

9 Lessons I Learnt As A Young Social Entrepreneur

- Ayesha Kalyan



I was 25 when I decided to quit my job in Mumbai while I was at the brink of a promotion. I turned down some great job offers that I would have otherwise died for. I moved back to my home-state Haryana to join my ex-colleague and together we established our social start-up in January 2018. My journey so far has been every bit exciting, challenging and rewarding as I had imagined it to be. We met some great people, formed a core

team and on our way, also met brilliant organisations who offered incubations, advice and mentoring. But it has also been overwhelming and draining at times, often to the point of almost burning out. No matter where we all come from, all of us young social entrepreneurs have pretty much similar expectations.

If I were to share my learnings to a friend who was planning their journey as a social entrepreneur, I would probably start with these nine -

Finding your ground will take time

My transition from a wallflower to being assertive took it's own sweet time and I often worried that I wasn't meant to be an entrepreneur. Until I accepted it was okay to grow slow. The journey of finding yourself requires time. You feel it all — the thrill, the hustle, the imposter syndrome, the intimidation, the burnout — all in no particular order. The successes won't always seem enough. The first few years will include crazy late nights, working Sundays and great meltdowns. Don't be harsh and beat yourself over it. Don't lose your personal relationships. Be thoughtful about your health and savings.

Find your own productivity pattern and avoid the trap of “staying busy”.

When you're just starting out, your roadmap seems obscured and you are in a hurry to find the missing parts. This is also a phase where we tend to go nuts over getting all the opportunities that are out there. Don't get me wrong, these opportunities are great. But they aren't always enough to anchor your actions and growth. Take time to choose the right opportunities where you have a competitive advantage in terms of your natural abilities or interests and can grow. There will never be a dearth of opportunities.

Limit the self-romanticising

At the beginning of your journey, you strongly feel the need to self-reflect and have heart-baring conversations. And they are, of course, crucial for you to create a comfortable and inclusive mind-space for yourself. But to what extent? Too much of it can be like having too much chocolate. Spending hours and hours of time talking about yourself, your struggles or your strengths can be blinding. Your perception of self can unnecessarily stretch while your sight for others will narrow. Most of the times, your reality is built out of your thoughts. Find people who are honest with their feedback, kind to your journey and keep you positive. Avoid people who add to your self-doubt or do not really make an effort to understand your purpose. Whatever you give your thinking a foothold for, it will take you with it.

It is okay to take a backseat

One of the crucial reasons we often decide to start our own work is also because we want the freedom to run things as we wish. Then comes the dilemma of staying relevant within their organisation which is faced by every founder at some point. The stubbornness to be “seen” can often push you into a sea of doubt, poor decision-making and eventually emotional recklessness. It makes you want to become the person people want to see which may or may not always be healthy for them or you. Refrain that temptation. Make sure your voice of reason and belief is strong enough to help you sail.

“We often think of our start-ups as our babies. It becomes all the more important to know when to let go of the control and take a backseat.”

Leadership must inspire

It has been rightfully said, extraordinary results don't come from “me” but from “we”. Do regular check-ins with the people you work with. Take time to nurture people and help develop them into becoming leaders. Stay away from dead-end conversations. Your title, knowledge, charisma can be the tools to attract people, but at the end of the day, if your actions and words do not inspire others to do better for themselves or towards your shared goal, you are more likely encouraging a follower-ship. Put yourself to

good use for yourself and your organisation. Find things to create, innovate or design for other people to use and learn from.

Aim long-term

I have lost the count of the times I have hid behind the “We’re just a start-up. It’s fine” excuse when things were not progressing as well as we had planned. It’s like I am waiting for some sort of alarm to go off. Reality is different. You need to maintain action no matter what and aim for a long-term focussed working. Hydrate your mind and get your creative juices flowing. But always know the difference between “an idea that feels great to you” and “an idea that works great for your organisation”. Knowing what not to do can be just as powerful as knowing what to do.

You will be disliked and that’s okay

Being a leader is about making choices and decisions. And not all of them are a valley of flowers. We are often expected to make choices based on conjectures. If anxiety or over-analysing is your natural response to things, as it often is in my case, the challenge of making quick or split-second decisions can be maddening. On some days, you need to be harsh. And the people around you won’t like you. Overcome that guilt.

Practice values

Develop a clear understanding of who you are, what you value and where you will or won't compromise. And do it more than you speak about it. Values can keep you both grounded and teachable, regardless of how much you already know. How you approach life indeed says a lot about you. Turn your thoughts towards appreciation and never underestimate the importance of transparency and humility.

“Your journey will be a string of your choices. No matter the circumstance, remind yourself that you have a choice. Whether to control or to collaborate, to stay aloof or to engage, to take or to give — the choices you make will impact your body of work, the course of your organisation.”

Success doesn't always lay in numbers

We tend to believe that social enterprises and non-profits have the power to change the world all at once. It is what drives most of us in taking that leap of faith. But remind yourselves that it won't be that easy. Change is slow. Ideas, people and results take their own time. We all like instant success stories, high visibility and impressive metrics. Sure, it's important. But success also has a lot to do with the lives you've touched, the good you put out and

however small, making that positive difference. That is the ultimate purpose of what we do.

The show must go on

True to my nature, every time an initiative took an unseen turn, or a person left the team, or we didn't crack funding, I'd lose my sleep and calm over it. I'd even make a list of things gone wrong and find someone to blame. Eventually, you have to get out of bed and find a way to go on.

In the end, even with all the knowledge in the world, there isn't really a full-proof formula to make things work all the time. People will move on. Ideas will lose spark. But what will never change about your journey is the uncertainty. It's part of the job. Appreciate the quality time spent together working. And remember, as long as you stay true to who you are and mean well, you will always be more than just good enough.

Link - https://medium.com/@ayeshna/9-lessons-i-learnt-as-a-young-social-entrepreneur-5d177a5dc41b?source=friends_link&sk=9fe2df664e1fc47aa52165ebf443d1ee