



Stanford eCorner

Forming the Founding Team and Seizing the Opportunity

Gajus Worthington, *Fluidigm*

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Gajus Worthington, co-founder of Fluidigm, talks about how the three members of the founding team of Fluidigm met in Stanford Physics professor Doug Osheroff's lab. Though the men went in separate directions after college, the bond that had formed between them remained. When one of them approached the two others with a business proposition about ten years later based on his research at Caltech, they joined him, and Fluidigm was formed.



Transcript

Gajus Worthington: Thank you. So, it's really an honor to be here. Thank you very much for having me back. I will, certainly, endeavor to make it worth your while. On the subject of being here ten years ago. Just a couple of weeks back, about a month ago. Somebody showed up at Fluidigm, who I immediately recognized, somebody from my dorm. I, actually, lived in Potter when I was a junior. To me that this person has just been hired in Fluidigm. And so, I walk up this person like, "Hey, Jeff! How are you doing? It's really great to see you." And he stared at me blankly like 'blink, blink'.

Like, "Don't you remember me? Gajus, I was in your dorm." "Sorry, I don't remember you at all." So, that may be the theme here, with the title like, "Thought Leaders: I'm unfortunately, miscast. I'm nobody's idea of a thought leader." But I do know a thing or two about taking action. I do know a thing or two about leadership. And that's what I'll be focusing most of my talk about. Also, I want to give you a sense for the history of Fluidigm. Because that's really the story of coming from a really leading-edge technology. Something that was fresh and raw out of a leading laboratory, Caltech. And making a real company out of it. So, it began, actually, here at Stanford. But not in the way you might imagine.

Steve Quake and I--feature here, some years later--were classmates in Doug Osheroff's mid-level physics laboratory course. What happened was that, Doug said, "Well, this here is going to be a new experiment. Nobody's ever done it before but it should be interesting." And independently, Steve Quake and another gentleman named Neil Schwitz; the three of us gravitated to this experiment. And as a result of pounding our heads against this for about 10 weeks--unsuccessfully, I might add, we became really good friends. And what's more, we established a bond of respect. It was clear from the beginning-- a minor action to Steve Quake, that he was one of these people who is really destined for greatness. And I'm sure you've met people like that here at Stanford. There are a few of them that you can just tell from the beginning, their abound for great things. And Neil Schwitz,--we'll talk about later-- was just somebody who would not quit. And the three of us forge the bond which is, really, the reason why Fluidigm got started.

That was way back in about in 1989. About 10 years later, I got a very auspicious email from Steve Quake. I had been on my self-imposed training program to figure out how to build a company because-- though, I don't like James Joyce, I'll borrow from him. I had an epiphany while I was here in Stanford as an undergrad. I knew, when I was 19, that I wanted to build a company. But I can't tell you why that is. I grew up-- a kid in Alaska, a really remote place. And I have no business, knowing

that, but I knew it. And so, for 10 years, I tried to figure out how to make that real. And about the time that I thought it was time to do it, Steve sent me this email.

And said, 'read at your own risk', basically. I read it. And it was his first publication that come of Caltech. It was something fundamental. And immediately, I was both hooked and really disappointed because Steve is in Caltech at Pasadena and I, coming from Alaska, was bound and determined never to move any far south than I have already. So, I called Steve up. And I said, "Steve, this looks great. But I can not move to LA. I can not do this with you." And he said, "You idiot. Put the company where ever you want but let's do it." It didn't take me long to decide to do this.

Because I believe so strongly in Steve, even though the technology was far from working. Far, far, far from working. And also during that time, you may remember or you may have read, that was the height of the '.com' era. Anything that was getting funded had a .com after it. Biotech was, absolutely, in a toilet. Anything that smelled like biotech was-- you know, it was old school.