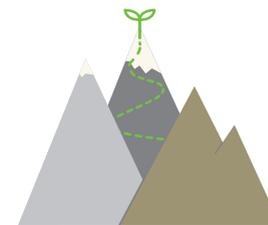


01 BUILDING A VENTURE

insights from our journey

BUILDING A VENTURE

It's tough starting out. So many things need to be done with so little money. It can be tempting to rush around doing things that appear urgent at the time rather than taking time out to get the important things done. With so much to do, focus is essential, as we discovered to our peril. Looking back on our experience of creating The Foundation and supporting start-ups, we've learnt that several ingredients need to be in place to succeed.



An inspiring destination

Any organisation worth its salt must have a clear, compelling vision. A destination gives an organisation a path to follow and inspires its people to run along it. Organisations should feverishly communicate the reason they exist to their staff, the people they support and their donors. We found our vision of being the most disruptive foundation in the world incredibly useful when deciding what to do with our limited resources. And we found ourselves drawn towards those start-ups whose people were bursting with passion about achieving their vision.

A unique personality

We came to realise that how you do something is as important as what you do. And, ultimately, this comes down to values, those fundamental things that define and drive people. One of the best decisions we made was to invest time in our early days to decide who we wanted to be. We decided on five values – youthful, fresh, adventurous, working together and going further. We embedded these in everything we did – they influenced our actions, decisions and people, every day. Internally, our values became our culture and externally, our values became our brand. By having such strong values, we were able to create a close-knit team, make good decisions quickly and stand out from the crowd.

Entrepreneurial spirit

Just like our start-up partners, we didn't know what would work and what wouldn't work to achieve our vision. So, we figured there was little value in creating and sticking to a rigid plan. Instead, we were drawn to an approach to management that many start-ups use in the tech world. The Lean Start Up sees the development of a product or service as an experiment to discover whether something should be built. And, like an experiment, a start-up should start with a hypothesis – assumptions that future success is based upon.



The Lean Start Up encourages assumptions to be tested as quickly as possible with the least amount of effort and resource. And that's what we did. With a huge bias for action, we built basic versions of the things we wanted to do – prototypes of our grant making, expertise and events programmes. We were agile, ditching things that didn't work, and improved things that did. By moving fast, we also built momentum to carry us through the difficult early days. What we didn't do well at the start was find ways to measure our work, so we didn't always have the best data available to tell us how successful are experiments had been.

BUILDING A VENTURE

Laser focus

One of the main messages that we communicate to our start-up partners is the need to focus. With few resources and little time, focusing on the most important things is essential. We speak from experience. We didn't focus. Instead, we got excited and wanted to do everything, spreading ourselves too thinly. We supported too many partners. We ran too many projects. It took us two years to strip things back to a focused model. In return, we were rewarded with far greater impact.

Friends

No organisation can achieve their vision alone. They need others to help them on their journey. This became so important to us that we assessed start-ups on their ability to draw support from others. Right from day one, we invested time building a network of people and organisations that could help us to achieve great things. We befriended non-profits, tech companies, funders and others. With so much else to do, it could feel that it wasn't our biggest priority but we were rewarded as we drew upon our friends all the time. We found that our best partnerships were built on three things – trust, a shared purpose and common values.

But we didn't have enough 'best friends' in the funding world. In four years, we only collaborated once with other funders on a major project. Given the huge potential benefits, that wasn't good enough. Our experience of joining a group of funders set up to collaborate perfectly illustrates the challenge. We couldn't find a shared purpose we were all sufficiently excited about, and we didn't have the resources to find what that was. So no collaboration emerged. Over the years, we didn't look hard enough for opportunities to collaborate with funders and were perhaps too scared of losing control.

A talented team

Successful start-ups have outstanding teams. It's no point having a great idea without a team to make it happen. We learnt that it's best to recruit smart people with exceptionally positive attitudes and a strong cultural fit. We ended up placing little emphasis on educational qualifications or experience of doing the specific job we wanted them to do. We were proven right that, if they have those other qualities, they'll pick things up quickly.



We were a highly motivated team. We did three things well to motivate and develop our people. First, people had a sense of purpose to their work. We talked about our vision all the time and the contribution people were making towards achieving it. And we made sure people knew what they were responsible for and had clear targets to work towards. Second, people had autonomy, with freedom to work out how best to achieve things and accountability for the end result. Third, people received regular feedback, with recognition for things they did well and useful insights into how they could develop.

"HOW YOU DO SOMETHING IS AS IMPORTANT AS WHAT YOU DO. AND, ULTIMATELY, THIS COMES DOWN TO VALUES, THOSE FUNDAMENTAL THINGS THAT DEFINE AND DRIVE PEOPLE."

What we found most difficult to do was create a balanced team. Although we had a team packed full of different skills, we all had a very similar mind-set – we were all positive, optimistic and adventurous. We're well aware that this meant we didn't challenge ourselves enough. When we got excited with our ideas there was no one to yank us back down to earth. If we were to have our time over again, we would have asked one of us to play the role of critical thinker in meetings and ask our Board to challenge us even more.

WERE OUR EXPERIENCES OF **BUILDING A VENTURE** HELPFUL? THERE'S PLENTY MORE FROM WHERE THAT CAME FROM.

INCLUDING INSIGHTS ON...

