URL: https://stvp.stanford.edu/clips/co-founders-and-co-ceos

Nathan Kondamuri of Pair Eyewear discusses how he and Sophia Edelstein approach being co-founders and co-CEOs. He explains the benefits of their trusting friendship, how they divide core functional areas in the company, and how they address conflict through communication and shared vision.

Transcript

- Tell me a little bit about what it's been like 00:00:05,370 to work as co-founders and co-CEOs, because that's a pretty unique setup, right? You know, oftentimes, it's easier some people believe to have a single CEO, a single final decision maker.. You know, the buck stops here, right? You know, and your board of directors is one person to hold accountable versus two.. So, could you talk a little bit about how you two went from being friends to co-founders to co-CEOs, and what works and you know, what doesn't work? How do you work through what doesn't work, and how do you work through conflict, for example? - Yeah, that's all great questions, Emily.. 00:00:45,120 Things we've thought a ton about along the way.. But to back up, I think it did really all start from when we had just become amazing friends at Stanford.. That set the foundation to, I think, have a successful co-CEO and co-founder relationship, because it is certainly one of the most involved relationships you will have throughout life, is having a co-founder, and it's like a relationship.. And so I think, you know, for us, we have such a strong foundation of trust in our friendship, and that translated extremely well to enabling success through our co-CEO and co-founder setup.. And, you know, there's a lot to, there's both a ton of benefits from it and then there's also a lot of things to essentially be thoughtful around to ensure success in the relationship.. Because there are, you know, as many investors, companies will, you know, the thing is, like, you do maybe want just one person in that CEO role, but we've actually found it to be really beneficial to have the both of us.. So, to start, I think some of the benefits that it's really allowed for us is that it's allowed us to go really deep into certain areas, and the two of us, it's allowed us to become experts and really lead the strategy in some core functional areas of the business..

And that's really how we set up and divide our responsibilities, is through functional areas of the business.. So, probably a year or two into starting the company is when we started to split up core responsibilities that we knew would be extremely important to the success of the business.. And so I oversee more of the operational, physical product side of the business with supply chain and manufacturing, R and D, you know, customer experience, where Sophia oversees a lot more of the outward consumer facing sides of the business, so all of the marketing, tech, website, product, all those areas you mentioned earlier, brand design.. And then we actually share people in finance, core elements of the business that drive business success and business culture.. And being able to split those areas, but then also come back to talk about 'em has been really beneficial for us because it allows us to essentially pressure check our thinking, right? I'll come to Sophia about, "Here's what I'm imagining our product innovation "and product roadmap strategy looking like "over the next three years," and sort of, "Here was some of the inputs "I was thinking about in developing this.. "What are your thoughts," right? You have both a deep

thinking view, where I've been spending all my time thinking about it, and then Sophia can come and be like, "Oh, but what about this and what about that?" And we can really debate and discuss strategy together in each other's areas of the business.. And so that's been extremely helpful to really always drive to the best answer and best solution for the business, 'cause that's ultimately as a team what you're trying to do, is find the best solution for the business, find the best solution for your consumers and your customers.. But there is definitely a lot that we had to learn along the way and put in place to really ensure success in the co-CEO setup.. So that first was just high level of trust.. I think that is core really to any co-founder relationship..

Putting sort of the co-CEO part aside, just any co-founder set up, you need to have an extremely high level of trust, 'cause you're gonna be in the weeds, in the thick of it for many years, so you better like that person.. And I think thankfully we were best friends through our college and so we had a lot of foundation of really liking each other and being friends that translated really well to success of Pair.. And part of what comes with that trust and needs to happen in a co-CEO, co-founder set up is constant communication.. You know, you mentioned how do you handle conflict? There needs to be that level of trust to communicate when there's conflict, to have a culture of feedback where Sophia can tell me something about, "Hey, you know, you probably could have done that better," or I can say something like that to Sophia and, like, we have a high level of trust, where we're not taking that personally, but we know that we're all just trying to make each other better.. And we've really made a culture of open and honest feedback and collaboration a core tenant of Pair's culture, and that needs to be strongest within the co-founders and then really waterfall down.. Another few areas that's been really impactful is having clear decision making frameworks.. So the two of us both really trust the way in which we make decisions in our core areas, but we'll come to each other with, "Hey, here's a big decision "we should probably both discuss together "and make sure we're aligned, and then look back at the data "to make sure we're making the most informed decision." And then finally, I think something that's key is to just always be in lockstep in the long-term vision of the business and be very crisp and concise and clear with your co-founder on what that vision is and making sure that every decision that we're making as a business is striving towards building upon that vision...