



## CHAPTER ONE

# INTRODUCTION

Welcome to *Startup Life*, a guide for having healthy relationships while working in the pressure cooker environment of a startup company. There are many powerful myths of the all-consuming nature of being an entrepreneur, and it is indeed difficult to balance your work life and your personal life. In fact, many people think that balance is not even worth trying for because it is a fool's errand. Others say that starting a company is another impossible goal, and it is true that the vast majority of startups do fail. But if you're an entrepreneur who loves your company and also happens to be in love with a particular person, you're not going to be stopped by naysayers or discouraged by the difficulty of the challenge of trying to do two hard things at once. If you're stubborn and committed to creating both a company and a relationship, this book will help you and your partner work together to clarify and communicate your core values, experiment to discover which relationship techniques work for you, and build a long-term life together while you're building your company. If you already have a company and are thinking of adding a relationship to what is already a complex system, or you have an existing love relationship and are considering embarking on building a company, this book is for you.

Our goal with this book is to help entrepreneurs and their partners have a healthier notion of what startup life looks like and to decide together what success means to you. There is a lot of buzz about work-life balance, much of it rather defeatist regarding the possibility of figuring out a sustainable solution. We'd like to counter some of the myths about the necessity of a maniacal work life and the notion that more hours at work increases the success rate of startups. The goal should be to work smarter, not harder, and to be efficient and deliberate about where you spend your time. We want couples to examine their preconceived notions of

what the startup life entails, and see whether they can create a path that works for them in the face of powerful and persistent mythologies about entrepreneurship.

We'd like this book to serve as a tool to help people think about what they want their lives to look like and be, in an entrepreneurial environment and in a longer and broader time frame. It can be used as a guide for exploration within an existing relationship, clarifying values and needs, and making it easier to have conversations about difficult topics. It's also optimistic and encouraging about the possibility of starting a relationship while you're already on an entrepreneurial adventure.

It's hard to create a startup company. It's hard to create a healthy long-lasting relationship. It's incredibly hard to try to do both of these things at the same time, or to start one or the other while in the midst of an existing startup or relationship. Both experiences can reveal things about yourself that are surprising, disappointing, changeable, immutable, such as whether you believe people change over time or that there's always room for self-improvement. Or that loving someone means accepting everything about them just as it is.

You will hear us say over and over again that the first principle of relationships, and startups, is communication. Without consistent, effective, honest communication, your relationship situation will be much more challenging. If you have different communication styles, use words as weapons, or expect your partner to be a mind reader, you are going to have to solve the fundamental issues around communication before you can tackle anything else. You can try a wide range of techniques, seek professional help, or enlist your best qualities to have effective communication within your relationship. Any efforts to improve communication are worthwhile, even if results can take time to be visible. We will harp on this notion throughout the book without apology. A commitment to being the best communicator you can be is a good place to start, and to return to, throughout your startup life.

One of our basic premises is that language matters. What you call your relationship matters. What you call yourself in public and private matters. What words you use when to speak to each other matters. The words you use when you talk about your relationship and your work to other people matters.

The second principle we're going to emphasize is core values, and communication is obviously a precursor to figuring out what your core values are. Shared values are what keep you together over time. They are part of

what initially brought you together as a couple. You will clarify these values together over time. Being able to articulate your personal priorities will help you direct your energy in the directions that will bring your goals to fruition. Having a mission statement for your company is a fundamental part of keeping the ship headed in the right direction, and having the same kind of alignment with your partner can make for much easier sailing. This book will help you communicate about what your core values are and how to live them.

## HETERONORMATIVE LANGUAGE AND PARTNERSHIPS

Our language, rich and varied though it is, still lacks words for life partner or significant other that are more romantic and less businesslike but don't imply or require heterosexual relationships. Furthermore, your business partner and your life partner can be the same person. Throughout this book we will use the word *partner* to indicate spouse, beloved, intimate other, soul mate, or whatever you call the person with whom you're working on a lifelong commitment. We will try to use inclusive language without confusing business partner with life partner. We will use the word *partnership* or *relationship* to mean marriage, cohabitation, and any form of long-term romantic intimate relationship that two people enter into. You'll also hear us refer to this throughout the book as an *entrepreneurial relationship*.

We want to say at the outset that we support all committed relationships, and that we fully support the right of our LGBTQ friends to have the same legal benefits afforded by the marriage contract as we do, even though we're not certain why the government confers any benefits at all. We cared so little about the legal part of marriage that we didn't get a marriage license until three years after we eloped to Alaska. We didn't claim any tax deductions, insurance benefits, or even free spousal rental car privileges during that time, but it didn't change the essential nature of our connection to have a piece of paper from the Boulder County Clerk and Recorder's Office. As part of our premise that language matters, being able to call your husband or your wife those things instead of boyfriend or girlfriend, or partner, is a different level of seriousness in our society. We look forward to the day when people who love each

other are able to share all the meanings of the word *spouse*. Entrepreneurs who are in committed relationships and don't intend to get married, whether they're legally able to or not, are also covered by the word *partner*.

## OUR PANEL OF EXPERTS

We aren't right about everything. Our path is only one of the myriad ways that people have figured out how to be happy together. We've asked a bunch of entrepreneurs and their partners to share their advice, approaches, and stories of success and failure. We appreciate their willingness to share what are often difficult stories. We are here to say that it can be done, and we applaud anyone who manages to stay together in these parlous times. We're not claiming to have some magic book of wisdom, although our secret sauce can add some spice to your relationship. What we do know is that it takes real dedication, hard work, top-notch communication skills, and a sense of humor to find your particular path together in this world.

We want to prevent lovely people who love each other from ever reaching the point that Rand Fishkin, the CEO of SEOmoz, describes here. We agree with everything he shares about how he and his wife, Geraldine de Ruiter, a travel blogger and writer at Everywhereist.com, are trying to get through the current struggle of building an extraordinary business while having an amazing relationship.



It's pretty obvious to most of the team at SEOmoz, to my wife, and (at long last) to me, that I'm drowning. I rarely get the sleep I need. I've been not quite shaking off a minor cold for seven weeks. My back is not getting any better—I still have to walk with a cane sometimes. I'm in fairly constant discomfort.

Sometimes I'm in semiconstant, serious pain. I'm never caught up on my email. And I haven't taken a formal "vacation" (the kind without at least four hours of work in a day) since my wedding in 2008. The longest I've gone without checking email since then was in Ireland, and it was around 40 hours. Hell, we've never even gone on our honeymoon.

There's no doubt that my efficiency should be higher, that my demands on my own time should be lower, and that I can't be the single point of failure on projects and communication that I've been over the last five years of Moz's growth.

My coach, Jerry Colonna, gave me some homework at the end of our recent call. After talking to Jerry, I talked to Geraldine about the problems seriously and in-depth. We talked about how my lack of balance made each of us feel. We talked about ideas for overcoming it. We did that. It felt really good—maybe as good as any conversation we've ever had, even if it was hard. And we came up with some rules we're going to try:

Once every week, on Tuesday, I'm going to come home by 7:00 P.M. and not do any work until the next morning. I've literally never done this before. Tomorrow is going to be interesting.

In the first half of 2013, we're going to take a 10+-day vacation where I will only work 60 minutes each day maximum. There will be a timer.

After a few months, we're going to try limiting work to 60 minutes on one day each weekend.

This is going to be hard, and I'm scared I'm going to fall very, very far behind on my emails and my obligations. But it will be a healthy forcing function.

Hardest of all, I'm going to have to say "no." A lot. To many people that I like and wish I could help. That's going to suck, but it's the only way. I don't expect to find balance, but I do think these rules can help build a separation that I've never had before and that should exist.

Rand Fishkin, SEOmoz, [www.seomoz.com](http://www.seomoz.com)

Geraldine DeRuiter, @everywhereist, [www.everywhereist.com](http://www.everywhereist.com)

<http://moz.com/rand/there-is-no-worklife-balance/>

Being happily committed is an achievement and a huge and difficult accomplishment. Some of the habits you need to develop to get there are like flossing your teeth—they are good habits that take only a small amount of time, but you can't make up for the missing days. Others are like preventative medicine that helps you keep your love healthy on a regular basis. Yet others are like regular checkups at the doctor that you do on a semiannual basis, while the rest are profound and deep behaviors that require years of commitment to master.

We are trying to share what we have learned in hopes that it will make it easier for you to have a fulfilling and purposeful life, which we believe needs both work and love to be complete. We hope this books helps people who are trying to build an intimate relationship at the same time they're building their startup company. If we help a single startup relationship, we've succeeded.