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When You're Too Good for Your Own Start-up

Every start-up needs two types of people: the visionary and the operator. If you think you can be both types, you're in trouble.

For a start-up to succeed, it needs two key people: a visionary and an operator.

These roles differ considerably, and crucially. The visionary has the initial idea and brings the passion, long-term vision and drive to see that idea into reality. The operator is focussed on the day-to-day detail of getting things done, is not so good with a blank sheet of paper, and is less prone than the visionary to passionate distraction.

Together, this duo is the perfect combination to take a start-up from concept to reality. Compensating for each other's weaknesses, they form a symbiotic couple, working hand in glove to identify and mine a profitable, sustainable market--and thus, secure the future of their new venture.

You've probably seen many examples of this type of successful 'V/O' combination. Not only is it the classic "Mom and Pop" team running your favorite local diner or muffler shop, many well-known organizations started the same way: Gates and Ballmer at Microsoft; the two Howards (Schultz and Behar) at Starbucks; and the two Steves (Jobs and Wozniak) at Apple being just a few examples.

When this needed combo fails to materialize, the results are usually obvious to all: the passionate but ineffectual visionary generates idea after idea, but never gains traction in the marketplace. Or the frustrated operator yearns to leave the employment of others but never quite has the confidence to do so.

What isn't so obvious, however, is an equally insidious, but infinitely more frustrating circumstance. The start-up founder is a competent visionary *and* operator.

Sounds perfect, right? The ideal combination rolled into one person--surely that's a recipe for accelerated success?

Sadly, no. In fact, the exact opposite occurs. When a start-up founder has the ability to switch easily between the visionary and operator roles, the new venture is more or less guaranteed to languish in a no-man's-land (not quite failing, but never quite breaking through to sustained success, either).

The Artisan Trap

Here's why it happens. Think of a highly skilled artisan--a luthier (guitar-maker) say, or a master tailor. They solicit business from potential customers, then they retire to their workshop to make the artifact. Then they repeat the process: Sell / make; Sell / make. The artisan is never going to become a "big business," but then, in their case, they don't want to, either.

When a founder of a start-up possesses the ability to perform both the V and O roles, they fall into the artisan trap: Because they can sell *and* make their product or service, that's precisely what happens. And as a result, they effectively block the start-up's ability to grow.

The seemingly complete V/O can envisage their new world domination app, and they can (and do) write every line of code as well. They can woo outside funders, and they can (and do) install every product themselves. They can listen to the market and pivot their strategy as necessary, and they can (and do) answer every email and take every call.

Breaking the Vicious Cycle

The key thing that's happening here isn't that there is anything inherently wrong with having strong V/O founder. It's that because the founder can play both roles, she does, and as a result, the business can only operate in one mode at a time: Sell / make / sell / make /etc.

Success (real, sustained, non-limbo-like success) will only come when the start-up learns to operate in both modes simultaneously.

If you're a V/O founder struggling with lift-off, the good news is that breaking out of The Artisan Trap requires only two steps, both obvious once pointed out:

1. Decide which role you will play personally.
Step one is simple: decide which you want to be.

2. Find someone else to perform the other role.
Simple, huh? You're going to concentrate on (probably) the visionary role and find someone else to perform the operator functions (coding, selling, administering--whatever is relevant for your business).

Problem is, that's going to cost money--money you've become used to not spending. Money that's not in the budget. Money you don't have.

But you're a visionary, right? You'll find it, somehow. In fact, if you want your start-up to succeed, you have no option *but* to find it.