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Till Exit Do Us Part

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Why Startups and Marriages are More Alike than You Think

Recent research shows that marriages and co-founder relationships share striking parallels. While the average unicorn startup exits after 8.8 years, the average U.S. marriage lasts 9.7 years, showing a 93% correlation between the trajectories of unicorn exits and marriage breakups.¹ This begs the question: are the reasons for choosing – and more importantly, leaving – a co-founder really that different from choosing a spouse?

When selecting a spouse, people often focus first on physical attraction, age compatibility, gender, and other personal factors. But as the relationship develops, deeper questions about how you function as a couple come into focus. Do you agree on major questions like whether you want to have children and, if so, how to raise them? How important are money and careers in achieving the lifestyle you both desire? How will household responsibilities be shared? Do you feel valued in the relationship?

When choosing a co-founder, on the other hand, factors like gender or physical attractiveness play a minor to no role. Instead, you are more likely to select a co-founder based on technical skills and compatibility of expertise. However, once you start building the business together, issues surprisingly similar to those in a marriage begin to emerge: Do you agree on major strategic decisions? How will you divide work and ownership? Do you feel valued by one another?

Startup Co-founders, Meet the Marriage Test

Given the many similarities between co-founding relationships and marriages, we set out to see whether the same indicators that predict divorce also forecast co-founder breakups. In marriage research, a well-known method for predicting relationship longevity is to observe how couples handle conflict.² In a classic study, psychologists asked newlywed couples to have a 15-minute discussion about an area of disagreement. Their interactions were videotaped, and their stress levels were measured. The researchers then tracked these couples for up to 20 years.

The findings? Certain conflict behaviors – called “the four horsemen” – predicted a decline in marriage satisfaction and a higher likelihood of divorce: contempt, criticism, defensiveness, and stonewalling. Elevated stress levels during conflict also turned out to be predictive of divorce.

We replicated this study with more than 100 real-world startup teams of two in our lab at the Technical University of Munich. Like the married couples, the founders were asked to discuss a topic of ongoing disagreement while being filmed, and their stress levels were monitored. We then assessed their satisfaction with their co-founder – both at the time of the study and again three and

six months later – asking whether they were still happy working together or had thought about leaving (or already had left) the venture.

Contemptuous and Stressed Teams Become Unhappy and want to Break Up in the Long Run

The more contempt founders showed during the conflict conversation, the less satisfied they were with their teammate and the more likely they wanted to leave three months later. Contemptuous behaviors included eye rolls, and openly mean or sarcastic comments, such as asking, “How stupid are you?” or sarcastically calling the other person “my little prince.” Interestingly, contempt is also the single strongest predictor of divorce in married couples.² We also found that founders who experienced the highest stress levels during conflict – as compared to a neutral interaction – were the most likely to report intentions to exit the venture six months later.

Test Before You Commit: Why Founders and Investors Should Prioritize Healthy Disagreements

While technical expertise and goal alignment are essential when starting a company together, they are far from sufficient. The ability to navigate disagreements openly and calmly – while continuing to show respect for each other – is just as critical for a successful co-founding partnership as it is for building a lasting marriage.

When you meet a potential life partner, you typically go on multiple dates, have deep conversations about the future, move in together, and inevitably encounter disagreements before making a lifelong commitment. The same principle should apply when choosing a co-founder. Arrange “work dates,” spend meaningful time together, and don’t shy away from addressing conflicts. Ask yourself: Can you express your opinions openly, and are they respected? Is your partner willing to compromise? If disagreements frequently escalate into heated arguments where logic breaks down, that’s a sign this person is probably not the right fit for a shared venture. On the other hand, if you can stay calm, listen to each other, and find compromises that work for both of you, you’re laying the groundwork for a healthier, more sustainable partnership – and ultimately, for stronger business growth.

For investors, paying close attention to how a team handles disagreements can offer valuable insight. Healthy conflict resolution is a strong predictor of whether a team will stick together through the inevitable challenges of startup life.

You wouldn’t marry someone after the second date – and you shouldn’t co-found a company that way either.

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¹Ilya Strebulaev, Venture Capital Initiative, Stanford Graduate School of Business (09/2024)

²Gottman, J. (2023). What predicts divorce?: The relationship between marital processes and marital outcomes. Routledge.

