This Founder Explains Why Success Isn’t the Biggest Valuation or Fastest Growth; It’s the People You Help

There are few things quite as stressful as figuring out the logistics of transforming your home into something that is a reflection of yourself. This is an experience that Jean Brownhill understands firsthand.

A Harvard and Cooper Union-trained architect, when Brownhill started working for Coach as senior manager in its global architecture department, she made the move to buy her first house. She was thrilled to put her skills to work designing the space, but soon ran into difficulties.

“I’d always dreamed about being able to actually do projects for myself, and when it came down to hiring a general contractor, I hired the wrong general contractor,” Brownhill told *Entrepreneur*. “I just thought this is really crazy. How is it possible that after 10 years of practice and working in the construction industry that I made this mistake? How in the world would my mom or people not in the industry, [be] remotely equipped to handle such a challenging process? I realized that my architectural education could go toward helping real people renovate their spaces and make them places that they’re really excited.”

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So with that goal in mind, in 2011 she launched Sweeten, a website that matches homeowners with general contractors so that everyone involved can have a positive experience. Seven years later, the platform has nearly $900 million

constructions projects in the pipeline.

Brownhill is also co-founder and chair of the African American Student Union at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design, an organization that supports African-Americans working in architecture, real estate and urban planning. She's one of only 11 African-American women entrepreneurs in the United States to raise more than $1 million in venture capital.

Brownhill shared her insights about why going back to the start will help you most when the going gets tough.

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Can you talk about a moment in your career that you had to advocate for yourself? How did you approach it?

In architecture school there weren't that many women. But certainly when I started working in the field, the construction industry is very male-dominated. I can remember my very first site visit realizing that I needed to, almost on a daily basis, advocate for myself in a way or at least present myself in a way that I would be taken seriously, seen as an expert and really prove myself.

I think there's been a lot of talk [recently] about this idea of power posing. And at that time I wouldn't have known to call it that. But your physical presence, how you stand, is certainly something that can command a certain amount of attention. Also, your preparedness for the meeting, in your ability to communicate effectively without hesitation. These are all super important ways of advocating for yourself and your position.

What was a mistake you made and how did you move forward from it?

Really early on I wasted a lot of time talking to the wrong people and partners, possible employees and even investors. And I did that because it took me a while to realize that I hadn't taken the time to clearly define my values. Now I waste far less time talking to the wrong people.

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How have you grown and changed as a leader throughout your career?

In the beginning I think I had this traditional idea of leadership that I internalized, which was super top down, super authoritative and oddly enough also really friendly. I thought that I had to give everyone exactly what they needed to do and they needed to be my friend. And my thinking around that has completely changed. I am a complete believer in collective decision-making. I definitely do not think that having the formal authority of the title of founder or CEO means that I need to give everyone clear direction. We make much better decisions as a group.

On the friendship piece, I'd say now I'm less authoritative and also less friendly – and I don't mean that in a negative way. I've really internalized that having people trust me and having me trust them is the really important part. Caring deeply for their humanity and them as people is super important. But the friendship piece has become less and less important to me. And it's allowed me to then work much more collaboratively in these kind of teams.

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What do you say to yourself to keep going during tough moments?

I have three pieces of advice that were given to me. One, smile. Two, be grateful. Three, always be growing. In moments

when it’s really tough at Sweeten, I really try to remember why I started the company.

I go to our blog. I read the stories of our homeowners. I read the stories of our general contractors and I remember that we’re solving a real problem and people are super grateful for our service. We have homeowners and contractors who we helped transform their lives and transform their businesses. And so it makes me really happy to connect back to the people and to know that we’re helping.

When I have to make really hard decisions, I just remind myself that this is all icing on the cake. I got this incredible opportunity, that I got to be born in America, that I have parents, that I’m smart, that I’m ambitious, that I’m kind and that I get surround myself with a network of similar people. That’s amazing. And all this other stuff – who raised what or what’s your valuation or how quick you’re growing – even decisions like having to let someone go who is a great person and just isn’t the right fit anymore, you just have to remember that it’s all icing. The fundamentals can’t be taken away. But if it all went away tomorrow, everything about my life I would be so proud of.

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Over time, how has your view of success and failure changed?

I used to think of them like they were opposite sides or binary in some way. And now I really genuinely 100 percent see that failure is the path to success. There literally is no other way to get there. Every no means that you’re closer to yes.

I’m certainly super ambitious and I absolutely want to build a multibillion dollar company. And I want to be nationwide and I want to be global. I want all those things still. But the actual doing of it, the actual being in the day to day and the

actual working through the challenges is the fun part. You don’t get that when you start. Your heart rises and falls when any little thing happens and it’s heartbreaking. And at some point it flips and you realize that that this is the fun part.

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