iterate and move quickly. And we're gonna constantly challenge you, but we're gonna do some hugely impactful things. And once we changed that message, the entire culture of the company shifted. The people that were used to kind of the old way of doing things, kind of self-selected out. And, again, totally fine. But the people that were there committed to that mission. You know, were a hundred percent committed. They are people, you know, that have worked for Elon across SpaceX and Tesla and others for a long time. And been rewarded, you know, in ways, you know, financially and, just in terms of their career and what they've been able to accomplish. And that to me is, you know, the most important thing. You know, again, this- this whole conversation started around my grandfather and the stories he used to tell me. And, you know, that's what I reflect upon is life is short. And if you're gonna do something, work on something

that's impactful. You know, work on something that you can sit down and tell your grandkids about. Something that you still get excited about. My grandfather talks about nothing other than, you know, the projects that he used to work on, you know, back in the 50's and 60's. These are the things that he reflects on the most. And, you know, I think that's important. We all work fifty or sixty or eighty hours a week, you know, you might as well do something that's important, and something you can be proud of to talk about later in life.

Justus:

I mean, what great insights. I'm inspired. That's certainly what brings me to this work. Is there anything else that you wanted to cover we might have missed?

Aaron:

You know, if I had any- any kind of thoughts or take away for the audience, it's just that last little bit. It's, you know, look at the space industry, look at where the industry is going. And those are the things, you know, where you want to associate your career with. You know, attach yourself to those people and those projects, and, you know, the rest is easy from there as long as you work hard. You know, but you've got to seek out the right opportunities, and you've gotta be ahead of where the industry is going. And that to me is, you know, the space layer, the infrastructure, the applications of these systems. And, you know, there's some other adjacent industries that I think are gonna make a big impact on the future of humanity as well. But, uh, yeah, that's- that's really my message here, and why I'm, you know, happy to partner with you guys at Space Capital.

Justus:

Well, every- every time we work together, I learn something new. So, uh, really appreciate your time. How can listeners learn more about Safire Partners?

Aaron:

Yeah. The best way is Safire - and that's spelled S-A-F-I-R-E - Partners dot com. We keep a pretty low presence. I mean, most of what we do is by reputation. But again, you know, the emphasis is on helping venture backed growth stage companies build their executive teams, lay the right foundation, and build a successful organization.

Justus:

Great. Well, on this show, we like to say there's been a better time to get involved in space. Can you give me your personal perspective on that, and what areas, you know, you think would be most exciting?

Aaron:

Well, you see a lot of launch companies these days. And, you know, I think launch is the sexy thing, you know, at the end of the day though these should be the UPS and Fed Ex trucks of the industry. To me, it's the applications layer. To me, it's the infrastructure that's gonna provide things like global Internet. The data, the intelligence of satellite systems, sensor technology, um, it's really the applications layer of these technologies. And that's where I would focus my career. If I were starting from scratch, these are the types of companies that I think I would, you know, gravitate towards, and the types of companies I still want to work with most here.

Justus:

Aaron, so great to have you. Thank you for coming on the show and being such a valuable partner.

Aaron:

Yeah. I appreciate it. Thanks, so much for having me. And, uh, yeah, happy to be a resource any time.