



TECHNO TIM

THE SMARTEST GUY IN THE ROOM

“The irony about hiring a brilliant jerk is that you immediately lose most of the good ideas from the rest of the team. They shut down when a know-it-all shows up. After making this mistake multiple times, I’ve learned that the damage to the team is never worth one person’s supposed genius.”

– **Suzi Sosa**, CEO and Co-Founder, Verb

For many entrepreneurial companies, their success relies on the proficiency of one or two strong individuals in the technical aspects of the business. Maybe it’s software development, artificial intelligence, or product development, or maybe it’s subject matter expertise in some form of accounting, engineering, or construction design. Bottom line is that a technical leader occupies a critical role—probably the most important role in the early stages of growth.

But expertise doesn’t make someone a great team player. While I’ve been around many successful tech

WHO'S YOUR MIKE?

startups, I've also seen many entrepreneurs struggle with prima donnas: guys who weren't shy about letting you know they were the smartest person in the room. I've seen tech leaders who range from amazingly egotistical and hard to work with, all the way to maniacal and diabolical. I've seen poor communicators and others who surround themselves with yes-men. And I've seen many projects fall behind and go over budget because leaders were afraid to admit they made a mistake.

If any of this resonates, read on. This chapter focuses on Tim as a technology subject matter expert (SME), but you can probably substitute other technical gurus or SMEs in most of the stories.

The Entrepreneur

Most of the successful entrepreneurs I know aren't true "tech guys." Sure, they know enough to be dangerous and they got the business started, but they need those uber technical whizzes around them to make the business truly successful.

I'm looking in the mirror when I say this: many entrepreneurs are skilled in a lot of different areas and soft skills, but we often can't even figure out our damn Wi-Fi network at home, let alone design and produce innovative technology. Hell, some of my founder buddies may even be knowledgeable about the latest technological advances, trends, and forecasts. But even the entrepreneurs who stay up to date on the latest and greatest usually don't remain the most technical.

Techno Tim

Techno Tim is WICKED smart: as in, smartest guy in the room and not afraid to let you know it smart; as in, talks for hours and hours about stuff you only sort of understand smart. Not only does he talk the talk, but he seems to REALLY get it! He can take your idea, break it down to the nuts and bolts, and put it back together again in the course of a conversation.

Entrepreneurial CEOs look to guys like Techno Tim all the time. Sure, you came up with a brilliant and innovative idea, but let's face the facts. You have a vision for the product or service; you know how to sell and how to lead. But at the end of the day, you have no f-ing clue how to actually develop, test, and build a scalable product! You need someone you can count on to develop the technology platform, complete with all the bells and whistles you imagined. You need someone with the technological expertise to get your idea into the hands of consumers.

You know this is a gap for your young company. But this point is beaten home through various discussions with mentors and investors. "Who's your CTO?" they ask. "Who's the tech leader who's going to oversee product development?"

You've been reaching out to your network, looking for a stud. An investor introduces you to Techno Tim, and you're blown away. He's the #2 tech guy at a very successful company in town. But in his mind, he basically does the job of the #1 guy—and they're missing out on a real opportunity. Sure, the company has done well, "but they could be so much better if they'd just listen to me,"

WHO'S YOUR MIKE?

he says. He wows you with his knowledge of tech stacks, coding, and the future of open source, along with other techspeak you vaguely understand. He knows all the newest and hottest technologies. In fact, he **JUST** got back from a mega conference the industry is buzzing about.

If you've ever worked for, worked with, or been around entrepreneurial companies that require technical expertise, you recognize this conversation: the one where you absolutely fall in love with Techno Tim, or at least the concept of Techno Tim. You don't know how you'll succeed without him. He's eager to showcase his brilliance for the right company, and you need a genius to complete your team. Tim's a perfect fit! He's a tech guru, he's got a great resume—and he was referred by an investor you trust (more on that later). You've probably convinced yourself that passing on Tim would be a huge mistake—as bad as the Trailblazers passing on Michael Jordan in the '84 draft!

You start to imagine what you can do with Tim on the team. The sky's the limit! Investors love the promise of your technology. Pair that with Tim's resume, and you're on your way! Most importantly, Tim was recommended by a trusted investor, for heaven's sake. And at this time in your company's lifecycle, referrals carry a **TON** of weight. What could go wrong? You're following the unicorn playbook: venture capital, world-class team, working prototype, and top-notch customer logos as early adopters. The only question is whether you'll sell the company to private equity or go public.

What Could Go Wrong?

You make the seemingly obvious choice to bring Techno Tim on board, and things start out great. He points out that the code your legacy team developed wasn't up to snuff; "It'll never scale and support the type of growth we want," he says. He plans to start by taking the time to "fix it, make it right." You're so relieved, because without Tim, you wouldn't have known until it was too late!

So, you leave Tim to do his work; he IS the tech whiz, after all. Meanwhile, you focus on raising the money you'll need to make this happen and wowing early-adopter customers with the promise of your solution. You attack your role with energy and vigor. Your dreams are coming true! Tim looks good for the dog and pony show. His resume impresses the local venture capital firms, and he certainly talks the talk.

But behind the scenes, things aren't going so well. While Tim is very smart, it takes teamwork to make the dream work. Remember how I said Tim likes to be the smartest guy in the room? Turns out that's not a good thing. He doesn't like to be challenged. He needs to be THE guy. At every opportunity, he reminds you how smart he is and how most everyone else, well . . . isn't. Tim surrounds himself with people who agree with him all the time, unwittingly hiring a team of B- and C-players who are afraid to challenge him.

The cracks start to show a few months in . . . subtle at first. When you reflect back on your experience, you realize you should have asked more questions early on. For example, the weekly management team meetings turned

WHO'S YOUR MIKE?

into a what-will-the-excuse-be-this-week exercise. At first, Tim was spending a lot of time talking about how the current technology would never scale and he would have to re-do a lot of what was previously built. It all made sense to you at the time (and it may have been true). After all, you brought in an expert to build this thing right.

Tim would regale the team with the latest open-source technology he's planning to use to fix one issue or another. He always wants to dabble in the new whizbang technologies out there. In retrospect, you suspect that he was probably just padding his resume or building relationships with key software and hardware vendors to further his career.

Deadlines were slipping and he was way over budget. "Be patient, we're doing something that's never been done before," he would say. Or my favorite, as the type of condescending things typical Techno Tims often say, "Kurt, you just don't understand! This is a complicated problem we're trying to solve." At some point you just want to punch Tim in the nose!

What you don't know is that Tim is creating manual overrides to cover up the bigger problems with his team's work. The issue goes deeper than you think. But what you do know is that the excuses for why things aren't on schedule are becoming more vociferous. He's definitely an A-player in the excuse department! The previous code had bigger issues than he thought, or the software vendor is an idiot, or "the board is demanding things that just aren't possible on such a short timeline," or perhaps his team is "just a bunch of whiny millennials."

Tim knows you're not sure whether he's full of shit or

TECHNO TIM

not. You're not a tech guy. He knows he has a long leash, and he can continue talking in circles to keep you satisfied. Whatever the excuse, Tim constantly reminds you how hard his job is to do—and by extension, reminds you how lost you'd be without him. You're frustrated, but at the same time you're scared you might lose him. And then you'd have nowhere to turn. That may be true . . . or you may be better off without him.

The pressure is building on you every day. The board and your investors (and your exec team!) are starting to doubt you as a leader. What can you do? I've seen some clients and friends successfully bring in outside experts to poke around and assess the situation. If you choose to go that route with your Techno Tim, proceed with caution! As the smartest person in the room, he doesn't like to be questioned. If he gets the sense that you're messing around in his kitchen, he'll feel threatened and honestly might blow up on you. He'll get even more defensive and make your life a living hell. That doesn't mean you shouldn't do it; it just means you should have a plan.

You may feel like you can't live without Tim, but the truth is, you can! There are a few options for what to do with a Techno Tim before it's too late, and we'll get to those later. Just know that you'll eventually reach a point where it **IS** too late. When the project looks like it will never get done or your board or investors lose faith in you, your investors will start to pull out. Sometimes, Tim will quit when he sees the writing on the wall. He doesn't want to go down with the ship. (Come to think of it, did you ever independently verify why he left his last job?) At some point, whether you expose the issue, or the shit just

WHO'S YOUR MIKE?

naturally hits the fan, the leak in the *Titanic* will be too large for the mop pails to bail out. And everything will come crashing down on Tim—and on you.

Real-World Example

I've got a ton of real-life Techno Tim stories, and I'm sure you do too. Here's just one example.

My friend Jeff founded an e-commerce company during the dotcom heydays, with little more than a great idea, some top-notch connections, and some well-worded scribbles on the back of a napkin. Without disclosing too much, his idea to partner with high-traffic websites and run their online e-commerce stores was novel at the time and well-received. He validated his idea with industry leaders and successfully circled up some early-stage investment capital to get the company off the ground.

But while Jeff was the idea man and had a clear vision for what he wanted the company to be, he wasn't the tech whiz who was going to design and implement his brilliant idea. He knew he needed one, a chief technology officer, a technology partner.

One of Jeff's board members and largest investors referred him to Tim. Jeff was not about to piss off his largest investor, so they met—and Jeff was blown away. Tim was very impressive and talked a great game. He had spent the previous fourteen years at a large and very successful organization, managing a large team. His team ran everything from tech support for over 1,000 desktops to the company's enterprise resource planning (ERP) system. He had even overseen the design of the company's nascent

TECHNO TIM

e-commerce engine. Dotcom mania was sweeping the country, Tim was eager to step out and punch the “tech startup” lottery ticket, and he believed in Jeff’s idea.

Beyond his on-paper experience, Tim dazzled Jeff with his brilliance, especially when it came to new tech. He seemed to understand cutting-edge technologies better than anyone. He swept Jeff away, and it didn’t take long for Jeff to fall in love with him and offer him the job. He needed someone to leverage these new technologies and turn his idea into a reality, and Tim sure seemed to fit the bill.

Jeff placed complete trust in Tim to develop the technology infrastructure while he focused on selling his vision to key customers and strategic partners. The initial plan was to develop a working prototype and win some name-brand early adopters through Jeff’s relationships. Then they would show off these early wins to alliance partners, build some marketplace buzz, and raise big-time venture capital ahead of the inevitable IPO and check-cashing frenzy.

Unfortunately, things didn’t go as planned. The tech always seemed to be behind schedule and over budget—not a great combo! Monday management meetings began to feel like *Groundhog Day* for Jeff (without the Andie MacDowell part, of course). Early on, Tim would rave about the latest and greatest shiny-object tech he was considering buying or implementing, but he never seemed to get things across the finish line.

When Jeff pressed for answers, Tim was well-armed with excuses, ranging from “I have a new team” or “this has never been done before/new technology is complicated” to

WHO'S YOUR MIKE?

“these things take time.” Or my favorite, “there were some bugs in the software. We’re fixing them, but I want it to be perfect before I show it off to you.”

Like many of the other versions of himself, this Techno Tim considered himself to be the smartest person in the room. Well, when someone like that is in charge of hiring a team, that’s a self-fulfilling prophecy. In this case, Jeff empowered Tim, giving him complete control over the makeup of his team. And while Tim probably didn’t set out to hire a team of B- and C-players, he definitely gravitated toward people who agreed with him. Some might say he didn’t want anyone who would challenge his place on the throne, but I believe he simply liked it when people kissed his ass. And this played out in interviews. If you were into his ego, his ideas, or his vision for cutting-edge tech, then you passed. If not, you probably just “weren’t a culture fit” or otherwise didn’t make the cut.

Without opposing viewpoints on the team, anyone willing (or able?) to challenge Tim, or even anyone to simply remind him of the task at hand, it didn’t take long for tiny cracks to develop and quickly become gaping holes. “It will be done next week” became next month, which inevitably got pushed out—again and again. As Jeff grew increasingly frustrated, Tim placed more and more blame on others. First it was the software, then the third-party development firm he outsourced much of the work to, then “the incompetent team I had to hire on such a small budget.” By the end, everything that came out of Tim’s mouth was some form of “It’s not me, it’s them.”

When you build a house of cards around yourself, as Tim did, the only question is **WHEN** it will come tum-

TECHNO TIM

bling down, not if. Through this process, Jeff learned valuable lessons about hiring, but he probably picked up a “real-life MBA” in managing his team and holding people accountable, which are things most entrepreneurs tend to struggle with.

Unfortunately, these lessons were learned the hard way for Jeff. In the end, all the delays hurt his chances to woo his next round of investors, crippling the company’s chances. When the economy took a downturn, it didn’t take long for the company to go under as well. In fairness, even with working tech, the company probably would’ve struggled in the downturn, but Techno Tim certainly didn’t help its chances!

What Can You Do about Techno Tim?

If you find yourself with a Techno Tim on your hands, you have a number of options. Let me preface by saying that you’re not always right. And even though you’re a successful entrepreneur, your gut isn’t always right, either. What I mean by that is you probably want to get a second opinion before you fire off half-cocked, especially with such a critical role. But you do need to recognize that you have a problem; dig in to see how real or how deep the issue is. Having said that, in Intermission I included a number of things for you to consider and options to weigh in dealing with Tim. And in Intermission II, beginning on page 135, I’ve provided some tips on avoiding Techno Tim in the first place. Good luck!