

URL: <https://stvp.stanford.edu/clips/how-directors-can-manage-vps>

VPs set strategy. Directors execute. But don't assume that VPs always give directors the updates they need. Directors at fast-growing startups, suggests Meebo co-founder Elaine Wherry, need to aggressively pursue information if they want to avoid being blindsided by evolving top-level priorities and negotiations.



Transcript

- An engineer that I know, and she had grown into a director role.. And she was responsible, she was at a startup, and she responsible for overseeing a product team, an engineering team, lots of different roles.. And her startup at that time had the opportunity to potentially get a Fortune 500 client.. It was a make-or-break deal.. It was just like holy cow, this client says that if we build such and such, they will switch from our competitor to using our tool.. This has a huge signaling value.. This could be a turn around moment for our organization.. I cannot wait for you to build this.. And so the director, let's just call her Emily, Emily.. Emily's like great, got it..

Everybody's so excited, and there are people who are excited because they think it's going to generate money.. There are people who are excited because they think it's going to have tons of press.. There are people who are excited because it's just a really interesting engineering problem.. But she's just like you know what, I heard the feedback.. I knew we had to get started on this, and so the first thing I did was just like let's just get the, you know.. I'm gonna deal with all the feedback in turn, but let's just get this rolling.. Let's just keep going.. So, she starts building it.. I think they have like five or six months to build it.. And around month two or three, she's taking her initial prototype, and she goes to the Fortune 500 client, and she says hey, I'm so excited..

I wanna get your feedback.. We're so excited to work with you.. Thank you for this opportunity.. I'm really excited.. I wanted to make sure you got feedback early, all those things, and the client says well, this is great, but why doesn't it integrate with our database? And Emily's just like what, what database? Nobody told me we had to integrate with a database.. Database is gonna take us two or three more months of work.. No one said this to me.. She doesn't say that to the client.. But she goes back to her VP and CEO, and she's just like listen.. If you have conversations with the client, or you've had conversations, and there's something we have to implement, you need to tell me because otherwise I'm not gonna be able to have the team be able to build this for you..

And so the CEO's like yeah, we could have handled that better.. We could have given you more feedback early on.. The VP is like yeah, but I really just appreciate you just rolling with it.. I'm so excited.. Aren't startup days crazy? And she's like yeah, okay, that's fine.. That's fine, you know.. What I'm gonna do is I'm going to build the world's most beautiful plan, and I'm gonna show you exactly how much time it's going to take to be able to build every single feature.. And I just wanna make sure that we're all on the same page because if we have any other surprises, I don't know.. And she went to her VP, and she's like see this plan.. If we have any more surprises like, crazy idea, free trial experience, you know, something crazy out of the moon, I wanna make sure that you know that we can't do it, and we need to be able to say no..

You guys know where this is going, right? Yeah, so, they're building it.. They've done a really, really great job.. And all of a sudden, it's a week before their deadline is supposed to happen.. And the CEO, the VP, there's this high-level management meeting.. Everybody comes out, and her VP comes straight to her, and he says hey, Emily, I'm trying to remember.. I know we had this conversation a while ago, and the CEO was asking, and I can't remember.. Did we decide we were gonna do the free trial experience or not? And Emily's just like holy cow.. Literally the one conversation I did not wanna have happen.. We talked about this.. We both agreed that we weren't going to have any more features, and the feature that I said that I was just making up in that moment that I absolutely did not wanna do was free-trial experience..

And so she's like we can't do that.. That doesn't make any sense.. That's gonna be so hard to implement.. And she called in her engineer, and she's like engineer, please tell our VP why this is so hard and why we can't do this.. And the engineer tried, and the VP's like yeah but our CEO really needs it, and that's what we need to do.. And so in a week, they build the world's worst free-trial experience ever, and they launched with it.. And what do you think happened? Yeah.. (attendee speaks faintly) It didn't work, right? It crashed and burned.. It was not the successful.. They had done so much work, and in the last week, the week where they should have been working on bugs, they should have been working on all these other things, And you know, the free trial, how do you get somebody to use a buggy product off of a really, really buggy free-trial user experience? This does not add up, right? So if you go to Emily, and you say Emily, what happened there, what do you feel like the mistakes might be? Yeah..

- [Attendee] She was bearing to downwards but not upward? - Oh, you are so astute.. Yes, that's absolutely right.. She always said that she wasn't necessarily thinking about, Especially in the director role, you really have to be thinking about you're managing your peers, you're managing the people underneath you, and you are managing the people above you.. And especially for a director role, you are right in the thick of it...