

10. Leaders Must be Willing to Learn and Make Adjustments

The most accomplished tech entrepreneurs have not always been the brightest or the most experienced people in the room, but they have certainly benefited from a willingness to learn and make important adjustments to their approach when necessary. In an effort to get the most out of a team, the most successful early-stage leaders consistently exhibit the ability to embrace feedback and welcome constructive collaboration from within. Unique perspectives and skillsets often help flush out ideas resulting in better outcomes, but only when the leader's approach to the given issue remains objective. In *Multipliers*, Liz Wiseman suggests, "It isn't how much you know that matters. What matters is how much access you have to what other people know. It isn't just how intelligent your team members are; it is how much of that intelligence you can draw out and put to use." The late Steve Jobs also shared this approach to innovation at Apple noting, "We don't hire smart people to tell them what to do. We hire smart people so they can tell us what to do."

This willingness to learn from others and admit to not having all of the answers requires a certain level of humility which I have found to be a defining quality of those who have guided the most notable startup successes. This concept of leaders being team players is captured in Patrick Lencioni's *The Ideal Team Player*— "Great team players lack excessive ego or concerns about status. They are quick to point out the contributions of others and slow to seek attention for their own. They share credit, emphasize team over self and define success collectively rather than individually. It is no great surprise, then, that humility is the single greatest and most indispensable attribute of being a team player."

A learning mindset doesn't always come easily for young entrepreneurs, especially when early success can fuel a sense of invincibility. Such was the case with Uber's founding CEO Travis Kalanick,

whose edgy and often controversial approach to leadership landed the company in several precarious situations. In *Upstarts*, Brad Stone gives a detailed insight into the reckless culture that had emerged at Uber on his watch which resulted in the need for a major course correction at the highest level. “Even he [Travis Kalanick], as CEO of the most closely watched startup in the world, had to change his tone, become more self-aware, and articulate the future Uber was rapidly creating with optimism and a whole lot more empathy.” Unfortunately for Kalanick, his willingness to learn and make the appropriate adjustments to drive the necessary changes into the culture at Uber came too late. As the company moved to professionalize its image, he was replaced by Dara Khosrowshahi, a more experienced and polished leader with a pristine track record of success. By then, the company’s valuation had swelled to 68 billion dollars in the private markets.

Even the most distinguished leaders suffer setbacks at times, but resiliency and a willingness to learn from those experiences adds to the credentials of the outliers. Angela Duckworth’s book, *Grit*, examines a number of factors that set leaders and winners apart, things that are often difficult to measure or define. She references a conversation with JPMorgan Chase CEO Jamie Dimon, who details some of the qualities that make great leaders— “You have to learn to get over bumps in the road and mistakes and setbacks. Failures are going to happen, and how you deal with them may be the most important thing in whether you succeed. You need fierce resolve. You need to take responsibility. You call it grit. I call it fortitude.” As so many accomplished leaders will attest, the most notable personal and professional growth comes through the experience gained from facing adversity. Warren Bennis in his book *On Becoming a Leader*, confirms “Some magic takes place in the crucible of leadership, whether a transformational experience like Mandela’s years in prison, or a relatively painless

experience such as being mentored. Whatever is thrown at them, leaders emerge from their crucibles stronger and unbroken.”

It is virtually impossible to anticipate all of the variables that even the best well-prepared startups will face along the way. The character of a company and its leaders is revealed in overcoming adversity and gaining conviction through the process. Such trials have proven to validate leadership teams when they demonstrate a willingness to humble themselves and learn from the experience. In *Measure What Matters*, Intel CEO Andy Grove summed it up pretty well, “Bad companies are destroyed by crisis. Good companies survive them. Great companies are improved by them.” The same can be said for the top startup chiefs that turn the most difficult setbacks into opportunities to learn.