33 Lessons I learned Working for Startups

The wisdom I gained from startups from building and managing to scaling and hiring.

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Choose Startups Wisely

Startup is a fertile soil for rapid learning but also very emotionally taxing. Things are uncertain. Processes are broken "For a while" If they even exist. Chaos in the norm.

Before joining one, be clear on your motivations and align yourself with people you trust, who demonstrate ethics and judgement that resonate with your values.

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How to Find or Join Startups

You need mileage to deeply understand the problem and then give it your all. Therefore, these are the most critical things to vet when starting x or joining y: Market, team, & Product.

In that particular order. Everything else comes second. Nail those three, you can afford a few stumbles along the way. Abandon them and even the best laid plans and solid company culture won't be able to pull you out of that hole.
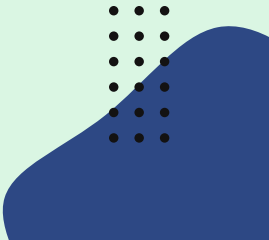
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Choose Your Problems Wisely

No matter where you go, you will find problems. Embrace them! Choose problems you love to solve and avoid those that contradict your values or deplete your energy & health.

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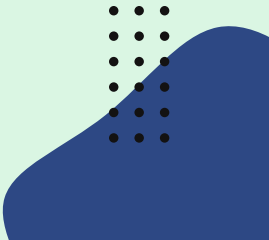@abdulabbag

Working With Founders

As an early hire / executive, you will work directly with the founder.

Prepare for an insane ride.

You will get an unfiltered precious view on how they think and operate but they will hold you damn accountable and drive you at an insane speed. Embrace that.

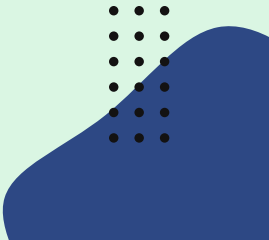Abdulrahman Abbag
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Invest in Yourself

Amidst the hustle and bustle, don't forget to invest in yourself. Take care of your soul, body, and mind. Pause, reflect, and recharge.

It's in these moments that you'll find the clarity and strength to tackle the next challenge.

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Manage "You" First!

To manage others, you need to master managing yourself firstly. Know you and embrace your authentic self.
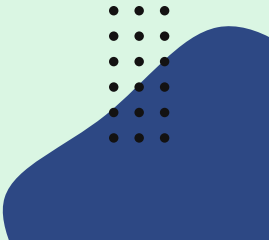
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Earn that trust

Secondly, you need to be trusted. You need to:
1. Say what's on your mind candidly and truthfully.
2. Do what you say you will do.
3. Remember that trust can go up and down.
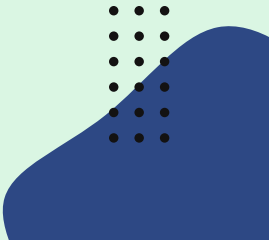
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Serve, Not Be Served

Thirdly, you are there to serve them, not the other way around.
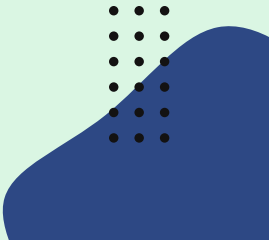
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Value Self-Driven Individuals

The dream goal of every manager is a low maintenance and highly competent individual; Self-driven individuals figure things out, avoid drama, and consistently produce exceptional work. Value them, nurture them, and advocate for them.
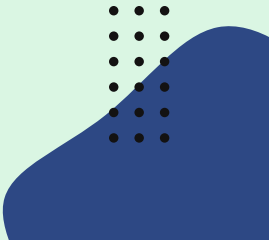
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Communicate Upwards

As a self-driven individual, don't forget to manage up by keeping your superiors informed about your work and any challenges you may be facing.

Honest and timely communication builds trust and ensures alignment.

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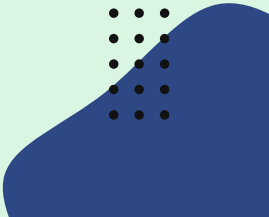@abdulabbag

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Feedback: A Two-Way Street

Feedback is essential for growth but few genuinely care and are ready to receive it.

For your feedback to land graciously, master 2 things:
1. Make it timely, frequent, and specific.
2. Acknowledge that it's a two-way street - You provide it and they choose to accept it.

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Empower Your Team

If you are after a highly capable team, then give them the right context and let them own the recommendation (most of the time!)

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Value Alignment

Alignment does not entail constant zooming and slacking. It is merely knowing where you are heading and values driving key decisions.

Highly aligned but loosely attached is where magic happens.
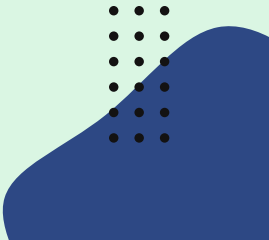
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Maintain Relationships

Don't burn bridges as the world is too small.
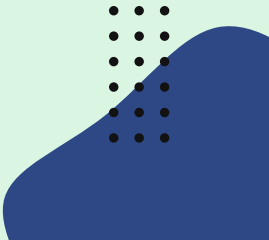
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Act Before Title

The easiest and surest way to get promoted is to do the job you want before you attach a title to it.

Act like you are there already.

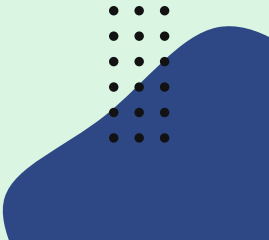Abdulrahman Abbag
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Process for Progress

To grow, you need progress. To make progress, you need a tight process to find what's working and remove waste so you avail time to find your next growth lever.

To find that time, you need to fire yourself from doing everything. You do that by empowering your team by delegating, documenting, teaching them, and leaning into their expertise.

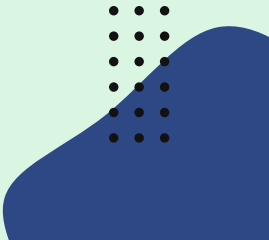Abdulrahman Abbag
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Progress Over Process

Don't obsess over perfecting your processes especially when setting something for the first time.

Remember, progress over process.

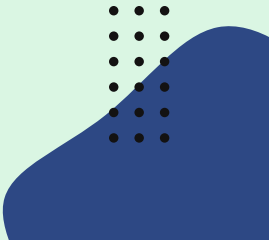Abdulrahman Abbag
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X's and O's of Product Marketing

Product marketing is such a vastly cross-functional discipline. You'll be dealing with almost everyone in the company.

A bit daunting? Maybe, but it's also a fantastic learning experience.
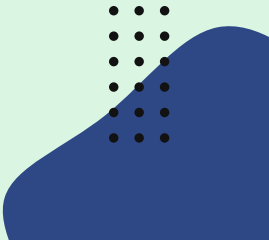
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Adapt to Change

Product Marketing is widely different as different companies.Accept that what you believe to be valuable may not always align with your current responsibilities.

But remember, the key is to gain trust and influence to shape where and how you work.
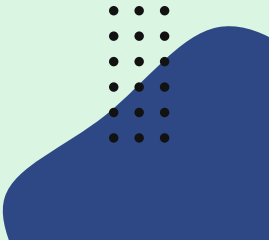
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Master Marketing Essentials

To do a great marketing, you need to be great at:

1. Knowing your ideal customers really really really well.
2. Hanging out where they hang out.
3. Educating them in an authentic differentiated way.
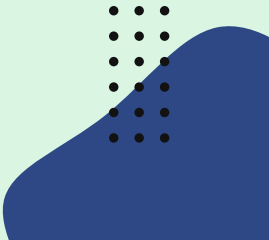
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Velocity Over Speed

Don't over-index on speed. Velocity, optimising for direction and speed, is the key. Before you hit the turbo button, ensure you have a clear destination in mind.

A well-chosen destination, even at a moderate speed, will outlive an ambiguous destination at an insane pace.

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Own Your Strategy

Don't outsource your brain to consultants. You should own and shape your strategy.
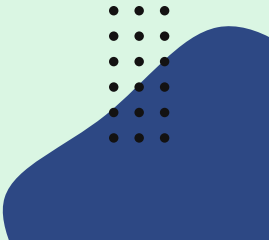
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Master the Art of Writing

Even if you don't write externally, you must build your writing muscles. It allows you to:

1. Think clearly.
2. Simplify complex ideas.
3. Persuade others.

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Cultivate Reading Habits

Start reading what you love till you love reading. Do it consistently.

If you are a good voracious reader, you can learn anything.

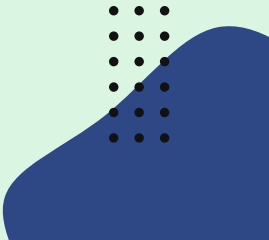Abdulrahman Abbag
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Embrace Deep Work

To make a sizable impact, embrace the power of deep work.

Carve out uninterrupted time, at least 90 minutes per day, to focus on deep work that requires maximum clarity and minimal distractions.

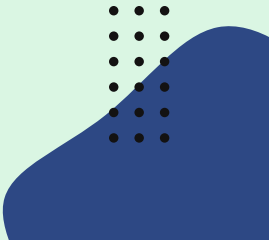Abdulrahman Abbag
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Hiring at the Right Time

Don't hire too early unless it's your previous experience informing you. Hire when you have real pain.

This means you have to explore the problem, understand how it's solved, and make it easier to hire and guide your chosen star.
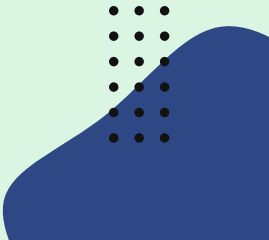
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Hire Wisely

You can get away with good enough but not when it comes to hiring. To me, It is either a hell yes or a hell no.

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Mastering Candidate Search

Getting that candidate requires:

1. Dedication. It is a full time job. Treat it as you treat your most important launch.
2. Understanding. Figure out what competencies you want to test and be critical in deciding how you will test them.
3. In my opinion, a past work / case study is the most informing of candidates' ability so do pay attention to this.

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Stand Out as a Candidate

Most candidates do a mediocre job at applying to jobs. The bar is too low for you to stand as a candidate.

Personalize your outreach, get curious by really researching the company and it's challenges.

I have seen candidates who did not bother checking the website of the company.
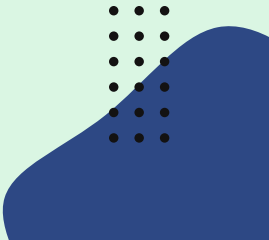
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Thoughtful
Applications

Every part of your application assesses you indirectly. The way you position yourself. How well you communicate; Your attention to details. Your energy; Be intentional!
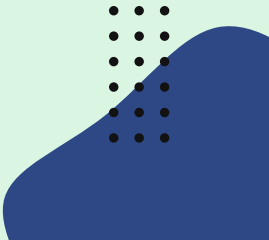
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Interview the Company

You should interview the company as much as they should interview you.

Don't go blinded. Ask & Check back doors, especially for things that are non negotiable for you as a candidate.
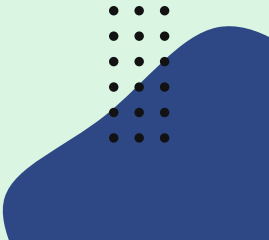
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Impress to Progress

The best way to get lucky is to impress the person sitting next to you in the room.

The way you do it is to treat every work like your entire career depends on it.

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Optimise Your Learning

Over-index on learning. Optimize for:

1. Delivery (Choose audio / video / text according to what you enjoy most and comprehend better)

2. Relevance (Is it relevant to a current problem or opportunity?)

3.Application (Can you apply what you learn immediately?)

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Let's Discuss!

What are some lessons you've learned from founding / building startups? Share your thoughts in the comments below!

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