Rana Florida
CEO, The Creative Class Group

Your Start-Up Life: Don't Manage, Lead

Posted: 11/20/2012 8:14 am

Your Start-Up Life is a business advice column by Rana Florida, CEO of the Creative Class Group. In addition to answering readers' questions she features conversations with successful entrepreneurs, creative thinkers and innovative leaders. Send your questions about work, life and play to rana@creativeclass.com

Some might know Don Tapscott as a management guru, a much sought after speaker at global forums such as TED, SXSW, and Davos, and the author of such bestselling books as *Paradigm Shift*, *Grown Up Digital*, *Wikinomics*, and *Macrowikinomics*. I know him as a talented musician, an all-around creative thinker, and great friend.

An adjunct professor of management at the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto and a Martin Prosperity Institute Fellow), a member of the World Economic Forum, and one of Thinkers50's World's Most Influential Business Thinkers, Tapscott is a great believer in collaboration, transparency, and the sharing of ideas between corporations. When I spoke with him recently, he shared some of his innovative ideas about management, creativity, technology and negotiating the fine line between vision and hallucination.

Q. What was your first job and what lessons did you take away?

A. In the late 1970s I was hired as a researcher at Bell Northern Research in Toronto. Our group was trying to figure out how computers connected to networks could change knowledge work and communications. We conducted controlled experiments and concluded that computers were going to go beyond data processing to become tools for communications. I was very fortunate to end up there, as the group was doing work 20 years ahead of its time. I wrote a book about that experience but it didn't sell well. Critics said only programmers would use computers because regular people would never learn to type.

Q. How do you manage and lead teams?

A. Peter Drucker said decades ago that in stable times good management is key; in times of change you need leadership. Today leadership is what counts and tinkering doesn't work. I actually think (deeply, truly) that both are changing anyway. My research suggests that peer collaboration models work better than hierarchies. Empowerment is no longer a motherhood concept. So I don't really manage people at all. I try and help them unleash their capacity.

Q. What traits do you look for in team members?

A. Intelligence, curiosity, openness, and the confidence to never play politics. I also like team members who will challenge and even irritate me.

Q. How has technology changed our lives?

A. Name me something it hasn't changed. Overall it's for the good.

Q. How do technology and creativity intersect?

A. Profoundly and positively. Sure there are problems where traditional or inferior technologies lock us into old ways of doing things, but the current social paradigm has the overall effect of unleashing new creative forces. None is more important than our ability to invent, innovate, create and even think collectively. I don't buy arguments that collaboration is undermining creativity. For example media theorist [Jaron Lanier](#) equates collaborative communities on the Web with Stalinist-style collectivism, saying that we're all being reduced to a common denominator in which new ideas can't flourish. Mass collaboration and Soviet collectivism are really polar opposites. Collaboration is based on self-organization, decentralized power, and knowledge and freedom of action. Collectivism is based on coercion and centralized control. Whereas Communism stifled individualism, mass collaboration is based on individuals and organizations working to achieve shared outcomes through loose voluntary associations. One produced the [Gulag](#); the other [Linux](#), [Wikipedia](#), and a myriad of large-scale scientific collaborations. Social media enabled the [Arab Spring](#), among other things.

Q. What is the best business advice you ever got?

A. In the early 1980's a colleague named Del Langdon convinced me to become an entrepreneur. I was an executive at Bell-Northern Research and from my big corner office, her argument sure seemed like a dumb idea to me. But she was right. Becoming an entrepreneur was the most important business decision I ever made.

Q. How do you choose business partners or the clients you work with?

In addition to the usual consideration of their capability, I gate partners by the five principles of [Wikinomics](#). Meaning I look for people with a collaborative attitude, openness, a love of knowledge sharing, and a sense of interdependence. Most important is integrity. I can't work with people who are not honest, not considerate of the interests of others, and who don't abide by their commitments.

When it comes to clients, to be honest, I'm less discerning. I've fired very few customers in my career, because their deficiencies usually evidence opportunities for me to help.

Q. How do you set a vision for the future in such a rapidly changing business climate?

A. Not by yourself. The old model of the leader who comes up with a vision and sells it down is gone. Peter Senge was right years ago when he said that the person at the top can't learn for the organization anymore. I also always try to remember that there is a fine line between vision and hallucination.

Q. Has technology brought us closer together or further apart?

A. Well there is much we don't know about the effects of the digital revolution on relationships. But the direction is clear. Rather than asking me, why not ask the 275,000 amateur astronomers who collaborate to map the heavens on Galaxy Zoo? Or the 20 percent of people with Lou Gehrig's disease In the US who learn from and help each other on the Patients Like Me Network. How about the grandparents who can communicate with their grandchildren weekly rather than yearly? Or the lovers whose relationships survive long times and distances apart? Ask the students in Tunisia who came together, enabled by social media, to bring down a tyrant. You could ask the 7-year-old girl who was buried in the rubble in Haiti after the earthquake, but who was saved by two youngsters who found her faint text signals on the Ushaidi network. Being alive I guess you might say that she is closer to her family than if she were dead.

Q. How do you tackle criticism or failure?

A. Most people who criticize me and my thinking and works are uninformed. But I think I've become good at separating out the good critiques, and I thrive on them. I fail at something every day and it is true that one learns more from one's failures. Besides, how boring it would be if all that happened was success.

Follow Rana Florida on Twitter: www.twitter.com/ranaflorida