

# Debunking the unwritten rules of startup with Joe Procopio

What's your favorite startup rule? What's that one saying that you always fall back on when you're having trouble pushing an idea into reality? Mine is "Go fast and break stuff." In five words, it reminds me that everything I do is an experiment, nothing new is ever perfect, and I'll never know if an idea works until I put it out there to potentially blow up in my face.

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But as much as I love that rule for myself, it's not a line I toss out in general conversation with entrepreneurs, or give as generic advice. It's a rule I reserve for people who already know me and know how I operate.

Without proper context, all the good intentions behind those startup rules can easily be misunderstood, or worse, ignored completely. This has two effects. For one, it can completely sink the entrepreneur's business as they attempt to execute a misguided strategy for the wrong reasons. And two, it sometimes results in an unethical means to an end.

Don't let that happen to you.

# Check your lexicon

Entrepreneurship is full of its own terms, acronyms, and rules. We constantly tell entrepreneurs to build “minimum viable products,” find “product-market fit,” and gain “traction.” We stress the importance of monitoring “ARR” and “LTV” and “CAC.” We tell them to “apologise later rather than ask permission first.”

The term and acronym stuff is fine, when it’s honest. Most business terms are just dead-simple words used as shortcuts for *slightly* more complex concepts. And acronyms are just shorter short cuts for those same concepts. For example, LTV is just lifetime value, which is just the total customer spend on your product for the complete cycle of time they own and use it.

When terms and acronyms are misunderstood, the results can be painful, but the pain is usually containable and recoverable. However, when startup *rules* are taken out of context, the damage can not only impact the startup, but also its customers, supporters, employees, and even its investors.

Starting a business is a unique journey every time it happens, marked by unique strategies, unique styles, and unique paths taken to get to roughly the same goal. But even the goals are as different as the entrepreneurs who chase them. This is a concept that gets lost when entrepreneurs seek guidance, because rules and mottos are the lazy answer to any complex question.

There’s been enough malfeasance perpetrated within the startup universe, most of it justified using these rules and mottos. Here are a few you should take with a grain of salt or, better yet, a boatload of proper context.

## Go fast and break stuff

I believe this gained popularity when something similar was uttered by Mark Zuckerberg while building Facebook, but the spirit of the rule has been around forever.

**The Good:** As stated above, for me, this rule is about addressing my own weakness of overbuilding, something that most entrepreneurs, especially technical entrepreneurs, suffer from. The rule pushes me to take a breath, find a stopping point, and take the required level of risk necessary for a startup to gain an advantage over the entrenched players — those who can’t move fast and have too much at stake to break stuff.

**The Bad:** When applying this rule as a mantra, it can take you out of your depth pretty quickly. And almost always, the broken stuff eventually has to be paid

for, by someone, metaphorically or otherwise.

## It's better to apologise after than to ask permission first

This is easily the most misunderstood rule and also the one that tends to land entrepreneurs in the most hot water. You're betting on the fact that once the offending thing is done, the offended party won't go to all the trouble of forcing you to undo it. And you're also betting that you can live with the blowback, which is something everyone always underestimates. Always.

The Good: In the fight against the status quo, this rule is sometimes mandatory. The status quo will say no to anything, for reasons they can't really back up, legally, ethically, or otherwise. The status quo will say no even when everyone involved is better off if they say yes. The status quo is kind of a dick.

The Bad: I have never seen a startup use this rule to do something unethical — like claim a customer they don't have, use a service they didn't pay for, promise something they had no intention to deliver, or anything like that — and not get dinged with a big hit to their reputation. The more unethical the deed, the larger the circle of damage.

## Get very good at one small thing

They say the key to success with any new endeavor, including a new business, is to get very good at one small thing, then move on to the next thing. It sometimes includes the 10,000 hours rule — in other words, you can become an expert at anything once you spend 10,000 hours doing it, or roughly five years worth of work-weeks.

I get this one. I actually live it — for pursuits like mastering golf or the guitar. I don't like it for starting a business.

The Good: Once your company and your product is established, 10,000 hours of experience will build a moat to keep your competitors at bay. You'll learn the gotchas, the outliers, the mistakes, and how to react and recover, all while they flail around and fail.

The Bad: For one thing, doing entrepreneurship the right way means attempting things no one has ever done before. Whether or not you're good or bad at those attempts usually depends on how the market reacts. On top of that, the most often overlooked element working against an entrepreneur is the opportunity cost of time spent. If you're not addressing the market well

before the end of that five work-years of experience building, someone else will beat you.

Plus, who the hell is paying your bills for those five years?

## Work smarter, not harder

Sometimes used in defense of the previous rule, people who know will tell you that when you're an entrepreneur, the calendar norm is like 16 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. And that's just during the down times.

The Good: Working smarter, not harder, means using part or even most of that 10,000 hours to find and eliminate inefficiencies that require a person to blow 10,000 hours becoming an expert on something in the first place. It also means innovating in areas that save time for you and for your customers.

The Bad: It does not mean a four-hour work week or whatever. It actually means doing more than what's necessary. For example, if a certain task takes so long to accomplish and happens so often that you worry about losing revenue if you take the time to analyse how to do that task differently, you'll wind up in a death spiral. Sometimes you have to work twice as hard before you can work smarter.

## Bonus rule-type terms!

Hustle. I love this term, others hate it. Entrepreneurs need to hustle to survive, but just remember you can't live on hustle alone. Without order, there is no scale. Without scale, there is no growth, there is only a house of cards waiting to collapse

Side hustle. I like this term because it takes the negative connotation out of starting a business on the side. I dislike it because it keeps the dream small. Side-hustles never last forever, they're just something you do instead of your real job. Always be thinking about how to turn your side hustle into your real job. Never get comfortable.

*[This article was originally published on Medium by Joe Procopio](#)*

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