



Stanford eCorner

Fallouts With Founders

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While serving as CEO of MySQL AB, Mårten Mickos had a falling out with a founder of the company. These types of situations are common in startups, says Mickos, especially between original founders and new management teams. Mickos explains why he made some tough choices out of dedication to the employees he had brought on board.



Transcript

We did have a complete fallout with the CTO and founder of MySQL in later years. This could have derailed the whole company. I was running the business and I was realizing or concluding or thinking or erroneously thinking, I'll leave that to you to assess that the founder wasn't being productive anymore. Didn't produce what he was supposed to do, didn't lead the way he was supposed to do, didn't let others lead the way they were supposed to lead. So I removed him from all important roles. We left all kinds of nice job title so it looked good. But we essentially stripped him of all responsibility because it didn't work. And he responded by starting to sabotage my work as a CEO. And managing this conflict between a hired gun, a CEO who came onboard and the founder is a huge stress for anybody. And I can tell you it happens in nearly every startup.

It's amazing how or not amazing it's sad how common it is, that you get conflicts between founders themselves or between founders and the new guys. And you have to manage it somehow and you have to figure out a way out of it. But it's very common and it can happen to any one of us that the one who is the biggest asset can the next day be the biggest liability. And as human beings, we don't like to acknowledge it, but it does happen. And it happens all over in life where you see people who have done something amazing, built something amazing and then comes a time when you realize that they shouldn't be doing it anymore. So, these are very difficult things for a CEO to handle. But again, I believed in the mission of the company - make superior database technology available and affordable for all. So it was okay to build a business, it was okay to give it out to everybody. We kept doing that and the board supported me in all of this and kept me going although I was ready to say, hey, founders, I came onboard to build this for you and you are not letting me build it. I mean, you can have it.

I'm done. I was ready - many times I was ready to just walkout. But then of course you look around and see we have 300 people in the company. I've hired half of these. I promised them a great future. I can't walk out no matter how much I'm personally feeling that I'm suffering.