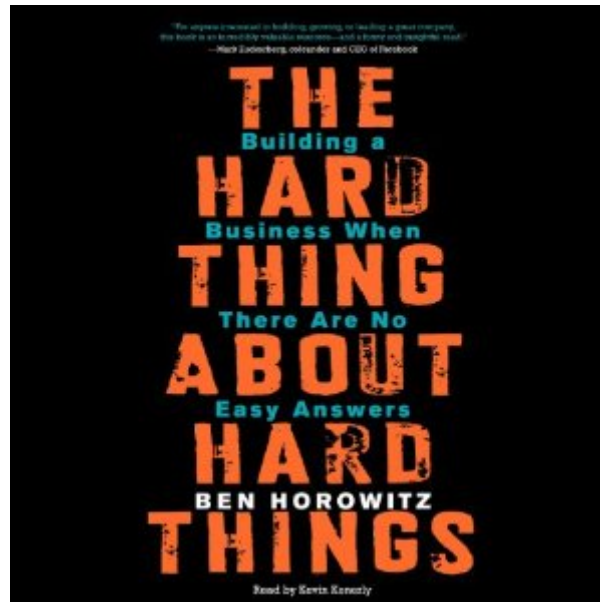# The Hard Thing About Hard Things: Building A Business When There Are No Easy Answers

Synopsis

Ben Horowitz, cofounder of Andreessen Horowitz and one of Silicon Valley's most respected and experienced entrepreneurs, offers essential advice on building and running a startup - practical wisdom for managing the toughest problems business school doesn't cover, based on his popular ben's blog. While many people talk about how great it is to start a business, very few are honest about how difficult it is to run one. Ben Horowitz analyzes the problems that confront leaders every day, sharing the insights he's gained developing, managing, selling, buying, investing in, and supervising technology companies. A lifelong rap fanatic, he amplifies business lessons with lyrics from his favorite songs, telling it straight about everything from firing friends to poaching competitors, cultivating and sustaining a CEO mentality to knowing the right time to cash in. Filled with his trademark humor and straight talk, The Hard Thing About Hard Things is invaluable for veteran entrepreneurs as well as those aspiring to their own new ventures, drawing from Horowitz's personal and often humbling experiences.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Ben is a smart guy. Ben has a lot of good things to say about what it means to be a CEO. Ben has worked in the whirlwind that is/was Silicon Valley on products you probably never heard of at the height of the silliness. Ben grew a lot as a leader and made a ton of money doing that. Unfortunately Ben is a mediocre author, and his editor needs to find another line of work.This book is like countless "how to be a leader" books on the market, and says a lot of the same things. Only this

time you get it from the perspective of a guy flailing to build a silicon valley startup to a point where he can unload it on some unsuspecting buyer and walk away with enough money to retire at 35, on the backs of the poor schlubs who wrote the code that got him there in the faint hope they'd get rich too. That's an interesting perspective, and one that says a lot about silicon valley, the venture capital culture, and the business world in general.The problems with this book are many, however. First, most of the advice is retread, stuff you can find in a lot of other books on leadership. More importantly, however is the seemingly random organization. It doesn't adhere to a chronological flow, or a logical structured flow -- either would have been a fine choice. It seems to be mostly stream-of-consciousness -- like someone just transcribed their notes from their beside table notepad. It never seems to go from point A to point B. And it rehashes the same stories over and over. I get it, you managed to dump part of your losing business on EDS, a miracle coup, and then build up what was left into something you managed to stick HP with. It's hard to decide which is more painful, the repeating of these stories time and again, or the smug attitude about how he miraculously sold these major corporations a bill of goods for millions.But even that aside, there are two affectations in this book that make it a painful read. Each chapter/section begins with some random quote from a rap/hip-hop music lyric. Most of those have literally nothing to do with the following material and feel just painfully tone deaf. It's only compounded by the fact that it's a british white guy quoting Kanye West .. ?? And the constant referral to the CEO as a "she" is just painful. It's so blatant, I found I spent most of the book wondering whether it was all "he" to begin with and the editor just did a "search and replace" or if the author was trying to be so PC that he strained to make every example a "she". Either way, it's just painful -- almost like he's talking down to potential women CEOs, and it eventually becomes insulting.Finally, there's the title, which simply has nothing to do with the contents of the book. Yes, there's lots of good and valuable advice about being a leader and a CEO. But the presentation is so flawed as to make it not worth the effort. My advice to readers is to search out any number of other books on leadership and leave this one to fester on the shelves.

As someone who spent 20+ years in Silicon Valley, including both the dotcom boom and bust eras, I felt Ben's pain when I read this book. When the valley was flying high, it was really high. Spending was ridiculous. There was nothing "Lean" going on in start-ups. Money flowed like tap water...and went down the drain in much the same way. And then the bubble burst. Chaos and calamity was rampant.Ben Horowitz not only weathered the storm, but he went public instead of going bankrupt. He turned a low of $0.37 a share into a $1.6B sale to HP. His stories of what he and the team went

through, the excruciating decisions he had to make, and how he ended up winning (buying a company in order to keep a $20M deal with EDS)...an exceptional story.So, the question is, how does his experience apply to those of us who are struggling with our own tech start-ups? While some of the advice was a bit preachy, what I like about Ben's advice is the brilliance of thought behind it. For instance, the Freaky Friday strategy. His Sales Engineering and Customer Service teams were at war. His flash of brilliance came from watching a movie on TV. He decided to permanently swap the responsibilities of the leads of the two organizations. What resulted was a fast understanding of the OTHER guy's issues...and a quick path to a mutually designed, collaborative solution. Brilliant.Other pieces of advice flow to the heart of leadership. He has defined the job of the CEO and distilled it down to the essence of the job--for instance, making decisions in absence of all the data, having the courage to stand behind and in front of your decision, and being able to sell others on your decisions. Yes, there's much more to it than he flippantly states; but in essence, his success and his ballsy moves in the face of failure...I'll bite. However, is the advice really USEFUL? Can a leader in a company (or someone who aspires to be a leader in a business) really learn from lessons and advice in this book?In this book, Ben put his thought processes on paper. Some were successful at teaching, including the process of screening and hiring a critical role--the VP of Sales. That concrete example was the most relevant--and potentially most critical--to those who are trying to glean lessons from this book. But for me, I just enjoyed the ability to delve into to the mind of a Valley vet who built something from nothing. His decision to sell LoudCloud and move to productizing Opsware was a lesson in understanding when it's time to pivot and how to get it done.The one thing that just didn't ring true was Ben's use of the pronoun 'she' in describing a CEO's role and challenges. There was a recent article in Business Week that hit the nail on the head. In writing about a company and about experiences in the trenches where there were few--if any--women in top roles, it was a bit disingenuous to use 'she' when describing the leadership roles and practices. It just didn't ring true to me, and as a woman who has worked in male-dominated industries (including Telecom), I found that single slant to be a really weak attempt to be politically correct. I'd rather that Horowitz be real...it worked in the rest of the writing of his book.All in all, I give THe Hard Thing About Hard Things a thumbs up. Enjoyable read, some flashes of brilliance, and some great stories. As a veteran of a start-up with a successful exit, I know how excruciating it can be. Making it out the other end in one piece (and in triumph), now that's a STORY.

The Hard Thing About Hard Things: Building a Business When There Are No Easy Answers There's No Such Thing as "Business" Ethics: There's Only One Rule for Making Decisions The Hard Thing

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