



Stanford eCorner

The Choice to Co-Manage

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Find people smarter than you, and hang on to them for dear life. This doesn't just apply to the talent you hire, but also to the people you work alongside to build and shape your emerging venture. Jay Coen Gilbert, Bart Houlahan, and Andrew Kassoy all co-manage B Labs on equal footing. Here, Coen Gilbert and Houlahan cite the decision to manage as a team essential to the operation's success.



Transcript

Job sharing doesn't really spring to mind as a winning approach for start-up CEOs. But one could argue that's essentially what the three of you are doing. There's no CEO of this venture. You have different and I think fabulously complimentary backgrounds. But you really are sharing the leadership. So I'd like to throw out to all of you the question of what's that like? What's really hard about it? What's really good about it? I think most people in the Silicon Valley, most venture capitalists, if you said, "We're going to do a start-up and we're all three going to lead it together." They would have a less than positive reaction. So I think it's a really interesting aspect of what you're doing. And I think it would be fun to hear you talk about it a little. See these scars? Exactly. We had a similar experience at AND 1.

Where there was three of us that founded the company and a solid five, six people that are really part of the key leadership team there. So we come out of a decade plus experience of running a real team-based organization. And there are a handful of benefits. Far and away the most important benefit is they're all smarter than I am. And so you start with the recognition that you find people smarter than you. And then you grab onto them and say, "Don't leave." And that's a pretty good strategy. None of us are good enough to do the stuff on our own. And so the most important thing about the job sharing is just because it enables you to do more and do it better. The next most important thing if you're lucky enough to do this with people that you love and that you respect is that you can each other out. When you guys fire away questions and I hope you're incredibly critical and etc.

There is no way you can be as critical of us as we are of each other. And that I think comes out of the total trust that we have in each other. And the recognition that we've all got relatively skilled and diverse set of skills. And so for stuff to get out of our building and out into the world, it has to have already gone through a pretty aggressive little gauntlet. And I think that's incredibly powerful. It's hard to do if you're just "I'm the man and I got the idea." And so well then you'll hire a bunch of people all lesser than you who are just saluting. And then hey if you're right God bless you know. But truth is you're most like going to be wrong way more than you're going to be right. And so you need people around to balance ideas of and to check you. And to heck you own ego on your own because often your instincts are incorrect.

It's all about the team. The experience at AND 1 we're trying to duplicate to some degree here at B Lab. Of the experience at AND 1 was we had two funding principles. The team with the most superstars wins and the best idea wins period. I think we were in our 7th year when we created job titles. Like at the time we were probably about \$72 million of revenues before we created job titles. And frankly the reason why we created job titles was because we had too many people who didn't understand what exactly we did. So we had to make sure they understood that we had a function at the organization. But I'm

dead serious about it. Jay's exactly right that it's all about recognizing that you can't do it alone.

That it always requires a team. And once you have that team, the humility to recognize that a best idea most likely won't come from this team. It's going to come from some of our staff who's here in the audience. It's going to come from outside the organization. And you got to be great listeners. You just got to be a great listener. You got to listen to what your team is saying. You got to listen to what your staff is saying. In this particular venture we got to listen to what the community is saying. Because we're brand new to this space.

We're brand new with the social entrepreneurship, social enterprise. And there are people who've done this work for 35 years. And if you will look back two years ago to how this started and what our idea was two years ago and where it is now. It couldn't be more different. It couldn't be more different. And we hope that's because we're good listeners.