

URL: <https://stvp.stanford.edu/clips/the-beginnings-of-betterup>

BetterUp CEO and co-founder Alexi Robichaux traces the origin of BetterUp to two interests that have been with him since high school: coding and peer-to-peer coaching. He describes how a period of burnout led him to envision a digital solution that would blend the expertise and rigor of clinical psychology with the business context of executive coaching.



Transcript

I'll keep it short, 'cause the origin really does actually go back to high school for me.. I find that I've been extremely fortunate, and it felt like I was stumbling, but eventually stumbling upon a venture or endeavor in life that really combined what had emerged as two great passions and sustained from high school, and the first chronologically was actually programming and coding.. We moved to England my freshman year.. It's a rainy place, if you haven't been there.. It was dark at four p.m.. half the year, and my little brother and I basically picked up web programming, HTML, PHP, ColdFusion was still a thing back then, ASP, and started making websites for my dad's friends' companies, and when we came back, through that, I started to get involved in some other school activities, and I had a buddy who had this idea for an after-school club where we essentially would do peer-to-peer coaching on what we called at the time "life skills." He had been reading a ton of Steve Covey and Napoleon Hill, Dale Carnegie, some of the classic self-help literature, and was disenchanted.. He had founded the Kiwanis Club at our school, or the Key Club, and was disenchanted with, loved volunteerism, but just going to conferences and hearing speakers and not being able to put this stuff into practice.. And so, they needed someone to build the website.. So I got looped in.. I helped work on the website, helped start this organization that eventually would become Youth Leadership America, and that just ignited in me this passion for this whole world of helping people realize their potential and the power of coaching and membership and practice..

So fast forward, I ended up in my career following the first passion, and ended up in Silicon Valley doing software, was very fortunate to join my first startup Socialcast, and we were fortunate enough to get acquired by VMware, and I became a very young executive at VMware, and was really, I think, at the time, I was probably 26, at the most.. I was pretty over-tasked and under-skilled, I would say.. It was a huge opportunity.. They were integrating a couple different acquisitions.. They were trying to build a social enterprise team.. I was helping to lead product and design for that, and I learned a ton during the integration in 18 months, but I also got extremely burnt out.. I remember driving down from SF to Palo Alto for these executive meetings with CIOs of some of the world's largest companies and the CEO of VMware, and just being completely nauseous, overwhelmed.. So I eventually hit a point where I was like, "Hey, this isn't a great headspace for me.. "I need to go do something else." In Type A fashion, I joined a YC company the next week and went into Y Combinator.. So I was not in a great mind space to do that either, and suffice it to say, was a little overwhelmed and burnt out and was able to take some time off and figure out what I should do next, and I kept coming back to the kids and coaching them and came back to this insight of, they have me helping them through their life transitions, which is like college apps or first join, resume building, first breakup at that age, and I was going through something significant in my life, and I didn't really have anyone to help me..

I could call my parents, but they live in Dallas.. A lot of the stuff in Silicon Valley, while they're empathetic and supportive, they didn't have the context for.. And so that started me in finding help, and I didn't know what that was.. So I tried everything from coaching to therapy to life coaching, executive coaching, the Landmark Forum in Los Angeles.. I walked the Camino de Santiago in Spain, and really was at this tension of, I kind of want the evidence-based scientific rigor and expertise of a clinician, but I want the business context of an executive coach, and I felt pulled, like I had to pick between the two, and I eventually found a coach who was a therapist by training, who did executive coaching.. And it was game-changing, and that was the seed of the idea for BetterUp.. It just kind of hit me, of like, "How did I miss this? "We should be doing what we did "for these high school students, but upgrading it.. "And if we did this," I had also been geeking out on this positive psychology, "this would really be "the missing equation in mental health today," which is there's not a powerful preventative layer.. Most of mental health is secondary healthcare, and we're not actually helping people preventatively develop the skills

that buffer from anxiety or depression or stress or high blood pressure or all these things I have experienced.. And so with that, I pulled in my buddy Eddie who had been building a nonprofit with me, had went to undergrad with me to USC..

He was at Haas, your friendly rival, doing his MBA there, and he had a lot of conviction around social enterprise and EdTech, and we had already been working together.. So, we just starting hacking on what I was pretty convinced would be one of the coolest products I'd seen and potentially the world's worst business, and went nowhere for two years, as I like to say.. So yeah, (Alexi claps) that was the story, and we could pick up on the rest later...