URL: https://ecorner.stanford.edu/clips/deciding-what-not-to-do/

Clara Shih, CEO of Salesforce AI, advises entrepreneurs to be aware of things that can distract them and their team from the company's strategic goals. She lists three common culprits, giving examples from her experiences at Hearsay Systems and Salesforce.

Transcript

- If you remember one thing from my talk, 00:00:05,340 please let this be it.. The hardest thing about entrepreneurship and life isn't figuring out what to do.. It's figuring out what not to do.. Because there's so many false prophets.. There's so many distractions.. They're insidious.. And a lot of them can feel like work, but it's actually busy work.. Or it's work that you don't have to do.. You should be delegating.. And this is really hard for both Steve and me, and I think for any first-time founder to figure out, is how do you manage your time? Because again, all eyes are on you..

The rest of your company is looking to you to look at what's important, and also looking to you to see if you trust them to delegate the other areas that you don't necessarily have to be the bottleneck on.. And so, just some common culprits, some pitfalls.. The first one is to stay disciplined as a company.. I think it's very difficult.. I always remember that first year, before we had any revenue, here we were a social selling company to help advisors, financial advisors, and sales professionals hear what's happening in their networks and say the right thing to the right person at the right time.. And yet, at the time in 2009, there were no other social selling companies, but social marketing and social advertising.. There was a lot of interest in budget being put behind that.. Facebook ads had just launched.. It was a completely new thing.. And so, we would often get called to participate in RFPs to try to win business in social advertising and social branding..

It was really, really tempting.. When Coca-Cola calls you and says that, without doing anything, just by reputation, you're on their shortlist, we really came close a few times to taking our eye off the ball.. And then seven years into the company, because we had sold out so many of the insurance companies and banks that were in our addressable market, we actually did then spread ourselves too thin.. We went from providing one product to really over six months later, expanding into three new product lines at once.. And so that was another issue that we had to, then course, correct a few years later.. But it's really important to stay disciplined.. Easy to say, hard to do.. The second part of this is, okay, once you've picked your focus, and you're working with customers, there's gonna be issues.. Things are not gonna work.. They're gonna get, you're gonna have bugs..

You're gonna have customer feedback.. Certain customers, when you expand into Europe for the first time, they're gonna want things that you haven't architected for it.. So, you're gonna have to re-architect the whole platform.. And the thing is,

you can't do everything everywhere all at once.. And so, the only way to survive and really to move things forward in a strategic way is to let the smaller issues burn, so that you can focus all of your time, and attention and your resources putting out the biggest blazes and going after the most strategic opportunities.. It's really hard to do, especially if you're a really high-functioning individual contributor, which pretty much everybody I met at Stanford was.. You're so used to being able to put everything out.. And you're the best player of whack-a-mole, but your company is going to out-whack-a-mole you.. And so, this is something that you just have to really, again, stay disciplined on.. The third one here you can see is about cutting cognitive load..

And I remember some advice that Tina shared with me years ago, which is that we can have it all, but just not all at once.. And so, thinking about how we spend our time and conserve our energy, again, for the most important things, is why Steve Jobs famously wore the same outfit every day so that he wouldn't have to think about it.. Now, I don't wear the same thing every day, but some other things that I've done to cut cognitive load is, one is for the first more than half of the time that I started my company, my family chose to live on the same block as my office.. And the reason for that is because I'm not a morning person.. And I didn't want to have the cognitive load of worrying how long it would take me to commute to my office based on the traffic that day.. Being able to walk to work and knowing that it was predictably three minutes and 22 seconds, that was everything.. And so, I never had to think about it.. I never had to worry about it.. I was never stressed checking driving directions, or feeling sad if there was a lot of traffic because I knew I had full predictability...