

Entrepreneurship Is a Lot Like Reliving Your High School Days: Here's Why

High school and entrepreneurship have a lot more in common than you might think. Apply these classroom lessons to boost your business.

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In that famous New York City borough located just east of Manhattan, you'll find the Brooklyn Steam Center, a tech education center that focuses on STEAM (short for "science, technology, engineering, arts and math"). What's interesting about the center is that with the education it offers, the lines between high school education and startup life are actually a little blurry.

The reason is that, first, students from public high schools in New York City come to the center to meet in conference rooms and learn to give 30-second elevator pitches. And, second, the center is located at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, where more than 400 companies are already based and potential future employers are just one office over. See what I mean by "blurry"?

For those of us already in the startup game, we rarely learned our first lessons in pitching in such a formal setting. Our stakes were always high, and if we messed up, there was no friendly teacher to offer gentle guidance. Yet I still see a similarity between my startup education and that of these

Brooklyn students because, in many ways, starting a company is just like walking into high school as a freshman: You're excited (and terrified) about all that awaits you.

Both educational paths also require a painstaking amount of reading, note-taking and retention of loads of new information. Further, the social challenges can make even the most confident person second-guess every decision.

Back to school

In school, some classes are harder than others – and often those you thought you'd love actually suck. This is another thing high school and entrepreneurship have in common: You enter both with preconceived ideas about what you're going to like and dislike. (For me, economics class was a huge disappointment; in business, I've found the same to be true of hiring and firing.)

In high school, answering every extended relative's query about what you wanted to be when you grew up was annoying. But once you're in startup land, it's your investors asking, and your answer could mean the difference between your raising your next round of funding and running out of money.

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Then, there's the social comparison game. Things can look so easy for the popular kids (or, in business, founders using their dads' money), and someone else always seems to be doing better, faster. While you're desperately trying to keep up your grades (revenue, net profit, valuation), people all around you are being recognized for their accomplishments.

If your footing feels shaky in these early stages, remember this: Entrepreneurship is just as unpredictable as high school. But, even if your first company fails, if you put in

the hard work and build some self-awareness, you'll find the right path. You just need to be dedicated.

Often, that “wallflower” surprises everyone.

Some of the most successful business owners run companies that don't fit the standard mold. And chances are, they approached high school the way they approach business: doing their own thing their own way.

Think about Richard Branson's case: He left school at 15 to run his own magazine. His eye was (and still is) on building great companies. And while that magazine ultimately failed, the mail-order record business he launched to make money on the side definitely took off; it's now Virgin Records. Branson's dyslexia also made school difficult for him, but he used his unique capabilities to hone his passions.

The most important lessons a successful high school career can offer are often overlooked. But whatever your previous experience might be, you have the opportunity now to effectively manage the critical startup period with the following classroom lessons for success:

1. Embrace your status.

Starting a company, like starting as a freshman in high school, requires thick skin. Most days won't go as you thought – some will be better, while some will be worse. But with no alternative (high school is mandatory to some point) you must figure out how to handle it all.

Startups are no different, so reading about other entrepreneurs' experiences can help you understand what you're in for before you start. For the first few years in business, I was overwhelmed by the number of difficult

problems I shouldered. It took resiliency to tackle them, and sometimes, I went home utterly discouraged. I knew we were growing and doing well, but I couldn't understand why I had to face new problems every day.

I later came to understand that "problems" are normal. As the CEO, you see the most difficult challenges fall on your desk. With this realization, I began taking these issues less personally and instead focused more on finding solutions quickly and effectively so I could be ready for future challenges.

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2. Lean on your best friends.

In high school, there's nothing like having a best friend – someone to walk with you through those tumultuous years, celebrating the highs and grieving the lows. Starting a company is similarly hard, and again you need supportive people around to make it through.

If you have co-founders, then, don't take them for granted. Having someone whom you can be fully transparent with (and someone who cares about your business as much as you do) is a lifesaver when times get tough. Having a person there to keep you accountable is invaluable, too. In fact, research by social psychologist Bob Cialdini has shown that when you have someone holding you to your goals, you're more likely to reach that next milestone.

Meanwhile, you can join entrepreneur groups such as Young Entrepreneur Council or Entrepreneurs' Organization to find like-minded people with whom you can discuss challenges and share advice. Outside perspective is always helpful, whether it's about what software is working best or how to downsize a company when times get tough.

A quick read through E0's testimonials reveals how beneficial these resources can be. You can build a valuable network, find mentors and educational events, reach goals more consistently with accountability groups and enjoy a social network. Kind of like that great crowd you hung out with in high school, right?

3. Be a good friend whenever possible.

By providing value to everyone around you, you'll inevitably rise. In high school, no one liked the mean girl who suddenly turned friendly right before the homecoming queen vote. So, be genuine: A positive public image can help your business, but it must be real. In the early days of networking, center your conversations on how your offerings can improve people's lives or businesses. And follow that path.

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Then, as you reach a more senior position in the entrepreneurial "high school" landscape, reach out to "underclassmen," and help them tackle challenges you've already overcome.

Foundations such as those created by Spanx and Nasty Gal don't view other women as competitors to beat; they understand that investing in others' success helps all women in business. Building positive connections and partnerships can only help you in the long run, whether that's with your current business or the future endeavors you pursue.

Looking back, I can see that true success in high school wasn't about being popular or even getting the best grades. Real success meant pushing through the awkwardness and insecurities to figure out who you wanted to be and what you wanted out of life. As an entrepreneur, achieving success isn't about knowing all the answers – it's about

moving *through* uncertainty to find your footing and build something meaningful. Just as you did in high school.

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