

Lessons from Building Praxis – Part 11

“The brick walls are there to stop the people who don’t want it badly enough.” – Randy Pausch

There’s a fatal flaw in your plan. Your business model, or market, or pricing, or something about your crazy idea is going to stop you dead in your tracks. Of course. That’s probably why no one else has done it yet.

Or maybe that’s why you’re going to succeed where they failed.

Obstacles are for others

I was thrilled. Things were really happening!

Every day, Praxis got closer to public launch. The curriculum modules were under construction, a designer was working on the logo, website, and collateral. I was writing website copy, building relationships with business partners, and building a list of students, events, blogs, and other outlets to push at launch.

Then I revisited my brilliant business model for some tweaks, stumbled upon a paragraph hidden on the Department of Labor website, and damn-near lost it.

My goal from day one was a program that took one year or less and cost \$0 to participants who got accepted. They would get awesome coaching, community, and curriculum resources and experience as a startup apprentice, and get hired right out of the program. No debt, no lost time, no boring BS make-work or memorization.

Business partners would get highly vetted raw talent to work and learn under them. They took a chance on younger, less experienced people, but on the flipside they got low-cost talent with great attitude, upside, and ongoing support and training from Praxis.

It was a win-win-win.

My model was simple. The program was free to participants and the apprenticeship was unpaid. Business partners would pay Praxis to find, filter, train, match, and support the participants through the apprenticeship.

Everything I had built so far was around this simple structure. I’d written tons of different copy for FAQ’s, social media, blogs, and the Praxis website and program guides. It was all focused on a zero cost program.

Then I ran smack into the heinous outcome of idiot bureaucrats and corrupt special

interests. Public Choice Theory predicts and explains just this kind of thing perfectly.

My model was maybe sorta kinda illegal.

Like most government policies, this one was full of weird exemptions, and impossible to determine with certainty whether I'd run afoul of the law, but it didn't look good. In typically absurd fashion, a young person could only work for free if they created no value for the company. In fact, the DOL policy read,

The employer...derives no immediate advantage from the activities of the intern and on occasion its operations may actually be impeded.

Yes. Imagine that great pitch to a growing company. "Hey, I'll provide you an apprentice, but I promise they will not help your business at all, and they may actually impede your progress. Whaddaya say?"

Like all comfy sounding labor laws, this was created at the behest of older, better off workers as a deliberate attempt to shut out younger, lower skilled workers. Vested interests don't like free market competition.

I was irate and felt defeated by Leviathan. I've got no love for government intervention already, so the economist and political philosopher in me spent plenty of energy being incensed.

To think, millions of young people are goaded and pressured into going five figures in debt and staying out of the market for half a decade in college, where they learn near nothing and it's considered normal. Yet if one of these young people says, "Screw that. I'll spend no money and go learn by offering to work for free under someone who's already doing what I want to do!" Illegal. Because, of course, being trained for free is exploitation, while paying fifty grand to learn nothing is education.

I called my brother. I told him they did it. They killed my dream with the dead hand of policy. I was despondent. I began to realize that I had been naive all along. Of course there's some big obvious reason no one else is doing this. C'mon Isaac, you really think you're that special? That no one else had an idea like this?

My brother laughed.

At a time like this, he laughed.

I said, "How is this funny?!" He said, "Look, there's always some obstacle like this. That's what keeps away everyone who doesn't want it as bad as you. Stop getting mad and get creative. There's always a way around it. Don't give up. Find it."

That's it. He was utterly unconcerned. To him, it was a given that I could navigate around this law. He seemed to think it'd be fun. That change of mindset changed everything. I smiled and realized he was right. This was going to be one more reason I would succeed, because it'd be easy to stop now, and I wouldn't.

Something amazing happened almost immediately after I switched my mind from helpless victim of state oppression to clever entrepreneur excited by a challenge. I found a way around it. It was actually rather easy and obvious, but I was too blinded by anger and defeat to see it at first.

Participants would pay tuition. Then they'd get paid by the business during their apprenticeship. What they earned would equal or exceed what they paid. The end result (though a little less sexy marketing-wise) was the same. Participants got all the same benefits and an apprenticeship in less than a year for \$0. Praxis earned the same revenue, and business partners paid the same for talent.

I felt dumb for missing such a simple fix. But I can't overstate the extent to which I thought my dream was dead. Mindset is everything. If you're willing to take no for an answer, you'll get it. If you're not, you'll navigate a sea of no's until you find a yes.