



Stanford eCorner

Surround Yourself with Smarter People

Phil Libin, *Evernote*

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Evernote Co-founder and CEO Phil Libin describes his joy in not being the smartest person in the room. As a serial entrepreneur, Libin seeks to surround himself with the smartest individuals, as this "bubble" helps get things done and provides endless opportunities for continued learning.



Transcript

When I got my - after college, I got a job and I was working with a few friends of mine in Boston as a software engineer. So, I am a programmer by training and I got a job at a company in Boston called ATG, the Art Technology Group. That's what it was called at the time. I think it has since been bought by Oracle a couple of years ago. And, ATG was this amazing company. I joined them right before they IPOed and we built - we just built all this awesome technology. We invented a lot of the stuff that you just sort of take for granted on the Internet, like dynamic web pages and stuff like that. This was in the late '90s. And, I had this phenomenal experience at ATG, which is for - up to now at every point in my life, I was sort of used to feeling like I was the smartest person in the room, totally not, just to fight obviously. But that was the feeling I had, right? I was this kind of the snotty, nerdy kid and I always felt that, like, I was always the smartest person in the room pretty much all the time.

Yeah, yeah, sure, the other kids had girlfriends and were good at sports. But, I always got the sense that I was the smartest person. And, at ATG that was the first time where that was patently not true, where like even somebody like me could look around and be like man, I suck, I am below average here. Like, this is a brilliant group of people, a brilliant group of developers and engineers, and they are getting stuff done in an amazing way, and I am like I am in awe of this team, and I frankly was below average. Like, I kind of got the feeling that, like, they were putting up with me because I was, like, I was just worth it to put up with. But, I certainly wasn't one of the star developers, one of the star programmers. Their other people were. And, I had this - when I first realized this, first, it really troubled me, you know, greatly. But, then I realized this is awesome. This is like the first time I'm ever really enjoying myself.

This is the first time where I felt like the environment that I was in that I lucked into by joining this company, and it wasn't the first company I worked at, right? I had worked at tons of places where I did feel like I was the smartest person in the room. But, in this environment where I clearly wasn't, where there was everyone around me or almost everyone was much smarter than I was, was the first time that I was actually happy and comfortable and not stressed out and not thinking about the end of the world for some strange reason. And, I thought this is great. This is how I'm going to structure my life. I want to structure my life so that I am never the smartest person in the room. I want to go to other rooms. I want to make friends. I want to create a bubble around me where everyone else is just so much better, you know, smarter, more productive, more capable because that's how stuff actually happens and that's how I get to feel good about things and that's how I learned things and learning is actually really fun when you are learning things that you care about. And, I kind of resolved to actually structure my life that way and that meant not working in places that were going to be stupid, not doing things that I didn't have any respect for, not associating with people when I could have avoided that I felt we thought was - weren't going to add to this but actively cultivating friends and relationships in work environments where I felt almost everyone else was smarter than I am. And, I've managed to hold on to that up until now.

That's been one of the fundamental things that I have done that I think has worked really well. In fact, it's clearly the case here, right? Just me being in this room, I think, is an example of that. Like, I couldn't get into Stanford, right? By definition, you guys are all smarter than I am. This is me and if being here is very much part and parcel of that lifetime experiment of trying to surround myself with the most interesting, the best possible people and then just kind of seeing what happens.