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Join the Bigger, “Boulder” Community

John Schneider once said, “Passion is different than desire. People that are successful recognize passion. You have to be willing to work at it. I love the image of pushing a boulder uphill - it will flourish you.” Maybe the quote does not directly regard Boulder, Colorado, but it sure is fitting. The city of Boulder is full of passionate entrepreneurs who are hardworking and are ready to face any obstacle to be successful in the business world. In his book, *Startup Communities*, Brad Feld discusses the good and bad aspects of this small 100,000 populated town.

Throughout the book, Brad stresses the idea of “give before you get.” This seems to be one of the many aspects that make Boulder a successful startup community. The principle that one will reap what has been sown is essentially what the quote means. Mentoring and helping others while not expecting much is demonstrated in many businesses and clubs. Going out of one’s way to help better another individual and the city will come back in good ways to the giver. Because of this mentality, the city of Boulder is a community, which consists of people who stand behind one another, root for the other team, and treat others as one wants to be treated. The collaborations between the leaders and feeders throughout the town demonstrate a family-like feel. Brad shares that the leaders in the community are entrepreneurs, whereas the feeders are everyone else—the government, university, and investors.

Individuals are part of Boulder; however, groups make the community. There are many different organizations and clubs that are well attended throughout the city of Boulder. Some of these include: Young Entrepreneurs Organization, Boulder Denver New Tech Meetup, Boulder Open Coffee Club, Startup Weekend, Ignite Boulder, and Boulder Startup Digest. These organizations all want to better individuals in the city. They have a goal to build people, the city, and even the country to be the best that it can be. They have ideas and products to offer that can benefit people around the world and truly make a difference. Some of these clubs are large events filled with hundreds of people, while others happen once a week and have grown to a smaller, but still appreciable size. There are events such as Startup Weekend that consist of people from many different fields, and innovators with an idea in mind. Ideas are shared among the group, and ultimately one or even a few ideas are decided to be the projects for the weekend. These folks then work on the idea to try to create a startup in a few days. On smaller scale, there are groups such as the Boulder Open Coffee Club, where individuals interested in the startup community meet regularly at a local coffee shop. The founder of the Boulder club, Jason Mendelson expresses that this activity is “a regularly occurring event by the community for the community” (Feld, 84). This setting allows for a relaxed atmosphere where individuals can collaborate, share stories, network, and just burn some steam. While Startup Weekend is more rigorous than the Boulder Open Coffee Club, they still serve the same purpose—building a better startup community.

Is Boulder in a perfect location for a startup community, or can this success be found anywhere? Today’s technology makes it very simple to shop online, so it seems that location is less important to make a business prosper. However, economic geographers have found that

innovative people are often found in clusters in certain areas. Brad explains this concept with economics, sociology, and geography. The economics aspect has to do with network effects, meaning the amount of like-minded people located in one area. Another economic factor is the resources of both professionals and other business inputs. The sociology part is closely tied with the openness and information exchange of the community. This fits with the “give before you get” mentality, where Boulder citizens are willing to help one another regardless of status or experience. And, the last area that demonstrates the importance of location is geography. Creative individuals like to be around those with similar mindsets. This explains why many people in a certain area are quite alike and live life in a correlative manner.

The Boulder Thesis is a key part of Brad Feld’s writing and describes how startup communities can be successful. The four components are as follows: entrepreneurs must lead the startup community, the leaders must have a long-term commitment, the startup community must be inclusive of anyone who wants to participate in it, and the startup community must have continual activities that engage the entire entrepreneurial stack (Feld, 25). The four aspects are clear and concise, and demonstrate the pattern that Boulder has followed thus far, and should continue to follow to stay successful.

Another key area that Brad touches on is the idea of failure. Failing is a part of life that can be a great learning experience. While most do not particularly enjoy failing, it allows an individual to develop a better idea, that is if they fail fast. It is good to experiment with ideas, test them out and see if they work. If they do not, then one should have the ability to step away. Many entrepreneurs waste time on an idea, only to later find out that no one is going to purchase the product or service. It is advised to analyze early on and understand if it is worth going forth in a startup. If it is not, then the next idea will come around, and the past becomes a learning experience.

In the business world, there is competition everywhere. Each company is trying to be good, better, and then the best at what it does. In a community, this is not the mindset that should take place. Brad describes this in the book as a “non-zero-sum game”, meaning that there are no winners or losers. This goes back to the mentorships and collaborations that occur—everyone wants everyone to win. Even failing is a sense of winning because it takes one to the next step. A community is a team, so it cannot be a connected and successful community with competition between the different startups, or even among the different clubs.

Brad shares many factors that contribute to the success of a startup community; however, there are also elements that cause problems among startup areas. One such issue is “The Patriarch Problem” which is described as having a hierarchically organized town. Often times, the retired generation has old money, which allows power in the town. This puts a damper on a startup community because status is involved. Another issue is complaints about capital, when more than likely there will never be enough to fulfill every entrepreneur’s needs. Grumbling about this issue puts the focus on lack of funds rather than building a better startup. To be successful, an entrepreneur needs to be willing to stick with it until the end. There cannot be short-term commitments in the community—an individual is either in it or he is not. It is a life decision to put everything into an idea or several ideas to see that it is fulfilled and that it betters the city and the people involved. Playing a zero-sum game, avoiding people because of past failures, a feeder attempting to control the community, and having bias against newcomers are also problems that will be detrimental to the success of a startup area.

The University of Colorado Boulder is located in the heart of this startup community. While not a leader in the area, it is definitely a feeder that adds great new innovators and

facilities for the advancement of startup Boulder. Students at the university have access to many different professors who can be mentors, as well as the opportunity to use the space and computers or labs at the school. This provides a step in the right direction for these young entrepreneurs as they begin their startup journey. There are also programs such as the Silicon Flatirons Center that was started in the law school. This is beneficial on many levels because of the resource for entrepreneurs to turn their idea into a business, as well as this allowing not only business students, but others to tap into the startup world.

With positives, there are negatives, so with the university's good attributes, there are a few issues. One is that faculty within the school is not rewarded to inspire or encourage entrepreneurial traits. This does not encourage the faculty to make the time to help students; however, this does not quite fit with the "give before you get" theory! Another challenge the university faces is the lack of resources in some aspects. There could be a shortage of professors to mentor or spaces on campus for students to conduct research. The final affair stated in the book is that collaboration throughout the campus is not embedded in the university. This meaning that the law, engineering, and business school are separate unless an individual steps out of his comfort zone and ventures to the other side of campus. This makes it quite challenging for student entrepreneurs to make advancements in his startup.

It is clear that Boulder is a city full of bold and brave entrepreneurs. The sense of community, and even "family" ties that string business and different fields together are the glue to this continually developing area. There are challenges that every area face, and location is in favor of some geographic areas over others. Nonetheless, with a mindset of "give before you get", soon entrepreneurs will "get what they give."

References

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