Conversation Arc 3: Motivation for Entrepreneurship

Founder Alignment Conversation User Guide

Objective

Distinguish desire to build a company from desire for impact or recognition. Arc 3 assesses whether an individual is motivated by the work of entrepreneurship itself, not just the outcomes entrepreneurship can produce.

Core prompts:

“Why a company, specifically?”

“What does entrepreneurship give you that licensing wouldn’t?”

“If this technology were licensed tomorrow and widely adopted, how would you feel?”

Deepening questions:

“What parts of a startup most excites and worries you?”

“Do you enjoy building teams and navigating uncertainty?”

What to Look For:

Reminder: Red, yellow, green is not a grade (i.e., red does not mean failure) and the facilitator should focus on patterns and overall sentiment.

Green Signals (Motivation is grounded in the work itself)

- Gets animated discussing customer discovery, hiring, operational challenges
- Interested in learning through iteration, not just achieving outcomes
- Can articulate what entrepreneurship offers that other paths don't

- Motivated by building something that works, not just proving something can work
- Talks about enjoying "messy" or "ambiguous" work
- External validation (recognition, awards, status) is nice but not the driver
- Frames success in terms of learning and capability-building

Yellow Signals (Motivation is mixed or outcome-focused)

- Primary motivation is impact; building company is instrumental
- Excited about outcomes but less clear on day-to-day work
- Describes entrepreneurship in terms of what it will prove to others
- Recognition and validation are significant motivators
- Sees company-building as necessary but not inherently interesting
- Would be equally satisfied with licensing if impact were guaranteed

Red Signals (Motivation may not sustain startup demands)

- Cannot articulate benefits of company-building
- Entrepreneurship valued for status, recognition, or proving doubters wrong
- No interest in operational work (customers, hiring, finance)
- Would prefer licensing but "everyone says startups are better"
- Discusses entrepreneurship only in terms of exit or acquisition
- Motivation depends entirely on external reinforcement

Decision Aid Questions

After Arc 3, ask yourself:

1. Is their motivation intrinsic to building or extrinsic to outcomes?

- Intrinsic: Can sustain through slow progress and setbacks
- Extrinsic: May lose steam when validation is sparse

2. Would licensing satisfy their actual goals?

- If yes: Why are we discussing a spinout?
- If no: What does spinout uniquely enable?

3. What happens if progress is invisible for 12-18 months?

- Still engaged: Motivation is durable
- Loses interest: May need faster feedback loops (partnership, licensing)

4. Are they motivated by the work or the narrative?

- The work: Can handle operational grind
- The narrative: Risk of disillusionment when reality diverges from story