

Lessons from Building Praxis – Part 3

“I would go 0 for 30 before I would go 0 for 9.” — Kobe Bryant

Launching a startup takes some big, scary leaps. You can’t leap tentatively. You can’t go in with an escape plan. You need to burn the ships behind you when you reach the shore in order to have the tenacity necessary for the attack.

Go all the way or don’t even try

When I knew I wanted nothing more than to get Praxis off the ground, there was one more hurdle before I got started. My most important partner in every endeavor needed to be on board. My wife.

I’m pretty persuasive and she’s pretty trusting of me, so many times in our marriage I talk her into something. She’s not an easy sell, but if I persist enough, I can usually get at least a tepid ‘OK’. The problem with anything less than full-hearted agreement is that if things go south I’ve got to pay later for pushing her further than she really wanted to go.

Even if unspoken, the feeling that I dragged her into something that turned out badly is awful, and a wedge in the family. It puts me in a defensive position, irrationally trying to justify the decision while she goes on the offense and uses her original hesitancy as leverage against me.

I knew that a startup was unlikely to succeed under these conditions, and my family certainly wouldn’t. That wasn’t an option. I needed her in on this 100% if I was going to be able to go in 100%.

So I made a pitch. It might have been the weakest pitch I’ve ever made to her.

I said, “I believe in this idea. I love it. It feels different than other ideas. I am willing to commit to launching this thing whatever it takes, win or lose. But I’m only willing to do that if you are in too. I don’t want you to go along with it just to make me happy and then later regret it. I don’t want you to use it against me later if doing this means we have to suffer.

I can’t promise you anything. We might end up living in my mom’s basement. I might be working all night. I might be emotionally drained all the time. We might get clobbered in the market. We might have haters. We might succeed and get rich and have a lot of friends and family resent us for it. I have no idea. All I know is that I’m willing to go for it and live with the consequences, but only if you are too. Take all the time you need to decide if you’re all in. I won’t mention it again. Think really realistically about what it might mean, and whether you will be bitter down the road if it’s tough. If you say no, I will not pursue it.” And I meant it.

She said nothing but, "OK, I'll think about it."

I was chomping at the bit. I could not wait to get started, but I also prepared myself for the possible pain of her saying no. There's only one thing in the world that could keep me from launching this thing, and that was my family. That's the one thing I couldn't force and cajole. It had to be real, genuine agreement.

I waited.

I waited some more.

OK, now it's just getting ridiculous. Did she forget? Is she trying to torture me? Is she waiting for me to sweeten the deal somehow? Maybe I should remind her? No. I told her to take as long as she needed and I told her I'd say nothing more.

So I waited.

We usually make decisions very fast. A few minutes is normal. A few hours an exception. Days? Never.

Two weeks. The longest two weeks of my life.

After two weeks of silence, one day as I was grabbing a snack and she was standing in the kitchen she looked up and said, "OK. Let's do this. I'm ready."

That was one of the best moments of our marriage. Probably because it's one of the few times where I didn't do any talking. I knew she meant it. I knew it was her saying yes to Praxis, not her saying yes to me. That meant everything. I needed her on my side to go full throttle. She gave me a blank check to pursue this thing come what may. That was by far the most valuable investment in the company. She was the first investor. The first person to believe in the idea so strongly they were willing to put tremendous personal resources at risk to make it a reality.

We've had hellish moments. Many. She's never once held it against me or asked me to stop or complained that Praxis takes a toll. She gave me the go-ahead to keep shooting the ball, even if I went 0-30.

If I had partially pursued it while hoping to win her over just enough to let me pursue it a little more I would have gotten crushed by the first big setback. I could always use the excuse, "Well, I guess I have to stop for my wife's sake." Destroying any excuse to retreat or any way to pin it on someone else put me in a position of win or die. Best thing I could have done.