Before I left salesforce.com to start Okta, CEO Marc Benioff gave me some advice. He said, “Todd, to be a great CEO, you'll need to learn how to be a great leader, not just a great manager.”

At that time, I didn’t think much of that suggestion. But over the past three years in founding and growing my own company, I keep coming back to those words and have found them to be hugely valuable. What I’ve learned--and I suppose what Marc was trying to tell me--is that building a successful company takes an entirely different combination of skills than I was used to showcasing as the head of engineering.

When you're running a large department in a growing company, you flex your management muscle all the time. You are constantly pushing your team and making sure that everyone is focused on the right priorities, that deadlines are hit and that together your group is functioning like a well-oiled machine. What I learned--almost immediately--is that being a CEO utilizes a totally different muscle combination than what I was accustomed to at salesforce.com.

Leadership and management are not mutually exclusive by any means. Instead, they each require both muscle groups applied in the right mix--and understanding how they are distinct makes managers better leaders and leaders better managers. And in going from an engineer to a CEO, it’s become much clearer to me how they differ:

Think Differently
When you start a new company—or even a major initiative within an existing company—you have zero momentum. In fact, you will likely even face obstacles designed to impede your creation of anything. To build momentum takes leadership. You need to be bolder, more vocal, and more compelling than anyone else to speak over the naysayers, to inspire your team, to do great things and get your business rolling in the right direction.

It’s not hard to understand why engineering as a functional area lends itself to management rather than leadership when it comes to growing a successful company. Startups often hire a vice president of engineering when they already have some kind of product roadmap, customer pipeline, or revenue machine in place. You likely don’t want your engineering team to radically alter direction—instead you want them executing against the plan that’s been laid out. This is exactly why few heads of engineering are considered amazing leaders.

To be a great company leader, you must be able to radically alter the momentum of a situation—and of course, be in a position to do so. Think of Abraham Lincoln taking over the presidency of a United States rumbling quickly toward secession and a divided country. Think of Steve Jobs coming back into Apple when it was weeks away from bankruptcy. Think of JFK’s 1961 address to Congress pledging to put a man to the moon. Talk about radical!

These folks changed the course of history. And I’d argue that most of us entrepreneurs have equally profound visions when it comes to building our own companies. That’s because in building a startup, a strong (often ridiculously ambitious) vision is often the difference between success and failure.

While good management can amplify momentum and bad management can slow it down, only leadership can change its course. If you are tweaking, optimizing, and tuning processes, you might be a phenomenal manager, but you’re not leading. You also won’t see radical change come about.

**What’s Your Story?**

Communication is hard—really hard. No wonder there's a shortage of great communicators in the marketplace today—particularly at the executive level. Management communication is different than leadership communication—and it's important to know the difference.

Management communication is a lot like engineering: logical and precise. You say what you mean and mean what you say. Just as good product code is delivered without errors or omissions, a good manager delivers information, clearly, crisply, and in a timely manner, often focusing on the details instead of the larger picture. And that allows people to use the logical part of their brain to work on the right things, make the right decisions, and keep things humming along.

On the other hand, leadership communication is about connecting with people at an emotional level. Done well, it hits people in the gut and makes them think. It makes them believe they can do something—even something crazy—and that they can win against all odds. Mel Gibson's inspiring *Braveheart* monologue [3] is a great, albeit somewhat corny, example of this.

I’ve found that the best leaders use stories to communicate. Over the course of history, poignant stories, whether about tradition, legend, or religion, have kept families and cultures connected for centuries. And if you've spent time with a young child, you notice they think in terms of narrative far earlier than they think in terms of logic.

When we first raised money for Okta, our original slide deck had a bunch of great figures and details, all presented clearly and logically, but the narrative was missing. The response we got over and over again from potential investors was, “Just tell us your story. What is Okta about?” Financials aside, investors just wanted to feel in their gut that we could create momentum and build a successful company.

The next time you present to a large group—or have a one-on-one conversation with an employee—think about
whether the goal is to manage or lead. If you want radical change, you need to lead. And if you're trying to lead, you need to tell a story. You need to inspire. If your slides have endless bullet points and are filled with "eye charts" and figures, you are managing, not leading. And probably boring folks too.

**Culture: It’s Not As Easy As It Looks**

Everyone knows culture is critical to a company's success. Think Google. What is less obvious is that leadership has to consciously create that very culture. When we first started Okta, we tried to "manage" culture. We wrote down our company values, we often reiterated them in meetings and thought long and hard about how we could build a company culture that reflected them.

And while all of that is well and good, over the past three years, I’ve found that what really matters in creating company culture is how I conduct myself. Every day. All the time. It comes down to which actions and attitudes that I validate and reward, and which behavior I discourage, as well as the kind of people I choose to hire. In a lot of ways it’s like raising a family--you have to instill the right values in your children, you can’t just tell them what to do. While management responsibilities can be delegated, leadership cannot, nor can company culture. At the end of the day, it’s about building a team of talented people, developing a culture that expects and rewards excellence, and giving them room to perform to their potential.

I’m an engineer at heart--it’s just how I’m wired--and even with three years under my belt as CEO, it’s still a challenge to approach each day with this “leader” mindset. I learn something new every day and continue to flex that leadership muscle, upping the reps day in and day out. Above all, I’ve learned that it’s an ongoing transition, with new lessons each week, and I imagine that’s what any good leader experiences.

Next time I see Marc, I’ll be sure to ask him.

_Todd McKinnon is CEO of Okta [4]. Follow him at @ToddMcKinnon [5]._

_Image: Flickr user David Matter [6]_

**Links:**
[5] https://twitter.com/#!/toddmckinnon