



Stanford eCorner

The Co-Founder Working Relationship

Kevin Systrom, *Instagram*; Mike Krieger, *Instagram*

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In response to a question from STVP's Tina Seelig, Instagram Co-Founders Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger describe their working relationship. Both Systrom and Krieger explain the stages of their relationship, and how the partnership respects each other's areas of specialty, while also providing a tremendous opportunity to sound out ideas. Because of this benefit, Systrom explains the co-founder relationship needs to be cherished. Krieger also believes honest and direct communication of expectations can prevent the relationship from wearing down over time.



Transcript

Can you tell us a little bit about your working relationship? Who does what? And has it always worked well? Have there been tensions that have come up? Tell us a little bit about how that works. And then I'm going to let you moderate questions. I think, of all the co-founders I know, we probably get along best. I've definitely talked to co-founder pairs that don't get along at all. I think what you need to do in a co-founder relationship is not necessarily decide who is good at what but realize that, like any relationship, your goal is to figure out the other person and figure out your relationship with them. And through the last year or so, we've really gotten into the groove of... we own different parts of the day-to-day stuff, but at the same time we use each other to bounce ideas off. You do a lot of the iPhone clients stuff, I do a lot of the CEO stuff of accounting, etcetera, and do a lot of the backend coding as well. But what happens is, because we both have our own specialties but also overlap into each other's areas, it really provides for this nice relationship where you can bounce ideas off of other people or get that person to say, "Are you sure you want to do it that way?" And what has happened is it's that yin-yang relationship that I really think has helped us succeed. And it's hard to screen for ahead of time.

We knew each other... We barely knew each other. Yeah, barely knew each other. We figured out that we can work together on a technical level by just getting together over a bunch of weekends and saying, 'Let's build a little simple Facebook game. It's going to take a few hours. Let's build it together', whatever, and you can get going. But a lot of it ends up being, what's your gut feel? Do your reference checks. I've said nice things about you. Thank you. So let's get going and let's see how it goes.

Yeah. It's hard because I think no matter who you work with, you have to figure out... And this is actually more even for employees. Your relationship is going to be a long one, and if you're in the entrepreneurship world, your best ally is sitting next to you, and you need to make sure to cherish that relationship because that's what gets you to the next level. The biggest source of strife I found is when there's a disconnect between expectations as to what you're building and how long you want to be building it for. And it's important to both of us that are like, 'I can't imagine doing anything else in the world. I love doing this and I want to be doing this for a really long time. I love what I do. I love coming in.' If people are, oh, six months to a year, then cash out, that's going to be really difficult. Unless you're both feeling that way, then it's a different relationship.

But if you're in it for the long haul, make sure that the people you know are in it as well. It's a tough conversation and you

might lose a co-founder that way early on, before you start, but it's much better, I think, than going on and then six months later having that really, really worned-down relationship. I'm looking back... by the way, just to finish off the thought. I can't imagine starting a company without a co-founder. I said that to you today, Mike. Yeah. It's such a hard job to get off the ground. It's such a hard job to recruit people, to deal with... whether it's investors or press.

Having someone across the way to be like, "Man, this really bummed me out," or "How do you think about this?" I actually think that's one of the things that has kept us going in 4 am or 5 am when we're fixing the servers or dealing with some issue. It's been fantastic.