

Reddit co-founder: How to turn failure into fuel

Alexis Ohanian 5:04 p.m. EDT October 17, 2013

Co-founding reddit wasn't a breeze. I know, like others in our generation, about setbacks.



(Photo: Richard Drew, AP)

SHARE

30

CONNECT

(<https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?url=http://usat.ly/1aSE0dO&text=Reddit%20co-fo>)

19

TWEET

There's a common perception that founding Reddit at age 22 and selling it [a year and a half later](http://thenextweb.com/socialmedia/2011/10/14/a-rundown-of-reddits-history-and-community-infographic/) (<http://thenextweb.com/socialmedia/2011/10/14/a-rundown-of-reddits-history-and-community-infographic/>) to Condé Nast was an extremely easy ride. And that two University of Virginia students, [Steve Huffman and I](http://alexisohanian.com/pages/about) (<http://alexisohanian.com/pages/about>), had an "ah-ha!" moment, simply dropped everything we were doing and just coasted our way to creative and financial success.

Except that isn't how it happened. That year and a half was riddled with failure, disappointment and rejection. Even when we thought we were making real progress, we experienced some unexpected cold moments of reality.

In 2005, after Steve learned that programmer, venture capitalist and essayist [Paul Graham](http://www.paulgraham.com/start.html) (<http://www.paulgraham.com/start.html>), one of his idols, was giving a talk called "How to start a start-up," we knew we weren't spending spring break on a beach. The talk was great and, after Steve got Graham's autograph, I talked Paul into getting coffee with us so we could pitch him on the start-up we'd founded: a mobile food ordering system called MyMobileMenu.

The idea was straightforward: Why waste time waiting in line for food when it could be ordered in advance on our phone?

Graham said we had a decent shot at turning the idea into a business. We were thrilled. A year of intense preparation — everything from pitching restaurateurs to researching competition — was actually paying off. A few weeks later, Graham announced that he was launching a start-up accelerator in Boston, called [Y Combinator](http://ycombinator.com/) (<http://ycombinator.com/>). He encouraged us to apply, and we did. We passed the first round of cuts and were invited back to Cambridge for an interview with Graham and his partners. We were on our way.

A moment of dejection

Back then, as part of the process, Y Combinator investors would call you after the interview with their decision. That night our phone call came. They rejected us. Steve and I coped by ingesting lots of beer and tried to convince ourselves that we'd prove them wrong. On the long train ride home to Virginia, my phone rang again. Graham was on the line. He told me they didn't like our idea, but they liked us. As long as we started something new, they'd accept us.

Steve and I decided in five seconds. We got off the train and headed back to Boston. A couple hours later, Graham, Steve and I were sitting around a table at Y Combinator agreeing to "build the front page of the Internet." Our conversation to abandon our original idea was so quick for one reason: We weren't afraid of failure. We didn't fight it. We accepted it.

Reddit launched a month after graduation. Four months later, a Yahoo executive, wanting to learn more about Reddit, invited Steve and me to Sunnyvale, Calif.

The Yahoo meeting started fine, but the executive soon interrupted our pitch with a very simple question: How many users does Reddit actually have? Steve and I explained that we just launched and had a nascent user base with a few thousand. Without missing a beat, he scoffed, "You're a rounding error compared to Yahoo!"

When I returned home, I wrote, "You are a rounding error" on the wall beside my desk. If Steve and I weren't comfortable with failure, these harsh words would have been a major setback. Instead, that simple sentence of rejection fueled us.

The first step

This mindset, where failure is accepted, is a total departure from our country's education system, which teaches students to avoid failure at all costs, to sideline building things for penciling in Scantron bubble tests. We need to teach future generations that there isn't always a trophy at the end of the tunnel.

At least not on the first try. Or the second. Or so on.

Our Millennial generation knows failure well, growing up watching the failures of two wars, the global economy and even the time-tested aspiration of homeownership. Stephen Colbert, one of the few voices in the establishment acknowledging this shift, did so in a recent commencement address at UVA,

my alma mater. He applauded Millennials for learning early on that there is no predetermined path for any of us: "[You do not owe the previous generation anything](http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2013/05/20/stephen_colbert_uva_speech_watch_2013_valedictory_address_at_university.html) (http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2013/05/20/stephen_colbert_uva_speech_watch_2013_valedictory_address_at_university.html)."

Today, there aren't a lot of conventions left to be conventional about.

Failure should be an acceptable part of society. This doesn't mean failing out of school or slacking off at work. It means doing something new, with the expectation that you'll fail, but to persevere and keep learning along the way.

True failure is simply giving up and not trying again. To quote Jake, [a cartoon dog](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJz0LAb6qIM) (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJz0LAb6qIM>) from *Adventure Time*, "Dude, suckin' at something is the first step to being sorta good at something."

I have that sentence on my wall as well.

Alexis Ohanian, who just turned 30, is the author of Without Their Permission: How the 21st Century will be Made, Not Managed.

In addition to its own editorials, USA TODAY publishes diverse opinions from outside writers, including our Board of Contributors (<http://www.usatoday.com/reporters/boc.html>). To read more columns like this, go to the opinion front page (<http://www.usatoday.com/opinion/>) or follow us on twitter @USATopinion (<https://twitter.com/USATOpinion>) or Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/usatodayopinion>).

SHARE

30
CONNECT

19

TWEET

<https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?url=http://usat.ly/1aSE0dO&text=Reddit%20co-founder:%20How%20to%20turn>

Help when you need it most.



National Breast Cancer Foundation, Inc.®

Get your breast cancer Early Detection Plan®

SIGN UP NOW

COLUMNISTS' OPINIONS (/TOPIC/7CC3AD82-F865-4385-AF76-1A20CD560E96/COLUMNISTS-OPINIONS/)



Shutdown helped China propagandists: Column ([/story/opinion/2013/10/17/debt-ceiling-obama-china-column/3004025/](http://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2013/10/17/debt-ceiling-obama-china-column/3004025/))

Mark Eades

[\(/story](#)

[/opinion](#)

[/2013/10](#)

[/17/debt-](#)

[ceiling-](#)

[obama-china-](#)

[column](#)

[/3004025/\)](#)



Time for an autopsy of fiscal calamity: Column ([/story/opinion/2013/10/19/richard-grossman-shutdowns-post-mortems/3000879/](http://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2013/10/19/richard-grossman-shutdowns-post-mortems/3000879/))

Richard Grossman

[Richard](#)

[Grossman](#)

[shutdowns-](#)

[post-mortems](#)

[/3000879/\)](#)

Tea Party holds most

blame for shutdown: Column ([/story/opinion/2013/10/18/congress-debt-deal-shutdown-column/3000751/](http://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2013/10/18/congress-debt-deal-shutdown-column/3000751/))

Hank Plante



[\(/story](#)



[/opinion](#)
[/2013/10](#)
[/18/congress-](#)
[debt-deal-](#)
[shutdown-](#)
[column](#)
[/3000751/](#)



Truth Revolt vs. Media Matters: Column ([/story](#)
[/opinion](#)
[/2013/10](#)
[/16/truth-](#)
[revolt-media-](#)
[matters-](#)
[sharpton-](#)
[limbaugh-](#)
[column](#)
[/2997567/](#))

Patrick Maines



Tom DeLay: In debt contest, America loses ([/story/opinion](#)
[/2013/10/16/debt-deal-shutdown-](#)
[gop-column/2997455/](#))

Tom DeLay and Brett M. Decker

[/story](#)
[/opinion](#)
[/2013/10](#)
[/16/debt-](#)
[deal-shutdown-](#)
[gop-column](#)
[/2997455/](#)



Common Ground: Debt not touched by shutdown deal ([/story/opinion](#)
[/2013/10](#)
[/16/debt-](#)
[ceiling-](#)
[shutdown-](#)
[deal-gop-](#)
[democrats-](#)
[column](#)
[/2997365/](#))

Bob Beckel and Cal Thomas

[/2997365/](#)
 USA NOW



[/media/cinematic/video/3008447](#)
[/ancient-rock-destroyed-by-giddy-trio/](#)

