Relentlessly Resourceful

March 2009A couple days ago I finally got being a good startup founder down  
to two words: relentlessly resourceful.Till then the best I'd managed was to get the opposite quality down  
to one: hapless. Most dictionaries say hapless means unlucky. But  
the dictionaries are not doing a very good job. A team that outplays  
its opponents but loses because of a bad decision by the referee  
could be called unlucky, but not hapless. Hapless implies passivity.  
To be hapless is to be battered by circumstances—to let the world  
have its way with you, instead of having your way with the world.  
  
[1]Unfortunately there's no antonym of hapless, which makes it difficult  
to tell founders what to aim for. "Don't be hapless" is not much  
of rallying cry.It's not hard to express the quality we're looking for in metaphors.  
The best is probably a running back. A good running back is not  
merely determined, but flexible as well. They want to get downfield,  
but they adapt their plans on the fly.Unfortunately this is just a metaphor, and not a useful one to most  
people outside the US. "Be like a running back" is no better than  
"Don't be hapless."But finally I've figured out how to express this quality directly.  
I was writing a talk for   
investors, and I had to explain what to  
look for in founders. What would someone who was the opposite of  
hapless be like? They'd be relentlessly resourceful. Not merely  
relentless. That's not enough to make things go your way except  
in a few mostly uninteresting domains. In any interesting domain,  
the difficulties will be novel. Which means you can't simply plow  
through them, because you don't know initially how hard they are;  
you don't know whether you're about to plow through a block of foam  
or granite. So you have to be resourceful. You have to keep  
trying new things.Be relentlessly resourceful.That sounds right, but is it simply a description  
of how to be successful in general? I don't think so. This isn't  
the recipe for success in writing or painting, for example. In  
that kind of work the recipe is more to be actively curious.  
Resourceful implies the obstacles are external, which they generally  
are in startups. But in writing and painting they're mostly internal;  
the obstacle is your own obtuseness.  
[2]There probably are other fields where "relentlessly resourceful"  
is the recipe for success. But though other fields may share it,  
I think this is the best short description we'll find of what makes  
a good startup founder. I doubt it could be made more precise.Now that we know what we're looking for, that leads to other  
questions. For example, can this quality be taught? After four  
years of trying to teach it to people, I'd say that yes, surprisingly  
often it can. Not to everyone, but to many people.   
[3]  
Some  
people are just constitutionally passive, but others have a latent  
ability to be relentlessly resourceful that only needs to be brought  
out.This is particularly true of young people who have till now always  
been under the thumb of some kind of authority. Being relentlessly  
resourceful is definitely not the recipe for success in big companies,  
or in most schools. I don't even want to think what the recipe is  
in big companies, but it is certainly longer and messier, involving  
some combination of resourcefulness, obedience, and building  
alliances.Identifying this quality also brings us closer to answering a  
question people often wonder about: how many startups there could  
be. There is not, as some people seem to think, any economic upper  
bound on this number. There's no reason to believe there is any  
limit on the amount of newly created wealth consumers can absorb,  
any more than there is a limit on the number of theorems that can  
be proven. So probably the limiting factor on the number of startups  
is the pool of potential founders. Some people would make good  
founders, and others wouldn't. And now that we can say what makes  
a good founder, we know how to put an upper bound on the size of  
the pool.This test is also useful to individuals. If you want to know whether  
you're the right sort of person to start a startup, ask yourself  
whether you're relentlessly resourceful. And if you want to know  
whether to recruit someone as a cofounder, ask if they are.You can even use it tactically. If I were running a startup, this  
would be the phrase I'd tape to the mirror. "Make something people  
want" is the destination, but "Be relentlessly resourceful" is how  
you get there.  
Notes[1]  
I think the reason the dictionaries are wrong is that the  
meaning of the word has shifted. No one writing a dictionary from  
scratch today would say that hapless meant unlucky. But a couple  
hundred years ago they might have. People were more at the mercy  
of circumstances in the past, and as a result a lot of the words  
we use for good and bad outcomes have origins in words about luck.When I was living in Italy, I was once trying to tell someone  
that I hadn't had much success in doing something, but I couldn't  
think of the Italian word for success. I spent some time trying  
to describe the word I meant. Finally she said "Ah! Fortuna!"[2]  
There are aspects of startups where the recipe is to be  
actively curious. There can be times when what you're doing is  
almost pure discovery. Unfortunately these times are a small  
proportion of the whole. On the other hand, they are in research  
too.[3]  
I'd almost say to most people, but I realize (a) I have no  
idea what most people are like, and (b) I'm pathologically optimistic  
about people's ability to change.Thanks to Trevor Blackwell and Jessica Livingston for reading drafts  
of this.