

As Carolyn Hotchkiss succinctly said, “great Entrepreneurs are passionate about an idea.” To me, this statement supports two of the key tenants of ethical entrepreneurship that Hotchkiss defined. First of all, entrepreneurs have many roles, or “wear many hats” within their startup. The entrepreneur can simultaneously be an individual, a founder, a co-founder, a CEO (or CFO, or COO), and an investor. While wearing fulfilling this multitude of roles, entrepreneurs can easily find themselves in conflicts with themselves. What is best from the entrepreneur as individual’s perspective is not always the same as what is best from the entrepreneur as a CEO’s perspective. One particular example that Hotchkiss used to explain this inner conflict was the usage of gifts in business. While an individual may wish to accept a gift, especially in a new company without a gift policy, they need to examine the situation from two perspectives. While they may wish to as an individual, from the perspective of a CFO setting a company precedent for accepting gifts may be less than ideal, and may not be fiscally responsible. In fact, entrepreneurs often need one of the same traits as Collin’s level five leaders exhibit, putting the company first. A secondary component of entrepreneurial ethics that Hotchkiss highlighted was that a venture’s mission statement clearly demonstrates the venture’s values. The mission statement will help guide a startup’s actions, and thus ethical values will come through in their business.

While there are many ways for a startup to be ethical, or even virtuous, these factors will give a head start. A startup venture with both founders who are capable of thoroughly evaluating their role within the company, and a strong mission will have a greater likelihood of success and a strong ethical foundation. Having started a company previously, Alight Learning, the importance of these rings very true. Alight Learning was founded with a very strong mission to improving middle schools by leveraging strong pedagogical principles with modern technologies. This mission very much reflected my personal beliefs and desires for the company. In this way, the startup had one of the very key factors towards being great.

However, with six co-founders wearing different hats, it became very difficult to tell if each individual was capable of wearing the proper hats to execute the company both effectively and ethically. Given the management structure, the company tended towards attempting to be a “real business,” with equity, tasks, and a strong hierarchy. This system required co-founders to wear very business oriented hats. This conflicted with the personal desires of the co-founders, and the interpersonal friendships that had existed. This affected me very much personally and professionally. I was displeased with the management style, and did not think we had the best implementation to solve the problems we had started with. As an employee, I needed to trust the judgement of our CEO to steer the company in a proper direction. However, personally, I disagreed very much with the company’s trajectory and chances at success.

One of the hardest decisions I ever made was leaving the company, a resignation I associated to personal conflict. This struck me as ethically questionable, as I had much knowledge of the company, and had used many personal contacts to the develop the company that seemed compromised in retrospect. In retrospect, and using the framework of Hotchkiss’ need for separate hats, I realized through this interaction that I was also at fault by limiting the potential of the company by stalling progress. Rather than simply contributing as assigned, I was maintaining a very strong perspective as an individual. This perspective stalled progress as it created more personal and professional conflicts within the company. I did not leave the company for the right reasons. However, since I was compromising the company’s success through my inability to remove myself from my individual identity, leaving the company was

likely best for the potential of the company to be great. Others faced very similar decisions about when and where to wear their hats, but I cannot evaluate the validity of when they chose to wear each hat and how it impacted the company. Above all, from my new ethical perspective, I made the right decision by leaving the company.