

IN
PURSUIT
OF
STORIES OF
AMBITION AND
ACHIEVEMENT
SUCCESS



**LIVE
AMBITIOUSLY**

▽
OUR
RALLYING
CRY

Ambition and financial opportunity connect at CNBC.

AMBITION: A strong desire to do or achieve something, typically requiring determination and hard work.

OPPORTUNITY: A set of circumstances that makes it possible to do something. A favorable juncture of circumstances.





INTRODUCTION

KC Sullivan | President, CNBC

For the past 35 years at CNBC, we've dedicated ourselves to providing the financial news, information, and educational tools necessary to inspire and empower the next generation of business leaders and investors.

The essential beliefs, characteristics, and habits shared by the real business owners spotlighted in this book illuminate what it really takes for entrepreneurs to find success in the modern economy.

After reading these inspiring stories, we hope you're empowered to pursue success and live ambitiously.



FOREWARD

Dan Colarusso | Senior Vice President, Business News, CNBC

Many of us have had the feeling of wanting more from our work. Not more wealth, per se, but more satisfaction, more independence, more passion and more security. Often that means starting a business or investing in a way that goes against conventional wisdom.

The personal essays we've collected for this special edition book, *In Pursuit of Success: Stories of Ambition and Achievement*, tell the stories of how great ideas, deep determination and a willingness to fail propelled the careers of trailblazers who now stand out as role models. Did some of them get lucky? Sure. But each had a plan or a purpose that put them in a position to succeed when the luck happened.

One of my favorite pieces of wisdom comes from Branch Rickey, the baseball executive who signed Jackie Robinson to break the Major League's color barrier: "Luck is the residue of design."

We hope this collection will give you the inspiration and ideas to design the luck you're seeking.



▽

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THEIR
STORIES
WILL
INSPIRE YOU

TOYIN AJAYI



Dr. Toyin Ajayi is a Board-certified Family Medicine physician and CEO of Cityblock, a value-based healthcare provider for Medicaid and dually eligible beneficiaries. She previously served as Chief Medical Officer of Commonwealth Care Alliance. Dr. Ajayi serves on the Board of Directors of Evolent Health and is a co-founder of Coalition Partners. She's an Aspen Institute Henry Crown Fellow and was named to TIME100 Next in 2023.

Cityblock was named a CNBC Disruptor 50 company in 2021, 2022, and 2023. Dr. Ajayi was featured in *When Women Lead*, authored by Julia Boorstin.



MY STORY

One of the things I deeply value from my entrepreneurial journey is learning alongside so many impressive leaders who are passionate about improving health care for historically marginalized populations. As we scale our business at Cityblock, we're laser focused on our mission and ask every single person to be "all in," knowing the power of the collective whole to maximize our impact.

Growing up in Kenya during the AIDS epidemic, I saw my parents' advocacy around health care and social initiatives and learned the importance of staying agile and adapting to change. I saw firsthand the clear structural biases and stigmas that exist for so many in health care; I also saw many health care professionals working to provide care within a system that was broken. I knew then that I wanted to be a part of a solution that would provide high-quality care to populations that were left behind by reasons beyond their control, whether it be income, socioeconomic status or even where they were born.

MY 3 STEPS TO SUCCESS

STAY AGILE, EMBRACE CHANGE: In health care specifically, we're constantly facing new developments in terms of public policy and new aspects of the regulatory environments within which we operate and the populations we serve. As leaders, we must stay flexible and adapt our business to best serve our members and maximize health outcomes.

SHOW, NOT JUST TELL: Earlier this year, we announced the publication of our second annual Equity in Action Report, which is one way we showcase the steps we've taken toward accomplishing our mission. We still have a long way to go, but we see this as a bigger effort to prove our model works for the Medicaid and dually-eligible populations. The more we can do to illustrate impact, the stronger the case becomes to invest in this space, beyond Cityblock.

PEOPLE ARE YOUR BRAND: Each one of our team members embodies our mission when they show up every day and convey our values in their work with our members. At Cityblock, this shared goal drives us to push for bolder policies that will explicitly address and elevate quality, access and the overall health care experience for marginalized populations. Only then will we truly disrupt health care for the better.

PATTY ARVIELO



Patty Arvielo is Co-founder and Co-CEO of New American Funding (NAF), a Latina-owned mortgage company. She manages the company's operations and sales, overseeing over 200 locations and nearly 4,000 employees nationwide. She also created the Latino Focus and NAF Dream initiatives, which focus on increasing homeownership among the Hispanic and Black communities. Patty has more than 40 years of experience in the mortgage industry.

Patty was featured in CNBC NEXT in 2018.



MY STORY

As a first-generation Hispanic American, I quickly learned the value of money. I spent much of my childhood with my grandmother in Tijuana, where I witnessed poverty firsthand. We played on dirt streets, and her house didn't even have a bathroom. I knew our middle-class life in the U.S. was better, and I wanted more.

I realized that money could be a measure of freedom and a means to take care of my family. I started working at age 12. By 16, I stumbled into financial services. I soon learned that the mortgage industry allowed me to emulate others and rise. My natural strengths, hard work and communication, drove early success. I later experienced hardship that led me to entrepreneurship—not to build wealth, but for the freedom to be a single mother of two.

There was no roadmap. But that time gave me the greatest asset in my career and life: my husband and partner Rick Arvielo. He saw what I couldn't see in myself: that I'd acquired many skills and could build and lead our own company. After many years of feeling "lucky," I realized that I was very talented and smart. Overcoming imposter syndrome allowed me to believe in myself and become a respected leader of one of the nation's largest independent mortgage companies.

MY 3 STEPS TO SUCCESS

WILL IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN SKILL:

Being the child of an immigrant, I learned the value of hard work very early. We knew that it was much more about will than skill. I know that education is important, but I've seen lots of educated people who didn't have the will to do the job. You can teach skill. You can't teach will.

GIVING IS MUCH BETTER THAN RECEIVING:

My greatest joys come from giving and helping others. I was lucky enough to meet several leaders early in my career who served as mentors for many years. I wouldn't be where I am today without them. That's why I have long believed in the power and importance of mentorship. I want to help others find their way like I did, help them avoid the mistakes I made, lift them up, and let them know that they're never alone.

FEAR IS YOUR FRIEND; LET IT DRIVE YOU:

My career was built on fear and making mistakes. Joining the financial services industry at 16, moving to mortgages a few years later, becoming a top-producing loan officer, starting my own company two decades ago and growing it into one of the top mortgage companies in the country were all the result of taking chances. You won't succeed at every turn, but don't let fear stand in your way. Fail early, win later. That's my philosophy.

JOSHUA AVIV



Joshua Aviv is Founder and CEO of SparkCharge, which procures, operates, delivers, and maintains electric vehicle (EV) charging infrastructure. He is also a certified data scientist. Joshua has ten years of experience in the cleantech and automotive OEM industries. He has raised over \$50 million to advance EV charging infrastructure and clean initiatives nationwide. Joshua attended Syracuse University where he earned an M.S. in Information Management, CAS in Data Science, and B.A. in Economics.

Joshua was featured on CNBC Make It.



MY STORY

I've always been interested in the way the world moves, not just the automotive industry, but all aspects of transportation. Growing up, my grandfather worked in the airline logistics industry transporting cargo around the world. I knew I wanted to be at the forefront of transportation.

I embarked on my entrepreneurial journey at Syracuse University when I realized electric vehicles (EVs) were going to have a positive impact on the world. One of my professors said, "If you want to solve a problem for the world, solve the problem of the infrastructure for electric vehicles." Since that pivotal moment, SparkCharge has become more than a solution to a problem; it's a beacon of transformative change in the EV charging landscape.

I founded SparkCharge to create a mobile electric vehicle charging network. This network enables businesses to charge EVs anywhere, eliminating constraints imposed by traditional charging infrastructure.

My entrepreneurial journey has been marked by challenges and risks, from navigating the complexities of the EV industry to securing funding for a game-changing venture—including an appearance and deal on *Shark Tank*. Through it all the vision has stayed the same: to create a cleaner, more accessible future for EV charging infrastructure.

MY 3 STEPS TO SUCCESS

FOCUS ON SOLVING A PROBLEM: The world has millions of problems, and entrepreneurs have the opportunity to solve them. Your business should be more than just a means to an end; it should embody a cause that ignites your passion. When challenges arise, it's this deep-seated passion that fuels your resilience and keeps you steadfast on the entrepreneurial journey.

ADAPTABILITY AS A VIRTUE: Embrace change and cultivate adaptability as a core virtue. The business landscape is dynamic, and the ability to pivot, iterate and evolve is crucial for success. Stay open-minded, be willing to learn from setbacks and view challenges as opportunities for growth and innovation.

BUILD A STELLAR TEAM: Surround yourself with a diverse and talented team that shares your passion. No great business is built in isolation, and a collaborative team can turn obstacles into stepping stones.

MELISSA BRADLEY



Melissa L. Bradley is the Founder and Managing Partner of 1863 Ventures, a business development program that accelerates New Majority entrepreneurs from high potential to high growth. She is also a general partner of 1863 Venture Fund. She co-founded and sold Ureeka, where she now serves as a board member. She is also a member of the Small Business Administration's Investment Capital Advisory Committee. Melissa is currently a Professor of Practice at the McDonough School of Business at Georgetown University. She earned an MBA from American University and a B.Sc. in Finance from Georgetown.

Melissa was a featured speaker at CNBC's Small Business Playbook in December 2022.



MY STORY

Growing up, I was surrounded by wealth—not in my own family, but in the private high school I attended. For years, I could not figure out why they lived in mansions and I lived in a one-bedroom apartment. Eventually, I came to understand the systemic racism and historical legislative barriers that prohibited me from accessing the wealth I desired. I set out to find out how my friends’ families became wealthy, and almost all said “entrepreneurship.” I was hooked. I found the answer to my quest. I started a financial services company; fintech was not a thing in 1989 as a college graduate. I couldn’t imagine the Small Business Administration (SBA) denying me a loan because I was Black and I was a woman. Well, if you know me, you know I love a good challenge.

Looking back, I have sold two businesses, started several venture capital firms, and I now teach entrepreneurship at Georgetown University McDonough School of Business. As for the SBA, they have come a long way. I’m currently an Advisory Council Member on their Investment Capital Advisory Committee. My biggest lesson is never to judge a book by its cover. The ending may surprise you.

MY 3 STEPS TO SUCCESS

TRUST YOURSELF: Never let others tell you about yourself. You are the only person who knows yourself best. Trust your instincts and have faith in your decisions.

SURROUND YOURSELF WITH PILLOWS AND MIRRORS: We all need a pillow: someone who will support us no matter what and tell us all will be well. We also all need a mirror: someone who supports us but will challenge and push us to help us succeed. Choose carefully and have a healthy mix of both in your life.

BE READY FOR ANYTHING: During my career, I often entered a meeting with an intended outcome and left disappointed because I did not hear what I wanted. I had to make a change. I began entering every meeting by listening for opportunities coming to me instead of waiting for someone to give me what I needed. Sometimes, we need to know what we need or want. Be in listening mode and hear what the universe is offering; you may get a better deal than you expected.

JOHN HOPE BRYANT



John Hope Bryant is the Founder, Chairman, and CEO of Operation HOPE, Inc., a nonprofit organization that provides financial literacy and economic empowerment services in the U.S. He is also Chairman and CEO of Bryant Group Ventures, John Hope Bryant Holdings, and The Promise Homes Company, a for-profit, minority-controlled owner of institutional-quality, single-family residential rental homes in the U.S. John attended San Diego City College and received Honorary Doctorate degrees from Paul Quinn College and Alvernia University.

John Hope Bryant is a CNBC Contributor and member of the CNBC Global Financial Wellness Advisory Board.



MY STORY

Mentors represented a game-changing experience in my life. I didn't have generational wealth to lean on. I didn't have the benefit of wealthy or well-connected parents. I didn't have a scholarship to a prestigious college. None of these represented resources, assets or outlets to a young man with big and bold aspirations.

Outside of my mom, who gave me a sense of "yes I can," and my dad, who gave me "yes I am," it was from an unexpected encounter that I met my first role model for aspiration. When I was in fourth grade, a white banker walked into my South Central Los Angeles classroom and changed the trajectory of my life. He was dressed in a crisp suit and tie to teach a class on financial literacy. He looked like money. I asked him in all seriousness: what did he do for a living, and how did he get rich legally? He said he financed entrepreneurs. I didn't know what that meant, but I knew I wanted to be one.

Soon, thanks to my mother, I started selling candy and became so successful that I put the local liquor store out of the candy business. Everything I've been able to achieve, and persevere through, are rooted in those three simple words from my mother that gave me the confidence to believe that I—a little kid with big dreams from South Central Los Angeles—could be successful in whatever I wanted to accomplish.

MY 3 STEPS TO SUCCESS

RESILIENCY, RESILIENCY, RESILIENCY:

Success is going from failure to failure without a loss of enthusiasm. Thomas Edison once said, "I have not failed. I have only found 10,000 ways that didn't work." Stop being afraid to fail. Go for that dream. As my friend Tony Ressler says, "If you don't quit, you can't fail."

BUILD RELATIONAL CAPITAL: Too many people put their immediate needs ahead of a long-term strategy. Everyone is so focused on "help me," they never get to "how can I help you?" Approach the relationships in your life (personal and professional) from a place of what you can give, not what you can get. Listen twice as much as you speak. Everything in life is built on some form of capital, but the one that will serve you best is relational.

LISTEN WITHOUT BEING DEFENSIVE.

SPEAK WITHOUT BEING OFFENSIVE. AND ALWAYS LEAVE EVEN YOUR ADVERSARY WITH THEIR DIGNITY:

These words are the foundational essence of my mentor, the great civil rights icon and global leader Ambassador Andrew Young. They serve as a guidepost for my approach to life, to business, and in my interactions with everyone I encounter.

MARTIN CABRERA



Martin Cabrera, Jr. is the CEO and Founder of Cabrera Capital Markets and Cabrera Partners, which serve global corporations, pension funds, private equity firms, and municipalities. Cabrera Capital has underwritten over \$1.8 trillion in debt and equities and trades on average \$2.2 billion in securities per day. Martin serves on multiple local and national boards and is viewed as one of the country's top Latino leaders. Martin earned a B.S. in Finance from Northern Illinois University and studied at the London School of Economics.

Martin is a member of the CNBC Global Financial Wellness Advisory Board.



MY STORY

Growing up in the Little Village neighborhood on the southwest side of Chicago, we didn't talk about stocks and bonds at the kitchen table; we barely had enough money for food and rent.

As a kid, my passion revolved around sports and the thrill of competing. Whether it was football, baseball, basketball, or volleyball, I was determined to put in the hard work to be the best. My participation in sports fostered a strong work ethic, a competitive drive, grit and perseverance—the groundwork for my entrepreneurial success.

During my senior year of high school, my basketball coach and mentor Mr. Artese encouraged me to take his economics class. We participated in “The Stock Market Game,” a statewide school competition where teams invest \$100,000 of simulation money in the stock market. I fell in love with the markets and picking stocks, and I was driven by the challenge of making our investments grow. After winning second place, I realized that it did not matter what neighborhood we grew up in or what school we attended; we could compete and win.

That economics class changed the trajectory of my life, and at an early age, I had a clear vision and passion for the markets. I continue to channel that competitive drive into delivering financial solutions for my clients.

MY 3 STEPS TO SUCCESS

BE THE BEST AT WHAT YOU DO: There is no substitute for hard work. Invest the time and effort to refine your skillset to become well-known among your peers for your expertise. Be creative and resourceful for your clients so they can see the value that you bring to the table.

TAKE RISKS IN BUSINESS BUT NEVER FORGET TO LISTEN: You will need to take calculated risks in business, and some of those chances may result in failure. You have to get back up and persevere, and you must never, ever, ever give up. Be open to constructive criticism on how you can improve and be willing to pivot if the trends are telling you to move in a different direction.

HAVE THE RIGHT SUPPORT SYSTEM: When you surround yourself with individuals who want to see you thrive and succeed, they will guide you to better opportunities. Hiring people with integrity and the right skillset on your team will prepare you for growth and help you deal with tough times in business. Be good to your clients, employees and your community.

SANDRA CAMPOS



Sandra Campos is a two-time Founder, three-time CEO, and Board Member of companies in retail, consumer packaged goods, and tech. In 2020, she created Fashion Launchpad, an on-demand training platform for retail employees. She previously founded Mobi, a storage bag retailer, and Cynosure Holdings-ACH, a celebrity brand management company. Sandra is also the former CEO of Diane von Furstenberg. She has received multiple awards, including Top 100 Latina Leaders by *Latino Leaders Magazine* 2020-2023, ALPFA's Most Powerful Latina 2020-2023 and Top Woman in Retail. She earned a B.S. in Retail Management at Texas Tech University.

Sandra Campos is a CNBC Contributor.



MY STORY

After spending the first part of my career working my way up the corporate ladder and being responsible for hundreds of employees and more than \$1 billion in retail revenues, my personal life took a dramatic turn. My trajectory shifted from corporate heights to the unexplored realm of building an entrepreneurial venture.

At a time when there was a rapidly-evolving business landscape, I partnered with Tony Melillo to create Cynosure Holdings-ACH, the first celebrity brand management company, for a then-teenaged Selena Gomez. Within a year, we met 100 prospective partners across licensees, investors, manufacturers, sourcing agents and retailers, and were rejected 99 times.

That was 2009. E-commerce was revolutionizing every industry, digital brands were creating new business models going direct-to-consumer, and the influencer and creator economy had just begun. In spite of those initial rejections, the resulting product line, “Dream Out Loud,” became Selena Gomez’s first \$100 million lifestyle brand and was exclusive to Kmart for five years.

Ambition, persistence and endurance are just a few of the qualities required to be an entrepreneur; it’s the failures that help you the most in succeeding, because building a business is a marathon, not a sprint.

MY 3 STEPS TO SUCCESS

VISUALIZE SUCCESS: Craft a vision that extends beyond the immediate horizon and stay tenacious in pursuing it. Amid so many rejections, we held on to our belief in the potential of our venture, turning each setback into an opportunity for refinement.

UNDERSTAND YOUR MARKET AND SET A ROADMAP: In the era of Gen Z and Millennial consumers, knowing our target market was paramount. Our success hinged on a deep understanding of the cultural shifts and consumer behaviors among teens and tweens, ensuring our business was not just innovative but aligned with evolving trends.

HAVE ENDURANCE FOR GROWTH: Entrepreneurship is a journey fraught with challenges. Embrace resilience as a companion, learning from each pitch and rejection. In a world that may resist unconventional ideas, staying determined helped us navigate uncharted territories and secure pivotal partnerships.

JAY CHAUDHRY



Jay Chaudhry is the CEO, Chairman, and Founder of Zscaler, a cloud security company. Jay has 25 years of IT expertise in engineering, sales, marketing, and management. His work in the cybersecurity sector has made him a trusted advisor for many enterprise CEOs, CIOs, and CISOs. Jay received an MBA and Master's Degrees in Industrial Engineering and Electrical and Computer Engineering from the University of Cincinnati. He earned a B. Tech from the Indian Institute of Technology BHU Varanasi.

Jay is a member of the CNBC CEO Council.



MY STORY

I was born and raised in a small village at the foothills of the Himalayas in Northern India, without electricity or running water. Watching my small-scale farmer parents toil taught me several key values: hard work, honesty, and integrity. I also learned that you don't need material wealth to live a fulfilling life. This attitude has had a profound impact on my journey, and it's because of this that I haven't been afraid to take risks.

I had no background in entrepreneurship, but I was inspired by Netscape. I learned about the Internet, and that instilled in me a strong conviction to start an Internet security company. When I failed to raise venture capital funding, my wife and I quit our corporate jobs and put our life savings on the line to fund it. Our passion about the technology's potential and our appetite for risk made it a clear decision for us. SecureIT, our first startup, became a big success.

We established four more startups, which all became quite successful. Looking back, I owe the success to being comfortable with taking risks, daring to dream, building great teams, lots of hard work and a little bit of luck. My next big dream was to build a transformative cybersecurity company. Today, Zscaler is a public company that develops innovative technologies which allow us to securely access applications from anywhere, on any device.

MY 3 STEPS TO SUCCESS

FOLLOW YOUR PASSION AND TAKE RISKS:

Following your passion with conviction and having an appetite for risk fuel an inner desire to make things happen. Remember that significant achievements require stepping out of your comfort zone.

EMBRACE BIG DREAMS: Even a simple idea can turn into something big. Don't be afraid to dream big, and don't get sidetracked by challenges that will inevitably occur; rather, see those experiences as opportunities to learn and improve.

RECOGNIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF BUILDING

A GREAT TEAM: No company can thrive without the collective efforts of smart and talented individuals. No matter the size of the organization, make it a priority to foster a culture that values teamwork, open communication and accountability.

OMER DAVIDI



Omer Davidi is Co-founder and CEO of BeeHero. This company aims to fortify the global food supply by leveraging data-driven technology to deliver predictability and precision to pollination, thus enhancing the health and well-being of bees and other crucial pollinators. Before starting BeeHero, Omer worked as a computer specialist and held a mentorship role at the Israeli National Cyber Center. He also holds the 2008 national championship title in Israeli horse show jumping. Omer earned an M.S. and B.S. in Computer Science at Reichman University.

BeeHero was named a CNBC Disruptor 50 company in 2023.



MY STORY

As the CEO of a startup that monitors bee activity and provides precision pollination services to growers, it's tempting to say that my entire life led me to this point. Tempting...but not necessarily true. I have always loved technology, but most of my experience was in cyber. My transition from cybersecurity to food security was pure happenstance, starting when I met my close friend and co-founder, Itai Kanot—a second-generation commercial beekeeper. Itai exposed me to the fantastic world of this vital pollinator, and with our third co-founder Yuval Regev, we started monitoring bee hives as a student project. Today, this project has evolved into the world's largest provider of precision pollination.

One thing that unites Itai, Yuval and myself is our deep passion for sports. Yuval is a former member of the Israeli National Youth Soccer Team and won the Israeli CrossFit Games in 2019. Itai spent many years skydiving. I was once Israel's National Champion in horse show jumping. There's something all three of us developed in the long hours we spent on the field or at the gym: a passion for setting new goals and breaking them, while also knowing how to rise from failure and continue trying. When you're an entrepreneur, that's a remarkable ability to have—loving to win but being able to get back up on your feet when you don't.

MY 3 STEPS TO SUCCESS

CHOOSE THE RIGHT PEOPLE — AND LET THEM EXCEL!: It might sound cliché, but choosing the right people to do the job is probably the most important lesson for any CEO. At BeeHero, we couldn't work without a dream team. Though we only have about 70 team members, we operate on five continents and across seven different time zones. That means that there is maybe one hour a day when everyone is potentially awake. For the remaining 23 hours, our team members must be great and independent, which they are.

FORGE STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS WITH PURPOSE: I've found immense value in forging meaningful partnerships aligned with our mission. We collaborate with like-minded organizations and individuals—government agencies, international organizations, NGOs and other stakeholders. Our business is at the core of one of humanity's biggest challenges—lowering bee mortality while sustainably increasing productivity from our farms—so alliances based on shared values can significantly amplify the impact of our entrepreneurial journey.

BUILD A RESILIENT COMPANY: Resilience is non-negotiable for entrepreneurs. A resilient mindset helps you weather storms, pivot when needed and turn obstacles into stepping stones for success. Tenacity is key in the highs and lows of entrepreneurship.

BONAWYN EISON



Bonawyn Eison is the Chief Investment Officer and Founding Partner of Wynsource Partners, where he oversees the private investment portfolio. The firm specializes in real estate private equity, middle market private equity, and mezzanine financing. Bonawyn attended Stanford University where he played for the men's soccer team and earned a B.A. in Economics.

Bonawyn is a CNBC Contributor.



MY STORY

Like many ambitious college graduates, I embarked on my professional journey eager to make my mark and achieve financial abundance. The “grind,” as I saw it, was a necessary sacrifice to realize my desired outcome. I observed senior employees compete to land the largest accounts and most lucrative deals. I accepted this must be the best method to advance my career. Two decades later, I can only chuckle at how myopic my focus was.

Expanding my methods has bolstered my skillset and network immensely. While the largest accounts may have an outsized impact regarding profitability and notoriety, they often result in a narrow scope of work and the need to compete on price alone. Conversely, my engagement with more fringe institutions has allowed for a holistic understanding of those firms’ operations. This has given me perspective as to the many possible points of failure and provided a nuanced understanding of processes. The impact on these businesses—and the relationships forged as a result—are invaluable.

My willingness to expand my opportunity set has rewarded me monetarily and experientially. It has allowed me to better understand risks. It has helped me form professional partnerships with individuals and institutions that allow me to create value on terms aligned with my values and aspirations.

MY 3 STEPS TO SUCCESS

DEFINE WHAT A SUCCESSFUL OUTCOME IS BEFORE ENGAGING: We find ourselves constantly bombarded with images of what success looks like, whether that be via advertisements, social media or comparative analysis. These influences can lead us to veer off course and pursue outcomes that are misaligned with our core values and competencies. While we must allow for a certain amount of dynamism, it is imperative that we clearly define a successful outcome at the outset of our entrepreneurial journey.

CHOOSE THE RIGHT PARTNERS: As an entrepreneur, your natural disposition is likely defined by a “can do” attitude and comfort wearing many hats. While this can be particularly helpful in the early stages of ideation and implementation, you will inevitably reach a point where you need to scale. Choosing the right partners—ones who are accountable, adept, and possess skill sets complementary to your own—allows you to focus on your strengths, operate more efficiently and cover your blind spots.

BE CLEAR ABOUT WHERE YOU WANT TO COMPETE: In business, as in sports, the fiercest competitors are often lauded for their desire to win. And why not? Competition ultimately pushes us all forward. Nevertheless, it is critical that you define the arena in which you want to compete—ideally one in which you have identified a competitive advantage.

KAREN FINERMAN



Karen Finerman is Co-founder and CEO of Metropolitan Capital Advisors, a New York-based hedge fund. She is the author of *Finerman's Rules: Secrets I'd Only Tell My Daughters About Business and Life* and host of the podcast *How She Does It*. She also owns a stake in the Women's National Basketball Association. Karen is a board member of The Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson's Research and the Wharton Board of Advisors, her alma mater. She earned a B.S. in Finance at the Wharton School.

Karen is a CNBC Contributor and serves on the Changemakers Advisory Board.



MY STORY

Our mom didn't subscribe to the touchy-feely, everyone-wins-a-trophy parenting style. She truly believed that being only warm and loving to your children conveyed that you accepted them as they were, as opposed to putting forth the effort to make them better. She always let us know that we could—and should—reach for more: with our academics, sports interests and our ambitions. If you had asked my mother, “Would you rather your children be successful or happy?” she would have answered, without the slightest bit of hesitation, “Successful. How can you be happy if you're not?” I would need to succeed, and then I could possibly be happy.

My mom isn't here anymore, but she did get to see me both successful and happy. She would have said, “You see, I was right!”

MY 3 STEPS TO SUCCESS

GET OUT OF YOUR OWN WAY: We women do ourselves a great disservice by throwing self-made artificial roadblocks in our path, from our complex relationship with the concept of ambition to our resistance to standing out and wanting to be noticed. Speak up! I say that as if it was easy for me. It was not. But I did it anyway. I asked to be considered for a job I wasn't ready for and fortunately, someone gave me the chance. The rest was on me.

TAKE ASYMMETRIC RISKS: Asymmetric risk in investing describes a risk where the upside of one outcome (the reward) is much greater than the downside of the other outcome (the risk). I try to build a portfolio of asymmetric risks. But here is *the* most important thing: you *must* take risks to get anywhere. Whether it's to make money on an investment or to start a new endeavor, there is no such thing as a riskless investment. In fact, never taking risks is one of the riskiest things you can do.

ALWAYS TRY TO HAVE AT LEAST ONE PERSON WHO BELIEVES IN YOU:

Thanks, Mom.

MOWA HAILE



Mowa Haile is Founder and President of Sky Blue Builders, a construction company. He is also CEO of Apex Underground. Previously, Haile worked in various management roles in the tech sector. He was selected as Minority Business Person of the Year in 2012 and CEO of the Year finalist in 2015 by *Colorado Biz Magazine*. He serves on multiple local boards. He earned an MBA at the University of Phoenix and a B.A. in Political Science from Colorado State University.

Mowa is a Colorado entrepreneur. He is featured in The Daniels Fund Junior Achievement (JA) Dream Accelerator, a career exploration experience curated by JA Rocky Mountain. Denver & Boulder, Colorado were featured in CNBC's "Cities of Success."



MY STORY

I am inspired by greatness.

Immigrant. Black. No English. Trailer park. I had no chance, right? My parents prioritized education and reminded us that this is the land of opportunity, but we would have to work twice as hard. I didn't understand until I entered corporate America after college. I worked for two companies in my 13-year corporate career. The first company was the same old environment, but the second expected excellence from all of us and gave us the opportunity to learn about the overall business. That company gave me confidence to fulfill my entrepreneurial spirit.

36. Married. Two kids under six. A mortgage. 2009: middle of the Great Recession. The perfect formula to launch Sky Blue Builders with our life savings of \$50,000. But I am inspired by greatness. Steve Jobs. MLK. Gandhi. Lincoln. Musk. I wanted to bring good to my community. We grew and needed more funding, but banks were still struggling post-recession. One of our trusted Advisory Board members wrote us a check— one we paid back in less than a year with interest. This lifeline let us add new employees and increase our bonding capacity. The first six years, we invested in our systems, process and people. Now Sky Blue has more than \$50 million in awarded projects for 2024 and an Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP).

MY 3 STEPS TO SUCCESS

BE DIFFERENT: Take Apple and Steve Jobs. Don't be the same as existing companies. You might provide the same services or products, but you can differentiate by innovation or your company culture. Maybe your products are the same, but one of your core values could be community-focused or employee ownership.

ONLY ACCEPT EXCELLENCE: Mediocre performance is not acceptable anywhere but especially not at a startup. You expect excellence from yourself, so why not from your team? People say they want to excel but fall back to mediocrity because they can. That's why they have you. They need your leadership to reach their full potential. Don't be afraid to make tough decisions and move on from mediocre performers. They haven't found their passion working for you, so let them go so they can.

PERSEVERE: This is your dream. Nobody else is going to work as hard as you. Believe in yourself and persevere to make it happen. You will be told "no" a thousand times. Especially if you are a minority or woman, you must work two or three times harder, but so what? What's the alternative? You can make it happen! I did, and there are thousands more that did!

JENNIFER HOLMGREN



Jennifer Holmgren is CEO of LanzaTech, a company that transforms waste carbon into materials such as sustainable fuels, fabrics, and other products. She is also Director and Chair of the LanzaJet Board. Previously, Jennifer was founding VP and GM of Renewable Energy and Chemicals at UOP LLC. In 2023, she was listed as a TIME100 Most Influential Climate Leader in Business. Jennifer holds a Ph.D. in Chemistry from the University of Illinois and an M.B.A. from the University of Chicago.

LanzaTech was named a CNBC Disruptor 50 company in 2016, 2018, 2019 and 2020. Jennifer was featured in *When Women Lead*, authored by Julia Boorstin.



MY STORY

I was born in Colombia. Like many kids growing up, I wanted to become an astronaut. I moved to Los Angeles when I was nine, and I remember there were days when I could not see the blue sky due to pollution. While attending public school, I fell in love with chemistry and realized science and math were not just for getting to the moon; I could use them to launch even more incredible discoveries. Today I lead a team and company that turns pollution into fuel, fabric, fragrances and products we use in our everyday lives. The science is state-of-the-art, but the idea is simple. We capture carbon emissions and use carbon-hungry microbes that eat the carbon and output valuable raw materials, from sustainable jet fuel to yoga pants.

Despite our success, it was not an easy journey. I have spent my career doing things everyone tells you “can’t be done.” My answer to them has always been, “Watch me!” I don’t fear failure, and neither should you. The only way to fail is to not try. Throughout your life, you will hear people say no to you. Ignore them. They are saying no because they most likely have not seen your idea proven before. It is so much easier to be second, but if we are to become disrupters, we need to be first. We need to find the people who have the vision to see change and make a difference.

MY 3 STEPS TO SUCCESS

DREAM THE BIG DREAM: Good ideas aren’t enough; you need to execute them if the idea is to become a success. You should do what you want to do and make your own decisions. Go with your gut instinct and make personal decisions that you think are right for you. Listen to people and take advice. What they see as your trajectory and the path you choose do not have to be the same.

DON’T FORGET YOUR CONSCIENCE: See the potential for good outcomes while still being aware of the risks, but focus on the prize! If you fail, course correct, learn and move on! If you work hard, keep your conscience, stay focused on what gets you excited and surround yourself with a supportive community, you will succeed. Go do good while being good.

KEEP GOOD COMPANY: There is one other important element that has helped me throughout life, and that is the company I keep. I am surrounded by friends and family who have supported me and lifted me through challenges and opportunities. I have also surrounded myself with a community of doers in various industries and fields where, together, we have challenged the status quo.

JARED ISAACMAN



Jared Isaacman is an entrepreneur, accomplished pilot, and astronaut. At 16, he founded Shift4 in his parents' basement. Since then, it has become a global leader in developing payment technologies, processing over \$200 billion in payments annually for more than 200,000 clients across the U.S. and Europe. In 2012, he cofounded Draken International, which provides tactical aviation services in the U.K., the U.S., and NATO countries. In 2021, Jared commanded Inspiration4, the first all-civilian mission to orbit. He earned a B.S. in Professional Aeronautics from Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University.

Jared is a member of the CNBC CEO Council.



MY STORY

Innovation thrives on disruption, and my entrepreneurial expedition has been a relentless pursuit of just that. At 16, in my parents' basement, I embarked on a mission to dismantle the complexities of the merchant-acquiring and payment-acceptance industry, leading to the creation of Shift4. The idea was straightforward: be disruptive by removing parts, making processes more efficient, and offering customers unique and innovative solutions.

In 2012, I was equally motivated by the concept of disruption when I co-founded Draken International. The problem Draken faced was resistance to change and resistance to outsourcing. Draken overcame this obstacle, delivering transformative benefits to the commercial air services industry and our nation's warfighting readiness training.

More recently, I've worked with perhaps the most disruptive and revolutionary company our world has ever known—SpaceX. This experience has been a privilege that has allowed me to view countless examples of its desire to innovate, unwillingness to accept the status quo, and fortitude to act boldly.

These experiences have built the foundation for my lifelong approach to business and entrepreneurialism: be bold, take risks, solve problems and above all, be disruptive.

MY 3 STEPS TO SUCCESS

ENSURE YOU ARE STARTING WITH REAL OPPORTUNITY: Most businesses fail, so if you are going to embark on an entrepreneurial endeavor, make sure it is with the aim to dramatically improve or fix something that is really broken. Be receptive to feedback and invite others you trust to tear your early idea apart. If the business concept survives a period of relentless scrutiny, then it is probably worth exploring further.

WORK HARD AND STAY FOCUSED: Just because you have a good idea and there is opportunity doesn't mean it's going to become a great business. Great ideas filled with opportunity fail all the time. Too many entrepreneurs are easily distracted and don't realize the real effort required to find success. Don't get wrapped up in pretty offices, hiring big teams or promoting flashy customers. Be prepared to sacrifice virtually everything and stay laser-focused on the needle movers if you want a chance at success.

BE LIKABLE AND INSPIRATIONAL: Starting a business will be a roller coaster with your employees, customers and investors. People will be more inclined to trust, support, be patient with and provide second chances to someone they like and believe in. Less so for jerks.

BRAD JACKSON



Brad Jackson is the CEO and Co-founder of Slalom, a localized and global consultancy with offices in 49 major metropolitan areas across eight countries and four continents. With over 12,000 team members, Slalom is creating a multi-generational, employee-owned company at the intersection of technology, business, and analytics. In 2023, Slalom was named one of *Fortune's* 100 Best Companies to Work For. Brad received a BBA in Accounting from Washington State University.

Brad is a member of the CNBC CEO Council.



MY STORY

Growing up, I was an extremely picky eater. When I was 10, my mother surprised me by signing me up for summer camp. I begged her not to make me go. Why? I was afraid of the food. I pleaded my case, but she made me go. She even promised to pack a food supply I was sure to enjoy. So there I was, a week later, with a duffel bag of clothes and a large suitcase full of food. I was ready.

On the first day, I returned to my cabin to find an infestation of squirrels devouring my private reserve. I was instantly panic-stricken and wondered how I would survive the week. That night, in the dining hall, my worst-case scenario came true. The cooks combined what seemed like every food I despised into a camp favorite—turkey and vegetable stew. As I sat contemplating my future, I became pretty hungry, so I took a bite. Surprisingly, I liked it; more importantly, it changed me. From then on, I decided to try every type of food served. I didn't like everything, but I learned I liked many things. I had been missing the courage to try and the willingness to suffer a moment of uncertainty for perhaps a life-changing discovery.

Since summer camp, I have survived many “the squirrels ate my food” moments. My most extraordinary experiences and cherished moments of growth became possible when I let go of a rigid perspective, inverted my thinking and “tried the stew.”

MY 3 STEPS TO SUCCESS

TAKE ACTION” VERSUS SIMPLY “BEING IN MOTION”: Often, the most significant concern in science fiction stories that depict time travel is if one were to go back in time and make even the smallest change, it could change the entire future of the world. If that is true, then is that not true of the courageous, creative and compassionate actions that we take today? Those will matter exponentially more in the future. “Try the stew” and, more importantly, be a “chef” for others.

LEAD WITH AN “AND” MINDSET: I believe we are moving toward what will become known as the “and” revolution, where traditionally contrasting things can concurrently be true and harmoniously coexist. Lead with “yes, and...” and remember that nearly 100% of the time, we have control over how open and optimistic we are.

ALWAYS MAINTAIN A TRIPLE HORIZON FOCUS: Today, we are likely at the slowest velocity of change we will ever experience in our lifetimes. One of the most incredible opportunities is true triple horizon thinking as it relates to our organizations: doing what we are already doing better, faster and more efficiently; doing what we are already doing in a fundamentally different way; and changing the very essence of our organizations.

SYDNEY KITSON



Syd Kitson is Co-founder, Chairman, and CEO of Kitson & Partners, a Florida-based real estate company specializing in creating and developing environmentally responsible, sustainable master-planned communities and commercial properties. Syd previously played offensive guard for the Green Bay Packers and the Dallas Cowboys in the National Football League. Syd has served on multiple civic, education, and nonprofit boards and was named *TIME Magazine's* Dreamer of the Year in 2023. He received a B.A. in Economics from Wake Forest University.

Syd is a member of the CNBC CEO Council.



MY STORY

Sustainability, resiliency and innovation have been passions of mine since college. Building Babcock Ranch has proven that working with (not against) nature is possible, scalable and financially accessible.

After my NFL career, a passion for the environment and desire to create great places led me to the next chapter of my life—creating something that can inspire others to innovate, work with the environment and conserve invaluable resources for future generations.

In the early 2000s we believed that clean energy and sustainable development could set the standard for “the future of development” around the world. In 2006, we put that belief in motion and purchased Babcock Ranch in Southwest Florida, an area five times the size of Manhattan.

To date, Babcock Ranch has partnered with builders who incorporate sustainable, modern design into their homes. The Babcock Ranch team monitors changing environmental demands and technological advances to lead the sustainability movement in Florida and beyond. The growth and success of Babcock Ranch can inspire communities around the world seeking to leave a positive (or neutral) impact on the planet.

MY 3 STEPS TO SUCCESS

BE TRUE TO YOUR PASSIONS AND STAY

THE COURSE: I am convinced that an unrelenting commitment to the original vision and never compromising on the original seven Babcock Ranch initiatives are the reasons we are successful. You can stay true to yourself, be thoughtful about how you execute and still run a successful and profitable business.

DON'T BE AFRAID TO FAIL: To future “innovators”: if you are going to do something unprecedented, be prepared for rejection. We are measured by how we handle adversity. In today's world, too many people are afraid to fail. The lessons we learn from rejection and failure are what teach us how to succeed.

LIVE APOLITICAL AND UNOFFENDED:

I seek out constructive criticism and realize it is a path to personal growth. It's a gift to receive feedback from people you respect. When it comes to doing the right thing, take politics out of it and focus on how to succeed at making this world a healthier, cleaner, safer and more reliable place.

APRIL KOH



April Koh is the CEO and Co-founder of Spring Health, a comprehensive mental health benefit for employers and health plans. Spring Health provides digital support, meditation exercises, coaching, therapy, medication, etc. She was named one of the 15 Most Powerful Women in Startups by *Fortune* and an honoree on *Marie Claire's* Power List, *Forbes' 30* under 30, and *Crain's 40* under 40. April received a B.A. in Sociology and Computer Science from Yale.

Spring Health was named a CNBC Disruptor 50 company in 2023.



MY STORY

I started Spring Health in my undergraduate dorm room at Yale without a background in business, but with a deeply held conviction that mental health care can become as data-driven as the things that threaten our mental health, like social media.

Since starting Spring Health eight years ago, I have made plenty of mistakes, but I have always viewed each as a learning opportunity. Lack of experience and mistakes go hand-in-hand, but I never let myself make the same mistake twice. That became my superpower: the ability to fail fast and learn faster. I questioned everything and applied only what seemed most sound, not what was most commonly adopted, to my management style, product decisions and our commercial business plan. I always remained gentle with myself, but was relentless about learning and adapting.

I never saw inexperience as a limiting factor. Sometimes when you don't know how things are "supposed to work," you're more willing to break the mold and try new things. This has allowed us to imagine how mental health can be delivered tomorrow, rather than how it was delivered yesterday.

MY 3 STEPS TO SUCCESS

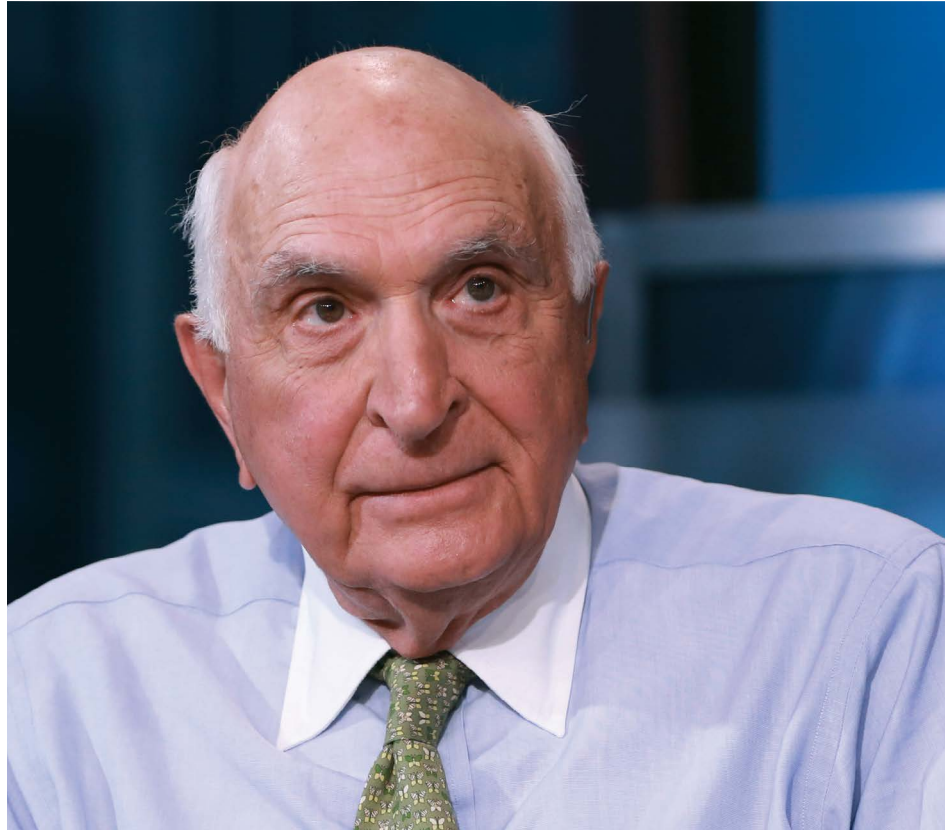
LISTEN TO THAT NAGGING THOUGHT:

Often I have a hunch about a project, team or metric. When I ignore these hunches, they tend to bite me later on. Throughout my journey with Spring Health, there have been plenty of moments when others have tried to talk me out of that gut feeling. Just know that as a founder, you have some of the most valuable instincts and a feel for what's right—trust that hunch.

KEEP INBOX ZERO: Inbox Zero, the practice of archiving all your emails so you have a clear inbox, is a core part of my workflow. I view Inbox Zero as a cornerstone habit for the professional world—it's a habit with a cascade effect that keeps you organized, disciplined and focused.

MAKE A QUITTING PROMISE: A book I always recommend is *The Dip* by Seth Godin, which is based on the premise that the primary difference between successful and unsuccessful people is that successful people don't quit when it inevitably gets hard (the "dip"). The trick is not to quit when it gets hard, but only when it strategically makes sense to do so. It's best to make a promise with yourself when you start your journey about when you would walk away—and only do so when that happens.

KENNETH LANGONE



Kenneth Langone is a Co-founder of The Home Depot and was lead director and a member of the board's executive committee from its founding in 1978 until 2008. He is also Founder of Invemed Associates LLC., a firm specializing in health care and high technology companies. He also serves on the boards of Unifi, Inc., The Center for Strategic and International Studies, the Harlem Children's Zone and its charter school, The Promise Academy, and St. Patrick's Cathedral. Kenneth received an MBA from the NYU Stern School of Business and a B.A. in Economics from Bucknell University.



MY STORY

Surely, the biggest advantage I had as an entrepreneur was being born in America. I can still remember my Italian grandmother telling me to notice how all the immigrant ships arrive in New York City full, but leave empty. Even people like my grandparents, newly arrived and with scant education, understood that free exchange among free people opens the path to prosperity.

I worked manual jobs in those days. I shoveled ditches to help build the Long Island Expressway. I worked at a butcher's shop, and I delivered mail for the post office. My partners in founding Home Depot weren't rich kids either. Bernie Marcus was a pharmacist from New Jersey. Arthur Blank was an accountant in New York. When Bernie came to me in 1978, they had both just been fired. But we had the freedom, initiative and hard-working confidence to take that setback and turn it into a kick from a golden horseshoe. We were lucky too, for all the teachers, relatives, friends and colleagues who believed in us.

But there's a dynamism in mutual support too. Hard work demonstrates purpose in the eyes of others. Respect builds trust. Showing grace toward others builds loyalty. When we make a vocation of those quiet values, the wings of fortuity open to carry us further than our hopes can see.

MY 3 STEPS TO SUCCESS

BUILD ON A GOOD IDEA: All the business breakthroughs we had at Home Depot, from the big concepts to the aisle arrangements, started as simple notions that we adjusted and enhanced together as they unfolded. We let innovation flow from being optimistically open to change.

WORK HARD: Giving full effort isn't just a boost for your own goals, it's contagious for others. I think of the many young people who started alongside us at Home Depot loading cars, pushing carts, and stocking shelves. They were the last people you'd see at the store each evening, and many of them have shared with me the level of success they achieved both professionally and financially.

SPARK SOME GOOD LUCK: Living each day with a simple code of ethics is about more than earning a merit badge. It reveals integrity to those who work with you and especially to people who might wish to help you. That's when the good breaks start happening.

THOMAS LEE



Thomas Lee is Co-founder, Managing Partner, and the Head of Research at Fundstrat, a research advisory firm. Prior to co-founding Fundstrat, Thomas served as J.P. Morgan's Chief Equity Strategist from 2007 to 2014 and as Managing Director at Salomon Smith Barney. He has more than 25 years of experience in equity research and has been consistently ranked as a top analyst by Institutional Investor. Thomas holds a BSE in Economics with dual concentrations in Finance and Accounting from the University of Pennsylvania Wharton School and is a CFA Charter holder.

Thomas is a CNBC Contributor.



MY STORY

Being an entrepreneur is the most rewarding professional accomplishment for me. It is often hard to describe the pride and enjoyment I get from seeing our thriving team, growing business and happy clients. Why did I start Fundstrat? Over my 25 years as a technology equity research analyst at large blue-chip investment banks, I admired the many entrepreneurs I worked with and saw them create innovative products and services. I felt the desire to create an institutionally great research product that would be available to a broader audience—a way to democratize finance with a high-quality but easily understandable service.

This was not an easy road and required relentless dedication from myself, my co-founder and all of the team members that contributed to our success. What gave our team focus was this singular desire to create an easily accessible and understandable product. This lens was used on every aspect of our work.

For someone leaving a company to start something on their own, it can be daunting. In the early days, this meant making personal sacrifices, such as less time for social goals, less financial flexibility in the early days and a general loss of a safety blanket. I think defining a clear goal besides “making money” is key. We wanted to create something unique and special for our clients.

MY 3 STEPS TO SUCCESS

DEFINE SUCCESS FOR EVERY PERSON WHO IS INSTRUMENTAL TO THE SUCCESS OF YOUR VENTURE: To me, this is the most important rule. Goals need to be realistic and you need to attract people who are aligned with that goal.

BE WILLING TO BE RELENTLESSLY DEDICATED TO THE SUCCESS OF THE VENTURE: The person starting the venture will end up being the hardest-working and setting the example for all team members. Be wary that many might want to join the process but may not have the skills or the motivation to make the venture successful.

BE OPEN-MINDED. ONE WILL CONSTANTLY BE SURPRISED AT WHO WILL BE WILLING PARTNERS AND SUPPORTERS AND WHO WILL NOT BE: It is important to be open-minded. I was constantly surprised by who was willing to support our efforts. I was disappointed by those who were expected to be supportive but wound up uninvolved in any of our efforts.

MARK MCCLAIN



Mark McClain is Founder and CEO of SailPoint, an identity security platform. SailPoint has more than 2,000 employees worldwide and operates in 37 countries. In 2022, SailPoint was acquired by Thoma Bravo, a software investment firm. Mark received an MBA from the UCLA Anderson School of Management and a B.A. in Economics from Point Loma Nazarene University.

Mark is a member of the CNBC CEO Council.



MY STORY

I've often described myself as the "accidental entrepreneur." Growing up with parents who worked in social work and education, I started out working in large corporate settings because I wanted "safety and security." But after a decade, I decided to join an early-stage company in Austin. I found myself thriving in the unpredictable and exciting world of startups. I was hooked. After some years there, a few of my best friends and I launched our first company. We had a great run, and after selling that company, we launched another. To make a long story short: 18 years later, SailPoint has gone from venture capital to private equity to IPO and back to private equity. The company has grown to more than 2,500 people, operating in 37 countries.

Along the way, I've learned a few key lessons about entrepreneurship. First, stay humble. No matter what you think you know, you'll make mistakes and learn a lot on this journey. Second, surround yourself with great colleagues, from your management team to your investors to your advisors and board. Third, don't just build a successful company; build a successful life. Build meaningful relationships, love your family, stay healthy, have a life outside of work, and always look for ways to help others on their journey. If you do, you'll look back with joy, rather than regrets.

MY 3 STEPS TO SUCCESS

GET SMART ABOUT AN INDUSTRY BEFORE YOU START A BUSINESS IN THAT ARENA:

When I see someone ready to launch a business, I always ask them what experience they have in that space. If it's very limited, but they think they have a breakthrough idea (see: Elon Musk in electric vehicles), their best bet is to surround themselves with others who have that understanding.

SURROUND YOURSELF WITH PEOPLE WHO ARE GREAT AT STUFF YOU'RE NOT:

No matter what kind of personality, aptitude or experiences you might have, you're not great at everything. Success in the early stages of a business has a lot to do with seeing things from many angles. Your strategy and operations are more likely to thrive the more diverse and complete your team's experience and skillsets.

EXPECT TO CONTINUALLY ADAPT TO CHANGES IN THE ENVIRONMENT:

The worst thing a young organization can do is "lock in" to its original premise. You'll need to adapt to survive and thrive. This shows the team you're willing to learn and change to grow. Side note: I do NOT think your values should change as you grow a business. Companies that lose their way often look back and realize they let go of the things that provided their true foundation for early success.

LARA MERRIKEN



Lara Merriken is the Founder of LÄRABAR, the original fruit and nut food bar. The brand was acquired by General Mills in 2008. Lara remains an advisor to the company and shares her expertise with rising entrepreneurs through coaching and mentoring. Before LÄRABAR, Lara was a social worker. Lara received a B.A. in Psychology from the University of Southern California and a M.S. in Positive Psychology from the University of Pennsylvania.

Lara Merriken is a Colorado entrepreneur. She is featured in The Daniels Fund Junior Achievement (JA) Dream Accelerator, a career exploration experience curated by JA Rocky Mountain. Denver & Boulder, Colorado were featured in CNBC's "Cities of Success."



MY STORY

Growing up around hardworking parents with high standards left a lasting impression on me. They taught me the importance of always doing your best, setting your own criteria for success and striving for excellence. This hit home when I was 11 years old: I took a job delivering newspapers. Every day, I set out on foot with 50 in hand. I remember the joy of walking the neighborhood with a sense of purpose, relishing the independence of having something of my own to do.

Although my job was to deliver newspapers, there was no description of how to do it. I observed that when the newspaper arrived at our own home, it was often thrown in different spots in the yard, or a mess because it wasn't properly folded. I made a point to make neat, tight folds and took the time to place every paper on the porch. I felt pride in going the extra mile.

As a result, I made my customers happy. It was wonderful for them to open the front door and find the paper waiting there. When it came time to collect monthly payments, people often tipped me and expressed gratitude, which gave me a deep sense of accomplishment. I realized that taking the time to make something special can be rewarding for all, an experience that ignited my entrepreneurial spirit and confirmed within me the power of intentional actions.

MY 3 STEPS TO SUCCESS

BE TRUE TO YOURSELF AND FOLLOW

YOUR DREAMS: It's important to stay true to yourself. Regardless of what others may think or say, set your own standards and strive for your own aspirations. When I started LÄRABAR, I had more naysayers than customers. The energy bar market, after all, was already saturated. But I believed intuitively in what I had created. Don't be afraid to take risks. With hard work, determination and a positive attitude, anything is possible in your life.

SURROUND YOURSELF WITH PEOPLE WHO ENCOURAGE AND INSPIRE YOU:

Surrounding yourself with people who support and inspire you is one of the most crucial things you can do, not only in business, but in life. What you share with your trusted confidants—mutual experience, feedback, advice, etc.—becomes a two-way support system you can draw from again and again to overcome obstacles, stay focused and make progress toward achieving your dreams.

BE CURIOUS AND OPEN TO LEARNING:

Embrace new ideas and challenges with enthusiasm and a willingness to step outside your comfort zone. Take the time to explore the world around you, and never stop asking questions. Try things. The more you learn, the more you achieve. Every experience is an opportunity to grow. Every obstacle is a chance to improve.

JOSHUA MUNDY



Joshua Mundy is the CEO and Co-founder of Pivot Technology School, which offers data analytics, software development, and cybersecurity training. Joshua also oversees ZAM Investments, a real estate holding firm and small business investment company. He is the author of *Unshakable Faith: Discovering the Power Within You*. Joshua attended Middle Tennessee State University.

Joshua is a Nashville Entrepreneur. The city was featured in CNBC's "Cities of Success."



MY STORY

As an aspiring entrepreneur, your journey is bound to be filled with challenges, but these hurdles are stepping stones to resilience and success. My own path in entrepreneurship, spanning janitorial services to technology education, is a testament to this.

First and foremost, embrace your ideas with confidence. Lack of experience in your chosen field should not deter you. Each venture I embarked on began with a strong belief in the concept, rather than expertise in the industry.

Risk-taking is an integral part of entrepreneurship. It's essential to make calculated moves, understanding that risks often lead to significant rewards. However, be prepared for unexpected challenges. A natural disaster once wiped out all my businesses overnight. Such turbulence is not meant to break you but to elevate you.

Remember, entrepreneurship is more than just running businesses; it's about identifying problems and creating innovative solutions. It's about leading with purpose and impacting the community positively. Your journey might be unpredictable, but with passion, resilience and a community focus, you can navigate the entrepreneurial landscape successfully and make a lasting impact.

MY 3 STEPS TO SUCCESS

START BEFORE YOU ARE READY: Sometimes, we think we need everything to be just right before we start something. Really, it's okay to begin even if we don't have everything we think we need. Just start moving toward your goal, and you'll find that the stuff you need will come along as you go. Don't keep putting things off. It's better to get going and do your best with what you have.

EVEN SO, DON'T QUIT YOUR GOOD W-2 JOB UNTIL YOU ACQUIRE YOUR ASSETS:

It's smart to plan your transition into entrepreneurship carefully. Before you leave your regular job, consider securing lines of credit and investing in properties while you still have a steady income. Banks often hesitate to lend to entrepreneurs because their income can be unpredictable. Therefore, preparing well in advance is key.

TEMPLE FIRST: Being an entrepreneur is tough, and it's really important to take care of your health and well-being first. Remember, you are your most important asset. I've seen lots of entrepreneurs get exhausted because they don't prioritize themselves. Make a solid morning routine before you dive into your work. Set goals for your day, spend some time meditating, read a bit and do activities that are different from the intense work of being an entrepreneur.

ELIANA MURILLO



Eliana Murillo is the Founder of Eliment and Company, a strategy and design firm focused on building and designing products and solutions for diverse communities. She is also the Co-founder of her family's Alquimia Tequila, a sustainable and 100% USDA-certified organic product. Eliana spent 10 years at Google, where she founded the multicultural marketing team and co-founded HOLA, the Latino employee resource group. Eliana was included in the *Forbes* 30 Under 30 List and named one of the top 10 Latina Corporate Executives by *Latina Style Magazine* in 2017. She is a graduate of Harvard College.

Eliana was featured in the CNBC 2021 Hispanic Heritage campaign.



MY STORY

“In everything you do, who are you helping?” My mom asked me these wise words many years ago, when I first decided to pursue business as a career. These words have guided me over the years, from when I led multicultural marketing at Google, to when my family and I started our organic tequila company Alquimia. The way we do business has always been centered around the impact we can create, from starting an impact-driven spirits company to creating strategies as an “intrepeneur”— someone who behaves like an entrepreneur while working in a corporate setting. Now that I lead my own company, I strive to continue making impact a measure of success. It is the legacy I want to create so people can continue to see examples of businesses that have impact at the core of what they do.

I support and invest in minority-founded startups, and I source and hire diverse vendors and talent to continue making opportunities available to others. I prioritize working with clients who are solving social challenges that are often overlooked. As I build my wellness company, I aim to make wellness practices and products accessible to as many diverse communities as possible. I focus on who I can help to stay committed to my “why” as I build.

MY 3 STEPS TO SUCCESS

DO WELL: Start every venture with integrity. Do things well and prepare well so that you can build on every step, knowing the foundation you built is unshakeable. From your research to your relationships, do right by your idea and your team by doing things well without cutting corners. Integrity is everything, and it is one of the qualities I admire most in successful entrepreneurs and community leaders who inspire me.

DO GOOD: Always find a way to contribute to causes and communities as you build your business. It is often an afterthought, but it can be built into your business and add inherent value to drive impact, create genuine relationships in the community and provide opportunities for development for members of your team outside of their roles.

DO MORE: As you build, do more to care for yourself and the people you love. Pay attention to the needs of your body, mind and spirit, as well as those of the people around you. What you are building is important, but nothing is more important than your health and happiness. Make sure that the people around you and those you love are taken care of, supported, seen and heard. We cannot build an empire alone, and nothing can be done well without keeping health, wellness and happiness as top priorities.

ALEXIS OHANIAN



Alexis Ohanian is a tech founder and venture capitalist. He co-founded Reddit, one of the largest websites in the U.S. In 2020, he founded Seven Seven Six, a VC firm built like a technology company. In 2022, he launched the 776 Foundation to support marginalized individuals and announced a \$20 million commitment to climate action through his 776 Fellowship Program. He is the author of *Without Their Permission* and the lead founding investor in Angel City Football Club. Alexis earned a B.A. in History from the University of Virginia.

Alexis was a speaker at CNBC Technology Executive Council events and previously served on its Advisory Board.



MY STORY

Starting Reddit changed my life. I was a naive first-time CEO in Charlottesville, VA when sketching Snoo (the Reddit mascot), naming this new kind of forum we were building and drafting the earliest website sketches. Steve Huffman and I received a \$12,000 investment from Y Combinator and joined the first batch of the now-storied accelerator. We faced fierce competition, technical hurdles and the constant need for funding. There were moments when it seemed like Reddit might not survive, but we persevered. In those first months of starting the company, my girlfriend fell into a coma and my mom was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer. Overcoming adversity became part of our DNA.

Selling Reddit in 2006 brought me more money than my parents made their entire working lives. When I returned to help lead Reddit's turnaround in 2014 as executive chairman, I got another chance to build the kind of organization I had envisioned, taking Reddit from \$8 million in revenue to hundreds of millions when I left in 2018. I left Reddit for good in 2020 when I resigned in protest from the board, asking they replace me with a director of color. They did, then banned hate communities one month later.

I'm grateful for everything I learned and all the ways those lessons have helped me since, as my career has now really taken off.

MY 3 STEPS TO SUCCESS

MAKE SOMETHING PEOPLE LOVE: One of the most crucial aspects of a successful startup is addressing a genuine need or problem. Ensure that your business idea isn't just innovative, but also serves a real purpose or solves a specific issue for people. And then do it so damn well that people LOVE what you've built.

FOCUS ON BUILDING COMMUNITY:

My experience, especially with Reddit, has taught me the immense value of nurturing a community. It is vital to engage with your users, listen to their feedback and create an environment where they feel a part of what you're building. This engagement doesn't just help refine your product; it builds a loyal customer base and turns users into advocates for your brand. Communities don't form by accident, they're intentional—do the work.

EMBRACE FAILURE AS A LEARNING

OPPORTUNITY: I cannot stress enough the importance of resilience and the willingness to learn from failures. In the journey of entrepreneurship, setbacks are inevitable. Rather than seeing them as roadblocks, view them as chances to learn, grow and improve both your business model and your product. This mindset fosters a culture of innovation and calculated risk-taking, which is essential in the startup world.

PRAVEEN PENMETSА



Praveen Penmetsa is the Chief Executive Officer and Co-founder of Monarch Tractor, a manufacturer of fully electric, driver-optional, autonomous tractor technology. He is also Chairman of Motivo Engineering, an innovation engineering firm. His work focuses on developing commercial technologies, ranging from micro-mobility to electric vertical take-off and landing aircraft. Praveen received an M.S. in Mechanical Engineering from the University of Cincinnati and a B.S. in Mechanical Engineering from Acharya Nagarjuna University.

Monarch Tractor was named a CNBC Disruptor 50 company in 2023.



MY STORY

Visiting my father's village in rural India has always been a poignant childhood memory. The village, nestled in the agricultural heartland, stood at the edge of electrical infrastructure. Power outages were an intrinsic part of these trips, a stark reminder of the disparities that persist between urban and rural areas.

Decades later, I made another trip back as an engineer-entrepreneur living in the U.S. One of the projects I was working on was a hybrid Prius that was re-designed to power the home and the grid. During a power outage, I remember thinking, "I wish I had that Prius to bring the power back on." Then I thought, "What about an electric tractor instead?" An electric tractor could do more than farming operations; it could power a farm. A fleet could power an entire village. After building a smart electric tractor and deploying it in India, I learned that just providing energy is not sufficient value for farmers. They want smart tractors that can remove the burden of manual labor and increase yields.

On my return to the U.S., I discovered that even American farmers were grappling with energy and labor challenges. Coming face-to-face with the challenges farmers were facing across energy independence, profitability, labor shortages and more was a key part of my entrepreneurial journey and the catalyst for founding Monarch Tractor.

MY 3 STEPS TO SUCCESS

FIND THE SWEET SPOT IN YOUR POSITION (PASSION, OPPORTUNITY, SKILLSET, AND IMPACT): The greatest entrepreneurial journeys are fueled by a heady mix of passion and skill converging with market opportunity that leads to a positive impact on people.

DON'T CHASE SUCCESS, CHASE IMPACT: Don't choose to build products and services because you know they are likely to be successful. Choose to build the solution that seems impossible but will have a lasting impact on communities and the world. More people will rally behind your endeavor if they see its potential impact, and they will stick with you when you run into tough times. Success is not so clear-cut anymore.

ITERATE BETWEEN FOCUS AND FLARE FOR A FUTURE VISION: Maintain a future-oriented vision while also being receptive to exploring the opportunity space. Striking a balance between focusing on a solution and flaring out into exploration is essential. This iterative process of focus-flare-focus-flare must be repeated constantly while moving towards your vision and will ensure success.

MARYAM ROFOUGARAN



Maryam Rofougaran is the Co-Founder and CEO of Movandi, a company that develops semiconductor systems and software technology for 5G service providers. Previously, Maryam was Senior V.P. of Wireless Radios at Broadcom, where she was instrumental in building Broadcom's wireless business and growing revenues to more than \$3 billion annually. Maryam earned a B.S. and M.S. in Electrical Engineering at UCLA and was pursuing her Ph.D. until she co-founded Innovent Systems in 1998.

Movandi was named a CNBC Disruptor 50 company in 2020 and 2021. Maryam is a member of the CNBC CEO Council.



MY STORY

Growing up as a curious girl in a conservative city in Iran, both before and after the revolution, I was constantly surrounded by a society that imposed numerous rules and restrictions. I consider myself fortunate to have had open-minded parents who encouraged their children, including their daughters, to reach their highest potential. My mother taught us that regardless of societal limitations placed on girls, our dreams had no bounds. She was instrumental in recognizing and nurturing our talents.

My strengths lay in math, logic and science. I was always drawn to the most challenging problems. This love for challenge also extended to sports, where I led my volleyball team. However, my greatest motivator was being told that I couldn't do something. It fueled my determination to prove the critics and naysayers wrong. This resolve has been a constant in my life, driving me to achieve high academic honors in the male-dominated fields of electrical engineering and semiconductor technology, where women executives and engineers are a rarity.

As an entrepreneur, patience, agility and adaptability have been key. My experiences have taught me that the limitations others impose on us can be the very catalysts for our success. They have instilled in me a relentless drive to achieve my goals.

MY 3 STEPS TO SUCCESS

DEFINE AND COMMUNICATE YOUR

VISION: Define and communicate your vision: Your business starts with a vision: a distinct idea that sets you apart. This vision should not only be clear in your mind but should also resonate with others — your team, investors and customers. Clarity in your vision and mission is crucial; it keeps you anchored to your core purpose while navigating the tumultuous waters of entrepreneurship.

MASTER THE MARKET: Understanding the market is not just about knowing your competitors and identifying your target customers; it's about immersing yourself in the ecosystem of your business. Conduct thorough research of market trends, customer behaviors and competitive strategies. This deep understanding is the bedrock upon which you can build a robust strategy, allowing you to anticipate changes, seize opportunities and position your business for success.

EMBRACE CHANGE AND THRIVE IN

CHALLENGE: The business landscape is ever-changing and success belongs to those who adapt. Being adaptive means being willing to evolve your strategies, products or even your vision as you gather new insights and face different challenges. This agility, coupled with resilience, will enable you to pivot effectively, overcome obstacles and stay ahead in a competitive and dynamic market.

JAVIER SAADE



Javier Saade is Founder and Managing Partner at Impact Master Holdings and a venture partner at Fenway Summer. He also serves as Operating Partner at Presidio Investors, Chairman of GP Funding, Inc., and he is a board member for Two. President Obama appointed Javier as Associate Administrator of the U.S. Small Business Administration. He has also served on various global and national boards. Javier received an MBA from Harvard Business School and a B.S. in Industrial Management from Purdue University.

Javier is a CNBC Contributor.



MY STORY

My first official job was a burger flipper at McDonald's. It was followed by an entrepreneurial venture: a mobile car wash business. I learned all about keeping schedules, acquiring customers, setting prices, buying equipment, maintaining the books and performing quality services with pride. Those lessons I learned as a teenager came in handy more than a decade later when I co-founded a media, entertainment and broadcasting business in New York City. There was, for sure, much more at stake, but the grit, resilience, creativity and hustle were much the same. Entrepreneurship is a combination of skill, will, hard work, focused energy, inventiveness and luck.

During the more than 20 years that followed, I invested capital in many businesses, advised startups and helped them grow. For a couple of years, I was the Chief of Investment and Innovation of the Small Business Administration. There, I oversaw tens of billions of dollars that were invested in thousands of small businesses and startups. The common thread has always been entrepreneurship. It's been a wild ride with lots of ups and downs. In this journey, I've learned a thing or two while hustling as an entrepreneur, investing in other entrepreneurs and making policy to support millions of American entrepreneurs.

MY 3 STEPS TO SUCCESS

GOOD COMMUNICATION IS KEY: Listening is more valuable than talking. Know what you need and ask for it. Simpler is better, and clarity is your friend. Humility and inquisitiveness are honey; slickness and fast talking are vinegar.

AIM HIGH BUT TRUE: Taking risks is the best path to achieving economic prosperity. Balance grounded practicality and boundless potential. Under-promise and over-deliver, always.

FAILURE AND RESILIENCE ARE PART OF SUCCESS: Fact: You will get punched in the face. To succeed, you must be willing to fail. When you stumble, brush the dirt off your shoulders and do it again and again. Endurance is more important than brute force.

JAMES SCAPA



Jim Scapa is the Founder, Chairman, and CEO of Altair, a global computational science and artificial intelligence company. Altair serves more than 13,000 customers and employs more than 3,000 employees, with 74 offices across more than 25 countries. Altair software serves a broad range of industry sectors, including automotive, aerospace, government and defense, banking, finance, energy, electronics, healthcare, life sciences, architecture, and construction. Jim earned an MBA from the University of Michigan and a B.S. in Mechanical Engineering from Columbia University.

Jim is a member of the CNBC CEO Council.



MY STORY

I got my entrepreneurial streak from my father. I grew up in an immigrant household; my parents immigrated to the U.S. from Greece after World War II as Holocaust survivors who barely spoke English. To support our family, my father sold textiles on the street. Eventually, he was able to open a small export office in a rough neighborhood. My father was always working—seven days a week—and while I did not get to see him a lot, through him I learned what it means to persevere and be successful as an entrepreneur.

After college I got a brief taste of what it was like to work in a massive, storied corporation—and quickly discovered that the “traditional” big company environment and career path was not for me. Instead, I wanted to be where people felt free to take risks and where there was more freedom and flexibility.

My co-founders and I started Altair in 1985, and it has grown into something remarkable. Today we are a global company that prioritizes people and relationships, and a place where everyone feels supported to become the best they can be. Ultimately, I have taken a simple approach with Altair: I want every single person to be essential and to know that they are essential. Success to me is support, growth and an eye to the future.

MY 3 STEPS TO SUCCESS

AGILITY AND ADAPTABILITY ARE KEY:

The world can change so quickly. You must always be willing to change and adapt, even if it is risky or uncertain. You have to be pragmatic and take different approaches quickly if and when things aren't working. I have learned this firsthand with Altair, and we continue to embody this approach every day.

START WITH WHAT'S FAMILIAR: Especially if you are just starting out, sticking with something you know well is incredibly useful. It gives you and others confidence that you can understand and adapt to new technologies, markets and contexts. It is not a requirement, but it can be very beneficial.

ALWAYS PUT PEOPLE FIRST: You have to respect people, including employees, customers and beyond. You also have to listen, something I think too many people overlook in business today. You must cultivate an environment where people can grow personally and professionally. There is nothing more important than doing right by people.

CARYN
SEIDMAN
BECKER



Caryn Seidman Becker is the Chairman and CEO of CLEAR, the secure identity company. She has grown CLEAR into a global brand serving 56 airports, more than 20 million members, and a growing list of B2B partners. Before CLEAR, Caryn started Arience Capital, a more than \$1 billion value-oriented asset management firm investing in a broad spectrum of industries. CLEAR was named a CNBC Disruptor 50 company in 2019 and 2020. Caryn was featured in *When Women Lead*, authored by Julia Boorstin. She received a B.A. in Political Science from the University of Michigan.

She is a member of the CNBC CEO Council.



MY STORY

I co-founded CLEAR to return people their most precious asset—time—and to bring control and predictability to the friction-filled airport experience. I saw CLEAR as an opportunity to leverage different areas of my expertise, solve a problem I was personally dealing with as a nervous flier and make a difference. We launched CLEAR in airports, where identity, customer experience and security collide, but my vision was always greater—I believed (and believe today) that identity is foundational to everyday experiences.

Just as CLEAR’s technology has replaced the need for physical IDs at airports, CLEAR’s identity platform delivers a safer and easier experience for businesses and consumers across travel, health care, financial services and beyond.

I’m proud of our growth over the last 14 years into a global, customer-obsessed brand serving 56 airports, more than 20 million members and a growing list of partners. I’ve learned that if you work hard to deliver incredible experiences for members, and if privacy and security are baked into everything that you do, you will create a trusted brand people know and love. They’ll want to see your brand in more places.

MY 3 STEPS TO SUCCESS

BE INDEFATIGABLE: I believe in tireless persistence. I look for ways to turn each “no” into a “yes” and believe change is essential to growth. You have to pivot to overcome roadblocks. The times change, the world changes—you have to always be adapting.

HYPERFOCUS ON THE CUSTOMER

EXPERIENCE: The process of building and launching new products should start with anticipating and addressing the evolving needs of your consumers and members. At CLEAR, we all report directly to our members. We aim to surprise and delight, building trust in our brand with every experience.

LIFT PEOPLE UP: Leaders should jump first and eat last. You should inspire and motivate your team by lifting them up and leading by example.

REA ANN SILVA



Rea Ann Silva is the Founder of Beautyblender, a makeup application sponge. Rea Ann created her exclusive hand-cut foam sponges while working as the head makeup artist on the set of a popular TV show. Rea Ann Silva currently heads a global beauty empire and was honored at the Smithsonian American Museum of Natural History in the *Only One in The Room* exhibit. She attended the Fashion Institute of Design & Merchandising.

Rea Ann was featured in the CNBC program, *The Path Forward: Race and Opportunity in America* and the 2021 Hispanic Heritage campaign.



MY STORY

My entrepreneurial journey was heavily influenced by my background and more than 20 years of experience as a professional makeup artist. Initially, I thought I was creating a tool for makeup artists only and never expected it to become a consumer product. As a Latina founder, my heritage was always top of mind while working with women of color and trying to solve practical, everyday challenges. When I was hired to lead the makeup department on an iconic network television show at the beginning of high-definition TV, Beautyblender was born.

Twenty years later, here are the things I now know from my entrepreneurial journey. Finding a good balance in my life is my definition of success, and my greatest life lesson is to learn everything. Do not become complacent because you can afford to pass off your responsibility to someone else. Also, it is important to learn every aspect of your business. Finally, do not delegate blindly—you have the opportunity to learn, and you'll only become stronger as a founder in doing that.

MY 3 STEPS TO SUCCESS

ALWAYS REMEMBER YOUR “WHY”: Passion has to be your driving force, especially when the beauty space is so overcrowded. You have to be willing to sacrifice everything for your business if you want it to be successful.

COMPARISON IS THE THIEF OF JOY: Trying to compare your triumphs with others is just a trap for disappointment. It's how you respond to your failures and accomplishments that matters most and sets you up for success.

THERE IS NO STRAIGHT PATH TO SUCCESS: The road to entrepreneurship is never just a straight line ascending into success. It's a zigzag. You're going to have highs, and you're going to have lows—don't fear those lows. Take them and learn from them because that's how you make your foundation stronger.

DARIAN SIMON



Darian Simon is Co-Founder and Creative Director of BE A GOOD PERSON, a clothing retailer based in Denver, Colorado. Prior to launching BE A GOOD PERSON in 2015, Darian worked as an advertising photographer. He specializes in custom content creation for social media, marketing campaigns, and print/digital advertising. Darian earned his B.A. in Digital Photography from The Art Institutes.

Darian is a Colorado entrepreneur. He is featured in The Daniels Fund Junior Achievement (JA) Dream Accelerator, a career exploration experience curated by JA Rocky Mountain. Denver & Boulder, Colorado were featured in CNBC's "Cities of Success."



MY STORY

As a co-founder of BE A GOOD PERSON, a clothing company that believes in “the most basic concept,” I believe in the importance of community philanthropy and grassroots creativity. My journey hasn’t been straightforward; recognizing my neurodivergence (autism/ADHD) was a turning point in my adult life. Behavioral therapy has led me to adopt a “brain-first” approach in business, focusing on my strengths and acknowledging areas where I need support. As someone who has survived violent trauma to my mind and body, my perspective on life has been profoundly reshaped, like a pair of glasses that I cannot take off. I’m not proud of the hardships, but I am proud of how I’ve managed to persevere through them.

The most meaningful part of my entrepreneurial journey has been the ability to connect people from all walks of life. It’s been incredibly rewarding to witness individuals with varied backgrounds—transcending traditional divides like race, gender, sexuality, political beliefs, skin color, religion and more—uniting under a shared message. This experience has reinforced my belief that our true differences don’t lie in these external or societal labels but in our unique personal experiences, the love we share and the challenges we’ve overcome.

MY 3 STEPS TO SUCCESS

EMBRACE THE THINGS THAT MAKE YOU DIFFERENT: Embrace the aspects of yourself that others may judge. These are the traits you’re here to redefine as “beautiful.” You’re not here to be anyone but yourself. You’re here to solve the problems you want to solve by drawing on your own life experiences.

CHALLENGE YOURSELF TO NEVER STOP LEARNING: Avoid getting stuck in “expert mode,” as it can be more limiting than liberating. There’s strength in admitting, “I don’t know,” and then following it up with, “I want to learn more about that now.” Self-actualization through self-teaching is rewarding, but remember, it’s also okay to seek help from others.

USE YOUR EMOTIONS AS FUEL: Allow yourself to fully experience your emotions, and use them to fuel your passions. This journey isn’t about comparing yourself to others; it’s about validating your own experiences. You’re the only one who has lived your life and survived your battles, and you are stronger for having done so.

SHIVANI SIROYA



Shivani Siroya is the Founder and CEO of Tala, a financial platform that has served nearly 9 million people across Kenya, the Philippines, Mexico, and India. Customers use Tala products to start and expand small businesses, manage day-to-day needs, and pursue financial goals. Shivani earned a M.P.H. in Health Economics and International Policy at Columbia University and a B.A. in Government and International Relations at Wesleyan University.

Tala was named a CNBC Disruptor 50 company in 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023.



MY STORY

I never set out to be an entrepreneur, but there have always been problems I've wanted to solve. As a kid, I'd start little projects and get other kids involved. From starting a magazine to a resume service, I'd do it all without telling anyone! I believed if you put your mind toward anything—whether it was a problem or something you wanted to do—you could do it. There is, and always will be, a way to do it.

This spirit is what led me to start Tala. I became obsessed with solving a massive problem: the lack of financial confidence in the underbanked. I saw what others didn't, and I had to prove that a different way was possible. I knew we could unleash the economic power of the Global Majority—the billions underserved by legacy finance.

While I don't fit the profile of a stereotypical Silicon Valley founder, I take pride in this outsider-ness; it reminds me of how our customers feel and why I do this work. Growing up between New York and Udaipur, India made me aware of the fundamental differences in systems and opportunities that exist globally. I believe that our customers, the Global Majority, have a right to control their own financial lives. So I didn't wait for funding. I built while working, invested savings, learned to code and scaled once I had real results. I was and am determined to prove their potential.

MY 3 STEPS TO SUCCESS

START WITH CONVICTION: Have a clear vision and an abundance mindset. You might not be there today, but deep down you have to know you will get there. You have to believe it is possible in order to reverse engineer it. This mindset opens doors and opportunities that I might have never considered otherwise.

COME WITH RESULTS: When I was raising my seed round, I went out with a prototype and made it hard—if not impossible—for investors to look away. I brought data about the business model and the opportunity at hand. I wasn't just trying to sell an idea, and that caught people's attention. Now, the right investors have seen the size of the opportunity and come alongside our team.

FOCUS ON THE PROBLEM, NOT THE SOLUTION: Understand the problem you're trying to solve, and don't assume that the solution you came up with when you started is always going to be the right way to solve it. I didn't set out to build a tech startup; technology just happened to be the best solution to the problem I wanted to solve.

TAMMY SUN



Tammy Sun is the Founder and CEO of Carrot Fertility, the leading global fertility care platform. Before Carrot, Tammy was a presidential appointee in President Obama’s administration at the Federal Communications Commission and held various roles at The White House, national and local campaigns and forward-thinking public policy think tanks. Tammy also managed growth partnerships at Evernote, a note-taking application. She graduated from NYU and attended the London School of Economics.

Carrot Fertility was named a CNBC Disruptor 50 company in 2023.



MY STORY

I never expected that freezing my eggs in my 30s would lead me to start a business. I was at a point in my career where I was excelling, loved my job and wasn't looking for a change. I wanted to be proactive about my fertility health and decided it was time to freeze my eggs. What I didn't realize at the time was that three rounds of egg freezing would cost me more than \$35,000 out-of-pocket. I was shocked to learn that none of this was covered by insurance. Despite how emotionally challenging my own fertility treatments were, I still knew I was privileged to have enough—tens of thousands of dollars in savings to pay for the care I needed.

Most people don't. And because fertility benefits aren't typically included as part of health insurance, this means that very few people have historically had access to high-quality fertility care. This was when Carrot's mission was born: fertility care for all, inclusive of age, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, race, income, marital status and geography. Today, this is my life's work. And in just a few short years, Carrot has expanded to support millions of people around the world, helping them access high-quality care that they otherwise would not have had.

MY 3 STEPS TO SUCCESS

THERE'S NO RIGHT TIME TO START A

BUSINESS: It may seem like there are plenty of reasons to wait. You may already have a great job, or the economy is bad. Just know that there's no perfect time to begin your entrepreneurial journey, and if you wait for the "perfect" moment, you may miss your chance.

REJECTIONS DON'T DEFINE YOU: In the early stages of starting a business, there are plenty of "no"s, especially when you're creating something completely new. The natural response may be to take it personally and feel defeated, but it's important to understand that for every no, you'll ultimately get a yes. If you believe in your mission, keep going.

DO THE THING YOU NO LONGER CAN'T DO:

One of the best pieces of advice I've ever received was from a friend, who sadly passed away a few years ago. I once asked her, "So why did you decide to write a book?" And she replied, "Because I could no longer not write one." She had something she thought she could give the world. This is the advice I'd pass on to anyone thinking about embarking on a journey to build an enduring company: do it, but only if you think there's no other pursuit you can, or should, be doing instead.

ROBIN THURSTON



Robin Thurston is the CEO and Founder of Outside Interactive, Inc., an outdoor content creator and home to iconic brands like *Outside Magazine*, Warren Miller, Pinkbike, GaiaGPS and others. Robin co-founded and built MapMyFitness, an open fitness tracking platform, which was acquired by Under Armour. He then served as their Chief Digital Officer, leading the overall strategic direction of the company's Connected Fitness and eCommerce business. Robin earned an M.A. in Finance from the University of Colorado Denver and a B.S. in Finance from Metropolitan State College of Denver.

Robin is a Boulder, Colorado entrepreneur. Denver & Boulder, Colorado were featured in CNBC's "Cities of Success."



MY STORY

I can't help but draw parallels between the spirit of exploration that defines *Outside* and my own path. The great outdoors is full of challenges, surprises and breathtaking moments of discovery. I am a proud Coloradan, and spent my youth in awe of the beauty and power of the mountains. My parents divorced when I was two, leaving my mother with the daunting challenge of raising two boys with very little income. We moved more than a dozen times before I was 16, which meant moving schools, meeting new friends and taking on change almost constantly. At age nine, I discovered my love for cycling, which allowed me to explore the mountains I admired from afar.

My cycling career took me around the world, racing in more than 30 countries and meeting my greatest advisors and friends. While I lost more races than I won, my journey to entrepreneurship was defined by the countless miles I rode across the world. The great outdoors and cycling transformed my life. If I had not found a discipline like cycling, I don't believe I would have even made it to college. And without the academic foundation and opportunities I was given while at CU Denver, I would not have had the confidence to build companies that can change the world.

MY 3 STEPS TO SUCCESS

THE VALUE OF ADAPTABILITY: One of the greatest lessons the outdoors and sports has taught me is the value of adaptability. Embrace the unknown, for it is in those uncertain moments that you discover your true strengths and capabilities. Remember, the most captivating views often come after the most challenging climbs.

CARRY A PASSION FOR EXPLORATION AND CONTINUOUS LEARNING: Seek out new experiences, embrace diversity and remain open to the lessons that every encounter brings. In the words of John Muir: "The mountains are calling, and I must go." Our personal mountains—our aspirations—call us to climb higher, dream bigger and make a positive impact on the world. Remember that regardless of the degree you hold or the title that you earn at your first job, you can do anything.

TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS WITH COURAGE AND CONFIDENCE: If I had not listened to some of the advice given to me, I would have never left finance to start my own business, or thought it possible to be the CEO of a genetics company. Nor would I have gone on to build my true dream that brings my passion for the outdoors to the world. Lean on friends, family and advisors but always remember you can do anything. Believe in yourself. You can always climb higher to see what is on the other side.

LO TONEY



Lo Toney is Founder and Managing Partner of Plexo Capital, which he incubated and spun out from Google Ventures. Plexo Capital invests in emerging seed-stage venture capital (VC) projects and directly in companies sourced from the portfolios of VCs in which it has an investment. Lo earned an MBA from the UC Berkeley Haas School of Business and a B.S. in Business from Hampton University.

Lo is a CNBC Contributor.



MY STORY

The job of a venture capitalist (VC) is multifaceted; however, one constant is the ability to provide advice and perspective to entrepreneurs. Typically, a VC will provide helpful advice to entrepreneurs based on a high-level view across many companies.

An interesting aspect is that VCs do not always “eat their own dog food.” In other words, a VC might not always think about their own firm in the same manner. In starting my firm, I took an entrepreneurial approach and thought like a founder.

As such, I ask myself questions like: “Who is my customer?” “What are the desired outcomes of my customer?” and “How should I differentiate my firm in a competitive market?”

These are questions we ask entrepreneurs, and those are the same questions any owner, or leader of any-sized company should ask about their business.

MY 3 STEPS TO SUCCESS

KNOW YOUR CUSTOMER: Understanding the customer you’re serving is the most important question to start. At Plexo Capital, we create a persona to understand the customer, including a picture and even a name to make it more personal. We answer questions like: “Where does this person live?” “What is their occupation and family status?” “How many of these people are there with this need or problem?” and more. All these questions help guide the development of a service or product to serve the customer.

KNOW YOUR CUSTOMER’S DESIRED OUTCOME(S): To create the right product or service in a competitive market, it is important to understand the desired outcome of the customer and the shortcomings of the existing products or services currently in use. We also look for opportunities where the outcome is really important, but there are not good offerings in the market to meet that need. This combination creates the largest opportunities.

DIFFERENTIATE IN A COMPETITIVE MARKET: Finally, after understanding the customer and their desired outcomes, it is critical to differentiate the product or service in the market. Positioning the product such that the customer recognizes it as the right solution for their needs relative to other offerings is key. The offering must “speak” to the customer and be recognized as the right product.

RAQUEL URTASUN



Raquel Urtasun is the Founder and CEO of Waabi, which creates autonomous trucking technology. Raquel applies AI technology to build innovative self-driving solutions. She is also a professor at the University of Toronto and co-founded the Vector Institute for AI. Over her 25-year career, she has received many awards. Prior to Waabi, Raquel was the Chief Scientist at Uber ATG and a Canada Research Chair in Machine Learning and Computer Vision. She earned a PhD in Computer Science at the École polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne.

Raquel was named a CNBC Changemaker in 2024.



MY STORY

Autonomous driving is one of the most exciting and important technologies of our generation. As a scientist, I'm always attracted to the most difficult problems that require innovative solutions. I founded Waabi to bring autonomous vehicles into the mainstream by leveraging generative AI. I've seen Waabi grow into a company that has raised one of the largest Series A rounds in Canadian history, partnered with major companies and expanded to a team of more than 100 of the brightest, most ambitious people I've ever met.

My journey started as a young girl in Pamplona, Spain who was always curious about how the world worked. That curiosity turned into a love of science. I studied engineering, where I was first introduced to AI research. That led to the pursuit of solving difficult problems which took me all the way through the ranks of academia and into the self-driving industry.

That said, my journey has not been simple. As a woman in science, I have always been somewhat of an outsider, and I have encountered instances of discrimination and harassment. It would have been easy to give up, but I chose to use these experiences to push forward. If anyone said I wasn't capable of something, it only made me set out to prove them wrong.

MY 3 STEPS TO SUCCESS

BE BOLD: Aim high and don't be afraid to step out of your comfort zone.

SURROUND YOURSELF WITH AN EXCELLENT TEAM, BUT RECOGNIZE THAT EXCELLENCE IS MUCH MORE THAN EXECUTION: Culture is just as important when building a business, and when building a team, it's important to emphasize strong cultural excellence as much as executional excellence.

NEVER GIVE UP: Don't let people tell you what you can or can't do. Believe in yourself and continue your pursuit of excellence. The world is in front of you for you to conquer.

CAMILA UZCATEGUI



Dr. Camila Uzcategui is the Co-Founder and CEO of Vitro3D, a company bringing its patented volumetric additive manufacturing solution to a number of industries, including life sciences, dental, hearing, aerospace, and automotive. She believes that deep technology entrepreneurship with a social lens can solve interdisciplinary problems with the help of additive manufacturing.

Camila holds a Ph.D. in Materials Science and Engineering from the University of Colorado, Boulder and a B.S. Physics from Florida International University.

Camila is a Boulder, Colorado entrepreneur. Denver & Boulder, Colorado were featured in CNBC's "Cities of Success."



MY STORY

I grew up observing people and their differing appearances, languages and afflictions. Growing up in a single mother household and having immigrated from Venezuela when I was 9 years old, I always knew that it had taken a village for me to get to where I am. From then on, I knew it was my destiny to give back to all human beings in whatever way I could. During my undergraduate studies, I originally thought I wanted to be a medical doctor. However, while I was establishing a health clinic in rural Latin America, I realized that despite having medical personnel, we lacked essential equipment and tools to help the people that needed it most. That revelation steered me away from medicine and towards materials engineering, aspiring to create solutions with broader societal impacts.

My passion for innovation led me to pursue a Ph.D., specializing in 3D printing for tissue engineering and regeneration. During this journey, I contributed to the development of technology that has the potential to create synthetic human organs, a breakthrough with far-reaching implications. During my doctoral work, I worked side by side with my co-founder who shared my vision of leveraging our expertise to create positive change. Together, we founded a company centered around a software-enabled manufacturing technology that has the potential to transform how complex parts are made.

MY 3 STEPS TO SUCCESS

SITUATIONAL RESILIENCE: Learn how to act when things don't go as planned. Know how to fail quickly. Be okay with the unknown.

CONTINUOUS LEARNING: Surround yourself with people smarter than you. Get diverse perspectives and embrace collaboration. Know when to be humble and when to be assertive.

GOOD COMMUNICATION: Listen actively and intently. Give and ask for radically candid feedback. Model empathy, compassion and emotional intelligence.

ANA VALDEZ



Ana Valdez is Co-Founder and President of Valdez Productions, Inc., an entertainment production company. She is also President and CEO of the nonprofit think tank The Latino Donor Collaborative (LDC). Ana has received multiple awards, including Top 10 Latinos in America by *Hispanic Magazine*, ALPFA's Top 50 Most Influential Latinas, and Top 100 Latinas by *Latino Leaders Magazine*. She earned an M.A. in International Relations from the Instituto Universitario Ortega y Gasset and a degree in Business from the Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey (ITESM).

Ana was featured in CNBC's 2022 Financial Literacy Month campaign.



MY STORY

As a 4-year-old listening to the conversations in my grandmother's kitchen, I first noticed the gap between what I saw as real and what I heard, a divide rooted in societal judgments and preconceived ideas rather than facts. I grew up in Mexico, and observing the world's arbitrary measures of worth puzzled me. At a very young age, I vowed to combat misconceptions with hard facts.

I am passionate about numbers and hard data. My journey began in companies like Nielsen, where I delved into data analysis, assisting transnational organizations in making informed business decisions. From there, I moved through roles at Banamex/Citibank's Venture Capital, the United Nations, and the Clinton White House using data as my guide to do well and do good. My professional experience and passion for data and people allowed me to do what I love as co-founder of our family production company. I also use them in my role as CEO of the Latino Donor Collaborative (LDC) and on various boards. Our LDC data reaches leaders in Fortune 500 companies every day, as well as the U.S. Congress, major political parties and international organizations like the World Economic Forum and the United Nations, impacting the lives and prosperity of millions.

MY 3 STEPS TO SUCCESS

PURPOSE: Find what really matters to you and keep your objectives clear. Clarity will help you stay focused and make successful decisions.

DATA, DATA, DATA: Powerful, well-researched data is my closest business companion.

BUILD YOUR VOICE EVERY DAY: Share your data, thoughts and conclusions; speak out, be kind but stay firm.



▾
PURSUE
YOUR
OWN
AMBITIONS



THANK
YOU

To everyone who had a hand in making this book a success:

The Entrepreneurs who remind us all what it means to live ambitiously (in alpha order): Toyin Ajayi, Patty Arvielo, Joshua Aviv, Melissa Bradley, John Hope Bryant, Martin Cabrera, Sandra Campos, Jay Chaudhry, Omer Davidi, Bonawyn Eison, Karen Finerman, Mowa Haile, Jennifer Holmgren, Jared Isaacman, Brad Jackson, Sydney Kitson, April Koh, Ken Langone, Tom Lee, Mark McClain, Lara Merriken, Joshua Mundy, Eliana Murillo, Alexis Ohanian, Praveen Penmetsa, Maryam Rofougaran, Javier Saade, James Scapa, Caryn Seidman Becker, Rea Ann Silva, Darian Simon, Shivani Siroya, Tammy Sun, Robin Thurston, Lo Toney, Raquel Urtasun, Camila Uzcategui, and Ana Valdez

The CNBC Strategic Talent Development Team for creating, compiling, and editing this collection of inspiring stories: Mary Duffy, Megan Rogers, Laura Measher, and Ashleigh Corby

The CNBC Strategic Content and Councils Team for collaborating with members of the CNBC CEO Council, CNBC Disruptor 50, and CNBC Changemakers collectives: Steve Lewis, David Spiegel, Sonie Osagie, Alexandra Thompson, and Riley de León

Senior Media & Tech Correspondent

Julia Boorstin for suggesting featured entrepreneurs from her book *When Women Lead*

The CNBC Global Marketing Creative Team

for their sophisticated design and keen eye: Tom Clendenin, Robert Poulton, Julie George, and Nina Markarian

CNBC Senior Photo Editor Adam Jeffery for capturing executive images

CNBC Public Relations and Copy Editors

Jennifer Dauble, Matt Howard, and Jasmine Wu for their unwavering attention to detail and voice

And our Editorial Leaders for sharing their gracious words of wisdom: KC Sullivan, CNBC President and Dan Colarusso, Senior Vice President of CNBC Business News



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