Startup advice, briefly

This is a very short summary with lots left out—here is the long version:
http://startupclass.samaltman.com

You should start with an idea, not a company. When it's just an idea or project, the stakes are lower and you're more willing to entertain outlandish-sounding but potentially huge ideas. The best way to start a company is to build interesting projects.

On the other hand, when you have a "company" that you feel pressure to commit to an idea too quickly. If it's just a project, you can spend more time finding something great to work on, which is important—if the startup really works, you'll probably be working on it for a very long time.

Have at least one technical founder on the team (i.e. someone who can build whatever the company is going to build).

In general, prefer a fast-growing market to a large but slow-growing one, especially if you have conviction the fast-growing market is going to be important but others dismiss it as unimportant.

The best startup ideas are the ones that seem like bad ideas but are good ideas.

Make something people want. You can screw up most other things if you get this right; if you don't, nothing else will save you.

Once you've shifted from "interesting project" to "company" mode, be decisive and act quickly. Instead of thinking about making a decision over the course of week, think about making it in an hour, and getting it done in the next hour.

Become formidable. Also become tough—the road ahead is going to be painful and make you doubt yourself many, many times.

Figure out a way to get your product in front of users. Start manually (read this: http://www.paulgraham.com/ds.html)

Listen to what your users tell you, improve your product, and then listen again. Keep doing this until you've made something some users love (one of the many brilliant Paul Buchheit observations is that it's better to build something a small number of users love than something a lot of users like). Don't deceive yourself about whether or not your users actually love your product.

Keep your burn rate very low until you're sure you've built something people love. The easiest way to do this is hire slowly.

Have a strategy. Most people don't. Occasionally take a little bit of time to think about how you're executing against your strategy. Specifically, remember that someday you need to have a monopoly (in the Peter Thiel sense).

Read this before you raise money: http://paulgraham.com/fr.html.

Learn to ask for what you want.

Ignore what the press says about you, especially if it's complimentary.

Generate revenue early in the life of your company.

Hire the best people you can. However much time you're spending on this, it's probably not enough. Give a lot of equity to your employees, and have very high expectations. Smart, effective people are critical to success. Read this: http://blog.samaltman.com/how-to-hire.

Fire people quickly when you make hiring mistakes.

Don't work with people you don't have a good feeling about—this goes for employees (and cofounders), partners, investors, etc.

Figure out a way to get users at scale (i.e. bite the bullet and learn how sales and marketing work). Incidentally, while it is currently in fashion, spending more than the lifetime value of your users to acquire them is not an acceptable strategy.

Obsess about your growth rate, and never stop.   The company will build what the CEO measures. If you ever catch yourself saying "we're not really focused on growth right now", think very carefully about the possibility you're focused on the wrong thing. Also, don't let yourself be deceived by vanity metrics.

Eventually, the company needs to evolve to become a mission that everyone, but especially the founders, are exceptionally dedicated to. The "missionaries vs. mercenaries" soundbite is overused but true.

Don't waste your time on stuff that doesn't matter (i.e. things other than building your product, talking to your users, growing, etc.). In general, avoid the kind of stuff that might be in a movie about running a startup—meeting with lawyers and accountants, going to lots of conferences, grabbing coffee with people, sitting in lots of meetings, etc. Become a Delaware C Corp (use Clerky or any well-known Silicon Valley law firm) and then get back to work on your product.

Focus intensely on the things that do matter. Every day, figure out what the 2 or 3 most important things for you to do are. Do those and ignore other distractions. Be a relentless execution machine.

Do what it takes and don't make up excuses.

Learn to manage people. Make sure your employees are happy. Don't ignore this.

In addition to building a great product, if you want to be really successful, you also have to build a great company. So think a lot about your culture.

Don't underestimate the importance of personal connections.

Ignore acquisition interest until you are sure you want to sell. Don't "check the market". There is an alternate universe somewhere full of companies that would have been great if they could have just avoided this one mistake. Unfortunately, in this universe, they're all dead.

Work really hard. Everyone wants a secret to success other than this; if it exists, I haven't found it yet.

Keep doing this for 10 years.