



Stanford eCorner

Rediscovering Psych 101 During a Time of Crisis

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Though Conley had a great experience in business school, an area of study that has become very useful for him as an entrepreneur is psychology. The dot-com bust and other outside forces presented an unforeseen challenge in a time of uncertainty. Searching for answers, Conley came across the work of Abraham Maslow, whose theories helped him rediscover his original purpose in starting the company. Through innovation based on "higher" needs, Conley took a fresh look at Joie de Vivre Hotels, the largest Hotelier in Northern California.



Transcript

As an undergrad in business school, I did study Maslow a little bit but I didn't think about him, I'm after you know, how many of you are in the business school here? OK. So I would tell you that after you've graduated about 5 years later. You'll use about 5% of what you learned. Not to say, it's not a good experience. It's a good experience but a lot of what I learned in the business school, I didn't necessarily take with me. And I wasn't using it 5 or 10 years later. Maslow, I think I had some consciously in my mind but I hadn't spent a lot of time thinking about it. Between 1986 or '87 when I started the company and 2001 during that 15-year period, we grew from one funky motel in the Tenderloin which is how I get started by creating this rock and roll hotel called "The Phoenix" to 15 years later we had 20 hotels. So by 2001, we had 20 hotels. At that point, all of the hotels were here in Northern California.

And in the prior 5 or 6 years, during the dot-com boom, being the largest hotel here in Northern California which is what we were, made us a company look like geniuses because we're in the best hotel market in the country other than Silicon Valley, San Francisco and Manhattan were the three best hotel markets in the country and we were the largest hotel here in San Francisco and Silicon Valley. But things changed overnight and they started changing before 9/11. But the dot-com bust affected anybody who was in any kind of business in the Bay Area but if you're a hotelier, it particularly affected you because people stopped traveling to the Bay Area. And then 9/11 happened, and people stopped traveling around the world for a little while. They definitely stopped traveling to the US and foreigners in particular stopped traveling to the US. Then we have SARS, so that for about nine months Asian travelers were not traveling to the US or just about anywhere else. We had two wars both of which we're still in which didn't help because it meant that the French didn't want to come visit the US and a lot of other people didn't want to come visit us. And frankly, the US had very new aggressive Visa policies and many of you know that. In terms of entry, it was harder to actually get into the US. So if you're a hotelier in the worst hotel market in the country and you're the largest hotel in that region and all of your hotels are in that region and you don't have deep pockets, what'd you do? Well, you go to the local bookstore and you hang out in the self-help section of the bookstore and that's what I did.

I actually literally went to the Borders Bookstore around the corner from my office in Union Square. And I was looking for a clue because I stopped taking the salary in April of 2001 thinking that not taking the salary was going to make a difference in my company. And then by 9/11, it was very clear that me not taking the salary was not going to make a big difference whether we're going to make payroll the following week or not. And I came upon Maslow at that point where I sort of trying to figure out my own life. Why did I start this company and call it "Joie de Vivre" which means joy of life in French. What is it that I was

looking for? And Maslow certainly helped reacquainted me to the idea of self-actualization and why I in my life what I was looking for in creating this hotel company. I wasn't looking to get rich. I was really looking to actually be creative and to live up to my potential.