

2. Founders—Mental Toughness

“People who are crazy enough to think they can change the world are the only ones who do.”

--Apple’s celebrated 1997 “Think Different” ad campaign

Setting out to start a company with a bold vision requires guts, perseverance, passion, relationships and a mental toughness to be a rudder in the water which can help to navigate the most difficult storms. Every startup journey is unique, presenting challenges that can rarely be anticipated—an evolving, competitive landscape, a difficult economic backdrop, funding challenges, staffing issues—startups are simply not for the faint of heart. As John Doerr, a partner at Kleiner Perkins, notes in *Measure What Matters*, “My favorite definition of entrepreneurs: Those who do more than anyone thinks possible... with less than anyone thinks possible.” Often juggling many responsibilities requiring unthinkable time commitments, founders make enormous sacrifices in the early stages which can often extend for many years. In most cases, it is not the possibility of making fortunes that act as the primary motivator. It is instead, a burning desire to invent something unique and deliver a product or service to the world that can be deployed pervasively. The relentless pursuit of such ambitions comes with euphoric successes often matched or overshadowed by devastating

setbacks. It is for these reasons, along with the persistent demands of a startup that a profound level of mental toughness is built into the DNA of most successful entrepreneurs.

In *Upstarts*, Brad Stone confirms that investors want to put their money behind leaders who, “even when the chips are down, and things aren’t working, and everyone says this isn’t meant to be, have so much love for the idea and so much passion that they just persevere. Startups are much romanticized, and most people are completely clueless about how you just have to will it into existence.”

Stone references a conversation between Sequoia’s Greg McAdoo and Y Combinator’s Paul Graham that both played key roles in Airbnb’s early development. They noted that “the most essential characteristic of great entrepreneurs is mental toughness—the ability to overcome the hurdles and negativity that typically accompany something new. They identified this kind of “true grit” as the most important attribute in the founders of their successful portfolio companies, like Google and PayPal.”

This “never say die” mentality and incredible resolve have been on full display not only in the founders of the most successful startups I have witnessed, but oftentimes in most of the early employees of those great companies. The desire and willingness to persevere, often against the greatest of odds is a hallmark of

mental toughness and fundamental to the leaders that guide these journeys. I can't think of a single great company where this wasn't woven into the fabric of the culture early on, which is why it ranks as one of the most important keys to startup success.