

# Building While Rome Burns: Every Startup Company's Job

***This post recaps and explores ideas in Masters of Scale Episode 10 - "Let Fires Burn".***

*"Fiddling while Rome burns."*

If you're the kind of person who blithely goes about your day while everything falls apart around you, you've probably had this phrase thrown at you before.

They say this was psychotic Roman emperor Nero's reaction to the burning of Rome. It's not exactly smiled upon to be this kind of person.

But if you're trying to build an innovative product or service from the ground up, this is exactly what your job consists of.

There are all kinds of fires which come along with building a company. Startups happen to be extremely flammable substances.

At any given time, your software will have ten different kinds of bugs or implementation issues. Your most important customers will want a dozen different new features you can't possibly deliver on at once. Your marketing team will make a slip-up in a mass email to tens of thousands of customers. Your support team will have to help a rush of angry customers at midnight on a Saturday.

You can help a bit. You can work hard to get at the root of problems with every aspect of your customer's experience.

But the hard truth you won't have the time or resources to solve all of these problems. You can firefight, but you will never put out the fires. You can heal, but you can't save all of the wounded. And if you try to firefight all the time, you'll never have time for building. If you don't keep building, someone else will, and you won't have anything to fight the fires with.

It's so tempting to spend all our time solving the problems we see. Everything within us wants to. Everything within us thinks building should wait until the fires are out. But if you're dead set on moving forward, you have to murder those feelings.

Day to day, your overarching pragmatic goal has to be to build more things than get burnt down. You have to remember that fires are inevitable - and that they'll never end. They'll just take new forms as you grow.

This is why you have to be a little on the psychotic/Nero-esque side to build a company. You don't have to **fiddle** while your startup burns, but you do have to **build** while it burns.

Or at least, that's what I've found in just a few years of this kind of work.

If you don't believe me, believe someone who's been doing it for much longer. In season one of his great podcast *Masters of Scale*, early PayPal exec, Facebook investor, and LinkedIn founder Reid Hoffman explains how founders should think about fires at their companies.

To make his point – that companies need to learn to “let fires burn” – Reid tells one of my favorite startup stories of all time. If you think your company has problems, hear how PayPal handled customer support fires in its early days: