

IN PERSON

OUTSIDE THE BOX

# Venture capital's people person

## CHRIS LYNCH SETS 'UNREALISTIC GOALS' AND LETS HIS TEAMS OF TALENT DO THE REST

Growing up in Yonkers, New York, Chris Lynch's dream was to be a bass player in a punk-rock band. That didn't happen. Instead, he became a rock star in the startup world. Known for his candid, straight-shooter nature and business acumen, Lynch is the former CEO of Billerica-based database software firm

**▶ CLOSER LOOK**

**CHRIS LYNCH**

**Title:** Investor at Cambridge-based venture firm Accomplice

**Age:** 52

**Town of residence:** Arlington

**Education:** Bachelor's degree in computer information systems, Suffolk University, 1985; master's degree in business administration, Bentley College, 1991

Vertica Systems and an investor at Cambridge-based venture firm Accomplice. His portfolio companies include startups in the cybersecurity, big data and digital-infrastructure markets. In a recent interview with BBJ Technology Editor Sara Castellanos, Lynch talked about

why failure is important in entrepreneurship, how he sold Vertica Systems to Hewlett-Packard Co., and why he doesn't want his five children to treat him like he's superhuman.

**Can you name a few ways you helped turn Vertica Systems around and lead it to a \$400 million acquisition by HP?** We re-messaged the company. The company's message was very scientific and technical, and I'm sort of a technical simpleton, so in my life as a consumer and a business person I try to break everything down to:

Why do people buy (the product?) ... Is it going to make you money or save you money? If it's not going to do one of those things and you can't clearly articulate how what you do translates into one of those things, then



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it's esoteric. We created this message around the fact that (Vertica Systems' product) was a real-time database that would help improve your bottom line. Those marketing changes were a big piece of it, and the company also had a leadership void. They were basically a company that never heard an idea they didn't like, so they were pursuing all these things. In my experience with startups, you have to be mad about one mission. What's the one thing you do better than anyone else on the planet? If you do more than that, you're going to fail, and most startups do fail. I don't know any startups that succeed by trying to do more than one thing.

**What lessons did you learn during your time at Vertica Systems?** It validated lessons that I've come to learn through my experience as an entrepreneur. Be decisive, don't be afraid to make decisions, and if you make the wrong decision, correct it swiftly. That's really what we did there. It wasn't any rocket science. (Vertica Systems co-founder Michael

Stonebraker) and those guys did the rocket science, but they missed the basic details of running the business. We just went in and quickly made changes and fixed an asset that was there.

**As a venture capitalist, what do you look for in a potential startup to invest in?** I over-index on the people, because I think great people, special people, can figure out anything. What makes somebody special? They have to be reasonably intelligent, but more importantly they have to have heart, soul and balls. They have to be courageous because at the end of the day most things fail and they have to be undaunted by that. They can't be people that are doing it for money. They have to do it because they have a passion for it and they believe in their team and the mission they're on. Then I look at whether it's a market I'm interested in. Is it big? And is it ripe for disruption? I'm not spending a lot of time digging into their tech because that's not what I do.

**Has that investment strategy paid off?** If I'm being honest, it's too early to say because I've been doing it for three years and the time horizon is longer than that – it takes about seven to 10 years to build a quality company. That said, my mission is to never have a deal fail, which isn't realistic but I always set unrealistic goals for myself. But the reason I do that is because there are people behind every deal. I don't look at it as a spreadsheet, like I need a \$1 billion deal and I can have 100 deals fail, because those are 99 people that I care about. Anyone I'm investing in I believe in and care about, so my mission is not to have any deal fail. I've had deals that we didn't continue to fund, but I've helped them get sold and the entrepreneurs have made money and I'm proud of that.

**What lesson do you hope to impart to your five children?** Be happy, be good. One of the challenges of the American Dream is that it mandates that your kids do better than you. But I think it's hard for kids who have parents that have any sort of professional success, because even if you're not applying that pressure on them, someone is, or they are themselves. I try to get them to be themselves and I'm transparent about my own weaknesses because I don't want them to view me as some superhuman that they can't live up to. I want them to be better than me, but being better than me isn't about being more professionally successful or making any more money or any of that crap. It's about being a good brother, sister, friend, husband or wife, and being a good person, and figuring out what makes you happy.

**What books are you reading right now?** I only read comic books. I think that if you read all these business books, then everybody just does the same things, so I just read comic books and I learn a lot from those.

**LESSONS LEARNED**

### What are you most proud of in your business?



**MIKE MULRENAN**  
PROEX PHYSICAL THERAPY

Our clinical training. Health care reform is forcing providers to achieve better outcomes at a lower cost and this will require extensive clinical training, which all our therapists get through our collaboration with BU and its Fellowship program."



**MARIE PEELER**  
PEELER ASSOCIATES

I'm most proud that we have been making a difference in the lives of leaders and their organizations, by coaching leaders to develop their ability to lead competently, courageously and authentically for the last 10 years.



**SARAH RUSSO**  
SARAHBELLUM LLC

Since launching my Dirty Water show, which is about relationships and the dating scene, I've been especially proud of some of the great guests I've been able to bring on the show – Alicia Quarles of e! News and Corri Fettman (The Love Laywer) are a few. There have been many. It's fun to keep the conversations lively!