

## Smelling like Smoke

*“Success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has overcome while trying to succeed.”*

-Booker T. Washington

The journey to the top of Silicon Valley is daunting when your life is a bull market. When all of the skids are greased for your benefit and all winds are tailwinds, conquering the tech world is still a Herculean task.

So imagine the degree of difficulty you face when walls are built high and wide in all four directions.

Think about starting a marathon race when your competition has a 26.1-mile head start.

That’s the nature of my odyssey.

My leadership origin story begins in high school.

I wrote my first line of code as a teenager. I won’t repeat exactly what the HTML said, but let’s just say I wasn’t a fan of the Los Angeles Lakers, and I had the edgy words to prove it.

But the content was far less powerful than the symbol. I had a tool I could use to talk to the world.

If I could write one line of code, I could write lines of code every day. I could use technology to build a platform to lead in my community and in the world at-large.

It emboldened me.

It inspired me.

It was the first brick in the foundation of the life I love today.

At every turn I didn’t look like everyone else around me.

At every level I got funny looks. My ambition was treated as a mere hobby.

If only they knew it was the fuel that drove my every waking hour, perhaps they would have kept their ignorance to themselves.

I stood out as a college freshman. I fought through the dismissive looks and condescending questions.

“Are you sure you’re in the right class,” I was asked more times than you can imagine. Every first day of every semester felt like Groundhog Day.

“Yes I am. Are you?” It was my patented reply.

I endured constant sleepless nights so I could set the curve. If I weren’t running faster and jumping higher, nobody would have taken me seriously.

But now you must.

B-students don’t thrive; they merely exist. And what kind of life is that?

It certainly isn’t the kind of life that I wanted to build.

So I stood out. The chip on my shoulder motivated me to make sacrifices. To get where I wanted to go, I couldn’t just blend in. I had to take giant swings at my most daunting goals.

With that motivation, I arrived in Silicon Valley.

I was a fish out of water, again. And in other news, the sky is blue and gravity is real.

They told me I had to learn to “land my ideas.” I had to learn the culture and “act as if” I had been there forever.

That’s not my way. Authenticity is the only option.

Spoiler alert: my authentic self wasn’t met with universal critical acclaim.

I got called into Product VP #1’s office during my second week. He told me I was “abrasive” and that some of the other folks on the team were “put off” by my presentation style.

Were the 20-something bros who spend untold amounts of money tossing money at dancers at De Ja Vu every weekend offended by my product idea? The irony astounded.

Product VP #2 told me that while bright and articulate, I don’t demonstrate the requisite level of intuitive EQ to match the company’s “vibe and aesthetic.” So the guys who wear pajamas to work and live life on an optional showering continuum are lecturing me about vibe and aesthetic? Don’t make me laugh.

And after several successful (read: 8-figure sales within six months) product launches, Product VP #3 thought it was a great idea to call me at 11:00 on a Wednesday night to discuss how my personality was far too aloof at happy hour,

and that some of the VC backers who are paying for the “party” are wondering if I am truly a team player.

He then dropped the anvil on my head. He spilled the true reason for his call.

“If your attitude doesn’t change, I’m not sure I can justify keeping you around long-term. We’re cultivating a very particular ecosystem, and your behavior has me questioning your fit.”

Incidentally, all of this culture questioning came within a week of when my hard-earned equity was scheduled to vest.

So let me get this straight: honors graduate of Stanford University, leader behind multiple product launches that kept the firm in the black, three more products in the pipeline and a legitimate claim to a partnership...but you want to x me out because of the particular nature of your ecosystem?

So instead of an olive branch, they extended a scolding bush.

I woke up the next morning with a conundrum. I had two options:

- A) Walk away from the money and the equity and stop subjecting myself to this passive aggressive 1,000 tiny paper cut death trap.
- B) Toss my years of hard work away and resign in a blaze of glory so I can start anew somewhere else.

I chose B.

I chose wisely.

That choice is why I stand before you today scarred but triumphant. I knew I didn’t have to live my life under someone else’s terms. That defeats the purpose of working to stand at the pinnacle of my profession. It would go against every tenet of the life I built for myself.

Building a great life isn’t that different from building a website or building a product or business.

It starts with both eyes planted firmly on the idealized end-state vision.

It involves asking yourself the right questions at every phase.

Is this really what I want?

If it is, then is this the fastest way to get there?

If so, is speed optimal?

If not, then what is?

Is my original vision of perfection sustainable?

Has it evolved into an entirely different animal because my inspiration and dedication created an entirely divergent vision?

Those are the kinds of big picture questions I get to ask every single day. It's exhilarating. But no true success comes without battle scars.

I smell like smoke because I've been through fire. And I'm better for it.