



Stanford eCorner

Differences between Student Life and Professional Life

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Dominic Orr, CEO of Aruba Networks, reflects on what he wished he had known as a student. Orr argues that as a student, a great deal of emphasis was placed on individual accomplishment whereas in professional life the accomplishments of the team and the company are much more important than any individual contribution.



Transcript

When you were a student, and here you were a biology student, and a physics student, what do you wish you had learned when you were in school, or gotten exposed to, that would have helped you as you're in your position now? First I have to think about how I was like when I was a student. For all the time I was in school, through all the degrees, I was a science student. So I have no idea how your class MBA students and Engineering students, how you think. As a science student, all the way up to the Ph. D. level, I feel in the scientific academia environment, it is a strict meritocracy environment, that the unit for meritocracy is individual. We went out of the way to give credits for some research done and so on, for the individual, to the extent that you have a paper that the list of authors is longer than the paper itself, if it's a short paper. And I have to take it out and say now, larger and larger budget projects, like in the high energy physics research project and so on, because the budget is so huge, you have to forge a collaboration between this lab and the Fermilab and so on. So you have the collaboration. But fundamentally, culture is giving people individual credit for the creation, innovation of the thoughts and ideas and implementation and experiments and so on.

I found that if you really got a degree and that kind of environment, and you move into a business world, I find it took me four, five years to adjust. In the business world, individual merit doesn't count. The fact that a consumer decided that Coke Zero is way better than new Coke, and it is not as good as Pepsi 1 and so on has nothing.. They have no idea who invented it. Is it a group? Is it a team, and so on. So in the business world, all it matters is whether the project is successful. And successful is defined by whether customers are buying it and loving it and continues to come back and buying it. So I think it took me a long time to adjust to it, because once you sink into the team winning, the cross function is not just engineering created a really good product, and marketing screwed up, therefore. That's beside the point. The whole idea is that our winning market share is the customer buying and enjoying it.

So this whole teamwork concept is way, way beyond the individual recognition. Obviously, we recognize individuals for their contribution and so on. But the mindset, from day one is, think about the end result, how a cross functional team can achieve that. And it doesn't matter. If the team wins, everybody wins. That, I think, is I wish something that I had a real life experience tasting, when I was a student. It would make my adjustment from academia to real life industry a lot easier.