URL: https://stvp.stanford.edu/clips/resolving-co-founder-conflict

Pilot CTO and founder Jessica McKellar talks about how she resolves conflict with her long-time co-founders Waseem Daher and Jeff Arnold. She particularly emphasizes the importance of building mutual trust, ensuring you are aligned on the facts, and moving on after a decision has been made.

Transcript

- You've been together for 15 years as this incredible team.. 00:00:07,930 What happens when you disagree? Like do you have, like, a sort of ritual, or sort of a way of making decisions, or like what happens? - Oh yeah, and I actually clarify like, and Jeff went, 00:00:20,630 he'd be fine with me saying this 'cause I've said it in front of him before, Jeff and I didn't get along for like the first seven years of our relationship together, as like kind of business owners together.. And, you know, I think what that speaks to is that, I mean, a lot of what running a company is about is about just interpersonal stuff.. And that's something that you get better at over time.. Like this is like a muscle that you practice.. One of the most transformative experiences that I had as an adult was actually at Dropbox in an executive coaching program that they kind of deployed with various departments, including the engineering leadership team.. And, you know, they run you, you sit in the fire with that type of executive coaching program, like you get a bunch of, like, very detailed, you know, like they send questionnaires to everybody who works with you.. Like, your manager, your peers, the people who report to you, like everybody gets like a 200 question questionnaire where they're rating you on a five point scale on like every possible attribute of your leadership style.. And then an executive coach distills that into themes, like where are your strengths? What are behaviors that are not serving you well or not serving you well anymore? And you like process that together.. And then you decide how you wanna come out the other side of it..

But you know, those types of reflections, they make you, sorry, I statements.. At least for me, it made me a better leader, but it also made me like a better partner in my personal life, because it really forces you to reflect on how you engage with difficult situations, how you engage with conflict.. So, yeah, I mean, it's a continuous investment in oneself and the team to be better and better as a people manager and as a leader.. That was a really transformative experience for me, and I think I benefited from it, you know, coming into Pilot because that's an experience I hadn't had in the previous two companies.. - I'm just really touched you share that 00:02:42,770 because I personally went through something very similar and it was super eyeopening just having that feedback come back, and then eventually working through, for me, I am incredibly conflict avoidant.. If I could, I would just hide in a cave.. And then I realized over time and through a lot of coaching and continuous development, you know, like you spoke about, like, conflict is not always bad, right? I think sometimes we have this perception, you know, as I was growing up, it was like, oh, conflict is not a good thing, or like, culturally, it's not a good thing, and yet it's kind of where the good stuff happens.. It's like when people are able to be so compassionate and respectful and laid out on table, you may find better solutions and better outcomes from it.. And yeah, I talk about this because I think

especially for students, sometimes there's this desire to go solo because then you'll have less conflict, but actually, you know, we're missing out on some great, great interactions and great opportunities to develop.. - Yeah, absolutely..

And then to go back to your 00:03:40,410 kind of direct previous question, you know, I was like, how do we resolve conflict? Well, first we've been a lot better at it because I think we've mostly kind of sorted out our issues over the past 15 years.. So if you're coming at it from a place of there is sincere mutual trust and respect, and, you know, for me, it's like I had hang ups about feeling like I had earned my place at the table, right? And so like, things that felt like they were challenging that made me react in a counterproductive way.. Once I worked through those things, it's like, oh, okay, we're having a disagreement.. Like, we're both reasonable people, we both trust each other.. Let's make sure that we're working off of the same fact base here.. - Yes.. 00:04:37,773 And if we do, great.. We probably have two reasonable opinions that just happen to be different, and we just need to make a decision about, you know, whose call is this? 'Cause some things are my call, they're in my kind of sphere.. Some things are, you know, Jeff's call, some things are Waseem's call and, you know, you can really, you can like pull the card if you need to say like, Hey, this is a deal breaker for me, but otherwise, we're making 100 decisions every day.. Like I don't have time nor the interest to micromanage everything that these folks are doing..

They're highly capable.. They're better than me at the stuff that they're doing.. So let them do what they're doing, let me do what I'm doing.. We'll make sure that we're aligned on the the big ticket items, for sure.. And then you just let it go.. You like disagree and commit, but let's move on, we've got a million other things to do...