



Stanford eCorner

From Inventor to Entrepreneur

Debbie Sterling, *GoldieBlox*

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GoldieBlox Founder Debbie Sterling describes her evolution from solitary inventor to becoming an entrepreneur who inspired others to believe in her mission to launch a line of construction toys for girls. Starting with a rough prototype, Sterling talks about encountering push back early on from older industry veterans, but then finding passionate followers among young social entrepreneurs.



Transcript

a pioneer, she is one of the first female animators and created Mr. MGoo and so I've always had this love of cartooning and art. And so my very first prototype of GoldieBlox wasn't a construction toy at all. I actually drew a sketch of a little girl who was not a princess, but not a nerd. She was gonna be a builder. And in these sketches, I had Goldie building these elaborate, cool machines. And so I started prototyping kind of what would Goldie build? What would be some of the machines she would make? And, in this first prototype, I created a belt drive where Goldie built a machine to help her dog chase his tail. So this is all stuff, like I'm going to the hardware store, I'm like rummaging through my drawers with thread spools and clay and these ramshackle prototypes but it was enough to kind of get my idea out of a girl character and an associated building set where kids could kind of build along with Goldie. And once I had this prototype, I was just like, oh my God this is genius, right. Nobody has done this, this is genius.

And so I came up with this plan, right, like my Grand Master plan where I've got this original prototype that I know is just this breakthrough idea and one day I'm gonna disrupt the pink aisle in every toy store with this idea. So, there wasn't a very straight forward path to that as I had thought. But, in my talk today, what I want to share with you all is sort of this circuitous path that I took from having my kind of first prototype in hand to actually getting GoldieBlox onto the shelves of toy stores around the world. So I'm going to start with my first step and my first sort of lesson learned along the way, which is, you know at the very beginning having this first prototype, I had to learn the difference between being an inventor and being an entrepreneur. So I brought my first prototype to the New York Toy Fair to get advice from the bigwigs in the toy industry. And very early on, and in my mind, I'm like this is the best idea everybody's gonna love this. This is what I heard. It was mainly old white men in suits who run the toy industry who said you can't fight nature. They said girls want to play in the pink aisle. Girls don't want to build.

This idea is never gonna go mainstream. So, at this point, I'd quit my job and I was going off of my life savings so this was not very good news to hear. I was pretty dejected as you can imagine and right after the toy fair, I actually signed up to go to this social entrepreneurship conference and to be honest, I wasn't in the mood to go at all, I kinda just wanted to go home and crawl up in a ball and hide. But, I had already signed up and I had paid so I go to the conference and it was this conference for social entrepreneurs, there were about a hundred people there and the deal was everybody who was there had to get up and share their idea in front of the room. Well, I wasn't feeling so great about my idea at that moment because all of those old toy men had told me it was a stupid idea. But, I got up anyway to share the idea and unlike the reception at the toy fair, all of the young people at the social entrepreneurship conference, they were inspired. They all got up to their feet and cheered. They formed a line around the building all wanting to be a part of it. And there was something that I learned that was really helpful at that conference and it was this concept of being an inventor or being an entrepreneur. I learned that being an inventor means that you sort of hole up alone working on your idea to kind of come up with something.

And that's what I'd been doing for the last few months I'd been kind of alone in my apartment making those sketches and prototypes. And even though it was my passion, it was what I knew I wanted to do with my life, I was lonely. I wasn't having a lot of fun and I was too afraid to talk to people about my idea 'cause I was afraid some big toy company might steal it. And so, I was just, I was lonely. The moment I went to this social entrepreneurship conference, and I built up the courage to get up and share my idea without making somebody sign an NDA, which by the way, I even made my Mom sign one I was so paranoid. The moment I actually, I'm not even kidding, I actually have a copy of it. The moment I actually finally kind of put myself out there, everything changed. All of a sudden, I wasn't feeling lonely anymore. I had people coming to my apartment every day, evenings, weekends, we were working on the prototypes together, they were helping me, they were giving me advice, they were giving me ideas. Just volunteering because they were passionate about it.

They helped me kind of take that first sort of ugly prototype and they helped me rapidly prototype it again and again and again. They helped me test it with kids. We tested it with over a hundred kids and each time we observed kids playing with it, we found ways to make it better and better. And so all of a sudden, I went from being this kind of lone hermit inventor to being an entrepreneur because the entrepreneur is somebody who shares their vision and more importantly, brings people along and the moment that those people lines up to be a part of it and I let them is the moment that I became an entrepreneur.