



Stanford eCorner

Not Quite Failing, Not Quite Succeeding

Stewart Butterfield, *Slack*

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Slack Co-Founder and CEO Stewart Butterfield discusses the intense difficulty of maintaining hope and momentum through repeated setbacks during the early days, and the resiliency needed to persevere. Butterfield speaks with Andrew Braccia, general partner at Accel Partners.



Transcript

But I actually wanted to go back to the resiliency thing. Because here's the part that you don't imagine when you start a company, or you probably don't. So one of the things you've got to do is tell a story that people can believe in. Whether that's the investors, whether that's co-founders, whether that's employees you're trying to bring on board, that's customers, that's potential users. That's like, what the brand is. Landlords. Yeah, landlords, everyone. Yeah, you've got to-- and maybe your significant other or your parents or whoever. And you really have to hope that that comes true. And then often the way that you said it the first time doesn't happen.

And so you alter the story. And then that also doesn't happen. And then you alter the story again, and that still doesn't happen. At some point you think, am I stupid? Am I crazy? Am I lying about this? Is there something here, or am I just going to have to keep on changing the story as reality punches me in the face over and over again? So we had the experience with this company, that ended up being a huge success, or it failing. And the feeling was not like, well, chin up, old fellow. We're going to try again, and it'll all be OK in the end. It was like, just-- personally speaking, from the inside, fucking horrible. Sorry, I'm not sure if I'm allowed to swear here. Really-- You're Canadian, you can get away with that. Yeah, OK.

Like, so actually, I mean, I still remember this very, very well. We had tried all these things. We were working the new user experience. We're looking at monetization. We're building this model. We're saying, like, we could do this, we could do that. We had \$5 million left in the bank. There was always one thing that was coming up that was going to be the thing that would make this work. And sometimes those things where we pegged all our hopes on would actually move the needle a little bit, but not quite enough. And that's the hardest position to be in.

Not quite failing, not quite succeeding. Because we actually had very, very high average revenue per user. We had deep commitment. We had this community that was really into it, but just not enough.