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and ... **PASSION-BASED
CO-CREATION**

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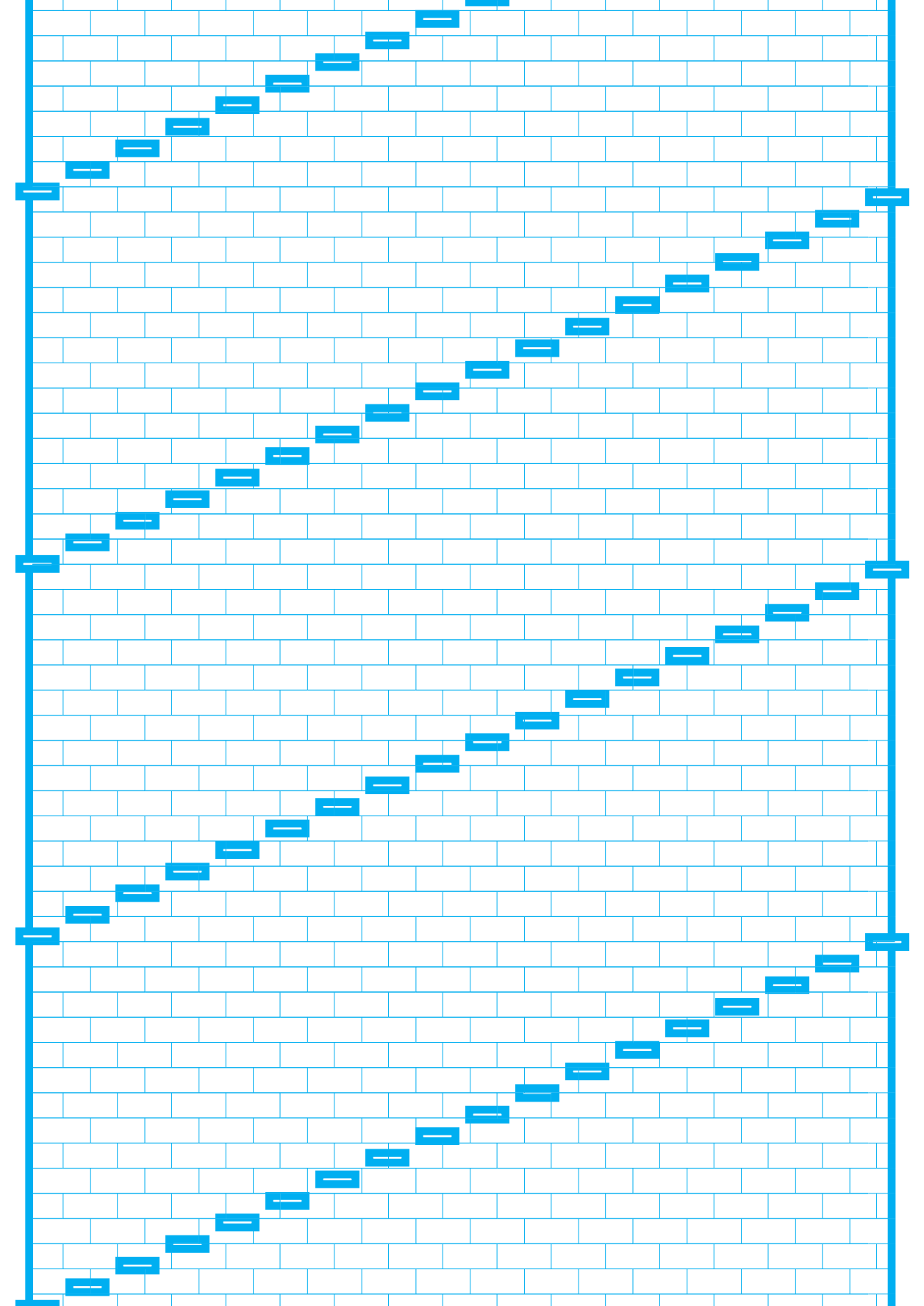
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SMALL WINS AS FOOTHOLDS FOR CO-CREATION

Tua Björklund

Key points

- Making a series of small bets rather than one large gamble is at the core of experimentation, thereby scaling down what is at stake.
 - Less effortful and more specific behaviors are more likely to be followed through, so making things tangible increases your odds of translating intentions into actions.
 - Small wins mark progress and offer proof-of-concept, opportunities for feedback, and opportunities for joining development efforts.
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Why we should look beyond coming up with great ideas

Many development interventions focus on having more creative ideas in organizations with internal and external idea contests; brainstorming days (often organized as retreats away from the office); training employees on the use of ideation techniques, suggestion boxes, and so forth. The assumption quite often seems to be that in order to amp up innovativeness, we need more and better ideas. However, most ideas do not progress beyond the idea generator's desktop.¹ Popularized by Jeffrey Pfeffer and Bob Sutton from Stanford University, the knowing-doing gap reflects systematic shortcomings in translating new knowledge into action.² Overemphasizing initial idea generation can happen at the expense of crucial efforts in idea advancement and implementation that are needed to bring initial ideas to fruition. Intentions to act do not predict actual actions in a straightforward manner, even in relatively short-term simple actions such as voting or using contraception,³ let alone taking the initiative in complex development projects. All too often development ideas get buried in the midst of daily hurdles. Thus instead of increasing the amount of development ideas to work with, an alternative approach to promoting co-creation can have a larger impact: enhancing the implementation rate of ideas and translating thoughts into experiments in order

Much of the time spent on planning could have been spent on learning—aiming for small wins means doing small experiments to test our way rather than taking one big leap.

to see what works rather than speculating about what might happen.

Based on his investigations of technological innovations in the military, MIT professor Donald Schön concluded that ideas either “find champions or die.”⁴ These informal, emergent leaders actively promote and advance ideas in organizations.⁵ However, taking the initiative to push ideas forward drains finite personal resources and can end up being costly for individuals.⁶ Faced with the need to develop in a continuous manner, we can no longer rely only on individual champions heroically going against the grain. We need to be mindful of how we can sustain development efforts on a continuous basis—*how* we develop can be just as important as *what* we are developing. Waiting around for breakthroughs can be demotivating. Rather than preparing for a big battle, a steady stream of initial small advances can sustain the motivation to continue developing.

Small wins are immediate, tangible, and controllable steps that can be tackled to advance ideas.⁷ They are experiments producing small but visible results, such as a positive customer testimonial, setting up a task force, or gaining permission for a new hire, to name a few possibilities. Development strategies focused around small wins rely on identifying “a series of controllable opportunities of modest size that produce visible results,”⁸ or concrete actions taken to discover, test, and develop ideas that are both achievable and affordable.⁹ Different kinds of small-scale experiments are created to test and demonstrate the

viability of development ideas, rather than planning the whole concept and execution process in advance. Acting in uncertain environments cannot rely on centralized comprehensive planning and foresight.¹⁰ The initial experiments provide more information to base our decisions on. Rather than thinking in terms of making mistakes or failing experiments, we learn from variations. Aiming for small wins scales down what is at stake by making a series of small bets rather than one big one.^{9,11} Furthermore, this approach can help to decrease the knowing-doing gap, as Pfeffer and Sutton propose that knowledge gained from action is more likely to be implemented than knowledge gained through contemplation or discussion.² Small wins get the ball rolling, and increase the odds for further development action.

The psychology of small wins

Studying 12,000 diary entries of professional developers, Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer found that perceived progress is the single most influential factor in day-to-day development motivation.¹² By creating, sharing, and testing a series of prototypes, development efforts are made tangible and visible in the environment. Small wins are a large reason why experimentation works so well. They specify the opportunity and solution, encourage feedback, and help to track progress. Seeing that our efforts are bearing fruit is a key component in most motivation theories, whether coined as impact, progress, or mastering a task.¹³

Visible development efforts can also prime for further development. Priming is a subconscious process through which the people, artifacts, and concepts that we are exposed to in our environment have subtle influences on us, making some thoughts

and behavior more likely than others.¹⁴ For example, being primed with a disapproving department chair leads to less favorable self-ratings of one's research ideas,¹⁵ being primed with nurses leads to participants more readily helping others,¹⁶ and being primed with creative stereotypes (such as Apple logos) can boost creativity in idea generation.¹⁷ In a sense, whatever is in our environment is contagious—in a “chameleon effect,” we subconsciously mimic the people around us,¹⁸ adapting similar postures, expressions, and mannerisms in

We can tweak our environment to our advantage, helping to trigger the types of development actions we want to pursue. In other words, development breeds further development.

order to facilitate smooth interaction. While these influences are small, they are significant. It makes sense to make our environment work for us, rather than against us, in our development efforts.

Already the act of making prototypes can enhance one's understanding of the development idea, context, and challenges specifying what is at hand.¹⁹ Furthermore, small wins carry several motivational benefits that can help in turning aspirations into action. Entrepreneurship research has found two key types of antecedents influencing intention-to-pursue opportunities: those affecting the perceived *desirability* of the opportunity and those affecting the perceived *feasibility* of the pursuit.²⁰ In general, motivation theories usually take into consideration both the desirability of a goal and one's perceived chances of reaching the goal when assessing the likelihood

of taking action.²¹ Small wins can enhance both of these antecedents by eliciting feedback, recognizing results, and lowering the threshold for action.

Positive feedback energizes. Development ideas are rarely pursued if they are not somehow personally valuable to the developer.²² However, *maintaining* idea advancement efforts is largely dependent on perceptions of how *others* value the idea.²² Making efforts more tangible creates more opportunities to gain feedback. Positive reactions from key individuals can have lasting impacts: Aalto Entrepreneurship Society founders perceived positive comments from the Aalto University board and management as a mandate to proceed with their ideas. On the other hand, feedback through weaker ties can also play a significant role in maintaining development efforts. In our studies of start-up companies creating their first offering at Aalto Design Factory premises, we have found that many entrepreneurs approach their firms with renewed energy after receiving positive reactions to their ideas in events such as fairs. Such serendipitous encounters, made possible by making a development tangible, offer affirmation of the pursued direction.

Progress maintains commitment. Positive feedback not only increases perceptions of desirability but makes development seem more feasible. Prototyping makes development more tangible, and action becomes more likely as the what and when of things are specified.²³ Without looking for small wins, we can easily feel like we are running towards an ever-changing goal, never reaching our target. One start-up, for example, kept delaying an in-office celebration one step later—from the first mock-up, to the first client, to the first profit—with detrimental effects on the team’s energy levels. It is good to stay

hungry, but failing to notice progress can end up gnawing at motivation. Breakthroughs are, by definition, rare—keeping track of smaller wins helps to check whether you are still on course.

Smalls wins lower the bar. Organizations are increasingly calling for employees to be proactive on all fronts, rather than just excelling in their own role. Knowing that time is limited, starting can sometimes be the hardest part. Especially when you are developing something outside of your primary task or project, efforts can often stall and wither away quietly. To scale down the required effort, try thinking about *the least* you can do. For example, rather than putting off cleaning the entire house indefinitely, you can set out to do a series of five-minute makeovers. What would be your organizational equivalent? Choosing a small task will make it more likely that you eventually get to your goal. Christine Carter from the University of California, Berkeley advocates identifying ridiculously easy “turtle steps” to help build new habits.²⁴ Almost half of our daily actions are done out of habit rather than based on actual decisions,²⁵ so it makes sense to make development a routine part of your workday. Setting the bar low enough minimizes the excuses you can come up with to avoid acting towards achieving your goal. Identifying clear action triggers²⁶ when you will take the turtle steps to advance your ideas further increases the likelihood you will actually do so. Identifying the first turtle step beforehand can be particularly valuable when returning from an off-site company retreat, inspirational talk, or development workshop in order to ease the transfer of your good intentions from a separate development-intensive event into your normal organizational life.

HOW SMALL WINS HELP TO TURN DEVELOPMENT INTENTIONS INTO ACTION

Benefits for the developer:	Benefits for potential allies:	Benefits for potential hostiles:
Making a habit of development	Making ideas visible	Getting used to the idea
Gaining feedback	Providing immediate small-scale opportunities to join development efforts	Scaling down the needed change
Marking progress		Proof-of-concept

Small wins help to get others on board

Nowadays development efforts are hardly ever a solitary pursuit. Involving colleagues, management, clients, and other stakeholders in your efforts can be crucial for successful development in the long run.^{22,27,28} In addition to providing motivational benefits for the initiator of the development efforts, small wins can also help to attract allies and deter opponents to your cause. Three key mechanisms are in operation to make development more palatable: small wins can minimize the required change at any given time, they demonstrate effectiveness, and they make efforts timely.

Downplaying change. The strategy of pursuing small development wins is compatible with the classic foot-in-the-door sales technique.²⁹ Approaching one small win at a time scales down the scope of the challenge, making it easier for people to say yes and harder for them to say no. Looking at 82 instances of managers selling issues ranging from creating an in-house mini-laundry to updating departmental practices, Jane Dutton and colleagues found that all successful (yet only few unsuccessful) attempts

had presented change incrementally rather than as a totally new path to pursue.²⁸ Acclimatizing key decision makers well before the need to decide arises and highlighting the compatibility of suggestions with current operations and goals have been identified as common tactics in successful idea selling.²⁸ In other words, successful idea selling or championing involves processes by which individuals affect others’ attention and understanding of developments in the organization.³¹

Building a track record. Generating a series of small wins also serves as proof-of-concept to skeptics, legitimizing change.³¹ Issue selling is easier when you have supporting evidence at hand, such as numbers and concrete examples gained from initial efforts.³⁰ Not only does initial success appease potential hostiles, it increases the perceived feasibility of your efforts in the eyes of potential collaborators. Demonstrating an action-orientation and achieving results at a quick pace was perceived as the most crucial success factor enabling the swift development of the Aalto Entrepreneurship Society, building momentum and attracting further input.³¹

No waiting period required. Finally, reaching for small wins can create immediate small-scale opportunities for joining in with or supporting development efforts. Many projects struggle in turning goodwill into actual contributions. Concretizations, even if quick approximations of the actual idea, provide tangible opportunities to join in the process of making, as well as to comment and give advice, compared to mere plans of action. Seemingly serendipitous events and “lucky breaks” are often based on groundwork building opportunities for collaboration and the propensity to act.^{31,32} Eliminating the waiting period between introducing a promising idea and the opportunity to do something about it can lower the threshold for initial input and strengthen subsequent commitment. Involving others in the project may take some time but it is needed for eventual effectiveness.^{28,22}

Using small wins to pace yourself for the long run

As development becomes a constant need in organizations, attaining spectacular results once is not enough. We are running co-creation marathons instead of a single make-or-break sprint. As a result, we need to take care of our development energy levels and make our efforts sustainable in the long haul. Adopting a strategy of small wins achieves this by breaking down development into smaller, visible, more palatable pieces, both in human and economic terms. Development ideas can be tested on a smaller scale, in parallel or sequentially, in order to gain the experience needed to make it work. For example, the Teaching Partner pedagogical development process in Aalto University, described by Maria Clavert in Section IV of this book, often starts with changing a single teaching session and gathering feedback on it, only gradually moving on to more comprehensive overhauls. Developing something new often means we do not know what will happen in practice—we can avoid overcommitting ourselves by first getting the feedback we need to hone our ideas.

Small wins also help to build a support base amongst stakeholders. For example, changes to the high-technology product of a large company advanced almost through a smuggling process. A product developer used client contacts to build external pressure for change, leading to the creation of a local adaptation of the product on the client site to satisfy client expectations. After positive experiences with this single site, the changes were rolled out on a wider scale to the product line.

The classic Zappos.com example illustrates that you do not need to set up an entire organization in order to test whether people would be willing to order shoes online: instead the founder walked into a local shop, took pictures of the shoes on sale and posted them online. When the first orders were made, the founder then bought the shoes from the store and delivered them to the customers.³³ Testing development ideas in such an incremental manner ensures that we do not fall far if our step is misguided. There is no need to dust ourselves off, rather we can incorporate what we have learned in a stride.

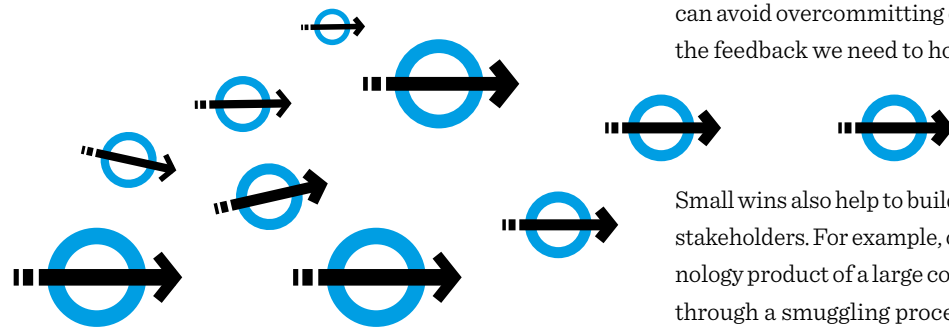
So the next time you are drafting a battle plan for your development idea, remember to.

Clarify your idea by making it more concrete, for example, in a sketch or prototype

Think about what is the least you can do to make some initial progress

Do it, and tell a friend—celebrate each small win

Repeat: keep on testing and refining the idea and seeking some easy wins along the process in order to attract allies, deter opponents and keep yourself motivated

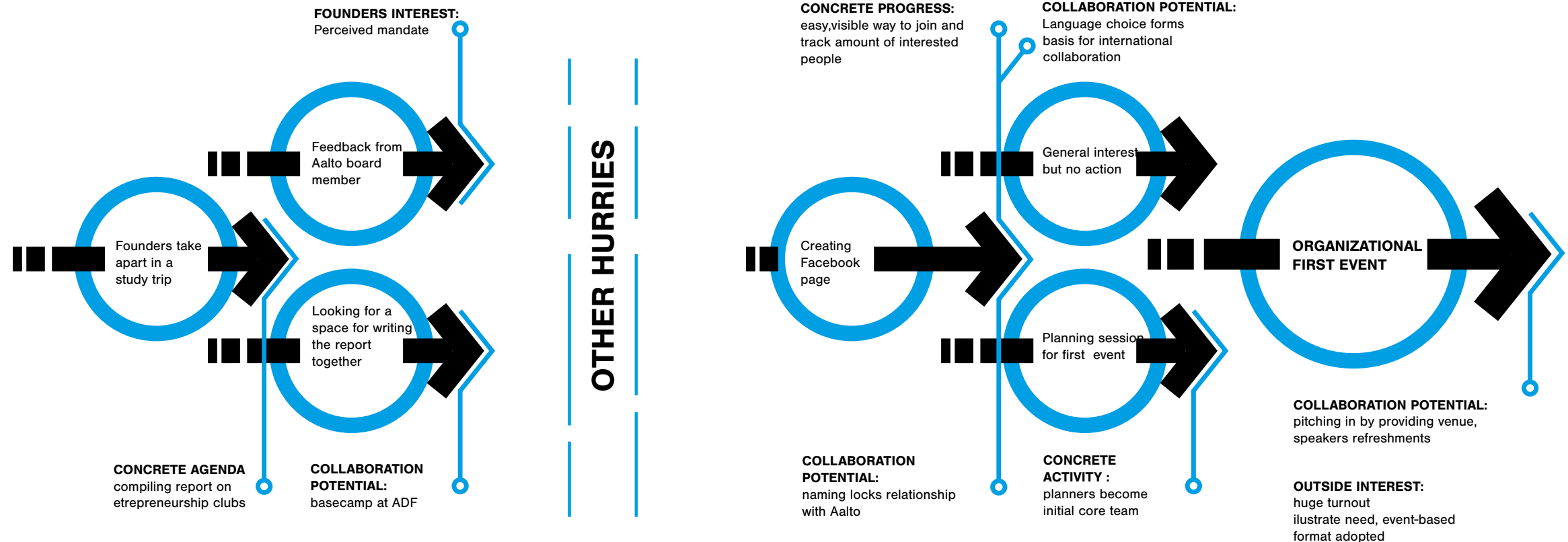


Actions and events are vectors rather than points in time: Each influences subsequent ones, making some options easier and more likely to be followed than others

Aalto Entrepreneurship Society: Gaining momentum through small wins

Aalto Entrepreneurship Society (Aaltoes) is a student-based society promoting growth entrepreneurship. Born during the formation merger of Aalto University, the idea of three students transformed into an organization with 5,000 members within a year that plays a role in university strategy as well as the development of the national entrepreneurial ecosystem. Startup Sauna, Startup Life, Summer of Startups, SLUSH ... Aaltoes actions can be thanked for a number of support formats offered for budding Finnish and international entrepreneurs today.

The founders credit their culture of action for the success. By concretizing action and making progress visible, Aaltoes was able to fuel the precarious initial development steps by small wins right from the beginning.³¹ The concretization in the form of a specific agenda, a Facebook page, a planning session, and an initial event made outside interest visible and laid the groundwork for future collaboration:



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Tua Björklund (Aalto Design Factory) is one of the co-founders of Design Factory. She conducts and leads research, teaches product design, and facilitates pedagogical development at ADF. Tua has a DSc degree in industrial management and a MA degree in cognitive science, looking at co-creation from a social and psychological perspective. She is particularly interested in how to support translating ideas into action with the help of prototyping and working practices in knowledge work.



*All you need is love,
design, business,
engineering, and...*

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