

Embracing the duality of foundership

Founders are typically driven by a deep passion to solve a big, meaningful problem. From the moment the entrepreneurial journey begins, everything is about that mission, and any time not spent on it feels like time wasted. There's a constant sense of urgency, a prevailing undercurrent of uncertainty, and we carry a heavy weight of self-expectation. This creates a hotbed for mental health challenges.

Temps de lecture : minute

10 July 2024

Unpacking the mental health journey of a founder is a very complex and intricate task, which likely requires a qualified doctor in the room. My advice has no basis more reliable than my own meandering experience, and in all honesty, I'm still at the start of the journey with much to learn, process and improve. There is, however, one particular challenge that has consumed me for most of my foundership, thus far, and it is one that I know many founders face: accepting and embracing utter duality.

When building a business, especially in the early days, I found myself walking a tightrope of wild success and inglorious failure, of euphoria and terror, of self doubt and self belief. Within a single day, it wasn't unusual to oscillate between a feeling of impending world domination and potential collapse at least once; and with my self worth tied to the success of the business, as many founders do, these extreme highs and lows really made me question my sense of self. Needless to say, this is not something to be solved; rather, it is an inevitability that I have found peace, and power, in embracing. How does one navigate this seeming

chaos? Stay with me.

Interrogate your definition of success

It is very tempting to selfishly attach my identity and personal success to the success of the business, for better or worse. If this business succeeds, I succeed. If this business fails, I fail. However, this quickly starts to enter dangerous territory. If people like the product, people like me. If people criticise it, that is a direct criticism of me. For a while, my personal success started and ended with Belong. This thought pattern persisted until, about a year into the journey, when I found myself at a retreat with a bunch of other founders. In one of the group coaching sessions, I reflected on this sentiment and my peers nodded along in agreement... all, except one (second-time) founder: "My personal success is not tied to whether or not my business succeeds. My personal success is tied to how I make people feel, and how they remember me," he said, with the wisdom of hindsight in his voice.

At that moment, the lightbulb went off. I can do my very best, work my heart out, and still not succeed because of a million things that are out of my control. Would that make me a failure?

No.

So, these days, I strive to be led by my values and my vision, I leave it all out on the pitch, everyday, I do my best, and I do it with integrity. Redefining success in this way can be difficult and counter-intuitive, and it's still very much a work in progress for me, but it helps to remind myself, and my team, about what's really important.

Reframe failure with a growth mindset

Failure is neither binary nor fixed. As Roger Federer recently reflected - in

his career as one of the greatest tennis players of all time, he won just over half of the points he played. The key? Every time he lost a point, he put it behind him so that he could instantly commit to the next point with clarity and focus. This is a great example of a growth mindset.

The 'growth mindset' is a concept developed by psychologist Carol Dweck at Stanford. It is based on the finding that the brain is a malleable muscle that can be strengthened and flexed, and that neural activity (i.e. the stories we tell ourselves) plays a huge part in our ability to face and overcome adversity. With a growth mindset, you believe that your abilities can be developed and improved over time through dedication, effort, and the almighty *grit*. To this end, people with a growth mindset understand that setbacks are part of the process and therefore see them as opportunities for growth, rather than an indication of some fixed limitation.

Framing failure through the lens of a growth mindset makes it feel more like a ladder to climb than a cliff to fall off. Of course, any setback still hurts, but I try to not let it define me. Instead, I consciously take every knock as a lesson and an opportunity to stand up, taller than before. Because, at the end of the day, building a successful business is not about the battle, but, rather, about the war.

Keep your house in order

Is it even a spiel on mental health if we don't talk about exercise and sleep? As they say, building a business is a marathon that you're expected to sprint; you need to be both mentally and physically fit. And when it comes to managing the highs and lows, clarity of mind is like currency. We've heard it all before, and I fear I sound a little uninspired saying it again, but science is science: sleep well, exercise regularly, eat healthy. Whatever that looks like for you. And that is the important part because I wish I could sit here and tell you that I'm a '*meditation, 10km*

run, fully balanced breakfast by 7 am' kinda gal, but I'm not. I tried that, and all it did was increase my cortisol levels. I wasn't getting enough sleep, I was rushing through my meditation and sprinting the 10km trying to fit it all in before the day started, which ultimately made me more stressed. So I've come to embrace the fact that, really, I'm more of an *'8 am cereal for breakfast, walk on the treadmill after work, reward myself by scrolling TikTok'* kinda gal, and it truly does wonders for me.

Psychologically, rest reduces cognitive load and improves decision-making (read: not resting literally makes you a worse decision-maker). I know all too well the feeling that any second spent away from the business is like losing money, and I'm here to tell you that that's simply not the case. There's a reason the airplane safety instruction is to put on your own oxygen mask before assisting others - you need to be at your best to make your business succeed. *Take care of numero uno first.*

Samantha Rosenberg is a behavioural economist, and the COO and cofounder of *Belong*.



MADDYNEWS UK

The newsletter you need for all the latest from the startup ecosystem

[SIGN UP](#)

Article by Samantha Rosenberg