

"Success is No Day at the Beach"

by Joe Hadzima

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It has been a hot summer in New England, the type of summer when people dream of just sitting on the beach. The beach is a great place to sit and think about the big picture, or perhaps just to sit. Here are a few ideas for you to consider if you are inclined to do a little thinking, instead of just sitting, while on the beach.

Do you know where you are going? I received a call a few weeks ago from someone at MIT who apparently has come up with some innovative software techniques which will solve some fairly serious technical problems involving the Internet. His question to me was whether he should (a) bootstrap his way along by doing some consulting; (b) assign his invention over to MIT and allow MIT to license it to others; or (c) try to raise money from investors and form a company to make and sell a product based on the idea. Since I don't keep a three-sided coin on my desk that I can flip to answer such questions, I asked him a basic question; "What do you want to accomplish personally?" After about fifteen minutes of discussion, it became clear that this fellow really didn't know where he wanted to go. The closest we came to answering the question was that he really wanted to have his ideas adopted because he thought that his technology solved some real problems, and he wanted to be recognized as the person who solved them.

Why did I ask him this question? Success is measured in many ways, but I think that the ultimate personal success is in achieving the goals which we set for ourselves. This is as true in business ventures as it is in life in general. Growing a successful new venture is somewhat like planning a trip. You have to know where you want to go in order to have a chance of figuring out how to get there.

Perhaps this sounds all to "touchy feely" and you are wondering whether I have been sitting out on the beach in the sun too long. That may be, but I can assure you that over the years I have seen a lot of ventures succeed and fail. I don't have any hard data to support the proposition, but at some level, the ones that I have seen succeed have done so mainly because the entrepreneur or entrepreneurial team has managed to sign on to a common vision of where they want to go.

A few weeks ago, I met with a team of three people who were thinking of starting a new venture. In the course of the meeting, I tried to get them to articulate their personal goals and here is what came out, although not in any organized fashion. They all wanted to make money. So far, so good. Bill, the technical person, wanted to be known as the guy who invented this great technology and product. Tom wanted to grow the company quickly, take it public, and cash out. He wanted to be known as a high-flying entrepreneur. Susan, who had previously been in a large organization, did not like

working in a bureaucracy and wanted the new venture to function in a lean and creative mode. What a recipe for a potential disaster. What is going to happen when decisions have to be made about financing and growth? Tom will be pressing for venture capital, and its resulting rapid growth (after all, it's hard to take a three-person company public). Susan is not going to like having to hire lots of people needed to support this growth; they're not likely to be the tightly knit creative group she wants to work with. And Bill may have a hard time dealing with all the "uninteresting" but important issues surrounding technical support and making sure that the product is compatible with customers' existing systems and needs. They may be able to work it out, but they are not going to have an easy time of it if they can't answer the question of where they want to end up.

These are not easy questions and it is not always possible to articulate clearly what the goals are. But if you don't know where you are going, how are you ever going to figure out how to get there? So select the beach you want to sit on this summer, and chart your course to get there through the traffic. When you arrive, put on the sunglasses and the sunblock, relax awhile and then take some time to think about what beach you want to reach in your entrepreneurial venture. Life's a beach, enjoy it.

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