8. Focus on a Reasonable Feature Set

Anyone who has ever worked for a startup can certainly confirm that resources and time are a scarce commodity. Early employees frequently juggle several responsibilities concurrently in an effort to do more with less. Companies are founded on concepts that inevitably evolve through the process of customer validation which provides clarity and helps to establish priorities. However, these customer validations often point in different directions and it is simply unrealistic to pursue too many things at once when resources are limited.

In *Good to Great*, Jim Collins highlights the unquestionable need for focus, noting what he observed to be the "hedgehog" approach to business that was evident in the most successful companies in his study. "Hedgehogs understand that the essence of profound insight is simplicity… they have a piercing insight that allows them to see through complexity and discern underlying patterns. They see what is essential and ignore the rest." This ability to distill the top opportunities from the others and maintain a disciplined approach to executing on a reasonable set of features is incredibly challenging for talented technologists with a versatile skillset. Collins adds, "Every company would like to be the best at something, but few actually understand—with piercing insight and egoless clarity—what they actually have the potential to be best at and, just as important, what they cannot be the best at."

In the early days, most companies do not have any dedicated sales resources which makes it difficult to open the right doors with the target customer prospects. When the stars align properly, and startups are able to engage at the most appropriate levels, meaningful collaboration can uncover unique use cases. These are exciting breakthroughs that can quickly alter a product development roadmap and impact the way finite resources are allocated. As tempting as it is to change a game plan to accommodate such opportunities, taking on too much too soon and moving too far away from a well-planned strategy can prove costly from a time-to-market standpoint. Even some of the most successful companies over time discover that their strategies are far too fragmented driving a need for greater focus. In Gary Keller's book, *The One Thing*, he details one of the biggest challenges Steve Jobs faced when he returned to Apple in 1995. The company's lack of focus in the years he was away had resulted in a growing list of underperforming products and steep losses that brought them to the brink of insolvency. It was critical for Jobs to take decisive action in an effort to reverse this trend and put the company on a better path. "In the two years after his return [to Apple] in 1997, he took the company from 350 products to 10. That's 340 noes, not counting anything else proposed during that period. In his 1997 MacWorld speech, Jobs noted, 'when you think about focusing, you think, well, focusing is saying *yes*. No! Focusing is saying *no*.'"

A different challenge presents itself when early-stage companies are tasked with balancing resources assigned to more immediate tactical revenue opportunities versus longer-term strategic options that offer more promise. It is never easy to make these difficult choices, especially when the margin for error between success and failure is often thin. Intel's former CEO, Andy Grove, sums it up pretty well in *Measure What Matters*, "The art of management lies in the capacity to select from the many activities of seemingly comparable significance [pick] the one or two or three that provide leverage well beyond the others and concentrate on them." The startups that have navigated these crossroads most effectively have consistently out-executed those that fall short most often due to the appropriate lack of focus and discipline. Focusing the right resources on the right opportunities at the right time has proven to be a key differentiator for those upstarts that ultimately ascend to the greatest heights.