



Stanford eCorner

Pivoting Towards Positivity

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March 08, 2017

Video URL: <http://ecorner.stanford.edu/videos/5114/Pivoting-Towards-Positivity>

Shirzad Chamine, founder and CEO of executive-coaching program Positive Intelligence, shares the lowest point in his professional life and how it became the pivotal moment that propelled him to learn why people become so self-destructive and what strategies we can adopt to think and behave more positively. He describes how founders often end up standing in the way of their own success in the tech-startup world.



Transcript

to the most humiliating day of my personal and professional life, and life as an entrepreneur, that led to all of this. It all started several years after I graduated from Stanford business school here. So I was in many of your seats, many years ago, and then several years out. After working at a bunch of great companies, I decided that I had a vision of my own. And what I had come up with, because my background, I had it in both psychology, and engineering, and business. The vision that I had was that with the emerging technology at the time, you could create a self coaching software that every employee within every company could use to coach their own career through the company. I thought that every company would be interested in having people be self guided in their career management because they would have an internal coach that we would create for them. Because of my engineering background, I ended up actually coding a prototype that was interactive, and pretty interesting. I cold called a bunch of Fortune 500 CEOs, and to my amazement, because I was on fire with this vision, and I was so believing that it was gonna happen, I got almost a dozen CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, and people of that caliber. One of the most senior people from venture capital committed coming as a personal investor, and one of the most famous authors in business, a whole bunch of first class people got interested, and we raised about a million and a half in seed financing, and later on \$20 million in Series A financing from major venture capital.

So due to this phase of me going out, talking to people about the vision of the company, and what was possible in the work that we were doing, I was all positive, I was all energized, I was all vision, and it was magnetic. Everybody I talked to wanted to be a part of it, and I also ended up attracting a world class group of people who wanted to work with me in the company, including one of my buddies from business school, who ended up becoming president of the company. So that was all great stuff, and we got one major Fortune 100 company to actually pay for the rights to use the software that didn't even exist yet. That really got us off the ground. Now fast forward two years into the company forming, and all of these wonderful things happening. Our offices was in downtown Palo Alto, and one day I went out to get lunch, and I strolled back to my offices in downtown Palo Alto, and I walked upstairs, we were on the second floor, and my heart sank when I walked upstairs because what I saw is that in our conference room, kind of doubling as our board room, what I saw was that my chairman of the board was sitting there. My president, my buddy from business school I had hired to run the company with me was sitting there. My most senior director was sitting there. My most senior vice president was sitting there, all awkwardly waiting to have an intervention with me. This was a palace coup, and what had happened is that during these two years, I had shifted from this extraordinarily positive, magnetic visionary that I was, that attracted everything to the company, and started it, to a monster that nobody wanted to work with.

To a controlling, distrusting, micromanaging, always negative, always angry, always pissed person who was trying to make everything right, and I was so not able to hear any feedback that people were giving me, that my president, my vice president,

had no choice but to go above my head, and have a palace coup, because there was listening in me that was happening at the time. And as the board started telling me the feedback about what was going on, and the feedback that they were getting, the way of course that I engaged with them was lashing out in a way that, of course totally proved the point, that I was not a person who could listen to a single word anybody was saying any more. That became the most profoundly painful moment of my life as a professional, and the problem that I had was that I could not actually walk away. Ordinarily I would have either lashed out or walked away, and I did not have the luxury of that because I had brought in everybody with the money. I'd brought in the clients. I'd brought in everybody that was working there. I did not have the luxury of walking away. I needed to stay, and see this thing through, even though that day I was stripped of a lot of my power, which a lot of entrepreneurs are familiar with. A venture backed software company, that happens a lot to founding members of the company, who at some point are shown to be the ones who are destroying their own vision, and have to be pushed aside, or changed in their roll, and all that stuff. So I had to stay, and staying was so profoundly painful because imagine you walk into an office space every single day, working with people that you were certain had totally betrayed you, and betrayed your trust.

And I was so convinced that they had betrayed me, and betrayed my trust, for self serving purposes. So imagine the amount of pain I experienced day after day, living with what it is that I had to be with, with the company. And that started a whole series of questions including the questions of so who is the real me. Is the real me the person who was an incredible, magnetic visionary that brought everybody to this company? Or is the real me this monster that nobody wanted to work with any more? Who is the real me? How had I shifted from one to the other? Was this shift permanent? Is there a way that I could now go back to what used to be? Are these people that I'm interacting with truly people who are betraying me for self serving purposes, or was there another solution? Was there another explanation? These were all the questions I had for my mind, and I could not answer them at the time, because I was literally in a daze for about a week, not able to even sort out my thoughts. And that started about 15 years working on myself, and also research that eventually led to the body of work that I have on positive intelligence, and all of the things that I'll be talking to you about today. Gradually there were all these discoveries through research, and my own personal experience, that led to the work that we do today. And the question was about trying to answer how is it that we self sabotage? How is it that we go from one to the other mode of ourselves, and what are the ways that we can actually shift that orientation.