

Woolly thinker teaches giants of Silicon Valley

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World



Brunello Cucinelli is working to restore the hilltop Umbrian village of Solomeo

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Italy
Tom Kington Rome

The world's richest man and a group of his fellow Silicon Valley technology billionaires have made an unlikely pilgrimage to a remote Italian village to glean some tips on management.

Jeff Bezos, the founder and chief executive of Amazon, has spent three days on a hilltop in the centre of Italy seeking inspiration from a cashmere entrepreneur who gives his staff long lunches, tells them to stop working at 5.30pm and provides theatrical performances for them.

Mr Bezos, whose company has been criticised for the long hours staff endure at its warehouses, became "emotional" while visiting Brunello



Cucinelli, known as a "humanist capitalist". Mr Cucinelli, 65, said that Mr Bezos, 55, wanted to learn about his relationship with his staff. "After touring my factory, he said, 'This is food for thought.'"

Mr Bezos was accompanied by Reid Hoffman, the co-founder of the LinkedIn website, Drew Houston, the chief executive of Dropbox, and Dick Costolo, the former chief executive of Twitter.

The visitors abandoned their phones for three days while touring the village of Solomeo in Perugia, Umbria. They learnt how Mr Cucinelli has achieved sales of €500 million a year while rebuilding the ancient village and offering his staff above-average wages.



Brunello Cucinelli says that if you can see the sky in an office, things are better. Workers at Amazon's warehouses, run by Jeff Bezos, left, would like the chance

subsidised three-course lunches, a theatre and a library packed with philosophical works. Cucinelli jackets, which cost thousands of pounds, have become a status symbol in Silicon Valley and a favourite of Mr Bezos.

Mr Cucinelli warned the high-powered delegation that long hours at work mean "the soul cannot rest". He explained that in any office "if you can see the sky, things are better".

That is a different world to the Amazon warehouses, where some of the more than 600,000 staff have complained about their tight targets.

Mr Cucinelli said: "I also talked about 'the right profit', that balance between profit and giving, which I learnt about when my father, a farmer, gave his first bale of hay of the year to the poor."

He described his guests as "good people who made millions quickly". He added: "They have done something bigger than themselves and it has escaped their control. We must govern the internet because it is stealing our souls."

Mr Cucinelli recalled first meeting Mr Bezos over lunch during a visit to America a year ago.

"We talked for two hours about spirituality, the dignity of work and projects for humanity," he said. "I said if I come back in 500 years what will the Michelangelos and Leonardos [of Silicon Valley] have left behind?"

Jeff said, "I want to work on returning to the moon." I said, "OK, but we will still be on Earth for a few millennia and it was here that Pericles built the Parthenon and the Egyptians built the pyramids."

Mr Cucinelli said that he took a stroll in Solomeo with Mr Bezos, and the Amazon boss was touched when a fruit vendor approached and handed them some apricots to try, free of charge.

He added: "I have busts of emperors including Hadrian, who said those who build libraries are building granaries for life. I gave Jeff the bust to take home as a gift."

Even in the hills of Solomeo, however, it was impossible to escape a little digital manipulation.

A spokeswoman said that two women guests who missed the group photo were later photoshopped in at their request.

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