



Inspirational Black Men In Tech: Dr Steven Williams of TriValley Plastic Surgery On The Five Things You Need To Know In Order To Create A Very Successful Tech Company

Jamie Hemmings | February 16, 2022



*As a part of my series about “Lessons From Inspirational Black Men In Tech”, I had the pleasure of interviewing Board-Certified Plastic & Reconstructive Surgeon, **Dr. Steven Williams**.*

Board-certified plastic & reconstructive surgeon, Dr. Steven Williams is the Vice President of The American Society of Plastic Surgeons (ASPS), founder of Tri Valley Medical Plastic Surgery in San Francisco, and a pioneer for the greater agendas of the plastic surgery realm. Ivy League educated; Dr. Williams has become one of the most sought-after plastic surgeons. He not only occupies leadership roles at the local, state and national level, but he is also frequently called upon for his expertise, having been seen on “Good Morning America,” “ABC News,” Allure and Byrdie, among several others. With an ethical approach, Dr. Williams takes great interest in social issues related to plastic surgery, access to care for those needing cosmetic reconstructive surgery, and giving a voice to African American patients. He not only formed the committee for diversity and inclusion within ASPS, but also plays an active role on the organization’s committee for technology and innovation.

Thank you so much for joining us in this interview series! Before we dive in, our readers would love to learn a bit more about you. Can you tell us a story about what brought you to this specific career path?

My father became a doctor mid-career. He started out as a scientist working for the space program. So very early on I had exposure to medicine. Growing up and through college I thought about law aerospace but I kept coming back to medicine. In medical school I was exposed to plastic surgery at Yale and I really identified with the talent, dedication and change that those surgeons were able to make in people's lives and that was it for me — I knew that's what I was going to do.

Becoming a doctor in America can be very expensive. Before I started college at Dartmouth, I started a tech company primarily creating websites for the US government, Wang computers, the United Way, and major sports venues. When I started medical school at Yale University, I pivoted the technology to service patients by starting an EMR (electronic medical record) customized to manage medical visible light images.

Currently, I practice as a board-certified plastic surgeon in Northern California. I bring that technology viewpoint to my practice and my patients. Additionally, I am in the leadership of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons (ASPS), specifically pursuing technology as a solution both domestically and internationally for our 10,000 physician members. I've been honored to be slated as president elect of this organization.

Can you share the most interesting story that happened to you since you began at your company?

It's been a long road. There are many stories about technology and coding late at night and many stories about studying medicine into the wee hours. However, one of my favorite stories comes from residency. The training between medical school and being a practicing physician is always a challenging time, particularly in the old days before protections for residents in terms of work hours.

That time was one of the most intense in my life. But usually, the best stories are the ones that give you the best introspection. I remember a specific surgical case. I was working with a young attending as a surgical resident and we had a patient who suffered a devastating injury to his arms after falling into a commercial mixing machine. The patient faced the real possibility of amputating his arms and living the rest of his life with that disability.

My attending came up with a plan to salvage his arms involving very sophisticated surgical techniques that managed the injuries of bone, muscle, nerve and soft tissue coverage. We took the patient from the emergency department to the operating room and got started.

I'll spare you the technical details but the operation itself took 26 hours. During those 26 hours, Dr. Narayan and I took a total of two 15-minute breaks. That's a total of 30 minutes away from the patient for a 26-hour surgery for each of us. It was incredible and at the end of the procedure everything had gone well.

I remember thinking of how powerful I felt in that moment because of the absolute mental and physical tour de force I had just performed. Dr. Narayan told me I did a good job and to go round on the patients and then go home and sleep for 12 hours.

And I did. I was spent.

When I came back to the hospital, I discovered that Dr. Narayan had run his normal clinic that day. And then, unbelievably, had operated that night again on another emergency patient.

And that moment was one of the biggest self-realizations I had had. It was a moment where I realized that there was always something more. And that achievements and things that bring you personal satisfaction are valuable, but they never should serve as the definition of what your potential can be.

People still talk about that case at Yale to this very day.



Can you share a story about the funniest mistake you made when you were first starting? Can you tell us what lesson you learned from that?

I remember once, as a medical student, accidentally walking into an operating room fully clothed and the look of shock and dismay from the nurses and from the surgeon. And then I remember the yelling.

Can you tell us a story about the hard times that you faced when you first started your journey? Did you ever consider giving up? Where did you get the drive to continue even though things were so hard?

There were lots of hard times. There are still lots of hard times. And I think that's an important message. The journey is going to be hard — it's supposed to be a little hard. I remember nights of driving down to the server room and salvaging a crash server. This is before the days of AWS. I remember the late nights with patients in the operating room when tired was down to your bones.

I think that the most important thing to remember about the hard times as they get you ready for the good and they are a necessary part of success. I think in the modern era when people set their standards by social media perfection it's easy to forget that.

None of us are able to achieve success without some help along the way. Is there a particular person who you are grateful towards who helped get you to where you are? Can you share a story about that?

There are so many people that I've been so critical to my success. Obviously, my parents, my family and the teachers and instructors that have helped me throughout my life. While it's impossible to name one singular person, in medicine the person that moved my medical career forward was John Persing who was the chair of plastic surgery at Yale University. He saw something in me and decided to take a chance.

I was the first black plastic surgery resident Yale ever admitted.

Can you please give us your favorite “Life Lesson Quote”? Can you share how that was relevant to you in your life?

I don't really have one. I try to take inspiration from the moments and people around me but try not to dwell on any particular saying.

Ok super. Thank you for all that. Let's now shift to the main focus of our interview. The United States is currently facing a very important self-reckoning about race, diversity, equality and inclusion. This is of course a huge topic. But briefly, can you share your view on how this crisis inexorably evolved to the boiling point that it's at now?

Well, that's a complicated discussion. Race equality and diversity have been a flashpoint subject for America since its inception. While I generally think that the issues are new, I do think that there is less acceptance of the slow rate of change than before. And that's a good thing. I also think that there has been a siloing of people's opinions and their interactions with others. Part of that is due to technology and the Internet. This prevents us from sharing and interacting as much as we probably should be.

This may be obvious to you, but it will be helpful to spell this out. Can you articulate to our readers a few reasons why it is so important for a business or organization to have a diverse executive team?

Diversity is a moral imperative. Sometimes businesses don't pay attention to moral imperatives. So, it's important to recognize that diversity is also a pathway to business survival and growth. In order to be prepared for changing customer demographics or changing needs within a product line or within a corporate structure, diversity provides the best chance of finding solutions that will move a company forward. It also exposes a company to be able to recruit from the largest possible pool of talent.

Let's zoom out a bit and talk in more broad terms. It's hard to be satisfied with the status quo regarding Black Men in Tech leadership. What specific changes do you think are needed to change the status quo?

Recognition of yourself and others is important. I think for us to make any kind of progress we need more people in leadership positions that reflect the increasing diversity in America. It's important to recognize that while things are slowly improving there is a massive amount left to do. Communicating to the younger generation is a critical step in making things better. And a key part of that communication is providing role models for that generation to emulate and to improve upon.

We'd now love to learn a bit about your company. What is the pain point that your company is helping to address?

I spend my time serving two corporations. One is my private practice plastic surgery group in Northern California, Tri Valley Plastic Surgery. We principally provide reconstructive and cosmetic surgery to our patient population. We endeavor daily to make each surgery safer, easier, more accessible and more affordable for our patients. We also endeavor to maximize patient education.

The rest of my time is spent helping to lead the American Society of Plastic Surgeons. Our mission is to support the members in efforts to provide the highest quality patient care and maintain professional and ethical standards through education research and the advocacy of Socio economic and other professional activities.

What do you think makes your company stand out? Can you share a story?

We are one of the top performing plastic surgery practices in terms of patient safety, procedure innovation and growth. We participated in several technology initiatives gathering information to improve safety for procedures like gluteal fat transfer and breast implant safety.

The ASPS is a recognized leader in the plastic surgery realm. There are so many — a leading academic journal, education resources, advocacy at state and federal levels, retention of board-certified plastic surgery members (94% of all US board certified plastic surgeons are members of ASPS) — the list goes on.

Are you working on any exciting new projects now? How do you think that will help people?

At our practice we're working on some facial recognition technology combined with artificial intelligence to help track muscle movement both for reconstructive and cosmetic patients.

At ASPS we have some really exciting technology developing new educational tools. These technology investments pay dividends as we help to support a whole new generation of plastic surgeons. We are hoping that this technology will be used in other specialties as well.

What would you advise to another tech leader who initially went through years of successive growth, but has now reached a standstill. From your experience do you have any general advice about how to boost growth or sales and "restart their engines"?

Living in the Bay Area I am exposed to technology entrepreneurs every day. I think the tech space has evolved from what it looked like in the 90s. That evolution means that tech continues to solve the problems that are put before it, but that tech must also bear some responsibility and be governed by a social contract with the industry and users it serves. This is particularly important in medicine as we can't utilize design and create technology that doesn't put patient safety first. As new and old tech leaders strive to build their companies and build their products it's important to think about those responsibilities as part of the product and make sure those elements are baked in.

Do you have any advice about how companies can create very high performing sales teams?

I think it's important that every part of any organization shares a culture. This is true of the leadership team, the sales team, and the development teams. That shared culture will provide for consistent responses to challenges as they become apparent.

In your specific industry what methods have you found to be most effective in order to find and attract the right customers? Can you share any stories or examples?

For the private practice plastic surgeon, social media has transformed how a practice grows and interacts with its patients. It's the way that the modern patient seeks information and communicates with the practice.

Based on your experience, can you share 3 or 4 strategies to give your customers the best possible user experience and customer service?

For the medical practice, the strategy is to be present and available for your patients. As the practice gets larger its technology that answers that problem. We use tools that allow us to communicate with our patients in a secure fashion. And we use algorithms to focus on the things that patients want to know about.

For the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, the challenge is even bigger, as ASPS serves patients and member physicians domestically and internationally both in academia and private practice. This means creating solutions that support a diverse variety of plastic surgeons in all parts of the world. The ASPS uses technology to create educational tools, tools for communication, and platforms that support patient advocacy and the furtherance of plastic surgery.

As you likely know, this HBR article demonstrates that studies have shown that retaining customers can be far more lucrative than finding new ones. Do you use any specific initiatives to limit customer attrition or customer churn? Can you share some of your advice from your experience about how to limit customer churn?

Both in my practice and at ASPS, clients, patients and colleagues — they all want to see return on investment. They want to understand the value that you bring. Part of establishing a bilateral communication includes understanding the needs of your client, patient or colleague and understanding the best way to show them the return on investment.

Here is the main question of our discussion. Based on your experience and success, what are the five most important things one should know in order to create a very successful tech company? Please share a story or an example for each.

1. A good idea isn't enough.

The tech landscape is littered with great ideas. As tech innovators we always seize on that blue sky moment when a good idea materializes. The truth is the next big thing requires a perfect storm of talent, market preparation, technology, innovation, resiliency, inspiration and a little bit of luck. Great tech can maybe survive missing one or two of those — but not more.

2. Diversity and inclusion only comes about through active effort.

The path forward involves maximizing experience, talent, resources and perspectives. It is almost impossible to name an industry where this doesn't apply. As such, it is important to recognize that through a myriad of reasons and pressures that lack of active effort towards diversity means less diverse solutions. Diversity requires active engagement and energy to achieve.

3. You usually don't get more than one pivot.

Each iteration of an idea is never perfect. The pivot has become the go-to answer when something fails. And it's smart — it's part of resiliency to have a backup plan and to be able to adapt. But it's also important to recognize that the pivot has a cost. It costs time, resources and the faith that the team and the customers have put in the company.

4. Team is important.

Sine Qua Non

5. Listen to the end user,

Sine Qua Non even more

Wonderful. We are nearly done. Here are the final “meaty” questions of our discussion. You are a person of enormous influence. If you could inspire a movement that would bring the most amount of good to the most amount of people, what would that be? You never know what your idea can trigger. :-)

I think we need to use technology to deliver medicine more effectively. Part of that is patient education. Part of that is actual patient care. Technology has the amazing quality of scaling faster than anything else. Healthcare is a problem that demands scalability.

We are very blessed that very prominent leaders read this column. Is there a person in the world, or in the US with whom you would love to have a private breakfast or lunch with, and why? He or she might just see this if we tag them :-)

There are tons of business and political leaders I would love to have lunch with. But when it comes to the intersection of technology and medicine there's no doubt that Apple will be in the forefront. So, it would have to be Tim Cook.

Thank you so much for this. This was very inspirational, and we wish you only continued success!

<https://medium.com/authority-magazine/inspirational-black-men-in-tech-dr-steven-williams-of-trivalley-plastic-surgery-on-the-five-things-ac290c982f8>