

URL: <https://stvp.stanford.edu/clips/becoming-a-startup-ceo>

Zoox CEO Aicha Evans contrasts her previous role as an executive at Intel to her current one as a startup CEO. In particular, she stresses the importance of first listening and learning when you're leading a startup that you didn't start.



Transcript

- There's a sense of responsibility.. 00:00:06,040 You're not just responsible for Zoox and the execution, the roadmap, the fundraising, you're responsible for a lot of families.. When you work in a big corporation, you can always look up.. It's the CEO's fault, it's the board's fault, it's the market's fault, somebody just doesn't get it.. Well, here, the but stops with you.. You don't get to whine and complain.. You can have a support system, and so the first thing, I think you were there, the first on-hand, they were like, what's your goal for the first, I can't remember, like 90 days or first year or whatever? And usually people have their normal big talking points, one, two, three, and I'm gonna do this, and I was like, look, I don't know in terms of the outcomes and deliverables.. My first objective is to be one of you, and so a year from now, I want you to forget that I wasn't here for the beginning of the journey, so I'm gonna spend a lot of time with all of you, I'm gonna learn, I'm gonna listen.. I will form opinions.. I won't talk a lot at the beginning, not because I don't have opinions, but because I want to understand what makes this company tick and what is important, and then after that and in the process of doing that, I had a very good board..

Thank you for that.. That was lucky too.. Started sort of forming some opinions.. You're in a startup, so capital is top of mind.. This is a capital-intensive endeavor.. So the whole fundraising strategy, who we are.. The second part was a little bit more funny, a little funnier.. At Intel, I was known as the change agent and renegade.. Why do we have this process? Why is this bureaucracy? Why can't we do this? Why can't we do that? Why all this infrastructure? Well, at Zoox, you're not just driving execution, you're building a company, hopefully an American icon.. So I was like, wow, nobody's coming..

It's me, I have to build the infrastructure.. HR, finance, all of the systems and sort of have an integrated roadmap, drive towards milestones, but do it from a place of generosity, from a place of teaching and learning, and really manage the rhythm and cadence so that you meet people where they are and then go along the journey with them.. Human beings do not like change, and so you have to try to make the change positive and, extra credit, make it even feel good and that doesn't mean you don't make tough decisions.. I think within the first, what, three months, a few executives were no longer with us.. That was hard.. Make the calls, don't sweat the small stuff, and remember what Andy Grove told me once, I was criticizing him and saying, I heard that during your days, this and this happened.. I can't believe you didn't deal with that 'cause I know it all, right? I'm opinionated like all of them, and he's like, Aicha, I knew about that, but that was number 25 on my list and number one to me was so much more important.. So sort of learn where to put your attention, where do you teach to fish, but it's been a great journey and I've learned a ton too.. This is a technology that I didn't know in detail.. This is probably the smartest collection of people that I've worked with and this is definitely the greatest variety of skillsets that I've had the pleasure to work with and building one thing together...