

PG and Jessica

A lot of people want to replicate YC in some other industry or some other place or with some other strategy. In general, people seem to assume that: 1) although there was some degree of mystery or luck about how YC got going, it can't be that hard, and 2) if you can get it off the ground, the network effects are self-sustaining.

More YC-like things are good for the world; I generally try to be helpful. But almost none of them work. People are right about the self-sustaining part, but they can't figure out how to get something going.

The entire secret to YC getting going was PG and Jessica—there was no other magic trick. A few times a year, I end up in a conversation at a party where someone tells a story about how much PG changed their life—people speak with more gratitude than they do towards pretty much anyone else. Then everyone else agrees, YC founders and otherwise (non-YC founders might talk about an impactful essay or getting hired at a YC company). Jessica still sadly doesn't get nearly the same degree of public credit, but the people who were around the early days of YC know the real story.

What did they do? They took bets on unknown people and believed in them more than anyone had before. They set strong norms and fought back hard against bad behavior towards YC founders. They trusted their own convictions, were willing to do things their way, and were willing to be disliked by the existing power structures. They focused on the most important things, they worked hard, and they spent a huge amount of time 1:1 with people. They understood the value of community and long-term orientation. When YC was very small, it felt like a family.

Perhaps most importantly, they built an ecosystem (thanks to Joe Gebbia for

pointing this out). This is easy to talk about but hard to do, because it requires not being greedy. YC has left a lot of money on the table; other people have made more money from the ecosystem than YC has itself. This has cemented YC's place—the benefits to the partners, alumni, current batch founders, Hacker News readers, Demo Day investors, and everyone else around YC is a huge part of what makes it work.

I am not sure if any of this is particularly useful advice—none of it sounds that hard, and yet in the 15 years since, it hasn't been close to replicated.

But it seems worth trying. I am pretty sure no one has had a bigger total impact on the careers of people in the startup industry over that time period than the two of them.