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Professor of the Practice Tina Seelig sits down with Steve Garrity, founder of Hearsay Systems and Juliet Rothenberg, product manager at DeepMind for a new podcast called LEAP!. This series will take a deep dive into how to grow your career by unpacking some of the often overlooked and under-taught soft skills critical to the success of every entrepreneur. Each episode invites alumni at different stages in their career to discuss real-life scenarios, focused around a particular skill. In this episode, Steve and Juliet talk with Tina about identifying, shaping and developing your superpower at work.



Transcript

- [Announcer] Who you are defines how you build.. - Well, this is actually a perfect session for homecoming week, right? We've got the two of you coming back to Stanford to share some of your insights.. I want to formally introduce Steve Garrity and Juliet Rothenberg.. Steve graduated in 2004, and Juliet in 2007.. So, quite a long time ago, but only a few years ago it feels like you were sitting in this audience right here listening the speakers who are on this stage.. So maybe you could give us a little snapshot of what you've done since you were sitting here as a student, until you're sitting here on the stage with me.. Steve, you want to start? - Sure, we were literally just talking about that as we walked on, that it was a strange feeling to be walking onto the stage from this direction.. But, so like Tina said, I graduated computer science in '04-'05, went onto Microsoft.. Actually, went to start up first called Fortify doing security work.. Went on to Microsoft for a while as software engineer and a product manager..

And then started my own company with another Mayfield Fellow alum Clara Shih, called Hearsay.. And that is going to this day.. I stepped back from my day to day job last year there, so I'm still on the board, but I took a year off and I've just been playing which has been amazing.. And now I'm working on a couple of new ideas, so they'll be another company sometime here in the future.. - [Tina] Great, and Juliet.. - So, I actually used to help TA this class, so it's particularly interesting for me 'cause I'm used to being up here saying, hey remember to turn in your papers and remember to sign up for dinner, and that type of thing.. So it's fun to be able to take a different angle on it.. And then I majored, and I started out management science and engineering, wanted to focus more on energy.. So designed my own major in energy strategy and engineering.. And then went off to law school, from an engineering degree..

Went to Harvard, spent three years there.. You could say started a company with some folks at MIT, incorporated a science project might be a more appropriate term.. And then went to become a software product manager at Opower which was an energy efficiency company.. Then went to the Google team that incubated Sidewalk Labs, Google's urban innovation arm.. From there went to Waymo, where I spent three years and launched our early rider program in Phoenix.. Which is Waymo's first experience with external riders in the cars.. And then now I'm at DeepMind, as Tina said.. I'm working on AI for good, particularly focused around energy.. So the team is, the team that used DeepMind's AI to reduce data center cooling energy consumption by 30 to 40%.. - You know what really strikes me about your backgrounds, is it's only 11 years and 14 years since you were here at Stanford..

And you've done all these different things, you know, often students are getting out of school and they're super worried about what's the first thing they're gonna do.. And you realize, maybe some of those first things like you're incorporated science project, you know, ends up falling off your resume, do not really worry about it.. But what we want to focus on today is kind of a provocative topic, and the topic is finding your superpower.. Now, you know people are often trying to find their passions and find their place in the world.. But we thought it would be interesting to look at it through the lens of finding your superpower.. And so when I ask that question to each of you, what does that actually mean, what is it to have a superpower? - So when I think a superpower and when you first invited us to this talk, I thought oh crap now I need to find out what my superpower is.. (laughing) But when I step back and thought about it I thought, you know what is it, the skill that you uniquely bring to the table? And Tina, I really appreciate LEAP and its focus on soft skills, because as students it's so easy to think of a superpower as an individual effort, right, it is what am I great at? What am I a rockstar at? Where am I gonna get

constant A pluses? And what could I get a PhD in, and that type of thing.. But as you get more and more out into the world, it's what is the unique skill that I bring to a team? And where will I be best when complemented by other members of the team? And I think within that then it's, what you uniquely bring to do, and unique means a couple of things.. I think it means you enjoy doing it, right? You should enjoy your superpower, and be really passionate about it, and then the other one is, that other people should praise you for it, meaning that they value it, and that it's a valuable thing to bring to others as well.. So when I think of superpower that's how I break it down..

- Great, what do you think? - I genuinely agree everything in Juliet said.. I think when I was, when you invited us, my first thought was like, oh yeah maybe this talk will help me figure out what my superpower is.. So I'm still trying to find it.. But to me the superpower is really something about what can you do significantly better than most people around you? And this is like what's the thing that you, I think there's a couple companies that call it, what do you spike on, is a term I've heard a lot.. But it's classically to me, it's what do you do that you can create an outsize impact more quickly? And so I think like computer science, you talk about this a lot where like the 10x engineer, right, like the best engineers are 10x more effective, not 2x.. Which I think is a real interesting shift from a world where if you get into you know the AI taking jobs conversation at some point, but like physical strength is one of those things that the fastest person in the world is 2x faster than everybody in this room, not 10x faster.. But the smartest person at a given, whether it's a machine learning problem, or literature potentially, right, anything intellectual is actually the distribution looks very different.. And you as a superpower might, you having a superpower might be 10x more effective versus 10%.. - Well, so that's really interesting, does that mean that, does everyone have a superpower? I mean is it that, okay we all have something that we do better than other people that we're uniquely qualified to do? What do you think? And also, as part of that do you, is a superpower something that's innate, or is it something you build? Can you decide, I'm going to be a superpower in computing, or in literature, or whatever other topic? - So one of my favorite quotes is sometimes attributed to Einstein although the internet disagrees with whether he actually said it or not, and it's everybody is a genius, but if a fish spends its entire life trying to climb a tree it will think it's stupid.. And that for me resonates so much because I think that we all have these innate abilities..

And there are people who are really talented and can see them, and hopefully one of those people becomes a mentor of yours or a manager throughout your life.. And puts you in a position where you can then exercise and build on that superpower.. And there are things that will inherently not be your superpower, right? Like my mom wanted to have a professional tennis player as a child.. And I was born and she looked at the size of my shoulders, and she said, well there goes that dream.. And, so there are things that you can't do and there are things that you will be good at, and hopefully there will be people who encourage you along the way who can see the things that you are great at.. - Yeah, I think the optimist in me agrees and says everybody has a superpower, and it's a matter of finding it.. And there's a separate question of, is it valuable, does the market value it? I don't know if that's true or not, but I hope it's true.. I think your second question about can you choose a superpower to develop? Again, the optimist you would like to believe that, yes you can, but I tend to lean, my intuition says more it's something that you are inherently good at that you choose to focus on.. Because you enjoy it, whatever, it just comes easily.. When I think of most people I know or superpowers that I can identify in friends of mine, they're often things that they don't think are very hard..

And you're like, you are exceptionally talented at this particular thing, and they're like, really? Like I don't, I just thought it was easy.. - You know it's funny because when I ran my first company, I had this experience where everybody thought they were doing the easy job.. And it was fascinating because you looked around, it's like, oh my God, you think that's easy? To me that would be really hard.. And I think that's actually really great when you have a team where everyone is playing to their superpowers and their strengths, and then everybody feels like they're doing the easy job.. So I'm curious, I wonder if have you figured out at this age what your superpower is? And what is it, and when did you figure out what it was? Was it something when you were 10 years old you go, you know what this is what I need to be doing? Or was it 20, or was it 25, or 30, or 50? You know, but you're not 50.. But the point is, at what point do you figure it out? And have you figured it out? - So.. - Yeah, please go.. - I think the, we were talking about this earlier, the one that comes to mind for me as what I think I eventually discovered is a superpower wasn't obvious to me at first.. Is it's either like my endurance or my pain tolerance, which is, I will just keep going.. And long after everybody thinks that it's worth like stopping or give up, or whatever..

To me it's kind of like, just keep going until you're done with it.. And at first that was just kind of a normal part of what I was around.. When I came to Stanford, I walked on to the crew team, not because I was any good at crew, but because they needed people who were tall.. And somebody decided that six feet was tall enough 'cause the team didn't have anybody that was that tall.. And so I started rowing, and the first thing you learned about crew and no offense to any actual rowers in the room, crew is not a skill sport.. You basically pull and then you slide forward, and you pull and you slide.. There's no like hand-eye coordination involved, there's no tactics.. There are tactics, if you're coxswain.. There's a very little bit of skill if you're stroke 'cause you've got to be very consistent.. But everybody else in the back of the boat is just literally pull on the oars as hard as you freaking can..

And that's really it.. You can teach anybody to row in about a day.. And then the rest of it is how hard are you willing to push yourself, and how small does that pinpoint of a light get before you black out? And that was very natural to me, freshman year I was like, oh yeah this is great, we're just gonna row, and row, and row, and row, and then you know puke into the trash can on the side of the erg.. And everybody said, that's crazy.. That seemed normal to me.. And over time I realized that in many parts of my life, whether it was athletics, I'm not built this, I don't look like this, but I'm an endurance runner..

And I just enjoy running long distances.. And it's 'cause I don't give up.. It's not because I'm fast, I don't ever win, but I just don't stop going.. And then you get into startups and then one of the biggest things I think, a Paul Graham I think said this, although again I'm not sure if the internet would agree..

Startups to don't die because they run out of money, startups died because the founders run out of energy.. And I think it's very true.. Like, you just keep going, keep going, keep going.. So at first it was just that's how I work.. Over time I've realized, I think that's somewhat weird and unusual.. - And it's a superpower.. - Which maybe makes it a superpower.. - Yeah, great.. Okay so Juliet, what's your superpower? - So my story's a little bit different.. I came upon what my superpower was when someone told me that they used the word superpower a few years ago, and I reflected on it, and I thought yeah, this might be right..

It was when I was at Waymo and someone told me, you know you learn really fast, and you absorb new information, and it doesn't matter what type of information that is.. And I thought about it and and I realized, yes that is what I like to do.. I got an engineering degree and then I went on to law school and I enjoyed that.. And then I decided you know screw all of this, my engineering was not software I didn't take any CS classes in college, and I said you know I'm gonna learn to be a software PM, and go down this route, and work in an entirely different industry.. And then there were moments where I would pivot and do bis debt and product definition, and new industries that I hadn't ever learned anything about before.. And I would be comfortable speaking with world experts on that very quickly.. There was one summer when I was at the Department of Energy, and I sat down it was a summer internship.. I sat down at my desk and they said, okay great, your job for the summer is this aspect of Chinese energy policy, and we've got a call in a few hours with one of the world leading experts on it.. Don't worry about it, you can just start and you can ask questions.. And so I said, okay great, I got three hours let's see how fast I can go..

And I read everything I possibly could on the policy.. And by the end of those three hours, I knew basically as much as the person on the call did.. And when someone reflected that back to me that it is my ability to learn really fast and come up to speed really fast, and get kind of the 80/20 of what is it that I really need to understand.. And what's the part that I don't need to understand that someone else can contribute? That was really gratifying to me and helped me understand to the types of roles that I should be in.. So Steve, you mentioned like, hey I'm great endurance, this fits really well with startups.. For me because I'm great at learning fast, it's really good for cross-functional roles.. And so product is actually a great role for me 'cause I get to work with teams of engineers on designing our technical infrastructure.. I get to work with UX designers on what is the user experience actually look like, and how do we base that on user research, how do we base that on design principles? I get to work with legal teams on regulation and on contracts, I get to work with salespeople on deals.. And that for me is a really fun and energizing, and doesn't feel like you were saying, it doesn't feel like hard work because it's, oh good there's something else to sink my teeth into.. And if you made me do it a 100% of the time I would disengage, and be a lot less excited, than if I get to sprinkle around in a lot of different areas..

- So do you, once you figure out what you're really good at again, you superpower, do you have to keep polishing it? I mean, is this something you say, you know what, all right I'm really good at endurance, I'm gonna really double down on that and focus on my endurance.. Or I'm really good at learning things fast, or I'm good at creative problem solving, or I'm good at whatever it is.. And then sort of say, hey I'm gonna spend a lot of time working to get even better.. Or do you just take it for granted and go, okay that's just the way I work? - I personally think it's something that you'll want to work at, right? 'Cause whatever you're doing in theory you're working on something.. And if I were in a role where I weren't leveraging something that I'm strong at, I think I would feel pretty demoralized and like I wasn't contributing as much as I could.. And so, I think inherently insofar as you're working on something you should be leveraging that superpower.. And that will be polishing it and growing it over time.. - I think that's exactly right, I think it's implicit.. Like, I don't think you got to work on it, I think you just you love it, you go do it more.. And the more you do it the better you get, it's all practice..

- Just practice.. So I'm curious though, there's always this tension between do you play to your strengths or do you support your weaknesses? Or do you say these are my weaknesses and I'm gonna go surround myself with people who complement me? How do you think about that for yourself and for your team? I mean if there's something I'm not good at, should I go, I actually have to go learn this and get better? Or do I go, I'll never be good at that, I just have to have people around me who help out? - I think it's an and.. So for me it's, I want to surround myself with people who are great at things that are not my core strengths.. And I want to consciously be watching them.. And if we have a relationship with enough trust, which hopefully if you're working closely on a team with people you do.. And I'll say Steve hey you're really great at this thing, it's something I'm working on, can you coach me on it? Can you tell me how you think about it? Can you give me opportunities to test this out? And that way I'm not letting the team down because Steve is there to catch me when I do a face plant.. And I'm also getting to learn as fast as I can from Steve.. - Yeah, I think that's right.. I think, I tend to think of it as a slightly different metric which is, how critical is this weakness to me, and how much do I really need, how much is it hurting me, versus how much do I just not care about it? And so if it's a really critical weakness that is impeding your progress in whatever you're trying to make progress against.. Whether it's your career or a relationship, or you know a sport, or whatever it is..

If it's killing you, you've got to go work on it, and you can't just, there are some things you can't accept as weaknesses and still continue to be successful in what you're trying to do.. And there are some things where it's not that big of a deal, it's an easy skill to go recruit.. - Outsource to somebody.. - Or outsource to somebody.. Or also just something that like you just don't

care that much about, like you don't want to learn.. I'm a big believer in what Juliet said earlier, which is you tend to learn the things that you enjoy.. And so if you don't enjoy it and it's not killing you, just ignore it, work around it.. And just be aware of it.. - Right, or find other people who are.... - Find other people who can do it..

- Who can fill in the gaps.. So I'm so fascinated by something you and I had a conversation about a year ago, about your thoughts on success.. And you told me the story about the messages you tell the people on your team about doing 1% better each day.. And it really resonated with me, and especially around the idea of being viewed as a superpower.. Because you often don't see those 1% things that people do.. Can you describe it because I thought it was so brilliant and insightful.. - Yeah, there's this, I've no idea where I found this or heard it, but I liked it so much I stole it.. And one of our very talented designers are here, so they made these awesome posters for our office that say, 1.01 to the 365 power is 38.. And 0.99 to the 365 power is.... - .02..

- Yeah, 0.02.. And the point of it obviously being, if you make yourself 1% better at something every day of the year, you're 38 times better.. And obviously if you slip you're basically zero.. And I really like that 'cause it gets to this kind of idea of iterative improvements.. Which for so many things in life, not everything, right, there's always sort of the discontinuous changes.. But there's a lot of things that you can just if you're 1% better every day, it's amazing how much progress you make.. And so if you can just iterate through things and figure out how to break it up into, I don't have to move the mountain, right? 'Cause it's really hard to get started on moving the mountain.. It's really easy to sit there and say like, ah, it's really big I'll do it tomorrow.. If you can find a way to do it very simply today, and just make a tiny bit of progress, it's compound interest, right? Like it's the thing that your parents told you 10 years ago and you first got to checking account, right? Compound interest wins and it just puts into motion.. - Yeah, I think it's really powerful to think about those 1% things you can do each day that have a huge compounding effect..

What do you think about that? - Yeah, I'm trying to think about what a 1%.. When I sort of heard about this I was wondering, what would a 1% action be, right? Like, or what would a 1% domain be? So say that the area that you want to focus on is engineering for example.. Like, is 1% like learning a new language, or getting code review by someone, or tackling a new problem? Or just trying to figuring out how to operationalize it.. - Yeah, I think it's a really good question.. I think in the engineering examples, see if I can come up with some 1% things.. If you're trying to become a better software engineer, right, the 1% thing might be, it's not picking up a new language in a given day, but it might just be literally picking up one new sort of library or one new design pattern or just one little thing.. The example I would give, that I often given I'm asked about this in terms to specific things is, it's keyboard shortcuts for email.. If you don't already use keyboard shortcuts for email, learn them tonight, it will take you five or 10 minutes, and it will make you 10 minutes faster every day for the rest of your life.. And it's 10 minutes that you get back, right? It's like, you may or may not want to follow this advice, I'm a big proponent of caffeine for getting more done.. And if you do the math on how much more work you get done if you sleep seven hours instead of eight hours a day..

And you can do that without losing productivity.. I mean you get like extra work weeks every year.. (laughing) - And then you die earlier, right? - If you take that to it's logical conclusion, if you sleep four hours a night, instead of eight, you're getting an extra year.. - Okay, okay.. - So I'll stop promoting excessive consumption of Red Bull.. It's college students, they all drink it anyways.. (laughing) Just don't mix it with vodka.. (crowd laughs) Bad for your heart.. But there's these little things, and okay sleep maybe is one that isn't a good idea.. But there's little things that you can pick up that will just make you a little bit simpler right? Like there's a book called, Getting Things Done, David Allen GTD..

That is, it's basically a cult, so fair warning.. But it's all about productivity hacks.. And if you look at this book it's a collection of little hacks.. There's nothing like overarching about it that is really that different, but it's these tiny little things that will just take one piece of mental load off of you, right? And one of the classic examples there is like, if you have to remember to bring something with you in the morning leave it in front of the door before you walk out, like before you go to bed.. So you'd have to trip over it walking out.. And all of a sudden you don't realize how expensive it is to have these background processing in your head that's like, don't forget that, don't forget that.. Wake up in the middle of the night, I'm gonna forget it.. If you do one of these things every day, your life just gets less and less filled with friction.. - I have lots 1% hacks, that have nothing to do with coding, I am a huge believer in sending thank you notes, right? I mean sending one thank you note is a 1% thing that you do every day and it has a huge, huge benefit.. Meeting one more person, right, that's a 1%..

I meet one more person and all of a sudden it might multiply because then I meet their friends, I meet their friends.. - That's it.. - Things like that.. So I think there are 1% hacks that have nothing to do with coding.. - Oh absolutely.. - Yeah, yeah.. - I think this is true of everything in life.. Like there's always little ways, and again that's not to say that there aren't big discontinuous changes that you make, right? And like I would imagine law school as an example is not a 1% thing, like you don't decide to learn 1% of the law every day.. Like it's actually.. - One law a day, one law a day..

- One law a day might work.. But you actually have to go to law school at some point, and that's a big thing, and my guess is it's been quite helpful for you, it's been for a lot of people.. So it's not that there's no value in discontinuous changes.. But this little, kind of improve everyday thing can help in a lot of realms, not just engineering.. - I would say my favorite one of those is listening to audio books while I exercise, right, 'cause it's like you're getting exercise, you're helping improve your longevity and your health, Steve and you're also getting knowledge of whatever topic that you want.. So for me that's a 1%.. -

Great.. so in a minute I'm gonna open it up to the audience and I'm gonna let you ask your burning questions.. So you can start thinking about that.. And I want to use this as an opportunity to sort of look at the flip side..

Yes, we all have superpowers, but I think we also have fatal flaws, right? And sometimes we all know that we sometimes are incompetent at knowing we're incompetent.. And how do you figure out where your flaws are, and how to fix them? What's the best way to address that? - Well, I just came off of an interesting experience, so for those of you who are familiar with the Touchy Feely class at Stanford interpersonal dynamics, I just, you can take it after Stanford lo and behold, which I found out recently.. And the minute that I found that out I signed myself up.. And I took a class where it was me essentially, and eight startup founders and leaders in a room for an entire weekend.. And got really transparent feedback about my flaws.. And I think that it's, and everyone in that room did, and everyone was really open to it.. And for me I've discovered actually that, I think along with learning one of my strengths is getting a lot of feedback and responding very quickly to feedback.. And the way that I do that is by soliciting a lot of feedback and actually asking people.. You know you never realize you work so closely with people all the time and you think, oh you know what they think of you.. But actually if you just sit down and say, okay you know what screw performance reviews, screw the feedback cycle, Steve how can I work better with you? And you know what, we don't have to talk about it in this one-on-one, can you come back next week and actually put some thought into it, and tell me what are three things I can do to make our working relationship better, and to help you do your job more easily? You'll learn so much more..

People are really nice in performance reviews because they know that it matters for your career, and they want to help you.. But if you actually ask for feedback, you'll get some really honest answers.. And you'll get answers like, I need you to back off of one of this area because I'm actually trying my hardest.. And you know, I need you to understand that I'm doing as much as I can do.. And those types of answers in context and in situations, I personally find to be so much more helpful than just generic statements about, oh you know you are this way as opposed to, you have a particular behavior that if you change would make our working relationship much better.. - So, just to follow up, so when you get this feedback, is it pretty straightforward to fix it? I mean, those were things that were very tactical.. Like, you know can you back off? Were there any feedback that you got that was felt like it was very personal about you, that you thought, wow that's who I am, that's gonna be something that's really difficult to change? - It's possible, I think there are multiple ways to take feedback, right? You can take it as that's who I am.. And I think there are people who can give feedback in a way that is hurtful.. And so hopefully people will give you feedback not in a way that is hurtful.. But I think you have to trust someone enough to give you feedback and then to take it and say, okay they're not insulting my personality, they're talking about a couple of behaviors..

And they're talking about, I mean someone gave me feedback recently, and said, like this is within like, I don't know you outside of work, like this is just feedback within work.. I am specifically not talking about your personality overall I'm talking about like these specific behaviors.. And that's really helpful.. And I think you need, like you can ask for that.. But then you can also mentally talk yourself into this person doesn't know all of me.. Let me vet that feedback with others.. For example one of the pieces of feedback I got this weekend that totally comfortable sharing, is that my emotional range seemed very limited in these interactions.. That I had sort of one cadence.. And, right, Steve I don't know if you know me well enough for this, but when I shared it with people who I'm close to, and when I shared it with my team at work, they said, what you? (laughs) You get really excited and you also, you know get disappointed and you're not afraid to show when you're disappointed.. And you're pretty human in who you are..

And so just being aware to of the context and vetting out feedback with other people can help you not take it as personally.. And then to follow up with questions.. You said that you know, what were the situations that caused you to say that feedback? How would you have liked to see me behave differently? What suggestions do you have for things that I can do and things that I can change? I think part of the reason I'm good at responding to feedback is because I treat it as almost like user research and user design.. Great, how many questions can I ask to understand the whole scope of what's going on here? - I think for a lot of people they would think that's a very brave thing to do, you know, to ask for feedback because you might hear something you actually don't want to hear that's hard to hear.. So what do you think? - I think that's right, and I think that's the point.. I think actually in a funny way what you want to hear when you ask for feed, if you're doing it right, is maybe not the right word.. But if you're doing it right, then you want to get stuff you don't want to hear.. 'Cause if all you hear is stuff that you want to hear then like it's nice to get praise.. It's not that helpful, right? Like you actually want stuff that's hard to hear because it's actually the hard stuff to work on that's impacting you.. I have a slightly different, not a different approach to it, but I just have to add on to Juliet's theory for this..

I think there are people whose superpower is doing this very well and particularly they tend to take roles, or should take roles as executive coaches.. And I've worked with, I think it's tough when you build and run an organization to get feedback very, very consistently.. Because everybody there works for you in some capacity, and so you get less honest.. Some say you don't, and there are people who are really good at that sort of giving feedback to people they work for.. But I think it's harder, or maybe I just suck at it, and this is one of my fatal flaws.. Either way, the way I've found to mitigate this is by hiring an executive coach whose superpower is to go around and get this feedback.. And then frame it in a way that is not personal, but is also not taking the edge off it, right? 'Cause what you want is somebody who can go through and say, hey here's all the stuff.. In their head this person made this very personal attack and I'm gonna reframe that to something which is not like, it's okay don't worry about it, but it's also not personal.. It's here's what I think they were trying to say, and here's some ways you can start to think about working on it.. It also gives you a nice hack for accountability 'cause you have somebody who can help

hold you accountable to the changes you're trying to make..

Which can be really hard 'cause these are behaviors you've adopted because they worked for you for the last 10 years of your life.. - You know it's interesting I'm just gonna push back on one thing you said because you said praise isn't useful.. I would say that praise is really useful in parallel with feedback about what you can improve.. Because that helps you understand what you do really well.. - Right? - I think that's right.. - Right, so.. - Yeah.. - But if you already know what you're good at, then the feedback is helpful.. - I think that's right.. - Great, so I'm curious anyone have a question in the audience? Okay right over here, stand up please..

- [Man] I had a question for Jeff.. - Steve.. - [Man] Steve, sorry.. (crowd laughs) - That's his middle name I'm sure.. - J name, but the guy, so we're cool.. Sorry, okay.. - [Man] (mumbles) I wanted to ask you a little bit about the methodology of continuing and just keeping going, which you pointed to as your superpower.. I wanted to ask you how do you balance that with a mindset of failing fast when something like actually isn't working, and it's wasting time to keep going.. Are there times when when that clouds your vision, when you should actually stop (mumbles)? - I'm gonna repeat it, so the question is, okay endurance is great but sometimes if you're failing you should just give up and say, you know what let's sort of count our losses and do something different.. Like when does endurance get in the way? - Yeah, I think that's a very insightful question..

And I think there's something to be said there about, to this point about not only superpowers, but fatal flaws.. There's also, generally this concept right of your biggest strength also is potentially your biggest weakness.. And I think fundamentally I struggle with that a lot.. Which is, it's really easy to keep going and put your head down.. And it's for me it's very hard to to cut my losses early, 'cause I'm like, ah I just try harder I can probably make it work.. And like nine times out of 10 I can.. And the 10th time I waste a lot more time doing it.. I think it's something I have become more and more aware of over time and something I try to be thoughtful about.. The biggest way I've found to do that is through, basically talking to kind of friends and mentors and like outside people, because it lets me divorce the pain from the, like is this likely to succeed or not? Because they're not experiencing the pain, generally, of kind of pushing on for whatever it is.. And they can either say like, no, yeah, looks like you're almost there..

Or you know, no you're really this is hopeless, get out.. And I know I'm not bailing 'cause like, oh man this is really hard, 'cause they don't care it's hard.. So, but it's hard, and it's something I've made that mistake many of times in pursuing thing's longer than I should have.. - Interesting, what do you think? - So I'm curious Steve when you when you say that, I think with every good idea there, I usually find that there are about 50% of people who are constantly, who will always say this won't work.. And you know, if you're lucky you get 50% of people who will say this will work.. But there always are people regardless of how good the idea is when it's early enough who will tell you, no throw in the towel.. So when you're relying on other people rather than yourself for that guidance, how do you distinguish between those? - So I think it's really important you don't rely on them, you just look for it as another signal.. - Okay.. - And say, hey how am I feeling about this, and how are these people reacting? And it can't be one.. And by the way that I don't know this is the right answer 'cause I'm still not good at this, but I've made me a little bit better at it..

I think you look at five or 10 people and you have track records, and you say, hey are these people good at evaluating this? It's a little bit, it's really important to frame the question correctly.. Right, so it's not like is this idea a good idea or not? Like in the case of a startup and my experience, like nine out of 10 people are gonna tell you it's a terrible idea.. And the general thinking there is that if it was already good it would have happened, and somebody else would have done it.. And so it's pretty logical that most people are gonna think it's a bad idea, so that's a slightly different one.. But in the sense of like I'm in this situation, is my current kind of course in speed gonna carry me through to where I want to go? I think you can frame it in a way that more people will give you better answers, but it's still more of a judgment call, right.. And maybe once that balance shifts to like 90% of your friends are saying like, what are you doing? You know it's maybe more time to pull the ripcord, then when you know just a couple people are nah saying.. It's also important by the way you get people who care enough about you but not too much.. Like your parents, pretty bad for this.. - You know it's quite interesting I find that all the time.. - Yeah..

- You know, that it's better to ask people who are not so close to the situation that they, their judgment is actually clouded.. - Yeah.. - Yeah.. Okay, I think there was another question, yes? - [Woman] Hi, so what if you have a passion or an interest in a field that your superpower is not necessarily in the hard skills? Do you think that you can still succeed in that field? And if so, which roles, or what kind of things would you suggest focusing on until you're able to get to a stage (muffled out by coughing), kind of comfy hard skills that you need to get to the next level? - Okay, so the question is, there are often times where you're passionate about something, but you might not have the skills yet to actually contribute to that field.. What are the soft skills or the other opportunities in that discipline that allow you to get your foot in the door as you're building those other skills? - That's a fantastic question.. Definitely soft skills become more and more important as you move further in your career, right? And there's a point at which it flips and they are far more important than the hard skills are.. I think it is, the hard skills don't necessarily need to be your superpower.. But getting those will make your soft skills so much more credible.. So for example, I remember being told when I was in college that I should get the hardest engineering degree that I possibly could.. And I didn't, I designed my own..

And I regret that, I regret not digging deeper into hard engineering skills.. It's not that it would have been my superpower and I always knew that it wouldn't, but I think if you have those soft skills to layer on top of it, you will always have

opportunities to exercise those soft skills because life tests your soft skills each and every day.. And if you have at least a certain level of credibility in harder skills, you'll be able to get past that period, and then your soft skills will start to shine really quickly.. So if I were you I would encourage you to go at getting those hard skills, be really diligent, work hard, it's gonna be a slog.. And then allow your soft skills to shine from there.. That would be my advice, some of which I took, and some of which I didn't.. - You know, it's interesting that's sort of the model that often gets floated around of the t-shaped person, the person who has a depth of knowledge and at least one discipline.. But the breadth of knowledge and the skills that allow you to work across disciplines, so it's about thinking of yourself as a t-shaped person that allows you to really be successful.. What do you think? - I agree, I think there's a lot to be said for acquiring some of the hard skills, even if they're not your superpower just to have credibility and knowledge.. I also think there's a lot to be said for, I can't think of the top of my head any problem areas or fields where the soft skills aren't also quite important..

And so they might not be as glamorous or as exciting in the early days of something, right? But you can almost always find a way to help and that gets you involved, and that gets you both building the hard skills and also more and more kind of expertise in that area.. So as you get deeper into your career you have more and more, right, and so you can get into classic kind of, you know, you're starting a technology company and it's Stanford, we're in the Technology Ventures program, and it's like, well you know what is somebody who's not writing code do in the first year of a software company? There's all a lot, right? Now it doesn't mean you need five people who don't have engineering degrees and one engineer, 'cause that doesn't work out that well.. But there's a lot of stuff to do and I don't mean like kind of dumb stuff, right, like you know, like, yes you need to get an office and get benefits set up and administrative stuff.. But there's actually, there's user research, there's partnership conversations, there's fundraisers, there's a bunch of stuff that needs soft skills.. You can find a way to help.. And then over time as the company grows there's even more and more need for soft skills.. - And the more that you have hard skills, I would say even in that role, hard skills are really important because you'll be so much more creditable with engineering teams, and you'll actually understand the pain and problems that they're going through.. And you'll be able to better take back say user research or fundraising feedback, and in a way that's useful to the team, so hard skills are always helpful.. - So I think back over my long career and your short careers I'm sure that there have been people who've been incredibly encouraging and some who have been discouraging.. Can you think of examples of someone at a pivotal moment who said something or did something that really allowed your passions and your superpower to blossom, because they did or said something at just the right time that really allowed that to happen? Or on the flip side, someone who did just the opposite? - There's someone for me that comes to mind immediately..

So when I was at Opower, I was working in product and the core area of the company's product.. And having a great time working with a really awesome team.. And then someone came to me and said, do you want to join my team I'm on the innovation team and we're gonna be exploring a new market? Here's my like rough idea for it in two sentences.. That's basically all I got, what do you think? And I went around and I talked to various folks within the company, and every single person said, it will be the opportunity of a lifetime for you to work for him.. And they said part of that was because he had such a strong superpower in being an idea person.. He was a really strong innovator, he could see opportunities, but he wasn't very good at making them definite, and bringing them to concreteness.. I once had the opportunity to talk with Vinod Khosla about this and he used an analogy that I really like.. Which is, there are people who define Mount Everest and what that grand vision is.. And then there are people who define what base camp is, and what the path, what base camp looks like, how to get from here to base camp, and then have some idea of how you're gonna get from base camp to the top of Mount Everest.. And he gave me the opportunity to pair with him, so that I could define what that base camp was..

And then help us get up there and help us get up to the top of the mountain.. And for me that was a pivotal moment because it showed me that that is the area that I really like.. That I'm not gonna be the person who's defining Mount Everest, that's not my superpower.. But if we've got an idea, I can define base camp and have the hunger and drive and endurance to go after and get it.. And that was really pivotal for me, just because he saw that spark in me that that would be something that I could do and encouraged me to go and explore something new.. And ultimately I think that's what great managers and leaders do, is they're able to see what an individual person might be great at, give them an opportunity to go and shine in that area.. So I have a lot of gratitude for that.. - Great.. - I have some similar and I've had a lot of people who are very encouraging.. But the one that comes to mind ironically when you mentioned that was the opposite, which somebody who was very discouraging, but triggered I guess I think was my superpower..

About eight years ago I was in a bad motorcycle crash out on highway nine.. And I was riding along with some friends and about 16 inch thick eucalyptus tree fell on my head.. And I woke up, I was unconscious and they thought I was dead for a while.. And I woke up and one of my buddies like, dude a tree fell on you.. And I was like, that's really embarrassing, I rode my bike into a tree.. He said, no, no, it actually fell on you, and it was like a cartoon, like it clotheslined me as I rode past.. Worst part of this whole story is he was wearing a helmet cam, but it was out of memory.. So always change your memory cards on your helmet cam.. So anyways, I got airlifted to Stanford.. It turned out that this tree had ripped two nerves off my spine and so I couldn't use my left arm for a while..

Like, literally it just wouldn't move, it just kind of hung there.. And I was training for Ironman at the time, and I was having this conversation with this, I think it was a med student or maybe a resident at Stanford and I said like, hey like I got to get back to training, not really realizing how serious this was.. Like when can I start running again? And this guy's like, are you kidding me? You're never gonna run again in your life.. And my immediate reaction was like, F you.. What do you know, you're

just a doctor.. (crowd laughs) And I got stubborn very quickly, and did a bunch of research, and, and, and, found these guys up in Rochester, Minnesota who can reattach nerves.. Went through a bunch of surgeries blah, blah, blah, and about a year later finished my first Ironman post accident, and I finished it significantly faster than I PRed previously before I got injured.. And then went on to run longer and longer races.. And I never got the doctor's name to go back and follow up with him.. But in a funny way I actually really owe him thank you in a sense 'cause it literally, the reaction was very immediate and like, no..

Like I'm going to prove you wrong, not only because it's my life and I want to have use of my arm again, but because like you said I couldn't do it.. - Wow.. - That's amazing.. - What an amazing story.. - It was.. - That is like, yeah.. (crowd applauds) - It doesn't deserve clapping.. - It sure does, it sure does, that's amazing.. But what endurance and persistence? - It was full of stubbornness.. - And stubbornness, that's so great..

Do we have another question, yes over here.. - [Man] In that vain, what is it that encourages you to become 1% better at something that you might already be the best at in your company? And then as leaders, how do you encourage other people to be that as well? - So the question is, how do you motivate yourself to get 1% better even when you already are the best at what you do in your organization? - Ultimately for me it comes down to what your goal is, right? Like if your goal is just to get better as a person, I think that's a good goal for sure.. But ultimately, when I'm on a team my goal is helping our team achieve whatever our team's goal is.. And so I might be the best in the company, but that is completely irrelevant.. What's relevant is how can I be the absolute best in helping go after what our goal is.. And so I think always having that benchmark is really important.. And can motivate you, and particularly can motivate members of your team as well.. I've been fortunate that I've always been a member of teams that have a really clear mission and a really clear vision, and that that can always be used to inspire people.. You know, every, all hands and every team meeting, it's always about what the broader goal is and how we're going about getting there.. And I think the best way to align yourself to improve is if it's not just in the service of yourself, but if it's in the service of the broader team goal..

- I think that's a really good answer, and purpose and mission.. I also think there's a set of people who are just intrinsically motivated to self improve, 'cause that's fun, entertaining, I don't know exactly what.. Like I find that way, I just I like improving 'cause I just, there's something inside my head that's OCD that's kind of like, oh I'm 1% faster today, like that's a good thing.. I don't know how you teach that or build that in an organization other than through hiring.. At Hearsay we focused a lot on hiring people who were, who thought that way.. And who just kind of were believers in continuous improvement for the sake of just getting better, like it was a noble goal.. One of the guys I work with said it really, really well, and I quote it all the time, his name is Mark Gilbert, said that perfection is the goal, but it's not the destination.. Meaning that like, you're never actually gonna get there, so there's no finish line.. Like you just keep going.. But that's kind of part of the fun part, like how boring would it be if you didn't need to improve anymore you just sat there? But I don't know how you teach that to an organization, I think you'd largely drive that through mission and purpose as opposed to just telling people to get better..

- Okay, so I'm gonna ask the last question.. So I want you to flashback to when you were a student here, whether it's 11 years, 14 years ago that you were sitting here.. And to think what you wish you knew when you were back here as a student.. - So I've got one.. I think there's this notion that you have when you're at Stanford that the world is your oyster.. And to a large extent it is, right? It is something that you can take advantage of because there are so many opportunities, and so many opportunities to contribute.. But I also think there's this notion that life is gonna be up and to the right, you know, the same as startup returns are.. And you're gonna go, and you're gonna get the perfect job after you graduate, and you're gonna have figured out what you want to do.. And I think what's the most beautiful about finding your superpower and also finding out what you're really called to do is that it's a really messy process.. And if you want, you can be methodical about this messiness..

I haven't read that much of Designing Your Life, but I read sort of 20% of it enough to get the gist.. And I think that the idea of testing out different areas and deciding which one of them is gonna be most suitable for you is a really good one.. The problem is that when you find out that an area isn't the area that you want to go into, you have a moment that where you have to pivot.. And pivots are not, they're not easy if you're a startup, they're probably just as hard if not harder if you're a person.. And I think pivot is a nice word for what this feels like, I prefer Ben Horowitz's WFIO acronym, which stands for we're fucked it's over.. Tina told me I could swear.. (laughs) And it feels like we're fucked, it's over, right? It's a really harrowing moment where you think I was on this path and this is what I was gonna do, and this was gonna be my identity, and oh crap it did not work out.. What am I going to do now? And those moments feel the scariest, but they don't mean that you're doing it wrong, they mean that you're doing it right.. They mean that you tried something so hard that you really could get a great insight into whether it was right for you or not.. You gave it a solid go..

And this applies to all aspects of your life.. And then when you're able to pivot from that and say, okay what do I learn from this, and how does it make me stronger? That's where the biggest growth opportunity happens, is it happens in those moments.. One of my favorite meditation teacher says that you know, in meditation the actual part of meditating is when you figure out that you're screwing up and your mind is getting off in your thoughts.. And then you bring yourself back to your thoughts, that's meditating.. And that is life, and that is learning too, in the we're fucked it's over moments.. Where you're realizing that you've screwed it up, and you need to find another path.. And what's that path gonna be and how are you gonna get there? And so you know, Stanford makes a lot of things really easy for us, I definitely felt like Stanford was a nice and

easy and safe environment.. And the real world can be that way, but it also can be more challenging.. And endurance and perseverance help, but so does an attitude of willing to learn through whatever life throws at you.. And being willing to pivot through those moments..

- Thank you.. - I think that's, yeah, I think that's awesome.. And the way I would add on to that, I would say is, don't take it so seriously.. Like life is a game.. And I find like when I was here I was so worried about what was next and was I'm maximizing everything? And was I improved my 1% a day? And was I going, and I just, the more I go through stuff the more I just kind of like let go a little bit.. And it doesn't mean you don't work really hard, and it doesn't mean you don't learn a ton of stuff, and doesn't mean you don't go through really hard stuff.. 'Cause Juliet's absolutely right, like the more of those you go through the more fun it is at some level.. And at some point you begin to embrace the suck and just like, you know, this is hard and we're fucked it's over.. And oh wow, okay I feel that's comfortable and I'm there again, like what do I do next? But it's like, enjoy it.. Like just go through it and have fun and relax a little bit..

That doesn't mean you know, go like smoke weed in Tahoe all year.. But, that's not as bad as cursing right? - No.. - 'Kay.. (laughs) - And it's legal.. - It's legal, that's okay.. - You can do it, honestly you can do it.. - Okay sorry.. No but it's not, that's not to say don't work hard, don't try to excel, all these things.. But like just enjoy the whole thing and realize that like there's a bit of chaos to this all, right? And I've read just enough chaos theory to know the name, and it's true, like it makes sense.. Everything is kind of chaotic and you can be the most put together planned out methodical intense type A person, and like the optimal Stanford student..

Like genetically engineered Stanford student.. And it won't all work.. And that's okay.. Like the most interesting, some of the best things I've done in my life have been things I did merely for the reason that it seemed like it would create a good story.. And like sure enough it did create a good story, but actually turned out to be really fun and memorable, whether or not I ever told that story to anybody 'cause it was just fun.. (crowd applauds) (upbeat electronic music)..