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In 2012, inspired by the HR headaches they'd observed working for technology companies, Sarah Nahm and a few friends founded Lever, a talent recruitment platform aimed at transforming the hiring process with intuitive yet data-driven software. Two years later, in 2014, she was named CEO. Based on her experiences designing what became Lever and then leading the company, she puts forward a model of entrepreneurial leadership that is about more than just stubborn confidence, and thrives by embracing the unknown and learning how to observe and trust others. [Note: explicit language]

Transcript

- [Narrator] Who you are defines how you build.. - I, you know, I don't know about any of you, but you know 10 years ago I feel like Stanford actually was a really different place for entrepreneurship.. You know my freshman year was the first year that Facebook was available to incoming students.. And this kind of notion of like the young entrepreneur like wasn't even really a concept, right? And very quickly in that period we went through all this incredible transformation in the tech industry.. We obviously saw the rise of the sort of the hacker in a hoodie.. We saw just this incredible kind of transformation of a whole bunch of industries.. We also saw the 2008 bubble kind of come in for tech and really I think coming out of that.. We had a lot of really incredible mythologies about technology.. I think the whole world was looking at Silicon Valley and they saw these paradigms, these trophs, these stereotypes dare I say, of what it meant to be a successful entrepreneur.. There was I think a prevailing idea that you were a coder, that you had a ton of confidence, that you walked around with this vision that propelled you into the future and you didn't care what anybody else had to say or think about it..

And I think now when you scan the headlines there's a really different story about that kind of entrepreneurship and I'm super excited to be up here because I personally feel really passionately that we as stewards of a technology community we need to create a much richer and more diverse set role models for leadership.. And that's not said lightly because frankly following a pattern of success, like the pathway that others have created, that's actually literally the way that venture capitalists make investments, that literally why a lot of you are probably showing up to hear from someone like me to hear about the wisdom and the knowledge of the people that came before you.. So it's scarier and it's harder to invent a different template for success, right? It's actually riskier and it's put more of yourself at stake to actually go out there and try to lead in a way that is different.. And I've had that tension and conflict in a lot of my key moments that I've had leading up to where I am today and I'm hoping to share some of that with you overall.. But I mean if I were to just describe what my journey has been it's very much been about learning to reinvent myself, but to actually kind of have ownership over that.. It's been learning how to believe in others who believed in me.. And then lastly I think it's about learning how to kind of tie my own success to creating success for others.. And that's really like been the three chapters of my journey to get to speaking in front of you today.. So, if that's what we're gonna cover I do wanna at least do like a little bit of an introduction.. So, if 11 years ago I was sitting here at Stanford where was I to get to that point? So I grew up all over the U.S..

You probably wouldn't guess where I'm from.. I'm from Birmingham, Alabama, deep South.. I was one of two non-white people in my high school in a deeply segregated community.. I think growing up there taught me a ton about respecting kind of differences in the world and the different points of view.. And by the way in Alabama nobody went to work in technology and nobody certainly went West to California to go to school.. So when I found my way out here it was so interesting it was the most diverse community I've ever been in.. And I think when I came to Stanford there was just like so much kind of coming together in terms of ideas, different people, different, coming from different places.. I ultimately found a home in the Design Program here.. And, oh my gosh, design was so much, it just, I felt like I was using all parts of my brain it was like you were combining technology and engineering with business and then also psychology and art, and for me that was just like a huge kind of transformation for me which I can talk about later.. And then ultimately graduating from Stanford I thought I was for sure gonna go down this kind of design path, but kind of took me by surprise, I ended up in technology and spent my first few years out of college at Google during big growth period for them doing a lot of different things..

I was a speech writer for Marissa Mayer and then went and spent a lot of time doing growth for the Chrome browser.. And quit Google, much to the chagrin of my parents, spent a few years wandering in the wilderness to eventually found Lever.. A lot of people ask me how did I found Lever? You know really founding a company is a, for me at least, it was something that caught me by surprise and I think that probably the first thing that I would impart to you is like how you make choices in your life really is such a defining characteristic of your leadership.. So for better for worse, every time I face like a juncture in my life I look down one path and you can see it really clearly, you can see it all mapped out, you know exactly how it's gonna go.. And then there's this other path and it makes no sense and you can't see anything about it, I always choose the second path.. And so I had been pretty comfortable at Google.. I had been growing a lot in my role.. I'd gotten to work with some incredible people and then I chose to leave.. And I think I chose to leave because I didn't know what would happen.. And I knew that at that point in my life, having been on this straight and narrow path of Stanford, and then Google, I wanted to put myself in a position where I'd have to take real agency over my choices, and over my life..

And I don't know if any of you have had that chance to really be put in a position where the only thing nudging you forward is gonna be you taking that step, and you kind of making a concrete decision.. And so I cut myself off from all the paths.. And in doing that really discovered a lot about myself.. And I think that probably the number one skill that I discovered about myself was how to design myself, and how to redesign myself.. And that has been a skill that I use constantly because as CEO at Lever I have to reinvent myself, and my job, every six months.. And so what it was like in that period was really trying to understand like what I valued, what I saw in the world like what resonated and I think more than anything the people that I gravitated to and the values we might share together.. So at that time I was working with a lot of different entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley on a lot of different problems.. Just putting myself in situations, right, I had to see how I'd react and see kind of what, what I would end up gravitating to.. And I ended up falling in with some old, old friends of mine, some folks I knew from Stanford and Google and we had kept in touch through the same burning man-camp, who would eventually become my co-founders at Lever.. And you know there's all these mythologies, right, that exist about how companies get founded and I'll be super honest, like none of those myths applied to us..

When we kind of found ourselves together we were really just three people.. We didn't know anything about what we wanted to do, we didn't know anything about some big vision that we had for the world, but we did know that we were really attracted to a change that was happening in the world.. And really for us at that time the change that was happening in the world was inside of every organization we saw this really big shift where you used to kind of work at a job to get paid.. And then suddenly people were working jobs to make a difference.. And they were working jobs to have impact.. They were working jobs to grow.. I basically would have conversations with all my friends and more often then not we would talk about whether we were fulfilled in our work.. And that's a huge change from our parents generation, the generation before that.. And really I think if I zoom out and talk about it from a macro culture and macro economic standpoint, what we had stumbled upon was like there was a literal generational shift happening in the work force.. Millennials were entering the workforce with a completely different set of cultural values..

You also saw the nature of work really changing as technology transformed every single industry out there, the types of work that was happening out there.. Airlines were now software and logistics companies.. Like hotel chains were now actually experience companies.. Work was really changing and the people doing the work was changing.. And that's essentially the kernel of what would become Lever.. So for those of you who don't know Lever is a company in the hiring and recruitment space.. So we build the software that other organizations use to run an entire end-to-end talent strategy.. Of course if any of you have ever looked for a job you might have actually used Lever.. We power a lot of the job pages that are online so when you apply to a job that's just the tip of the iceberg of all the software that we have behind the scenes to help an organization run the entire process that it takes to bring talent into the organization.. And I think what we decided to think about that problem differently was to recognize that this wasn't a transaction, it wasn't like just you post a job and you hire somebody..

But there was actually kind of the relationship that people were having to organizations and it was getting more complex, and it was getting richer and nobody had really entered that space to create what would eventually be like a talent-relationship management solution, and long story short we saw an opportunity there.. So that's a little bit about Lever, but really I think what I'm telling you all this is to tell you that's the glossy kind of like story.. What it felt like at the time was completely different.. We had no idea what we wanted to do.. And what we ended up doing, and maybe this is the design program at Stanford influencing us, was to go learn from other people what it was all about.. So our first nine months as a company we spent embedded inside of hyper-growth companies, mostly technology companies, watching them as they went through incredible amount of scale.. So we were really employing like, kind of like, user research methods and sort of like almost like anthropological-style observation to make sure that we weren't the entrepreneurs that were just saying, this is what we think is happening in the world and then like blindly following it.. We chose instead to actually observe and watch kind of the entire, the entire process of what it really took for an organization to hire and study that patiently for nine months in order for us to even get an inkling on what we wanted to do, or how we were gonna disrupt something, or how are we gonna be different.. And in doing that I think we founded the company on a premise of really debunking this idea of like the startup founder that has this like idea descending from the mountain and really kind of embracing the humility of being innovative through listening, and being innovative through empathy, and being innovative through our ability to believe in other people's ability to see the future.. And I think that's why for me like believing in other people is a huge mechanism for I, where I have entrepreneurial success..

I think that a lot of our mythologies about start-up founders tell us that these are people that are just relentlessly in pursuit of some sort of inner vision that comes from inside of them.. But I personally have really embraced multiple times in my career the idea of like drawing from others and being more connected to others being the strength of my superpower so to speak.. And certainly when it comes to literally innovation, and literally coming up with new ideas for founding a company, or building a new product, we found that embedding ourselves inside of organizations and studying the way that they hired was in fact a really, really profound way for us to, to start the company.. So we got our start in roughly 2012, formed the team.. In 2013 we sort of actually found our own offices, exited that research period, started building the company.. And really I think those early days it's, it's really fascinating.. So I said that reinventing yourself is like a huge part of what it takes to be a successful entrepreneur.. I think that early start-up days really reveal why.. So nowadays we say that I'm the founder and CEO at Lever, but actually neither of those things were really true at the beginning.. When I first joined Lever I actually just joined as a team member..

I was a designer, that was my title, I had business cards, we thought we were very fancy because we had business cards.. And as a designer I obviously was a huge part of that process of doing the user research and of that process of creating kind of a sense for what our product would be and what we would build the company around.. But actually my co-founder, Nate, was our CEO and he very much embodies kind of the stereotype, or the myth, of what a great start-up CEO looks like.. He is a engineer who is very like dapper, tall, he's a very tall, white guy, very charming, very persuasive, very confident.. He's actually also really awesome like I do really love my co-founder.. And you know we kinda had like all the markings of a great stereotypical engineer, Google PM, like male CEO.. But I think what ended up kind of happening in this period is really revealing and I think for me what I would impart to everybody is I hope it stands to show that leadership in many ways is what you decide to do and what choices you make rather than kind of being born into it.. So we started kind of working quite a bit on developing a product, and of course as a designer I was literally doing design at the time.. But then since I knew our early users I also became kind of like the first person to, once we got people on our actual platform, like make sure that we were closing the feed-back loop, making sure that we were hearing kind of like how is it going, whether the, like the next things that we could build, partnering with them.. Since I knew our early customers then I went and found more customers so I quickly found myself building out our very early go-to-market engine..

And this is around the time that there were about six, eight people, really hustling, but we hadn't really taken down any serious funding yet, so everything just like racing to get to the point where we feel enough of a business that we could actually raise some serious venture capital and become like a real business.. So we were like all hands on deck, pounding super hard, trying to build this business.. And then my co-founder who's our engineer, Google PM, kind of co-founder, like super mired in all the feature requests that we had to deliver on for our customers.. So we had that rhythm of like me running the business, him running the product.. We had the whole team around obviously and then when it came to fundraise it was sort of funny because my co-founder is the CEO, but he didn't know anything about our revenue, about our numbers, about our customers, about any of the things that the investors ultimately would care about.. So we decided, all right, let's go after this together and we fund raised together, we got several term sheets in a competitive round from our series A, but it was really fascinating because that whole period I still had my business cards that said, designer.. And people would be like super confused, like why is this designer in the room, and like why is this person like here right now like trying to basically pitch us? And even in some cases when I would be on email threads with Nate, they would think I was his EA when he would cc me, so they would just sort of be like, oh yeah, my calendar blah, blah, blah.. And it was just such an interesting experience because at the end of the day like Nate and I knew what we were doing and we would be driving all up and down 280 going from San Francisco to Sand Hill Road.. And he like really gave me a lot of sanity, like really, partnered with me and acknowledging that that was like a super weird thing.. The why, why wouldn't a designer be welcome in the room? Why wouldn't someone who wasn't the CEO still be able to like legitimately lead the business, right? But this really all came to a head for us when, when really around that same time, you know my, we, we had all these, we were lucky we were able to actually successfully get several offers from VCs..

We did ultimately kind of pick one and we started to work with them and between signing a term sheet and actually getting the cash in your bank account, there's actually this period where the layers are doing stuff.. So we were in that period and it's a really happy period because you're planing for the future, you now know that you're going to be scaling the business, growing the business.. So Nate and I were locked basically up in this, the one conference room that our office had, and planning all these things for the business, it was a really great time.. And I had it in my head that, oh we were gonna hire like a head of sales and I'd like handoff all this business stuff and then go back to being a designer.. But then our third co-founder, Randal, who had the segment in our company, all hands for a number of years, called, Getting Real with Randal, so you can imagine what kind of co-founder he is.. He was always sort of a guy who spoke like the truth and he had this wisdom about him.. So Randal kind of comes into this conference room to interrupt us and he goes, guys, there's something wrong and I think if we don't fix this the company will probably fail.. And if the company fails we might as well not take the money, like blah, blah, blah, we should, we were just like, Randal, we're listening tell us, tell us what's wrong.. And he goes, the wrong person's CEO.. And I think what Randal was speaking to is just this, like this choice that we had as a company, as a founding team, as a culture frankly, about whether we would kind of continue in this model, call it like the Sheryl Sandberg to the Mark Zuckerberg model, or whether we would just right, like right this situation and actually just sort of make this switch..

There's a lot of companies where engineers and technical founders are like the CEOs of businesses, but we were a B2B

SAS software company and for the most part building the business is like kind of like the job definition of being CEO.. And it was really a decisive moment for us.. I think as a company it was probably our first diversity and inclusion moment.. It was sort of the first time we had to really ask ourselves what kind of culture do we wanna be, what kind of values do we wanna have? And frankly, Nate, it took him like 30 hours when he came in he's like, I think it's the right thing, it's like the way to go.. And for me it took me like 10 days which in seed-stage startup time is like infinity of kind of wandering around in this like weird head space because I had never saw myself being a CEO, being a founder, being a leader, all of this had happened kind of incrementally over time.. And I think that's where I kinda come back to this idea of believing in others that believe in you.. I think for the people that already know they wanna be founders of companies, entrepreneurs, CEOs, great, that is awesome.. But there's more people out there who can be those leaders that don't think of themselves that way today and I was once one of them.. And I think in that moment of like wandering through this like metaphorical desert trying to figure out this choice that I had to make and what it meant and what I wanted and what I was gonna do.. I kept ultimately returning to the people around me and how much I valued them, and their beliefs, and the things they had sacrificed, things they had like put on the line..

The team that had joined and like had signed up to work on this like what wasn't that much more than an idea with their passion and their talents and their skills.. And then also our customers like all the people who like rationally should not have been buying our software and relying on it to do all their recruiting.. They had backed us and they had thrown their weight behind us because of how much they believed in, literally in us as people.. And I think a lot of people ask me, so what was going through your head, what made you decide to say yes? It wasn't because I saw myself in that role it was because all these people around me that I trusted really profoundly saw me succeeding in that role.. So, 10 days later, I shuffle into the office, and I tell Nate and Randall, okay, I thought about it let's do this, here we go.. And they thought obviously it was a great idea.. Their support as co-founders really meant a lot to me.. And then of course we had to tell the team and that was a big milestone.. So we like hemmed and hawed about it we tried to figure it out and eventually like sort of got everybody together and told everybody and team was just like, oh yeah, that makes sense, okay, and like went back to, really, okay.. But then we actually, we're still in this period right, where we had signed the term sheet but we hadn't gotten the cash, so we had to tell our investor who is Dana Stalder, he's the general partner of Matrix Partners..

They've been in the PC business for over two decades, a really fantastic person, really fantastic firm.. So we had to tell Dana and actually that was like we were like, on no, this is like material information, we really have to tell people this, but does this, is this gonna like basically blow up the deal? Is this gonna make him kind of question like what else are you hiding from me here? You know, what else do I not know or have you not told me? And we had another moment, we're like, okay maybe we should just wait and not do this now.. It was again one of those critical choices where deciding what kind of a company we were gonna be and whether this was the right thing to do or what, that it was just another one of those moments and we ended up just saying like, fuck it, like we have to, we have to be this kind of founding team and this is the decision that we have to make.. So not knowing whether this would completely blow up the entire company and everything we'd worked for, we invited Dana over.. We sat him down in the one conference room, we had this whole thing prepared.. And so we sat him down we like all told this whole story, da, da, da, da, da, and Sarah should be CEO.. And it was one of those moments that I don't even remember well, I think I blacked out a little bit because I was so stressed out, but like time just stretches out, that sort of thing.. But what ultimately happened is Dana he kind of looks at me, I feel like he's seeing me for the first time, (laughing) and he just leans over and he goes, girl power, high five.. (audience laughing) So, needless to say, for us at least, it was the right choice.. It was the right choice and it was the hard choice, like harder for me..

I think stepping into that was really me making a huge choice about choosing to see myself in a way that I couldn't see myself on my own and choosing to redefine my idea of who I was and what I could contribute in a way that I hadn't before.. And I think that's the beauty of entrepreneurship.. I think that's what attracts talented, smart, driven people, to this painful nebulous-like journey of being an entrepreneur.. Because it sucks, like just saying, it many ways it totally sucks.. You make sacrifices, you make sacrifices with your time and your wellness and your sanity and to some degree if you're lucky to actually have, Levers now 225 people, we have two offices in San Francisco and Toronto.. We have over 2500 customers, we've raised 73 million in capital.. We are all-in-all like really on a path to success and I definitely have to say like once you have that, I mean, then there's so much responsibility that comes with that and there's a lot of pressure and there's a lot of sacrifice.. But why we choose to still be entrepreneurs and why we choose to still be on that journey is because there's just no other way to put yourself in these definitive moments where the choices that you make are just so clearly creating who you are.. And I think that for me, is again, coming back to kind of my maybe passion or the thing that I really care about a lot nowadays, is I think there's more stories to be told in entrepreneurship.. And I think it's all too easy to tell the story that the world wants to hear, and tell the story where you just like woke up one day and you knew were gonna be the f-ing like CEO of this like game-changing disruption, start-up..

And I actually, my experience, the experience of a lot of founders, a lot of CEOs that I know, it's just so much more complex, so much more human then that.. And I think what I would hope for all of you to take away from my story is really that at the end of the day it doesn't matter nearly as much your ability to see yourself in your destination.. And I think what matters more is to put yourself in a path where you have to take risks and make choices.. And in many ways like we're so fortunate to be really in the heart of Silicon Valley where there's so many people to learn from.. Where there's classes like this where there's other people you can look to as mentors.. But truly my experience has very much taught me that there, there's nothing that can replace your ability to put yourself in situations where you're not sure what you're gonna do and where

you're not sure what's gonna happen and where you have people around you that you can trust to help you see bigger and more clearly.. And where you push yourself to actually, I don't know, I guess be something more than you thought you wanted to be, or to do something more than you thought you wanted to do.. And I think that to me that's what authentic leadership is and to me I think if more people, not only made those choices, but shared the story of their choices we would pave the way for a lot more people to find their way to leadership and for a lot more people to be role models for the generation that will come after us.. So I'm happy to take questions and talk about pretty much anything.. Okay..

- [Man] Do you think if you would've brought up the company not in Silicon Valley, but somewhere else, you would've had the same results? - Should I repeat the questions? The question was, if we had maybe gotten started, or incubated outside of Silicon Valley would we have had the same question, would we have formed the same company with the same results? You know I, I, literally no.. I think like the situations you put yourself in really influenced you and the things you choose to study and the models and templates that you're exposed to matter tremendously, so absolutely not.. I think if we had exposed ourselves to different inputs we would've gotten a lot further; however, as we've scaled as a company we have very consciously brought in influences from other types of organizations, other types of customers.. We've tried to mix in a lot of our influences, so to speak, to consciously broaden who we're serving and the impact that we can have and the solutions that we imagine are possible.. We obviously continue that design thinking kind of methodology in the company today to do all of our ongoing R&D and to some degree even influencing other parts of the business.. So we are really conscious about diversifying the models and the customers and the problems that we're exposed to so that we can keep, keep enriching and broadening the solutions we can deliver.. Great question.. Yeah.. - [Man] What is the hardest part in building your company, and how did you manage this? - The hardest part in building my company, let's see, people.. I have a feeling you're gonna hear that from a lot of the entrepreneurs in this Speakers Series, but there's kinda this idea about technology companies in particular that it's kind of all about these like systems, and structures, and like these kind of sciency things, but a lot of it is about people and I think in particular as a CEO you are, you are the story teller of the business..

You're trying to tell the story of your company not just to your perspective customers, but to all the people inside the company.. You have to tell them what you're doing in a way that's simple enough that everybody can actually see themselves in it and can run as fast as possible in the same direction.. Simplicity is really a superpower, it's one I'm still refining.. It's one I'm still working on.. So I think the hardest part is being able to be a leader to larger and larger and larger sets of people who have greater and greater kind of diversity in what their jobs are, what they care about, or the tensions between them and to keep a company simple so that everybody can actually run in the same direction, that's definitely the hardest part, yeah.. - [Man] Like when you and your co-founders started the company with the idea that you were inspired by the space you were talking about and so decided to do something about it, or did you kind of wanna, did everyone wanna start a company and then look for the closest space they were interested in? Does that make sense? - Yeah, I mean, so the question is like, did we, were we inspired by the space and then made the company, were there other, like how did we end up? And the answer is like, yes, you know.. I think I tried to convey this, but maybe not vividly enough.. It's confusing at the beginning.. Like you don't really know what you're doing.. You're a, I think like the most important thing you're doing is your exposing yourself to a lot of interesting ideas and surrounding yourself with the people that really like draw out the kind of creativity and like ingenuity in each other..

I think the most important thing you do in the early, early stages, is you find the people you wanna work with.. And in many ways like finding the people that mesh with you it does involve some degree of like finding the problems in common, or passion for problems in common.. We all, for example, loved working on the future of work.. That was something we were just naturally passionate about, it drew us together, it was something that was really obvious like in a time when everybody was building mobile apps and like companies that ended in dot L-Y.. Were were all about B2B software and that was pretty rare and special and I remember that being like a huge draw for why my co-founders and I loved working together.. But yeah in the very beginning you don't really know what you're doing, but the most important thing is to find the right people to go through that exploration phase together with.. Yeah? - [Woman] I have two questions.. One, is that HR is a highly competitive space, and a highly entrenched space, there's like big players and, so I was curious like what do you think made you guys successful? And two is like, do you think you would have been successful if you had just like (mumbles) or do you think actually getting funding was like, because ultimately you care about getting customer money, but like you think you would have, do you think any funding actually got you in with certain customers as well? - So that was a two-parter.. So the question was, with HR being a competitive space what made us succeed? And then the second question is, do I think venture capital was necessary for our success? So, the jury's out, we haven't succeeded yet, we're on this path though, I guess I'll caveat with that.. HR is an interesting category..

I actually think all categories there's some degree of, there's periods and waves of evolution.. I think actually HR technology is going through a wave that, you know, this happens every 15, 20 years, in every technology category.. So timing is really huge for picking when you focus on an area and whether or not, you have a chance at success.. So I think for us what helped us break through in a category that's very old, like ever since there has been software there has been software to do our problem.. We're therefore in a replacement market and so we're selling something better, a next generation version of something people already have, not inventing something out of the blue.. So what helped us were these macro economic factors I mentioned.. That there's a new workforce, that actually there's been this massive digital transformation of everything we do.. So you used to, believe it or not, like give a paper resume to an employer to evaluate them.. Obviously we digitized that into software and we digitized job ads into like Monster.com and Indeed and these online platforms.. But there

was another kind of wave of digital transformation where truly like one-to-one relationships, the rise of the relationship was definitely a concept that was driving and fueling like a completely different way for organizations to actually proactively reach out to people..

Like send them email, send them LinkedIn, send them text messages in some cases to proactively engage talent instead of just like posting a job and getting applications.. So for us there were these macroeconomic factors that had changed about the world that had triggered this category to go through one of these transformations that do happen every so often.. And then whether or not venture capital was critical to our success? You know I tell a lot of people there's a lot of ways to scale a company and they're just really different.. And certainly if you go for a VC-backed growth strategy, I mean that's gonna drive and determine a lot of your priorities, a lot of the decisions you make down the road.. I've enjoyed working with venture capital.. I can't even fathom a day when you would like mortgage your house to be able to pursue like an idea.. I think venture capital gets a bad rep sometimes because there's all these stories about the fact that they're capitalists, it's in the name people, venture capitalists, it's a clear, it's a clear relationship.. I think it's all about being as selective with the VCs that you partner with as the people that you co-found your company with, or the people that you hire.. I, we have always like had a luxury of choosing kind of like who we wanna work with and we've optimized for choosing with people that feel like people I want to work with for a decade.. And I think that makes a huge difference..

So I personally have felt that we have liked being on that high-growth, venture-backed path, it's not without its challenges, you do feel a little bit like you're on a treadmill.. But I think the key to making that successful is remembering that, don't go for the brand names, or the sexiness, or whatever, go, like evaluate those people just like you would evaluate anybody that you were gonna work with.. Yeah? - [Woman] So you mentioned design thinking (mic not picking up voice) like you said how you did a Stanford design program and leveraging that (mic not picking up voice).. So how have those skills helped you with your career? - Oh my gosh.. The question was, how has design thinking helped me in my career.. Gosh, I could do a whole hour-long talk about that.. So I can't help but be a designer, right? It's like so much of how I formulated my way of solving problems, my way of looking at the world, my way of interacting with others, it's what I try to bring to my CEO job, to being a founder.. I think in a way, I don't get to like literally design the product anymore, much to my, you know, single tear, but what I do do is use basically the same skill set in designing my company.. So instead of user research I'm doing research, but my employees and my customers are my users.. And instead of the product being the product, the product is our strategy, the product is our culture, the product is the company, right? And so I actually use the same skills..

I try to use, I feel like a lot of design thinking is about how you listen to others and listen to both what people say and what they don't say, or what they're trying to express.. Identifying needs, both explicit needs and latent needs, and being able to actually articulate needs not necessarily solutions.. Because as soon as you anchor on a solution it's a whole difference of, I need a ladder versus I need to reach something on a high shelf, right? So I think being able to separate out needs and solutions and then being able to actually lead a lot of people in generating lots of solutions, different solutions, alternative solutions.. That process is so huge because when you have cash limitations, bandwidth constraints, like when you don't have that hire with the explicit skill set, you gotta generate a lot of solutions 'cause basically you don't have any ladders around.. And so being able to think as creatively about out team, and our culture, and like how we solve the problems that we have with the people and the skills that we have.. That is very much a design thinking exercise.. And I think the other thing I take away from design thinking is the importance of storytelling.. And I kinda mentioned this earlier, but in many ways giving people the capability to see something that doesn't yet exist, it's such a huge part of the value that I can drive, and the value that I can give to the team.. And I do think something I love about design thinking, if any of you have the chance to take design classes here at Stanford, you should, it changed my life, no promises for you.. But I would definitely say that there's just this critical need to inspire other people in that design thinking discipline and that is just so valuable to entrepreneurs..

Yeah.. - [Man] How would you say that your work with like Google maybe kind of helped you, or what are your thoughts in terms of working in a more stable condition.. (mic not picking up voice) - So the question was, what was it like working at a kind of corporate environment before going into a start-up? You know I feel really lucky that when I was at Google I had a lot of really diverse experiences.. Some of them were very much being a part of a big kind of like machine, I was part of team that took Chrome to market and that was like a big effort and we definitely had some amazing people, that whole initiative was led by Sundar and so I got to see just like top-notch people at the top of their game.. But my first ever job at Google was a great lesson in entrepreneurship because it was essentially speech writing for Marissa Mayer, she was the VP of Search and User Experience at the time.. And nobody had ever had this job and they had no idea what it would be and I had no idea why I was doing it or why I had been selected to do it.. And it was this great experience for someone who had been at Stanford, and had just been on like this achievement path for like such a long time, to suddenly be in a job that was entirely subjective that you could not succeed at no matter how hard you tried (laughing).. Hoping with ambiguity was probably the most valuable thing that I got to experience early in my career that I think was hugely fundamental for my success as an entrepreneur.. And you know I think you could do that no matter what environment you're in.. If you're in a corporate environment just seek out situations where there isn't a path, they're every where, like at Lever we have them every where, and like people just kind of pursue them..

So I think it's more a frame of mind.. And I would definitely say why I went to Google is just following great people.. So if you follow great people, no matter what types of companies, or environments they are, I think you will learn a lot.. (audience clapping) (digitized music)..