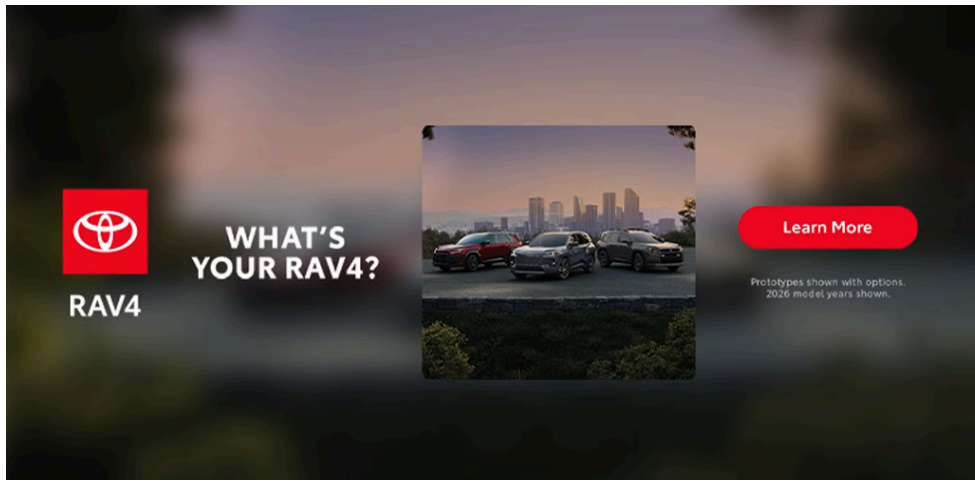




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What's This?

THE THIRD YEAR LEAPS, BUT NOBODY TALKS ABOUT THOSE FIRST TWO YEARS

But nothing meaningful begins with a leap. It begins with a seed.

By **JESSICA BILLINGSLEY**

APRIL 17, 2026

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We love the leap. We celebrate it, fund it and write headlines about it. The overnight success. The breakout founder. The technology that “suddenly” changes everything.

But nothing meaningful begins with a leap. It begins with a seed.

There’s an old saying where I’m from in the South of which my mother recently reminded me. In talking about a newer venture of mine, she said, “when you plant something, the first year it sleeps, the second year it creeps, and the third year it leaps.”

Year One: It Sleeps

This is where most ideas die — not because they’re wrong, but because they’re invisible.

You’re working. Thinking. Building. But there’s no external validation. No traction that translates into a story people want to tell. And hey, not all seeds sprout, no matter how much you water them.

From the outside, it looks like nothing is happening. This is where the mythology of entrepreneurship breaks down. We’ve been conditioned to expect progress we can see — metrics, momentum, something we can point to as proof.

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But the earliest stage doesn't give you that. It requires faith. The discipline to keep watering something that hasn't surfaced yet. To trust that with the right conditions, it will. I've lived this firsthand. Years ago, we were building products using machine learning — quietly, practically — long before anyone cared. Then almost overnight, AI became the headline, the mandate, the movement.

From the outside, it looked sudden. It wasn't. It was years of root-building finally breaking through. That's what the first year really is — building something beneath the surface, without validation, without visibility.

Just the belief that if you keep tending it, it will grow. Eventually.

Year Two: It Creeps

Then something shifts — but not enough to impress anyone. You get early signals. A few customers. A use case that works in a narrow lane. Maybe even a little revenue.

It's real. But it's not yet undeniable. This is the most deceptive phase of entrepreneurship because it feels like you should be further along. Close enough to success to see it, but not close enough to reach it.

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This is where bad decisions get made. Founders pivot too early. Investors lose patience. Teams chase momentum instead of building durability. But growth, like anything organic, is conditional.

Too much pressure, and you overwater it. Too little attention, and it dries out. The wrong environment, and it gets choked out before it has a chance to expand.

Markets don't adopt innovation on your timeline. They test it. Stress it. Ignore it. Revisit it. What looks like slow progress is often the market deciding whether your idea can actually survive outside of controlled conditions. Most things fail in the sleep phase. But even the ones that sprout aren't safe. They fail in the creep — when progress exists, but the conditions for growth aren't managed well enough to sustain it.

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Year Three: It Leaps

And then, suddenly, it works. The market moves. Adoption accelerates. Capital shows up. The narrative rewrites itself almost overnight. What looked uncertain becomes inevitable.

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We're watching that happen right now across AI, digital identity and computing infrastructure. Years of quiet iteration are now surfacing as rapid, visible change. But there's nothing sudden about it. The leap is just the first time the outside world catches up to what's already been built.

The leap doesn't create winners. It reveals the ones who kept tending what hadn't yet broken through.

The Cultural Lie of Speed

We've built a startup culture obsessed with acceleration and allergic to patience. We glorify founders as if they manufacture outcomes through brilliance alone. We reward visibility over substance. We ask how fast something is growing instead of how well it's built. But speed without foundation doesn't create durable companies. It creates fragile ones that break under the pressure of their own growth.

Growth doesn't fix weaknesses. It *amplifies* them. If your roots are shallow, the leap exposes it.

What Actually Builds Something That Lasts

Entrepreneurship is less about breakthrough moments and more about sustained, often invisible, execution. Showing up when there's no signal. Making decisions without full information. Continuing to build when the feedback loop is silent or inconsistent.

It's not glamorous. It's not particularly marketable. But it's the work. And it's consistent with every pattern we see in innovation cycles. Technology doesn't emerge fully formed. It compounds. It iterates. It waits for the right conditions — and then it moves fast.

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Entrepreneurs are no different.

Asking a Different Question

Most people approach entrepreneurship asking, "Is this working?" The better question is: "Which phase am I in?" Because if you misdiagnose the phase, you'll make the wrong move. You'll abandon something in the sleep phase that just needed time. You'll overcorrect in the creep phase when you should have stayed the course. Or, you'll be unprepared for the leap because you didn't build for scale while things were quiet.

Understanding the cycle doesn't make it easier. But it improves your odds of survival.

A Final Thought

The seed doesn't care about your expectations. It won't grow faster because you're impatient. It won't respond to pressure, urgency or external timelines. It responds to consistency and to conditions.

And not every seed will sprout. Some won't take. Some will break through, only to stall, never strong enough to sustain real growth. Not every idea has the right conditions. Not every environment can support what you're trying to build. That's part of the work.

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You plant more than one seed. You tend to them. You watch. And over time, you decide where to focus — where roots are taking hold, where growth is actually possible.

So plant it. Tend to it when it looks like nothing is happening. Stay when progress is slow. And when something does take — nurture it. Because if you've done that work, the leap will come. And you'll enjoy the greatest satisfaction of successful entrepreneurship — knowing you recognized what could grow, gave it what it needed and tended it through fruition.

IN THIS ARTICLE: **THIRD YEAR LEAPS**

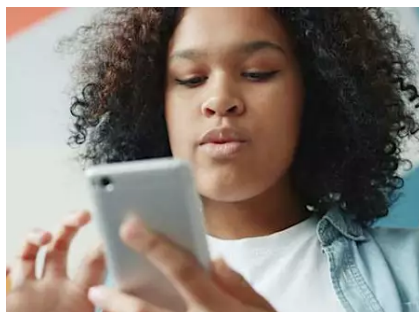
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