

# Greatness Begins with a V1 Moment

With commitment and courage, success is pinned to taking risks.

When on trips involving air travel, I have a habit of pausing at the concourse windows, gazing at the artificial bird that is about to ferry me to my endpoint, and finding myself astounded that these man-made contraptions can actually fly. After hundreds upon hundreds of flights, I'm not afraid of flying, not in the least. Just amazed.

Fascinating too are the pilots who operate these beasts. Rim-rod posture, hair cut high and tight, military grade caps and uniforms and the enormous responsibility of guiding the plane and its precious human cargo safely off the runway and into the sky above only to reverse the process when time comes to land the whole works at its next destination.

Perhaps this fascination is what prompted me to dive into an abridged version of Mark Vanhoenacker's "Skyfaring: A Journey with a Pilot" (Vintage Departures, 2016). As often happens, I discovered portions of this non-business book analogous to leading a company. In one such moment I became stuck on the paragraph wherein the author describes the speed to which pilots apparently refer as V1. As Vanhoenacker describes departing the runway at London's Heathrow, destination Tokyo, Japan, "Before this speed, we have enough room left ahead of us on the runway to stop the takeoff. After this speed, we may not. Thus committed to flight, we continued along the ground, gathering still more speed."

I find huge power in what I have since begun calling the "V1 Moment", that space in business time where, committing ourselves wholly and without exception to a project or end goal, there's no turning back. Like a pilot's realization that the aircraft has now reached a velocity to which there's no safe or reasonable alternative but to proceed with

never looked back after launching Tesla, persevering through financial and technical challenges that would have derailed the plans of a lesser man. Nike founder Phil Knight, after his V1 Moment at Stanford, in which he realized he had an entrepreneur's blood, peddled shoes out of the back of his car and faced countless working capital and supply challenges on the way to building one of history's most powerful brands.

The alternative to a V1 Moment is to drift from day to day, idea to idea, with little purpose or intention. I have a close friend who reaches out about three times each year and asks me for feedback on her latest business concept. Every one of them is brilliantly conceived and thought out. Yet she hasn't pulled the trigger on a single one. If she put half as much energy into executing one of her ideas as she does into dreaming them up she might likely have retired a millionaire by now. Her lack of a V1 Moment, a decision from which she refuses to turn back, prevents her from realizing her dreams.

Our V1 Moment commands our commitment. In the mid-1990's, while leading a cash-strapped high-tech company, I goaded our board into a V1 Moment. Our leadership team presented to our unsuspecting board members our "Go for Broke" plan in which we would risk the entire company's future on three key business initiatives. If we failed, we would run out of cash and likely lose the business. If we succeeded, we would be well on our way to building lasting value. Fully committed and with no other viable options, our team put every ounce of innovation and energy into executing our "Go for Broke" plan. To this day, I'm convinced that the main reason it worked was that we had no acceptable Plan B. We had no choice but to succeed.

The speed of Vanhoenacker's aircraft passes through and beyond V1, "As the lights of the runway started to alternate red and white to indicate its approaching end, I lifted the nose."

Following our V1 Moment, we gather speed. We gradually lift off. We gain altitude. We encounter and overcome turbulence, our focus and commitment steady, unwavering until the point that we burst through the clouds flooded and bathed by a sun that always seems to shine at thirty thousand feet. Our goals accomplished, our risk rewarded, we fly. ■■■



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**"Our V1 Moment comes when we reject all other options but one."**

the takeoff, our V1 Moment comes when we reject all other options but one, and proceed with confident determination and laser-like focus toward the only logical outcome.

History is flush with examples of individuals who, encountering or creating V1 Moments of their own, proceeded with intention in the only direction therefore available to them. In 1519 Hernán Cortés scuttled his ships and denied his men the option of reversing course on his conquest of the Aztec Empire. In 1864 as the Union's David Farragut damned the torpedoes in Mobile Bay and headed his ship across a line of mines, and nearly a century later as President John F. Kennedy stared down the Russians during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

The success of the subjects of three of the best business biographies I have read in the last several years can all be pinned to V1 Moments. Amazon's Jeff Bezos left his job at a New York City Hedge Fund to found Amazon. Elon Musk