

Andy Crissinger:

Hello, everybody, welcome to the Reboot podcast. This is Andy Crissinger. I am the Director of Coaching at Reboot and I'm excited to be here today with one of my coaching clients, Evan Drumwright, from Dextrous Robotics. And we're gonna be talking today about some of the particular challenges of scaling as a technical founder and CEO. Obviously, scaling a company, as a CEO, is hard no matter what. And, particularly, founding CEOs who are leading through the early startup to scaling years will often report that they feel like, from season to season, they're leading a completely different company in terms of what's required of them. And then, if the founding CEO happens to have technical expertise and someone who has been intricately involved in the building of the product and, and the technology, uh, underlying the product, that can bring its own set of unique challenges. How does that CEO balance business responsibilities, fundraising, business development, organizational development, building out a leadership team with continuing to lead and guide the product and technology vision? How does the CEO's job description and priorities shift as the company scales?

So, if a CEO is highly technical and w- is instrumental in building out a company's product from the beginning, it may be especially hard to navigate a shifting relationship to that product and technology as the company grows. And this is a theme that has come up a lot in my coaching experience. It comes up a lot with other coaches at Reboot. And I wanted to talk with Evan because I feel like he's been on a growth trajectory around this particular topic and, um, has had some, some great breakthroughs, personally. And, uh, is really on a great journey. So, um, wanna welcome Evan to the podcast. Evan, it's great to have you. Why don't you start by just introducing yourself? Tell us a little bit about you and about your company.

Evan:

Sure. So, Evan Drumwright. I usually start off my bio talking about my education because that, that was kinda my background. I did undergraduate degrees in math and computer science and then I went on to do my PhD in computer science specializing in robotics. And, uh, had, had kind of a (laughing) long journey from there.

Went, uh, went into academia. Uh, worked there for a number of years and, uh, decided it wasn't a very good fit for me. And decided to start my company after that. That's Dextrous Robotics and we do high speed robotics for arduous manipulation tasks.

Andy Crissinger:

Awesome. As I mentioned earlier, Evan, the reason I wanted to have this conversation with you is I've, I've watched you think carefully about these challenges, the ones we were alluding to earlier. The challenges of being a highly technical CEO in this startup that's growing and shifting and where the needs of the company w- what the company needs out of its CEO shift and change. And I've seen you willing to modulate and, and make transitions as Dextrous has needed you to. And so I think you have a lot to offer other CEOs in similar situations. Um, and, and even just normalizing these challenges, talking about them openly, sharing what's working, what hasn't worked, I think could be incredibly valuable to other folks out there. Even non-technical CEOs but may- maybe CEOs, founders who have deep expertise in some other business function but find themselves in a similar situation. As the company grows, their focus needs to shift and they need to empower others to really lead out in those areas where they're maybe most comfortable.

So, maybe let's just get into it a bit more. And, um, just by way of introduction, can you tell us a little bit about the origin story for you as founder of Dextrous? But then, in particular, what was your relationship to the core technology from the beginning?

Evan:

Sure. So, I'll kinda pick up where my bio left off. When I got out of grad school, had my PhD, um, I had a few options available. I could go, you know, typical kind of thing is to do industrial research somewhere. Um, but I really wanted to be able to pursue my own ideas. Um, and so I went into academia and, um, the, the interesting thing about that kind of job is it's really an amalgamation of jobs.

Andy Crissinger:

Mm-hmm.

Evan:

Being a professor, you, um, you know, it's one part entrepreneur. Um, you have to raise funds and, and run a research lab. Uh, one part researcher, one part mentor, one part teacher. Um, and, and one part governor. You're, you and the rest of the department are governing the department and helping to govern the institution. So you wear a lot of hats and, um, what I did find from that job was that it, it was a poor fit for me. I, I felt the work-life balance was really poor. Um, you don't really have enough time to do quality work. Um, so I was doing so many things but not that many of them well.

And, so I was looking for, really, the next thing I wanted to do. And I was looking at all of the things, all the parts of that job that I did enjoy. Um, and the things I did enjoy were entrepreneurship. Um, I did enjoy research, creating new things. Um, and I enjoyed mentoring. And, um, so I looked to make a career transition to something that would emphasize those aspects and, um, also kind of leverage, you know, my, the, the things I had worked my whole life to build.

For me, as a researcher in robotics, that was a few areas. It was robotics simulation, high-speed robotics, and, robotic manipulation. So I wanted to find something that could combine all of those together.

It so happened that, while I was kind of going through this transition, um, I was out living in the Bay Area. And, you know, as the Bay Area tends to be, you run into fellow entrepreneurs there. So, um, you know, we, we ran into some very dynamic people out there and they convinced me to think about entrepreneurship. And the more I thought about it, the more I decided that that was what I wanted to do. So next was (laughing) really, what, you know, how could I make a, um, a business out of that.

And so that, that, you know, was the, the genesis of Dextrous Robotics.

Andy Crissinger:

So tell me a little bit more about, um, the early days of setting the technological vision. Maybe building the first few ideas. And what, and what, specifically, was your involvement in that?

Evan:

Yeah, so, I had, um, I, I really set the, the vision very early on. I came up with, um, the tasks that we were going to focus on and, also, the pretty unique technology that we developed to, to pursue it.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of our technology is that it uses, uh, it's a, it's robot that essentially uses a pair of chopsticks to pick up all different sizes and shapes of things. I was inspired by people doing this. And, it was a particular engineering problem that we had to solve which was... if you

look in, oh, let's say like a Amazon truck, you've got all different sizes and shapes of packages. You've also got different materials and, really, there was no kind of robotic technology that could handle all of those things. You would, if, if you wanted to, um, pick, you know, what we call pick, or manipulate all of those items, you would probably have to pick a subset of them and then you would have to change the mechanical device at the end of the robot to something that was more appropriate for picking the next set. And then you would have to keep doing that. And so I thought well, you know what? Uh, chopsticks are, are basically a way to solve this kind of problem. You can, um, you can pick up all different sizes and shapes of objects.

And the fact that, you know, the chopsticks are kind of an extension of our hand tells me that you, or it told me that you could get by on having a whole lot less sensation than, you know, all of the, the nerves that we have in our skin. So, all of those kinds of things inspired me to do that. And then, um, I also, um, came up with our architecture, our software architecture. Um, but this isn't to say like I did, you know, I, I created everything. I- in many cases like, for instance, I came up with the chopstick idea and then, um, I was able to turn a lot of those ideas just over to my, um, co-founder or other people on our team.

Andy Crissinger:

Mm-hmm.

Evan:

And allow them to turn that vision into reality.

Andy Crissinger:

Yup.

Evan:

I really set the path going forward. I continue to have a lot of input into it but, um, you know, it's, it's, obviously, a lot more than just me and my ideas.

Andy Crissinger:

Absolutely. And I want to talk about that, specifically, next. So, okay, you're contributing, in the early days, a lot of this kind of high level inspiration. And how can we put this together? How can we create novel new approaches to this technology to solve these real world problems? And, from early on, you've got, sounds like, some smart, technical folks around you. Um, talk about those early days of, um, sort of figuring out the right level of involvement, technically, for you as CEO. And what were those early kind of decision points like for you?

Evan:

Well, the very earliest ones were really areas where I knew that I didn't have the expertise to be able to have real input into it. Um, so, I had, um, I mean, more th- definitely more than a superficial knowledge of hardware. But definitely not as much as my co-founder has.

Andy Crissinger:

Mm-hmm.

Evan:

And so, for those particular areas, I, I might offer some input from time to time but those are really, you know, I, I had already pretty much delegated that. I think the next kind of phase shift there really happened when I was getting prepared to raise our next round of funding.

Andy Crissinger:

Mm.

Evan:

So, so, we had taken an initial round of funding in December 2019 and then, uh, started preparing for raising another round of funding early last year. And, uh, because I was still, at the point, the primary software architect uh, I was doing two things at once. I was, well, maybe, maybe three in this case but, I was, preparing to raise funds and I was also working on the code for our first proof of concept.

And the combination of those two things, knowing I was responsible for both of those, just ended up putting a lot of pressure on me. And I reflected on it and I said, you know, I've got this great team. Um, I, I need to be content with being able to hand that over to others even though I enjoy doing the work.

And I said two maybe three. Really, I was doing three jobs because, first of all, I was being CEO. So, um, um, there's a quote I can't recall who said it but I, I heard it and it stuck with me. That, you know, a CEO can do at most two jobs.

And, (laughs) I had heard that quote after I went through this experience. I was like, hmm, yeah, that tracks. Because I was doing three there and I, I was, you know, I had the technological responsibilities for me. So I was, um, you know, stepping outside my lane, doing CTO-type stuff. And I was also fundraising and doing, um, you know, the stuff that a CEO should do which is, um, you know, in my mind, setting the vision for the company, um, acquiring resources, and, you know, that's money and talent, um, and, uh, in- and also allocating those resources. And also acting as the chief psychologist for the company.

Andy Crissinger:

Mm-hmm.

Evan:

Making sure that, you know, the culture that I'm building and have built is, is really consistent with my vision and, and, um, that, that everybody is on that same page and mission.

Andy Crissinger:

You mentioned enjoyment earlier and that, uh, that feels like an important theme, I think, to, to kind of zone in on. Obviously, you're someone who, prior to founding your company, had devoted your life to the study of technology. So, obviously, this is stuff that is (laughing) compelling, deeply compelling to you, if you're gonna devote that kind of time and energy to it. And you, so you mentioned, I, I r- you recognized that you had to delegate some of these things to capable people around you even though you really enjoyed doing that work.

Evan:

Yup.

Andy Crissinger:

Can you talk about what that was like for you as a founder? When this is maybe the work that you're drawn to because it's exciting and interesting and stimulating. And how do you make that call when it's time to, you know, maybe turn in another direction?

Evan:

Well, I think you're... I've since figured out a few things. What's the right kind of stuff for me to work and what are the bad things for me to work on?

Andy Crissinger:

Hmm.

Evan):

You know, why am I working on anything in the first place? That's a, you know, why am I working on anything technical in the first place? I think that's also a very valuable (laughs) that's a very valuable question to ask. Um, but y- yeah. I think you kinda s- want to start with the things that you just should not work on. And you absolutely, as CEO, you should not be working on anything that is on the critical path for something that the business needs. Because-

Andy Crissinger

And why not? That may be an obvious question but can you say why not?

Evan:

Well, it's that the CEO has to, you know, I, the way the CEO job works the responsibilities often come in waves. I've had some weeks where, you know, it's relatively quiet. And then I've had some weeks like this week where, you know, I'm up, work late, working every night and early working every morning and I'm working the weekends too. And, um, it's, it, it's very hard to tell a priori when those times are gonna come.

Andy Crissinger:

Mm-hmm.

Evan:

So, you know, if you start a new project based on hey, I'm not super busy right now. Well, uh, next week may come and, and it will completely knock out your ability to work on that thing. And, meanwhile, your entire team stalls because they were counting on you.

Andy Crissinger:

Yup. Yup.

Evan:

So, yeah. My opinion, that is not something CEO's should be doing. At least not outside the very early stages.

Andy Crissinger:

Yup. Yup. Okay, so you mentioned a heuristic earlier which is, you know, a question that you might pose to yourself. Why am I working on anything technical? And, so, the idea would be the answer has to pass a certain, certain muster in order to proceed.

Evan:

Right.

Andy Crissinger:

And so tell me a little bit about how you think of that?

Evan:

I think about that in, in really two different ways depending on the, the kind of work that I'm doing. Um, first is going back to that vision component of, of that being part of the CEO's job. If you're building a deep tech company, in particular, but sure it can't be the only company that's like this, kind of company that's like this, um, you don't want to just build one product. You, you really want to have a vision and you want to be able to expand and, and, you know, uh, I hesitate to use the word empire (laughs) but, you know, you hope to make something that grows to, to, um, to be beyond even your imagination, I think.

And to be able to do that in a, in a space where tech is, is just constantly evolving, you've got to continue to put the investment in, as CEO, to figure out what types of things should you be investing in. I mean, you could rely upon others to try to convey that information to you. But, you know, I, I prefer to get the information from the source and, and that, you know, one source of truth is myself. So, that is, is one aspect of it. Um, and, and this is, so we're talking research. And research is something that is, is not on the critical path. It's a long-term investment.

Andy Crissinger:

Mm-hmm.

Evan:

And I feel comfortable, as CEO, dedicating some percentage of my time to doing that. If I'm looking at the company and the company's health, which I always am, that's kind of my number one thing. I look at as I am the steward for this whole organization that I'm building and, as long as, um, as long as I am in that role, then I'm going to do what's best for that organization which may even include getting rid of myself.

Andy Crissinger:

Hmm.

Evan:

Right? If I, I find that I'm not the best instrument for leading this organization then that's, that's, you know, that's the indication that I should not be the head of the organization anymore. But I'm always thinking, again, I'm always thinking about like what is my role? What is my responsibility to the company? And so that's, typically, how my week is organized. I prioritize things and say how can I add the most value to this company, this organization, right now?

But, you know, I also recognize that I am an employee in this organization too. And I'm not just a cog in the machine. And just like as, as chief psychologist, I try to give the rest of the people in the organization, um, assignments or, or roles that help, um, fulfill them in some way, I recognize that I have to do that for myself.

Andy Crissinger:

Yup.

Evan:

So I don't do this to a large degree but, you know, I allow maybe like five or ten percent of my time to be spent on things that give me joy. And, you know, often those are technical things. And so that's how I think about...

Andy Crissinger:

Yup. Yup. I think that a- that approach is so creative. And I think that's one of the things n- y- you, I think came up in a session that we had several months ago where you, you shared that. And I thought wow, that's a really, uh, interesting and, um, sorta self, self-compassionate way of approaching this. You're still, ultimately, putting the needs of the organization first. And you're asking what does the organization need from me. But, at the same time, you're recognizing hey, I'm a, I'm a team member too and I'm at my best when I'm, you know, experiencing joy and, and thriving here. So if there are ways to do that without derailing the team or becoming a roadblock, well, then let's do that.

Evan:

Exactly. And what I've found already, even though we're a relatively new company, we're just about three years from our date of first funding, um, those ideas have already... Or, or that, that, spending that time on, on those kinds of passions has already had an impact for us.

I worked on a project early this year that, um, really just came out of an observation I had that, you know, something was costing us a lot of time. I said, you know, I'm gonna figure out how to solve this and, uh, it turned out, you know, it turned into a multi-month project. I think about six or seven-month project just kind of part-time.

And, it had a big impact on the company. And, you know, I had, I got a lot of joy out of seeing something that was impeding our progress, being able to solve that. And that's kind of a, maybe another thing that, that we can touch on too. I find myself, as CEO, often acting in a supporting role, technically.

Like because my job, you know, often, my job kind of requirements come in waves, um, I also kind of look for opportunities that I can, I can help our still relatively small team accelerate just by removing obstacles.

Andy Crissinger:

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Evan:

You know, and that gives me joy too.

Andy Crissinger:

Yup. You know, I wanna go back to what you were sharing a few moments ago about the, um, the ways that some of your, sort of, st- staying, um, giving yourself an opportunity to think creatively and, at times, take on small creative projects related to the technology, how that's yielded, you know, some, some advancements for, for the team. And, again, I'm thinking about this connection between what you're doing as a technical founder and CEO, and what an artist does to shepherd and cultivate and, really, steward their own creativity. You know, you have to pro- you have to protect the conditions so that the creative inspiration can happen. And, by giving yourself the right of amounts and, and the right focus of time to really play in this space, you're stewarding your own creativity which allows you to continue to cast a vision of what's com- what's gonna come next.

Evan::

Absolutely. Yeah, I do, I think there's a lot of alignment between the arts and engineering. It's never the case like you learn in school that somebody's going to set a problem in front of you and they're going to say, "Solve it," you know?

Andy Crissinger:

Mm-hmm.

Evan:

"Find x." That's, that's just not the case. Really, it's, uh, you're, you're, you've got a, first of all, you've got a whole palette to work with. And you can solve problems in very creative ways. I would I say that chopsticks are the only way you could solve this particular problem, that we're, or this particular class of problems that we're working on? No, but it definitely works well and it's a fun solution and we've enjoyed working on it.

So, yeah, I think you've gotta acknowledge that. And by you, I really, I typically mean engineers because I think (laughing) there's a whole lot less maybe, the intersection between engineering and the arts than I would like. But there's a lot of commonality there.

Andy Crissinger:

For sure. Yeah. Well, you know, this is the Reboot Podcast after all so there's, there's one more area that I wanna explore with you before we end our conversation today. And that's what's been hardest about the inner journey of this, this process of growth? And by that I mean, you know, what are some things maybe you've had to embrace and/or let go of in terms of your identity, you know, behavioral patterns, familiarity, what's, what's been comfortable. What's been the hardest about that inner process of change for you?

Evan:

First, I think, is really a deeper understanding of myself than I ever thought (laughing) I would have. When I was an academic and a researcher, you're spending so much time on cognition you have very little time to pay attention to what's going on with you emotionally.

Andy Crissinger:

Hmm.

Evan:



And, as an entrepreneur, I don't think you can or should do that. I have found, and I think you and I were talking about this fairly recently, but the body is giving me so many cues from my subconscious and those cues are really useful.

Andy Crissinger:

Yeah.

Evan:

And, you know, where I could ignore those as a, as a researcher or as an academic, um, I don't have that luxury and, and I'm actually happy to, to be able to get outside of that space because I think again, this is, this is a lot of what makes us human and, and, you know, ultimately, really what we're trying to do is we're trying to build tools that serve humanity. So I think, you know, that connection is really good to me and I think, um, while it's been a hard journey, it's, it's also been very important. Um, so, so that's been the hardest. I think, I could also talk about this, this kind of transition from, uh, you know, pure engineer to, engineer business hybrid.

Or currently doing at the moment. And really what that means is, is I have a little bit less time to focus on some of the technical areas that I was able to study for so many years. One of the things that I did at Dextrous this last year was instituted an educational plan, for all the employees so that we can consciously plan how to, uh, keep ourselves educated and, and learn new things, which, for a deep tech company, is just critical.

Andy Crissinger:

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Evan:

I mean, you can spend x amount of time on devel- you know, we've got R&D and they're, ideally it's gonna be some, some mix between the research and the development. If you do all research, you're, you're never going to produce anything useful.

If you do all development, you're gonna produce something useful and you're not gonna have anything left to do after that. So, you've got to figure out how to get the right mix there. And, the educational investment is part of that, you know, for the whole company. So, part of my educational plan is focused on continuing to learn in my technical areas of expertise and, even outside of them. But also in business as well.

How I can run the best organization. How I can be effective in that role as chief psychologist.

Andy Crissinger:

Mm. Mm-hmm. So maybe last question. What do you sense is the next frontier of growth for you in this area, specifically as it relates to, you know, being the technical founding CEO of Dextrous?

Evan:

Yeah. I think it's a little hard to say, right, because what we know, if a startup is successful and effective is double to quadruple in size every, you know, 12 to 24 months. And so the organization looks very different by [inaudible]. A lot of people's roles look very different, um, year to year. And my hope is that I'm con- I'm going to be able to continue to strike this balance between effective CEO and provider of

this vision for the future. One way that I do that, that I've, that I've kinda figured out how to do that is, um, you know, one thing that particularly, pretty early on in startups, the CEO will spend a lot of time doing, wearing a lot of hats. And what I've figured out is, you know, once I'm spending, as CEO, once I'm spending a significant portion of my time doing something, then it's time to figure out how to delegate that role and hand that work off to somebody else. So my hope is that, as we continue scaling, I'll be able to continue doing that and continue this investment in our company's future. I'm able to stay up to date, relevant, and even push, continue pushing the state of the art, personally.

Andy Crissinger:

Hmm. I like how you said state of the art. Ties it all together (laughing) with this theme we've been tracking for the conversation. Well, Evan, thank you so much for this. It's been great to have this conversation. Thanks for being willing to share more of your journey with our listeners. And, um, I know this is gonna be, um, helpful for folks who are thinking through their own processes, as founders, perhaps as, you know, like you, CEOs of organizations where, um, they were, uh, instrumental in the early days of the product or the technology. But hopefully, anybody who's a part of organizational life and is experiencing, like we all do, the necessary, um, need to, to shift, to let go of some things so that something new can emerge, um, according to the, the season or the needs of the organization. I know this will be helpful for folks, um, who are experiencing that. Well, I'm thankful to know you. Thankful to spend this time together with you this afternoon.