MIT 2005 - Essay #3

Please give an example when you were part of a high- or low- performing team (up to 500 words).

Just like most people who've ever been involved in either engineering research or advanced product development, I've participated in some projects that didn't bear fruit for either technical, managerial, or financial reasons. However, for this essay I would like to talk about our own unsuccessful "dot-com" venture, which was also my first true leadership experience.

As I was finishing up my Master's studies, my life took an unexpected turn. These were the "Internet Bubble" years and anything seemed possible. My idea was to develop and sell integrated hardware solutions for an emerging alternative operating system called BeOS. At the time when Windows 95 was the most popular environment, incapable of true multitasking or advanced multimedia, BeOS was already able to handle such tasks that were otherwise reserved for expensive UNIX workstations.

A friend of mine, a professional software developer, and I were really surprised that we could suddenly wholeheartedly agree on a computer-related issue. This has rarely happened before, so we felt that BeOS must be a cause worth embracing. Subsequently BeShop.com, Inc. was born and we got busy building a company to support what we thought was the future of computing. We were the first to announce development of complete Intel-based computer workstations specifically optimized to take advantage of the system's unique capabilities.

Among other things, I conducted extensive market research, wrote a comprehensive business plan, designed a custom interactive Web site, and embarked on a long search for a source of venture capital. Unfortunately, partially because we were lacking sufficient connections and experience, but also due to widespread skepticism about any new technology that competes with established Microsoft products, we were unable to secure enough financial backing and eventually had to go our separate ways.

Although initially discouraged, I soon realized how important it would have been to have solid business knowledge and credentials. For the first time I started to seriously consider going to a B-School to gain better understanding of corporate management and technology marketing. And, even though we were ultimately unsuccessful, I still think that this was the most exciting professional experience I've had to date, primarily because we truly believed in our cause and were convinced that we could make a real difference.

As for Be, Inc., the California company which originally developed BeOS, it also seized to exist about three years later. It was pushed out of the market by the monopolistic practices of Microsoft Corporation, which later paid Be's founders $23.2 million to settle "groundless allegations" of anti-competitive behavior. Yet to this day, whenever I see Microsoft implementing the features that BeOS had more than six years ago, I wonder whether the computer industry is actually capable of "self-regulation" through competition when the Justice Department fails to strictly enforce the antitrust laws.

The final lesson that I learned from this venture was that even the most advanced, superior technology might fail if not marketed correctly or if an "industry standard" has already been established, however mediocre it might be.