Stanford eCorner

Success Changes a CEO

Bob Tinker, *MobileIron*

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Drawing from his experience as founding CEO of MobileIron, Bob Tinker talks about how a company's top officer must evolve as the business grows. He discusses how the drive to be hands on when a venture is small can be detrimental as it scales. "Instead of doing a lot of things for a lot of people, you have to change your way of thinking, and instead be doing fewer things for a lot more people," Tinker says.

Transcript

- You need to start preparing for something I call the CEO Success Irony. So what is the CEO Success Irony? It's that as the company grows, the CEO job changes, so what that means is you have to change. The way you behave, how you work, and even change on the inside. And this is hard. Actually really really really hard. It's like rewiring your plane while you're trying to fly it. You're working your tail off to fly the plane and try and make it, hopefully it gains altitude. And you have to rip open the fuselage and start messing around with wiring. Ugh, it's the last thing you want to do. But it's absolutely critical.

And what I realized in sort of looking through the rearview mirror is that I actually had three very different CEO jobs over my eight years. And I think this is probably generalizable to anyone in a leadership position that's going through significant growth. So to make some superhero analogies here, the first CEO job was kind of like Captain America. You're in the woods with the troops, throwing punches, doing hand to hand combat, getting dirty with everybody else. It's a blast. Then the CEO job changed, where it was a little bit more like The Avengers, where it's you and your band of superheroes, and you had to hire and build a team of superheroes that all had their special superpower that was better than yours. You need a sales superhero, a marketing superhero, an engineering superhero, a finance superhero, and your job as CEO is to keep the Avengers together and all going in the same direction. And then in really sort of the last year and a half, the job changed again, and it was a really big change. It became sort of more like Professor Xavier in the X-Men, where you're dean of a university where your professors are your warriors, and they're bringing up the next generation of students, and instead of doing a lot of things for a lot of people, you have to change your way of thinking and instead be doing fewer things for a lot more people. And these two transitions to these three jobs forces a fairly significant rewiring inside.

And this is hard. And I think the key and trick to it is that ironically, the very things that make you successful in getting from A to B actually become the things that can hold you back, or even kill you, going from B to C. And for me, I'll share some examples. In the beginning I had my hands deep into the product. But then I had to change my focus to be much more focused on the business as a whole. In the beginning I was much more detail-oriented and really hands-on with everybody in the company. But then I had to change and learn how to work through others. In the beginning I was always really good at keeping fairly complex execution plans in my head. It's one of the things that you need to do in the early days, but that doesn't work anymore when you grow. You have to be able to distill all that down to three, four, or five goals you can communicate to the whole company.

These were all really big rewiring exercises for me, all while you're trying to fly the plane. And this led to what was probably the hardest rewiring exercise for me, and it took me a little while to figure this one out, which is that in some cases I would let my fear of sort of short term turbulence get in the way of making a decision to try and do the right long term thing. And I think where this came from is that for so long I was focused on company survival that I needed to change my mindset to thrival.

Which is how do we go build a whopper?