This Young Entrepreneur Explains Why You Shouldn't Fear Being Wrong



In this series, Open Every Door, Entrepreneur *staff writer Nina Zipkin shares her conversations with leaders about understanding what you have to offer, navigating the obstacles that will block your path, identifying opportunity and creating it for yourself and for others.*

When you are building your company, one of the most important things is the relationships that you build, including with your customers, employees, advisors and investors.

When you're operating alone – or at least with a small team – there may be a lot of things going on, but the last thing you want is for an important meeting to fall through the cracks. That's where Maran Nelson wants Clara Labs to come in.

Nelson, 26, is the co-founder and CEO of the nearly 4-year-old company that is the maker of scheduling assistant Clara. It works within your email to make sure that all of your meeting needs are taken care of.

With her 24 person team, Nelson has built software that reads and responds to meeting requests in a straightforward and conversational way, integrates with calendars, books conference rooms and automatically follows up if a recipient is unresponsive.

Nelson, a first-time entrepreneur, is a Y Combinator alumni, has raised $12 million for the company. She shared her insights about why her idea of success is creating an environment where it's OK to fail – as long as you learn and pick yourself up again.

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Entrepreneurship can be really lonely, especially for young entrepreneurs. What have you done to build a community for yourself?

I strongly advocate having a co-founder that is truly a close friend. I think having a foundation of deep impermeable respect in your co-founder relationship helps stave off a lot of the loneliness. Still, even with that, you always want to have a community of folks going through similar problems to bounce things off of. Anything that you're experiencing someone else has definitely gone through.

I feel very lucky to be in a kind of hotbed of entrepreneurship. Living in San Francisco there are several women entrepreneurs [I've gotten to know] and they've been completely invaluable. They've become some of my closest friends because of so many shared experiences.

Is there a piece of advice a mentor gave you that you still take to heart today?

Bob Metcalfe. I meet him when I was in college and he is actually the inventor of ethernet, as well as the founder of a company called 3Com. He told me that your only job as the CEO is to think of your company as a ship that is in a war. And there are all sorts of people attacking you and as long as they're just hitting you above water, you're fine. You can always withstand the attacks that are above water, and you want your team to be fighting those attacks.

As a CEO you just need to focus on understanding what it is that would be an under-the-water shot that could take the whole thing down, and to only step in or protect against those kinds of problems. I thought that was a great way to delineate of this matters vs. you should just let go.

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For somebody who is about to take the leap and start their own venture for the first time, what would you tell them? What do you wish you had known?

I think it’s important to be as enthusiastic about failure as you are about success. It can be easy to find something that you become personally passionate about and to try to defend that thing that you’ve conceived of is right. In a way, that cuts you off from the information that you really need to be able to hear to build something that people will find valuable and useful in their lives. That listening mindset of non-attachment to anything other than making sure that you are malleable enough to be receptive to the truth is the biggest challenge to being a successful founder.

How would you describe yourself as a leader?

I try to give the team a lot of sway and autonomy in determining what they do. The only thing I try to hold us accountable for is running experiments, meaning, this is a hypothesis and I could very well be wrong. So it’s important to ask that question: What is the company infrastructure you need to be wrong and let everybody on the team know that it is actually great to be wrong. Being able to know with confidence that something doesn’t work is fantastic.

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

The compulsion to say I can work 80 hours a week so I’m going to schedule myself for 80 hours a week worth of work, which I will inevitably not finish because it was actually 120 hours a week of work. I really should just learn how to schedule for 30 hours a week of work, which will fall over into being 70

and call it good.

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

I try to constantly remind myself that I am worth advocating for – not just in a way that is me representing myself but others representing me. I would suggest that a shocking number of people will advocate for and with you. We actually really do want to help each other more. It's not about taking advantage – of course there are exceptions but on the whole people want to do work that betters people collectively. That mission emboldens and inspires people.

I think it's good to get in a mentality where you feel you are perpetually advocating for yourself, not from a place of arrogance but from the recognition that the world really wants us all to be advocating for ourselves. We aspire to a world in which everybody has that kind of sense of personal mission. And we work together in achieving it.

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

Sometimes it's easy to feel like you've fallen off a path somehow or you've lost your way or that you're confused. I think it's important to remember that that's actually not possible. You are always on your path. You're creating it as you go along and it was always set for you. And I find a lot of solace in remembering that.

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