

Why Lifeguards Make the Best Founders and CEOs

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Lifeguarding provides early lessons in decision-making under pressure, leadership, risk assessment, adaptability, and crisis management.

This paper presents the results of a pilot study that explores the impact of ocean lifeguarding on leadership and entrepreneurial development. The setting for our research was the Wildwood Crest Beach Patrol in Wildwood Crest, New Jersey (WCBP), where one of the authors (Robert) served as a lifeguard during high school and college and was re-certified in 2024.

By focusing on a single organization, our work aims to generate initial insights, test survey design, and assess the feasibility of broader research across other high-stakes environments critical in professional domains such as venture capital, entrepreneurship, and management. The goal is to understand how early exposure to autonomous, high-pressure decision-making influences long-term leadership development, professional adaptability, and entrepreneurial capacity. Survey data and qualitative insights from former and current lifeguards provide an initial assessment of the transferable skills developed in lifeguarding and their long-term impact on career trajectories (Gompers et al., 2016; Zhang, 2007).

Background and Context

My 25-year career (Robert's) in asset management included roles across institutional sales, private markets, and investment research, which provided a unique lens through which I approached this study. Managing multi-billion-dollar portfolios and evaluating investment strategies around the world required a deep understanding of risk assessment, decision-making under uncertainty, and the ability to act decisively with

limited information—skills that closely mirror what was required of me as a lifeguard.

Over my professional career, I developed strategies for institutional investing, often making rapid, high-stakes decisions based on incomplete data. My work at emerging boutique asset managers as well as large, established investment organizations, required assessing risk tolerance and adaptability, key qualities found in both successful investors and lifeguards navigating unpredictable ocean conditions. These parallels between financial markets and high-stakes environments led me to question how early experiences such as lifeguarding shape an individual's ability to lead and make sound decisions under pressure.

Additionally, my experience teaching early-stage venture capital at Drexel University has reinforced the importance of resilience, adaptability, and independent thinking—traits essential in both entrepreneurship and lifeguarding. Through my courses on venture investment, I mentor students in evaluating business opportunities, understanding founder psychology, and navigating uncertainty in competitive markets. By co-developing Drexel's Innovation Fund course work and guiding students through due diligence on venture-backed startups, I have seen firsthand how decision-making frameworks parallel the split-second judgment required in lifeguarding.

This combination of academic and professional experience led me to explore a key research question: If venture capitalists prioritize entrepreneurs who excel in uncertainty, make strategic risk assessments, and demonstrate strong character, could formative experiences like lifeguarding serve as an early training ground for developing these critical qualities?

Lifeguarding as a 'Leadership Accelerator'



My return to the Wildwood Crest Beach Patrol in summer 2024, after more than two decades away from the beach, was not only a personal reconnection but also an opportunity to explore how this environment cultivates leadership skills that extend into professional and entrepreneurial success. My goal was to immerse myself in an environment that demands leadership, decision-making, and adaptability under pressure.

Sitting on the stand alone for the first time in years, I felt the same nervous anticipation as any rookie. The ocean stretched before me, a "wilderness of water," as poet Langston Hughes described it—unpredictable as ever. The responsibility of guarding lives came rushing back—but so did the realization that lifeguarding is more than just a summer job. It's a high-stakes training ground for skills essential to leadership, entrepreneurship, and high-performance teamwork – a leadership accelerator.

This led me to another important question: How does ocean lifeguarding shape young professionals' ability to navigate uncertainty, make quick decisions, and take ownership of challenges? In fields like entrepreneurship and venture capital, success often hinges on the ability to operate in ambiguity, assess risk, and act decisively with limited information—skills honed daily on the beach.

Through this research, survey data, and personal observations, we explored how lifeguarding develops critical leadership traits that extend far beyond the shoreline and why these insights should inform how we assess and cultivate future business leaders.

What We Studied

To better understand how lifeguarding shapes leadership, decision-making, and professional development, we conducted a survey of current and former WCBP lifeguards. The goal was to explore the entrepreneurial mindset, leadership experiences, and cognitive skills developed on the beach.

Using a mixed-methods approach, we surveyed 119 current and former Wildwood Crest Beach Patrol (WCBP) members, collecting both quantitative data and qualitative reflections through open-ended questions and structured interviews. The survey covered multiple aspects, including:

- Demographic and educational background

- Years of experience in lifeguarding
- Self-reported impact of lifeguarding on decision-making, leadership, and adaptability
- Qualitative reflections on the most valuable skills gained from lifeguarding

Respondents ranged in age from 15 to over 60, with the largest cohort (28.6%) aged 60 and older. Most respondents had at least a bachelor's degree (41.2%), 28.6% held a master's degree, and 8.4% had a doctoral or professional degree. On average, they worked 3.36 summers as lifeguards, with some serving only a single season and others returning year after year. The study also included qualitative responses through open-ended survey questions and structured interviews to capture nuanced perspectives.

What We Found

The survey results suggest that lifeguarding significantly shapes leadership, risk assessment, and resilience. Beyond technical skills, lifeguarding cultivates fundamental character strengths, such as courage, perseverance, teamwork, and integrity—traits that align with Peterson and Seligman's (2004) classification of virtues essential for leadership and professional success.

In high-pressure environments, lifeguards must exercise prudence and judgment, remain calm under stress, and demonstrate social intelligence in communicating effectively with both teammates and the public. These findings reinforce the argument that character-driven leadership, rather than just technical proficiency, is a key predictor of long-term success in entrepreneurship and venture capital.

80.7% of respondents reported that lifeguarding significantly impacted their ability to take risks, lead, and adapt to uncertainty, showcasing their courage and resilience in the face of danger.

61% cited their first experience sitting solo on the stand as the most challenging moment, reinforcing the role of independent decision-making in skill development. This transition forces independent risk assessment and decision-making, mirroring the reality of leadership and entrepreneurship, where uncertainty and limited oversight demand calm, decisive action (Andreoli & Rouwelaar, 2023; Brandstätter, 2011). Just as lifeguards must evaluate ocean conditions and make split-second decisions without immediate oversight,

founders and CEOs must navigate ambiguity, assess risks, and act with conviction in volatile markets (Kerr et al., 2019). One respondent noted, "This moment is terrifying—but necessary. You learn that no one is coming to make the decision for you."

59% likened managing their beach area to running a small business, pointing to the real-time problem-solving, ownership, and resourcefulness required on the stand. While managing a beach is not identical to building a startup, the sense of autonomy, accountability, and situational awareness mirrors key elements of the entrepreneurial mindset (Sarasvathy, 2001).

59% reported that working without cell phones improved focus, problem-solving, and situational awareness—key traits for leadership in high-stakes environments (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991). The modern workplace is dominated by digital distractions, with the average American checking their phone about 96 times per day, and spending more than 5 hours a day on it (Flynn, 2023). Lifeguards, however, work entire shifts without a phone, forcing them to develop deep situational awareness, strengthen face-to-face communication skills, and manage stress in real time (Isaak et al., 2024; Mooradian et al., 2016). A respondent commented, "It's freeing, actually. You don't realize how much phones pull you out of the present moment until you don't have one for eight hours."

Key Skills Acquired

In open-ended responses, our respondents talked about how lifeguarding helped them develop several skills that are critical to business success.

Decision-Making Under Pressure: Lifeguards consistently develop the ability to assess risk and make split-second decisions in unpredictable conditions. Respondents described this experience as "poise under pressure," "being proactive over reactive," and "patience and quick decision-making" (Zhao & Seibert, 2006).

Leadership and Communication: Lifeguards operate in teams, enforce policies, and manage high-stakes situations requiring clear and assertive communication. Many highlighted "teamwork," "communication skills," and "the ability to speak to anyone and have a productive conversation" (Colombo et al., 2021).

Resilience and Grit: Lifeguarding fosters mental toughness and perseverance, as lifeguards must remain vigilant and physically prepared for emergencies. Responses included "perseverance, grit, and team building" and "through hard work, anything is possible" (Gompers et al., 2016).

Adaptability and Crisis Management: Lifeguards are trained to handle rapidly changing ocean conditions and dynamic social interactions, skills essential in entrepreneurial and leadership roles. One respondent noted, "Being prepared and flexible enough to change course should conditions change." Another added, "How an organization can have a huge impact on a town and be the reason that the tourists continue to come back to Wildwood Crest beaches."

Takeaways

These findings suggest that lifeguarding is a formative experience for individuals who later pursue leadership and entrepreneurial careers. Here are some takeaways for businesses, their investors, and the institutions that train future business owners and leaders.

Investors Should Value Founders Who've Been Lifeguards

The ability to operate under uncertainty, assess risk independently, and take decisive action mirrors the traits sought by venture capitalists when evaluating founders and business leaders. Research highlights that venture capitalists prioritize founders who demonstrate resilience, self-reliance, and high-risk tolerance, as these traits predict long-term success (Gompers et al., 2016; Zhao et al., 2010). Our insights suggest that investors refine due diligence criteria by emphasizing founders' abilities to make autonomous, high-stakes decisions under uncertain conditions—skills that often separate high-performing entrepreneurs from those who struggle without constant guidance (Colombo et al., 2021; Kerr et al., 2019).

Minimize Digital Distractions at Startups

The absence of digital distractions in lifeguarding highlights the benefits of deep work and cognitive endurance, which are becoming increasingly important in modern professional environments. The ability to sustain focus and make clear, high-stakes decisions under pressure is a critical indicator of long-term success in leadership and venture scaling (Mooradian et al., 2016; Isaak et al., 2024). Research has shown

that attention control plays a crucial role in complex, real-world tasks, with individuals who can maintain deep focus demonstrating superior decision-making and performance under pressure (Draheim et al., 2022).

Integrate High Stakes Training Into Professional Development

Organizations should consider incorporating elements of high-stakes decision-making training, such as lifeguarding, into their professional development programs. Simulated scenarios that require quick thinking, risk assessment, and leadership under pressure can help cultivate resilience and adaptability among employees.

Emphasize Teamwork and Communication Skills

The ability to communicate effectively, resolve conflicts, and work collaboratively emerged as crucial skills developed through lifeguarding experiences. Lifeguards must make quick, clear decisions under pressure, often managing high-stakes situations that require de-escalation and conflict resolution with the public, teammates, and authority figures. Businesses should prioritize team-building exercises, communication workshops, and conflict resolution training to empower employees to engage in productive dialogue, foster teamwork, and navigate challenging interpersonal dynamics. These skills are particularly valuable in industries where collaboration and high-pressure decision-making are essential to success.

Support Risk-Taking and Innovation

Encouraging a culture that supports calculated risk-taking can enhance innovation. Organizations can create environments where employees feel safe expressing ideas, experimenting, and learning from failures, mirroring the decision-making environment lifeguards experience. Psychologically safe (Newman et al., 2017) and supportive environments can nurture an entrepreneurial mindset and potentially lead to groundbreaking initiatives.

Install Former Lifeguards as Mentors

Organizations consider pairing newcomers with professionals who have had lifeguarding experiences. Such mentors can share insights about resilience, leadership, and adaptability, thereby reinforcing these critical skills in future leaders. This model can be particularly valuable in venture capital incubators and

accelerators, where founders must develop the ability to make decisive, high-pressure decisions while navigating uncertainty—paralleling the autonomy and risk assessment lifeguards face in the ocean.

Develop a Structured Leadership Pipeline

The skills developed through lifeguarding—such as decision-making under pressure, resilience, and adaptability—should inform business recruitment and retention strategies. Junior lifeguarding programs (ages 7-13) and the Futures Lifeguarding program (ages 14-15) serve as models for companies looking to build structured leadership pipelines, fostering talent from an early stage. These programs instill confidence, teamwork, and responsibility long before participants officially enter the workforce. Businesses can adopt similar “farm systems” by creating early exposure programs, mentorship tracks, and progressive leadership training that cultivate future leaders, ensuring a strong, adaptable talent pool while enhancing long-term employee engagement and retention.

Simulate Lifeguarding in Educational Curricula

Educational institutions might benefit from integrating experiential learning opportunities like those found in lifeguarding into their curricula. Programs emphasizing adaptability, crisis management, and leadership can better prepare students for uncertain and dynamic career paths, equipping them with the tools needed to succeed in various fields. This approach is particularly valuable in venture capital due diligence training, where investors must rapidly assess risk, navigate ambiguity, and make high-stakes decisions with limited information—skills honed in high-pressure environments like lifeguarding.

Ideas for Future Research

These findings establish a foundation for future research contributing to literature on entrepreneurial mindset formation and venture capital decision-making. This study highlights how early, high-pressure experiences—such as ocean lifeguarding—cultivate the ability to navigate uncertainty, assess risk, and make autonomous decisions, traits critical for both entrepreneurs and investment professionals.

Our research demonstrates that lifeguarding fosters crucial leadership and decision-making skills applicable in entrepreneurial and professional settings.

Independent decision-making under pressure predicts entrepreneurial success (Zhang, 2007; Andreoli & Rouwelaar, 2023), while an ownership mentality and leadership autonomy align with VCs' emphasis on founder-driven execution (Gompers et al., 2019). Future research can further refine these insights to inform leadership training programs and investment decision-making criteria within the venture capital industry.

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