6 Lessons Learned in my year as CTO at N26

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Life has been a bit of a whirlwind trip in the last year. I moved cities (London to Berlin). I started a new role as a CTO. I transitioned from 14 years of consulting into a management role. I joined the hyper-growth startup, N26 — the mobile bank the world loves to use. It's been exciting to particularly see the company growth. Our customer base has grown from 500K+ users to more than 1 million. Our users transact more than €1B in currency. We've expanded our offices from Berlin to New York. We also announced moving to Barcelona and this is only the beginning.

In this blog entry, I will share my personal lessons learned on the rollercoaster ride from this year.

1. Management overlaps with leadership, but is different

Over the almost 14 years of consulting, I spoke all the time about leadership. I still believe that anyone can be a leader. Leading is less about a title, and more about how you act. In my role, I also better appreciate the important role of effective manager. Google even proved that effective management matters.

I still think great managers are also great leaders. We try to test for this at N26 during our interviewing process. We hold our managers accountable for having difficult conversations. We want them to be kind, not only nice. We want managers to nurture an environment of candid feedback. Great managers manage things and lead people. Managers, unlike coaches or consultants are also held accountable for this.
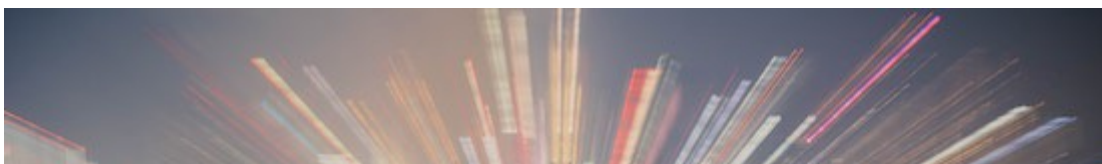
2. Hypergrowth stretches everyone

I've definitely grown over this year. Our company has also grown rapidly (both with users and people). Hypergrowth means people have opportunities for new tasks. We are also not the first company to experience this. The community has been very generous with sharing their knowledge. I will contribute more to this in the future too, as I build on lessons learned.

I have found myself repeating, "The company will grow much faster than people."

With this in mind, I have tried to support, develop and grow as many people as possible. At the same time, I've focused on bringing in new skills and experiences that we need. Combining a learning workforce with experienced people is tremendously powerful.

3. Really underscore the Why, not just the What

I believe very much in Simon Sinek's "Start with Why." A group of brilliant, collaborative problem solvers will end up with a better idea if they understand why. You can, of course, still give your input. Your role as a leader it to explain the context. Or to clarify the goal or problem. Not just the solution.

I've seen too many technical debates fail because they first didn't agree on the problem. Agree on why, then move on to what.

In a fast moving startup, I found people underrate listening. Listening and asking questions are my most powerful tools as a leader.

4. Investing in people has exponential returns

I always try to be generous with my knowledge and experience. I've particularly enjoyed helping people grow. Sometimes it's required tough, candid conversations. Effective feedback helps people grow. Coaching and training helps people see potential they don't

see. It's been wonderful to help people discover, test and practice tools that make them more successful.

I'm proud of N26's technical leaders (both formal and informal). I'm impressed with how people have rapidly grown. I'm also impressed with what they do to pass it on.

5. <mark>What got you here, won't get you there</mark>

I read the book, "What got you here, won't get you there" many years ago. It's message resonated with me during this year. Startups often go through several phases, "Start Up, Scale up, and Optimise" is how I like to think of it. We are definitely in the **Scale Up** phase. This phase demands different thinking.

Acting as if we were in the Start Up phase no longer scales. It's an educational journey for many people. At scale, you can no longer manage every single situation. At scale, you can no longer make all the decisions. At scale, you have to decide on where you will have the greatest impact. At scale (as a manager), you make less, and need to focus on multiplying more.

6. Focus on Capabilities, not just People

In Hypergrowth, it's too easy to hire lots of people. I am wary of this after reading the Mythical Man Month many many years ago. As a manager, I first focus on understanding what capabilities we need. I also think about how those capabilities are best met. Be clear on what you need before hiring people.

Focusing on what you need helps you find the right people. It also helps those people be clear about how they will be successful.

Conclusion

I have learned many other lessons in this year as a CTO. The six lessons above reflect some of the major themes for this past year that I hope you many learn from.

I'm super proud of the people I work with. I'm super proud of the product we produce. It's been a great ride so far, and it's only the beginning of the journey.

Want to join me at N26?

If you would like to join us on the journey of building the mobile bank the world loves to use, have a look at some of the roles we're looking for here.

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Originally published at patkua@work.

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