



Boston University Questrom School of Business

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How I Learned to Become a Business Leader and Why It Changed Everything

Blair Merlino's journey from BU's Questrom School of Business to becoming an entrepreneur, and the impactful lessons he has learned along the way.



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When Blair Merlino looks to his future as an entrepreneur and business leader, he always reflects on his past. Co-founder and CEO of 9point8 Collective—a Bozeman, Mont.-based growth-focused consultancy—Merlino realizes that he relies on valuable lessons from his education and career to help shape his future success.

After graduating college in 2007 with a degree in psychology, Merlino enrolled in the U.S. Army. He worked his way up to sergeant in Special Operations and was responsible, in part, for brokering relationships with native leadership wherever he and his team were stationed.

After six years, Merlino left the military in 2013 and made a big change: He enrolled at [Boston University's Questrom School of Business](#). "My decision to select Questrom started with my decision to go to business school altogether—it provided me an education in business disciplines that I'd never been exposed to previously and a network—professional and social—that would help me get placed in the civilian world," he says.

Following his graduation from Questrom, Merlino spent several years working in consulting and later as COO for a startup incubator and data company. At the end of 2022, he and a handful of partners set out on their own to start [9point8 Collective](#). "I didn't set out with a vision to be an entrepreneur," reflects Merlino, who is 37. "My partners and I saw a need in the market that we thought we could fill, and we do so in a way that works well for the companies we engage and for us ourselves."

The name "9point8" references the formula for acceleration due to gravity (9.8m/s²) and is "a callout to our commitment for achieving targets and outcomes over everything," Merlino says.

Distilling and clarifying objectives, and achieving outcomes are skills Merlino picked up in the military and honed at Questrom. Here, he shares three important lessons and how they've made him a better strategist, leader, and entrepreneur.



9point8 Collective co-founder Blair Merlino

Image credit: Boston University Questrom School of Business

1. Never waiver from your mission.

At Questrom, Merlino participated in the MBA program's Integrated Project, for which candidates develop a business plan. That plan includes a market assessment for business growth of a current enterprise and continues through corporate and competitive strategy up to an implementation plan for the enterprise, he explains.

"Overall, this project drove home the importance of keeping a holistic view of the market you are trying to play in" as well as the end goal you're aiming to achieve—no matter what obstacles turn up during the process.

"This is the item you hold clearly as your destination and do not waiver from," Merlino says. "This acts as your north star."

2. Act like a river.

There will usually be several strategies that allow you to compete successfully in your industry. It isn't always easy knowing which one will work best and when to pivot if necessary.

What should be constant, though, is your mindset as a leader. When describing 9point8's approach to business, Merlino says he imagines a river, always accelerating as water rushes downstream. "A river is going to get to the sea," Merlino says. "It may pass over obstacles, go around them, seep under them, carve out paths through them. It doesn't matter. It always achieves its end destination."

At Questrom, Merlino says he learned to always think in this way; Not when or if or how in his life that it would play a role, but rather to "always be paying attention to the finely-tuned balance between rigor and fluidity of path."

3. Keep it simple.

A river not only will it reach its destination, but it often takes the path of least resistance. Merlino says business owners should think similarly when developing workflows and execution plans.

"Only create processes that produce the results you desire." And always have an eye for streamlining, as processes have a way for running away from us, he says.

"Questrom focused me on only creating the minimum process required to achieve my desired results, and to hold discipline around exactly that for all of the operations I oversaw," Merlino continues. "That is what I brought to my career, and ultimately my own business with my partners at 9point8 Collective."

[Click here](#) to learn more about Boston University's Questrom School of Business and how its innovative programing is transforming the lives of students.