

From Rose Valley to Silicon Valley

Five early lessons on which I built a career in tech

In 2007, with a BA in anthropology and a blank canvas for a career plan, I walked through the doors at Google Inc.—and stayed for 5 years. It was my introduction to the wild and wonderful world of “tech,” an industry that has leveraged (and developed) the incredible creativity and ambition of its people to achieve amazing things. Working at Google really felt like living with one foot in the future— an optimistic future in which anyone can see the world from space, online publishers get paid, traffic accidents are unheard of, and ignorance has gone completely out of style.

Today, I’m the Vice President of Product at TicketLeap, a tech startup right here in Philadelphia. It’s exciting to see the culture of innovation and wide-eyed human ambition that hit its stride in Silicon Valley expanding outward across the U.S. and the world.

It would be reasonable to think that my path to Google and beyond was paved with computer science classes; but it would be wrong. I’ve not taken a single computer science class in my life. Turns out, the fact that I feel at home in the tech startup world has nothing to do with my technical aptitude and everything to do with my values and my approach to problem solving— both of which took shape at Rose Valley. In fact, if you look past the material differences, the parallels between SRV and the tech startup world are stunning.

Here are five.

Thinking is more important than knowing

Facts are commodities and, in 2013, they’re often free and readily available to anyone with a mobile phone. But mastering the mechanics of *how* to think and *how* to communicate will never be a click away. Rose Valley not only gave me the tools to think, but also empowered me to think creatively—to question assumptions and see through perceived limits. In a tech startup, you won’t survive if you can’t think creatively and solve problems in ways no one has ever solved them before. Innovation is the life blood of successful technology, and innovation cannot be memorized. Multiplication tables and spelling won’t get you very far.

There’s no *them*, only *us*

When conversations get even a little complex, people often resort to applying one of two labels to everyone in the room: *ally*, or *enemy*. Rather than working as a team to derive insights from the friction, they select their

side and rally their energy to work *against* the perceived opponent. Often the rift falls down lines of authority: those who make the rules versus those who must live them. Traces of this very human habit are everywhere you look: Washington, workplaces, and even schools, where teachers—who are charged with enacting rules and evaluating students—are often perceived as the “them” in an “us versus them” struggle.

In a tech startup, there’s no room for sides. Everyone is playing for the same team and shares the same goal: the success of the company. There’s probably a myriad of opinions on how to achieve that goal and disagreements are often animated. But, in an effective company, everyone knows that we’re all on the same boat: we float together and we sink together. And all disagreements are framed in that light.

At Rose Valley, it never occurred to me that my teachers might be the enemy. I learned early that two people representing very different points of view (that of a teacher and that of a student) can share a common goal, and can work together harmoniously—even if it does take work! I didn’t learn to look for the common goal per se, but I didn’t have a chance to develop the bad a habit of assuming otherwise.

There’s rarely one right way

I’ll admit, I have to check myself on this one regularly (it’s a tempting thing to forget): differences of opinion do not necessarily mark differences in intelligence or competence. They reflect differences in point of view. If you want to go through life without being a total jerk, it’s pretty important to remember this. But it’s especially important in places like tech startups where the group needs to make a million fast decisions each day. In that environment, it’s necessary to trust other people’s decisions even when they don’t align with your own, and to imagine success following those decisions. It underlies the capacity to find a good path forward in varied and sometimes non-optimal circumstances. And if you can’t do that, you’re dramatically diminishing your likelihood of success.

This is hard coded in Rose Valley’s DNA. I arrived at Rose Valley a stubborn, impatient, opinionated kid and left Rose Valley... OK, OK... a stubborn, impatient, opinionated pre-teen—BUT, a pre-teen with a strong foundation for valuing contrary opinions. And thank goodness for that.

Work on things that excite you

Because that’s when you’ll do your best work. I suspect one of the tech industry’s greatest assets is the seemingly boundless, occasionally annoying excitement that bubbles forth from its

most successful entrepreneurs. Excitement begets vision, vision begets good execution.

Rose Valley knows this. As a student, I learned that learning (and working) could be fun. I also learned what I liked, and how to direct my energy towards those things. My Rose Valley was a place where sculpting figures from a “butter stick” of clay was one of the most tightly constrained assignments—but, of course, no one flinched when my butter stick turned into a human-shaped goat relaxing in a bathtub.

We are great; have high expectations of yourself and others

About a decade after I left Rose Valley, I got the urge to return for a visit—and I brought my boyfriend (now husband), Dan. We stopped by the wood shop at some point and were lucky enough to find Big Mike there with a class from the preschool. Students were working on various angular and asymmetrical projects. It brought back fond memories.

As we left, Dan confessed the shock he felt when we walked into the shop. You’d have to be crazy, he figured, to equip 4 year olds with hammers and let them loose in a room full of potential weapons, not to mention a good selection of power tools. But to his utter surprise and amazement, no one was being chased with a saw; no one was hurt or upset; no one was even mildly out of control. What he saw was a room full of impossibly polite, responsible kids doing creative, constructive things.

Building a culture of trust and responsibility takes time and energy. And good will. Many communities spare the expense and are forever fighting for order and authority. This happens not just in elementary schools but also high schools, colleges, and workplaces. Employers often enforce arbitrary hours, restrict employee internet, and so on—for full grown, entirely independent humans! Google, TicketLeap, and other great places to work have bucked this trend. And so has Rose Valley.

Clearly, Rose Valley spares no expense when it comes to creating a culture of trust and respect. The reward? A community of kids who hold themselves responsible for being good humans. Is there anything better?