

5. Leadership Needs to See the Big Picture

One of the great struggles in every startup is finding the right balance between near-term objectives and longer-term strategic initiatives. When product development issues surface, do you assign your top architects to solve the biggest problems or keep them focused on pursuing the most strategic opportunities? Liz Wiseman suggests in *Multipliers*, “As leaders, probably the most important role we can play is asking the right questions and focusing on the right problems.” For leaders, that requires discipline and never losing sight of the big picture.

In 2014, I recall working closely with the founders of Versa Networks and uncovering a multi-million-dollar opportunity with Yahoo! that would require a meaningful amount of custom development. Though the prospects looked favorable, the feature requirements were fairly extensive and not shared by any of the other customer prospects the company had engaged. Versa Networks had incredible engineering talent, but its resources were not unlimited. Ultimately, the choice was made to pass on the Yahoo! use case to pursue the development of a more common set of features that mapped to use cases shared by several of the target customers. It seemed logical that the chosen path would yield bigger collective opportunities longer-term which they certainly did. Yahoo! was later acquired by Verizon which would have rendered most of that custom development worthless. Young companies face these difficult tests often and when they do, it is critical for a startup’s leadership team to maintain focus on the big picture.

In *Upstarts*, Brad Stone touts Airbnb’s founding CEO Brian Chesky’s unique ability to juggle his many responsibilities while never losing sight of the company’s biggest goals. “Few Silicon Valley execs can so effectively phase shift-digging into operational complexities at one moment, negotiating with politicians the next, and then leaving it all behind to speak in relatable tones to students, other startup

founders, and the general public. Chesky did this with ease, and it was a reminder of the remarkable personal skills that had propelled his company to such astounding heights.” Founders and top executives often find themselves in the middle of all areas of the business at one time or another but must always find a way to remain mindful of the company’s overarching goals.

Another, more complicated scenario, presents itself when the success of a startup begins to require a more experienced skillset than the founders are able to deliver. The passion, commitment, and vision of most founders can never be called into question, but many of the most successful startups have at some point outgrown the leadership capabilities of those who conceived the company in its earliest days. It is not uncommon for a company’s investors and non-executive board members to be the first to suggest a CEO succession plan when it serves the best interests of the organization. The transition from an engineering team to a well-balanced, revenue-generating entity brings a new set of challenges and expectations with it. In *Beyond Talent*, a reference is made to Bud Wilkinson who suggests, “For a team to reach its potential, each player must be willing to subordinate his personal goals for the good of the team.” Larry Page and Sergey Brin understood this well and turned to Eric Schmidt for his senior leadership to guide Google’s path when a more experienced skillset became necessary. By many accounts, it was that transition that helped instill the discipline and focus that would propel the company to today’s nearly 900-billion-dollar valuation. As John Wooden suggests in *My Personal Best*, “No player is bigger or better than the team.” Understanding this mindset and always maintaining an eye on the big picture has proven to be a winning strategy and key to the playbook for those startups that have reached the greatest heights.