Episode Three Transcript

Engineering a Better Harvest: Adam Stager's Pivot from Defense Tech to Clean Agriculture

00:06
SPEAKER 1:
The entrepreneurial journey is rarely straightforward. It's unpredictable.

00:11
SPEAKER 2:
Challenging.

00:12
SPEAKER 3:
Collaborative.

00:14
SPEAKER 4:
Risky.

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SPEAKER 5:
Transformative.

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SPEAKER 6:
And often deeply personal.

00:19
SPEAKER 1:
The VentureWell Voices Podcast offers an inside look at the changemakers, using science and technology to solve the world's greatest challenges. Hear their stories of the messy, meaningful path from idea to impact.

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Christina Tamer: Welcome to VentureWell Voices. I'm your host, Christina Tamer. And today we're talking about science and tech entrepreneurship and strawberries. So it's peak summer right now where I am, and we're eating lots of strawberries in our house.

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Christina Tamer: And I've been using that as an opportunity to teach my five-year-old daughter about where our food comes from and how it's grown. And in my line of work, I naturally start to think about technology and sustainability. And, as many of you know, conventional strawberry growing relies heavily on chemical pesticides to protect those crops, which comes with some health and environmental concerns.

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Christina Tamer: Happily, I know a startup that's working on this head-on TRIC Robotics is helping farmers reduce pesticide use and boost yields using a combination of robotic automation and UV light treatment. Today I'm joined by Adam Stager, the CEO and co-founder of TRIC Robotics based in California. Welcome Adam.

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: Thanks. It's a pleasure to be here.

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Christina Tamer: Yeah, I'm happy to have you here. You know, we've known each other since we were just talking about, since I was pregnant with my daughter, so almost six years. And you started this back in 2017, if I remember correctly, you were Phd. Student candidate in mechanical engineering at the University of Delaware. Tell us what life was like. Back then, when you were 1st getting started on this.

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: Yeah, yeah, for sure. Yeah, I think I've always been an entrepreneur in the sense that I was always inventing stuff. And I think back then, I was inventing a lot of things that I thought were really cool.

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: But they weren't really adding a lot of value for other people in the world. So I was kind of tinkering a lot, and I think it was fun pitching all kinds of ideas. But that was really just me getting started with entrepreneurship, and I was lucky that there was a program at the University of Delaware. That kind of helped me steer myself into a direction where I could focus and help a lot of people.

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Christina Tamer: Yeah, you started out doing, you know, a mechanical engineering innovation. And you didn't. You don't come from an Ag background, right? Like this was purely a mechanical engineering focus, right?

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: Yeah, our funding is back. Then a lot of the funding was Department of Defense-related. So it was actually military funding for building small robots that could do like recon, and things like that, so totally, totally different direction.

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Christina Tamer: Yeah. And this story, this pivot is sort of legendary in the, you know, the National Science Foundation I-Corps™ Community. This is a classic pivot of you had a technology looking for a solution or a problem it could solve. And you had a hypothesis, and that hypothesis turned out to be pretty wrong, you pivoted. So tell me about that story about where you started, and then how you got into Ag.

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: Yeah, I'm so grateful that these kinds of programs exist. And I think that a lot of the technologists and scientists would be would gain a lot from going through programs like that because they pressure you in all of the right ways to start a company and get your head out of the science. And so back. Then we were building these small robots, like I said, for the Department of Defense, and I was looking for a great way to make it into a product that we could market and

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: and solve some kind of problem in the world. And we ended up starting with SWAT teams after figuring out, like, where could we take that small robot and make it useful? Saving lives seemed like a really noble thing to do, and

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: through Icorp. We talked to a hundred different police departments, and drove all around the country, focusing mostly on the East Coast to start, and we found that it was a no-go, which is something that's pretty humbling.

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Christina Tamer: Yeah, this is a great example of like a no-go is not no, go forever. Right? You can change. You can pivot. You can go into another market. So how did you then

identify the agriculture opportunity and get your foot in the door for doing customer discovery?

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: Well, we didn't give up after the program. We very much continued a lot of the learnings. We just kept talking to everyone we could about the things that we were trying to solve with SWAT teams, some of the recon-type stuff. And we had the idea of small robots. So we had this concept, but we kind of diverged away from the robot and started talking to people more generally, and I think that unlocked in our minds like new markets. And now, looking back.

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: Agriculture seems like such an obvious fit for automation, and I think it kind of was the perfect direction to go. There's a lot of structure in the environment. You're helping all of these people. I mean, basically, everybody you're making an impact on. So it's, it's really for an entrepreneur. I think it's an amazing place to be starting a company. And from a business perspective, one thing we learned is, it's important that you have a business that can make sense over the

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: long-term, something that can really snowball. And we were doing one-off sales originally with the SWAT team robots, and that was really hard business to get going.

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: But in agriculture, there's this recurring, a lot of recurring expenses for these farmers. So as soon as we kind of learned about. Ag, wow, this would be an amazing place where my skill sets could be valuable and where we can have an amazing business. So, yeah, I think you just need to keep a super open mind. That's the key to finding an amazing problem.

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Christina Tamer: Yeah, you unlocked something that was scalable. Right? So with the SWAT teams, the one-offs, you know, you can sell something once. That's one sort of challenge. But the real key to running a larger business or a scalable business is finding where you can have those repeatable sales based on a hypothesis or of a value proposition. That's true for many, not just one, right? So, like doing a 1 off sale is kind of just like consulting. But you unlocked something that could scale.

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Christina Tamer: And I remember you found a USDA scientist or some research that showed that the UV light was effective at preventing pests, and then what you did was combine it with the robotics. Innovation. Can you tell me a little bit about that merging of technologies and how you uniquely got it set up to work in a field?

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: Well, we didn't know much about Ag when we started. So we actually took a very similar approach to what we did with I core, and we literally drove around to farm stands and started talking to farmers about some of the problems they had. And we also, in parallel, were talking to some scientists because we didn't know what innovation would be able to help solve some of the problems, or if it would be innovation at all, maybe it was just some kind of organizational thing, something simple.

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: So we kept a really open mind. But we ended up finding the perfect pairing that also used a lot of our skill sets. So the scientists that we ended up meeting was working at the USDA for 10 years on this really amazing innovation that uses light to replace chemical pesticides, and a few of the things that we heard from the farmers.

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: especially in specialty crops. They don't tend to make new chemicals for specialty crops. So the farmers were dealing with a lot of uncertainty with their sprays. So they were spraying a lot of chemicals and weren't getting very effective

control. They were also seeing a lot of regulatory pressure, and the labor was also one of the biggest challenges that the farmer was facing.

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: So it seemed like we could solve the bring UV light to the field problem using automation so that we can get the right dose. Basically, too much light will burn the plants, and too little won't get control. So perfect use case for that. And that technology, combined with automation, can solve these three big problems. We kept hearing from farmers.

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Christina Tamer: Can you share? Summarize the 3 big problems you were hearing.

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: Yeah, it was the resistance to these chemicals, so consistently doing these sprays, but not getting good control regulatory. I think it's a good thing that we're really being considered about the chemicals that we do spray. But because of that, a lot of these chemicals that they have had in the past aren't accessible anymore to them. And then on the labor side, not only is it hard to find labor, but the labor cost is continuing to increase, which is making it really difficult for these farmers to make a profit.

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Christina Tamer: And you did a lot of work from Delaware to begin the understanding of the ag market. But then there was a key moment, right when you moved out to California. And I think that was in 2021 or so. And I remember you were, you know, driving back and forth between the central Valley and, I think, San Francisco. Can you share a little bit about how you then really began to go from customer discovery to earning your customers' trust to eventually sales?

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: Yeah, for sure. I think that's a really important point for an entrepreneur. When you're just thinking about a technology and trying to figure out how to make a business, to actually talking to the customers.

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: We were really lucky because the USDA scientists had spent 30 years in this market, so they were able to give us access to a couple of people who are willing to give it a shot.

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: And I had a couple amazing students that were at the University of Delaware at the time, who are now Co. Founders with me of the company, and one of them was willing to take a whole semester off and come out to California and live out there for 8 months while we built trust with these customers, and initially, the farmers said, it is a big problem for me. I need a solution. I don't see one coming. I'm willing to give it a shot, but it's really risky

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: If I don't spray my chemicals here and get any kind of control. Then this could wipe out my whole field. Imagine this pest proliferating through the whole field.

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: So they gave us like half-acre plots, and because we were able to raise some money from the NSF. And the USDA. That gave us a little bit of runway to really get going. So we were able to move out there and spend that time with the farmers. It takes time with this technology to show the value, so unlike some things, like, for example, weeding. If you develop something that does a weeding

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: task on the field, you could see if it did it right away. But for pest and disease control, there's a lot of uncertainty about the amount of pest pressure you're going to get one season to the next season from different plots even.

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: And we were very lucky, because on one of our plots, the farmer really took that leap of faith with us.

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: and they agreed to pay if it was working, and the reason we were lucky was one of the plots was on a hill.

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: And there was a visible line where the robot stopped and we were talking to the farmer like, Okay, like, I think this is starting to work. Would you be willing to pay and like how much you know. How much do you spend today? And just having that honest conversation with them?

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: I think that was Super key. And as we're having that conversation. The farmers looking up the hill, and the line is clear. He's like, Oh, my God! It's working! And we had these little robots that we had built. And he's like, How much can you do? And that was where we were like, okay, this is, we've got something that could really start to scale. And it was really important from that point on, to really talk to the farmer about how to make the business work, not just

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: to solve their problem, but also to build a scalable business for us. And those insights have been

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: absolutely essential on how we build the product from there.

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Christina Tamer: Yeah, they had to see it to believe it. And honestly, I think they had to see you like in person, like, I know, you spent a ton of time in person building trust, you know, on the phone, like, I know, you were on like a texting basis with some of your customers, so I don't want to understate how important that was, how much effort that took. You always have to be where your customers are. But you. You moved across the country to make that happen. So that was huge.

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: We lived on the farm. We didn't even have an office for the 1st year and a half or so. It was like in the dirt. The farmer would leave the farm, and they worked long hours. They would leave the farm, and we were there, and then they'd get there in the morning. We're still there, and they're like, did you even go home? And sometimes the answer was, No, we didn't, so I think they really appreciated the hustle, and the way that we treated their farm like it was our farm.

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Christina Tamer: Yeah, that's great. I think if there's anyone listening to this, you know, you have really exemplified what it means to live with your customers, work with your customers, really understand a day in the life that I think was really critical to your success. And you know now you've just raised your seed round to 5.5 million, led by version one ventures, which is huge congratulations. By the way.

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: Thanks.

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Christina Tamer: So what got you to that point? What's your impact to date that unlocked that seed round for you? And what's next with that round.

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: Well, since that time when we were on half-acre plots, we've seen the farmers continuously scaling up every season, and now we've got to the point where we're doing full farms. I mean, this is a commercial product. We've got 9 tractor-sized robots. So, not these little tiny golf cart-size robots, but these huge tractors, and we built them in a way where the economics really make a lot of sense.

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: And I think now, investors have really seen Ag tech as a place where you want economics that can scale today, you know, solving problems of today for the farmers, not necessarily problems that are like 5 years out from a solution, but something that the farmer can have value in, and that they can sell a commercial product through. So I think that really the mindset of

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: Building a business that has really strong economics has helped us when we were talking to investors.

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: And I think it's really that the big idea here is that we're building a foundation that we can scale a lot of other automation tasks on top of. So this robot that we're launching now, we affectionately call it Luna, that is currently doing pest and disease control.

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: And it's because the farmer is willing to pay for that today, we're able to scale this fleet of robots on the farm in a way that the farmer is willing to invite those robots there. Now we're learning even more from the farmers on the next things that we can do to help them, and that's going to make this company incredibly valuable, not just for the farmer, but also monetarily.

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Christina Tamer: Yeah, this is just the beginning, right? It's really remarkable to hear you talk about it in this way, because right when we met, you were looking for what problem you could solve, how you could solve it. Very technology-focused. And you're still an expert in the technology. And even more so now, but thinking very much about the operations, the viability of the company. I remember we were talking about some operational considerations around, like just the safety of operating the vehicle and staffing it. So you've come a long way.

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: Yeah, I think a lot of it is because we've increased our team and brought some amazing people on board, because as you start to build a company. There's so much to do. It's it's not like the technology is just one little piece of building a company that's adding value for customers and for us, because we're a service business. We actually provide this treatment as a service to them.

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: We have an entire Ops team that really knows the farm. They know all the little nuances to how operations are scheduled, and we work with the farmer kind of like part of their team. So it's the technology team which is continuously innovating on the platform that we have, making it perform better and better in the fields while our Ops team is really focused on just having a really strong finger on the pulse with the farmer and making sure that we're doing the best job we can with them.

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Christina Tamer: And so we've we've talked a little bit about. You know the round and how you built your team and advanced the technology and the vision. But can we go back for a second to just the impact on the strawberries and the yield and the pesticide use? What's that? What have those results been.

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: The results have been incredible. We got really lucky again. I mean, there's a lot of luck in starting a company. And one of the things was that we didn't

know if all these results would translate to the field, and 3 of the biggest pests that they have in strawberries are 2 spuds, spider mites, mites in general, powdery mildew, and botrytis.

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: And we've seen strong results on all of these, with UV light in the fields, in real open fields at commercial scale. So now we've already done well over a thousand acres with our robots. What I'm really excited about is the concept of strawberries, which have been at the top of the list on the dirty dozen, which is a list of the highest pesticide residue crops.

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: I just dream of the day when they're not even on the list at all anymore. And I think that's gonna be amazing for the market, because a lot of people don't eat strawberries because they're afraid of the chemical use. We can reduce the chemical use by as much as 70% on these farms.

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Christina Tamer: Yeah, you are making a very tangible difference in something that's kind of a household-level problem, like a lot of people are tracking and are aware of the dirty dozen, as you said, not eating strawberries because of that concern. So this is making a very tangible difference, and there's a huge market opportunity for you. I'm very excited to see where you end up.

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: Yeah, I'm excited for the farmers, the community, and people that can join our team. I think we've got all 3 of those things. There's a lot of value we can add, for people on the farming side make them much more profitable for all the time they put into growing our food. On the team side, it's a really exciting technology. And then, just everyday people could have food that has less chemicals on them. And ideally, if we can do everything right. I'd love for that food to be higher quality and less expensive.

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Christina Tamer: Yeah.

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Christina Tamer: Yeah. And I just think about, you know all it took for you to get to this point like you're you're at the beginning of your impact. Really, right? Like this is just the beginning, which is very exciting. And it took a while to get here. And it was hard one right? It wasn't necessarily easy. I don't want to characterize your experience for you, but you might recall we talk about stress tests in the aspire program. So those inevitable, really stressful kind of unpredictable things that come up.

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Christina Tamer: Was there anything that happened to you that you'd be willing to share in your journey that was totally out of the blue that you know almost derailed you.

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: Oh, yeah, those things were. Those things were brutal back then, like just thinking through how your company could get impacted, I think a lot of them actually focused on team like investors like IP concerns.

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: And we've we've managed to dodge all of those we've got. Incredible investors are super well aligned our team. Culturally, everybody's on board to bring this technology out there. But one thing that we have experienced is on the vendor side, because we're a hard tech company. So we've got these really big machines.

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: And sometimes you order something, and it's supposed to come in 2 weeks and you need it to come in 2 weeks for the robot to get out there on the farm. It's really important that it gets out there on time because of the seasonality of it.

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: and sometimes the vendor calls you back a week before it's supposed to show up, and says it's gonna be a month out, and those kind of things

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: feel like a stress test because it's super critical for our relationship with the customer to get that product out there. And we've been able to kind of negotiate with these vendors and talk with them about how to solve these problems. Sometimes we had to swap a component out, even to make it make the deadlines.

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: But we've, I think, what we've done and what the stress tests help us to is just think through the options, not just take someone's word as like gospel kind of it's it's just them thinking that there's only one solution and a lot of times if you talk with them. And really not even just negotiate, but just have an open conversation

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: about other alternatives. Usually there is a solution that can solve your problem so definitely as an entrepreneur. You have to keep an open mind in pretty much all aspects, and we've had a lot of with that.

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Christina Tamer: Yeah, some scenario planning some, you know. If this, then that planning, and I think with hard tech, a lot of times we think about the challenges like of the building right there. You know, in the lab or on site, in the shop. But that's assuming everything is that you need is there. So

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Christina Tamer: management is a huge skill.

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: Definitely definitely. And and we've met a lot of people along the way who've helped us because we also didn't know how to build giant tractors. And we've worked with some incredible manufacturers who've had 30 plus years of experience building equipment like this. So we've got lots of people we can call now for advice which has been super helpful. I think network is one of the most important parts about starting a company.

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Christina Tamer: Yes, I remember when you 1st got in touch with one of your manufacturing partners, and that seemed to be really impactful. It's good to, you know, bring in different types of expertise, you know. Strategic partnerships are complicated, but can be very beneficial when done well. So, what is something that you wish you had learned about sooner when it comes to entrepreneurship?

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: I think. Well, there's probably a lot of things. But one thing that comes to mind is as a founder. Sometimes you feel you kind of feel like you have to solve the problem alone. I don't know. Maybe you just don't.

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: You don't want to share some of the challenges, potentially. I think that's the wrong approach. You usually have a lot of people on your network, and this is something that we've done well. But I I think I could have even done better

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: and reach out, reach out to those people and say, Hey, I'm running into this challenge. Have you had any kind of experiences that are similar? And I think VentureWell actually did an amazing job preparing us for building a company. It helped us avoid tripping on our feet with some of these things, and I think now, as we're growing every time your company gets to the next level.

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: There's new things that you just didn't expect at all, and there's usually a new set of people that you've brought on in our case. It's our new investors. I think they're going to be super important as partners to help us build from here, and for me. It's now, I know, to ask the questions, and I think that could have helped us along the way even more.

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Christina Tamer: Yeah, those investors are going to be the people that you call when things are going well and when things are going very poorly. And you're very stressed out. So it's really important to have that relationship with them where you can just pick up the phone. And it sounds like you found that, which is great.

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00:22:38.920 --> 00:22:51.119
Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: Yeah, that's what investors should be. They shouldn't just be giving you money like you've been a very good advisor for us in the past. You should consider investors the same way, like an advisor.

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Christina Tamer: Exactly. Yeah. I always said that when you find the right investor, you should kind of get butterflies like be excited about their alignment in the vision for the company, and then just the way you kind of work together. So I hope that you have butterflies for your investors.

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: Yeah, absolutely. They're like friends. It's we're very fortunate.

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Christina Tamer: That's great. And so just to wrap it up here, what is something you do to take care of yourself?

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: I've been getting into hiking recently. And actually.

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: it's I think it's amazing to hiking is an amazing thing for entrepreneurs to do, because it gets you out there out of the office, into nature. It actually helps me think through some of the more complicated things with the company.

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: And I had an advisor when we were getting started that used to take me on hikes to talk about some strategic things with the company.

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Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: And I actually think that's like a really nice way to do something healthy and maybe bring the team out for a chat while we go on a hike. And there's a we're in the central coast here. San Luis Obispo is where we're headquartered, and there are a lot of incredible hikes around in the area, and there's a lot of nature to see, so it'd be kind of a shame to not be able to get out there and see these things.

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00:24:08.350 --> 00:24:33.890
Christina Tamer: Yeah, that walking and talking, so where you can just talk. And the other person, you're not necessarily looking at them, and you can't really see their reaction. But that is a great way to just get your stuff off your chest without the reaction that might cause you to go one way or another in your train of thought. That is like a very honest, active way to be able to communicate how you're feeling.

95
00:24:33.910 --> 00:24:48.240
Christina Tamer: Totally down for the hiking and strategy meetings while hiking. And it sounds like you're trying to bring that into your culture at TRIC Robotics. You're at the point now where you're building a larger team. I think you might have some open positions. You want to tell me a little bit about that.

96

00:24:48.530 --> 00:25:08.789
Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: Yeah, we're hiring. We're growing our team. And pretty much all the different directions from everything from the technical side on the automation engineering, manufacturing operations, and even people in the field that get to work with these robots directly, so definitely reach out. If this sounds like something exciting. We'd love to chat.

97
00:25:09.090 --> 00:25:24.329
Christina Tamer: Yeah, I mean San Luis Obispo hikes strawberries. It all sounds pretty appealing to me. Thank you very much. Adam, for joining the podcast. Today it's been a pleasure to catch up with you. I always enjoy our conversations, and I'm so excited to see where TRIC robotics goes next.

98
00:25:24.530 --> 00:25:26.330
Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: Thanks a lot. This was a lot of fun.

99
00:25:26.540 --> 00:25:27.687
Christina Tamer: Alright, thanks, Adam.

100
00:25:28.070 --> 00:25:28.870
Adam Stager - TRIC Robotics: Bye.