

Lessons from Building Praxis – Part 5

“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it.” — Hebrews 13:2

I had a lot to do, much of it outside my ability, much of it costly, and I had a few grand I could put on my personal credit card and that was it. The idea for Praxis wasn't fundable yet, and I didn't even know what the letters “VC” meant anyway, let alone how to go raise.

But I didn't need any of that because I had something far more valuable. I had dozens of accounts with positive balances of social capital, and it was time to cash them in.

Social is the most valuable kind of capital

The first decade of my “professional” life was full of meaningful connections. I went out of my way to meet people, follow up with people, respond same-day to every email, look for excuses to write thank you notes (physical ones!), generously offer help without asking anything in return, and connect people to each other whenever possible.

Part of this is my personality. I'm a connector and a people person. But part of it was a choice and it took a lot of practice. I am not sentimental, I move on to the next thing quickly, and I'm forgetful. That made the practice of writing thank you notes the furthest thing from natural. A leader I respected wrote me a thank you note for something small. I asked him why, and he passed on advice someone had given to him, “Look for excuses to write thank you notes.” It stuck with me. I bought a stack and carried them with me everywhere, stamps and envelopes too. I used them generously.

It's not so much about thank you notes specifically, but the mindset necessary to write lots of them. It requires/develops an abundance mindset. You begin to see win-wins everywhere. You become more grateful and happy. You begin to see subtle ways people just doing their job is helpful to you. This, in turn, makes you more able and willing to help more people out.

Instead of a social spender, you become an investor in your network. When you meet new people, instead of handing them a business card and asking them to help you, you default to a genuine interest in them, a real connection, and seeking any way in which their interests could be served by something or someone you know. Every person you meet has an invisible account with your name on it. Every interaction is a deposit or a withdrawal.

I made deposits. Tons of them. For years and years with no clear payoff at the end. I enjoyed it and it seemed like a good idea. I didn't have a clear and compelling reason to spend any social capital, so why not keep investing and saving unless and until I did?

When I went all-in on Praxis, I knew this was the time to empty my accounts and even go into social capital debt.

I turned to friends, colleagues, acquaintances, and acquaintances of acquaintances. I cashed in every ounce of social capital I had and got some lines of credit. I asked for introductions, advice, lists of leads, design help, tech help, legal help, strategic help, research help, product development help, and most of all help spreading the word. I traded some phantom stock and paid some cash, but I mostly traded on goodwill and positive social capital I'd built from helping lots of people, being kind and open appreciative, and having a reputation as a guy who helps lots of people.

Had I seen my professional life as a zero-sum game, where I must exploit and best every threat and carve the biggest slice of a fixed pie, Praxis never would have left the launchpad. The fact that I chose to see it as a positive-sum game, where helping as many people win as possible would grow the size of the pie, meant that I had access to a lot more of it when the time came.

The social capital I cashed in to get started was priceless. I'm not being cute. There is no amount of money I could have raised that could have accomplished what a deep, wide, and rich social network did.

I'm so glad I had the patience and self-control to not get spendy early in my career and trade tiny bits of social capital for tiny promotions, pay raises, or prestige. I needed a huge balance to build a company, and my long-cultivated habit of generously depositing social capital everywhere possible was the only way.