

SUCCESSFUL NEURODIVERSE ENTREPRENEURS



NEURODIVERSITYHUB

INTRODUCTION

Navigating the entrepreneurial journey can be daunting, so we have detailed the journeys of eight successful entrepreneurs to help you get better insight into the process– from a neurodivergent individual’s perspective!

Each entrepreneur works in a different industry and comes from a different personal background. For each entrepreneur, we have included information on the challenges they faced growing up and in business, their strategies for utilising their neurodiversity, their rise to success, and their advice for budding entrepreneurs like you.

Remember: Everyone’s journey is different. There is no one correct path when it comes to entrepreneurship so make sure you stay true to yourself and recognise your own unique strengths and challenges.

Xialene Chang

INTERN



CHARLES SCHWAB

Charles Schwab Corporation



OVERVIEW

In 1971, Charles Schwab started his first brokerage office with the belief that the stock market should be open to everyone – a belief that revolutionized the financial industry. By the time The Charles Schwab Corp. went public in 1987, it had a market capitalization value of \$400 million. Today, that figure is up to \$44.01 billion – and counting.

SCHWAB ON FACING CHALLENGES AND RECOGNISING STRENGTHS:

As a student, Schwab had extreme difficulty taking notes in class, flunked English two times, and struggled in foreign language classes. To cope with these struggles, Schwab states: “I invented my own accommodations, like relying on Classic Comic Books to read such assignments as A Tale of Two Cities and Ivanhoe.” But it wasn’t that simple, “It’s painful”, Schwab says, “People decide you aren’t working hard enough or are slow. I didn’t quit, because I was really good at other things, terrific in math and science and anything that didn’t deal with words ... I had good skills in dealing with people” (Schwab, WSJ).

Recognising his personal strengths and weaknesses was imperative to Schwab's success. With his own talents in math and economics as well as the help of his friends who took notes for him in class, Schwab graduated from Stanford University with flying colors. Then, his entrepreneurial skills, which he started exercising as a child when he hatched a profitable business selling chickens and eggs, ended up helping him graduate from Stanford Business School and ultimately start his own company.

"Many skills and talents, in addition to reading ability, are as important in the making of a top executive. Character, ethics, communication skills, consistency, analytical and relationship skills – those are important for leaders."

—
Charles Schwab
The Los Angeles Times (April 30, 1996)

In an interview for The Los Angeles Times (April 30, 1996), Schwab delves further into his various strengths, many of which he credits to his dyslexia: "I'm really good at concepts and visualisation. I get into a meeting with business associates and I can process all kinds of stuff and get to the conclusion much faster than other people who have to go step by step, processing things sequentially... That helped me in solving complicated business problems. I could visualise how things would look at the end of the tunnel." Importantly, "[he] discovered that many skills and talents, in addition to reading ability, are as important in the making of a top executive. Character, ethics, communication skills, consistency, analytical and relationship skills. Those are important for leaders. I have some of those skills, and I work with a lot of great people who bring other strengths and talents to the table" (Schwab, LA Times). In an interview with the Child Mind Institute (2018), Schwab also says that having a learning difference will make you "become somewhat of a humbler person, and that's a good trait ... you don't know everything and so it's good to go to people that might be smarter than you on a subject matter. It can also lead to some leadership qualities by being accepting of other people's strengths where you show weakness."

Schwab also emphasises that time and technology have helped him a long way in developing useful coping mechanisms. After decades in the financial world, he finds that industry-related words have become much easier to read and recognise, and text-to-audio translators have helped him get through the "reading" he has to do.

Surprisingly, Schwab did not have a name for his learning difference until much later in life when his own son was diagnosed with dyslexia – an event which changed both his and his family's life. Following this news, Schwab and his wife founded Schwab Learning to help the parents of children diagnosed with dyslexia, and created sparktop.org for kids diagnosed with dyslexia.

SCHWAB'S ADVICE:

"Find out what you can do well, focus on it, and work doubly hard ... We all aspire to do the best we can with what we're dealt. Focus on your strengths. Don't be afraid to ask for help and to admit you need it."

—
Charles Schwab
The Los Angeles Times (April 30, 1996)



Dyslexia and What I Would Tell My Younger Self | Chuck Schwab

Child Mind Institute
May 8, 2018



Charles Schwab on dyslexia: I struggle with the alphabet

Graham Bensinger
October 9, 2019



Transform Your Biggest Weaknesses Into Your Greatest Strengths--with Mark Thompson

leaderpowertools
December 9, 2010

DAVID NEELEMAN

JetBlue



OVERVIEW

David Neeleman founded JetBlue Airways in 1999 and built it into America's eighth largest airline. Despite a myriad of naysayers — from the venture capitalists who turned down investment opportunities to the media who cast their doubts on his abilities — Neeleman ended up revolutionising the flying experience by introducing innovations like live in-flight television and unparalleled customer service.

NEELEMEN ON FACING CHALLENGES AND RECOGNISING STRENGTHS:

In an interview with Fortune, Neeleman admits: "I struggled a lot in school. I really had a hard time with standardized tests, staying focused and absorbing information from a written page into my brain. It was tough. I thought I was stupid, that I didn't have what the other kids had. In third grade, sitting inside at recess, not being able to go out, because I couldn't get my work done. That was difficult" (Neeleman, Fortune).

“When I was in my mid-thirties, my mom sent me a book called *Driven to Distraction* by Ed Hallowell. My little brother had been diagnosed [with ADD] and she said, “I think you might want to read this book because I think you may have the same thing.” So I didn’t read the book, obviously, because I couldn’t do that. But eventually I did, and there were criteria for several different characteristics of someone with ADD. When I got through reading, it was this huge epiphany for me. I thought, wow, that’s it” (Neeleman, *Faster Than Normal*).

“I can look out on an industry with all kinds of problems and say, ‘How can I do this better?’ My ADHD brain naturally searches for better ways of doing things”

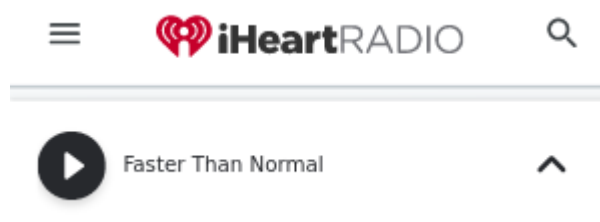
—
David Neeleman
ADDitude.

NEELEMAN'S ADVICE:

Neeleman makes sure to take the appropriate measures to counteract the challenges associated with ADHD. “My assistant helps me write letters and keeps my calendar,” he says. “I have no idea what I’m doing one day to the next.” When at home, he has trained himself to put his wallet and keys in the same place so he doesn’t misplace them. He also wears a Casio DataBank watch, which allows him to type in reminders of appointments or ideas as they pop up. At the office, he actively surrounds himself with people who are good at the details of the business.

What helped Neeleman overcome these challenges was a great support system: “My parents were always positive. They always tried to get me to look on the bright side and tried to let me know that I had other talents that maybe would be better than just reading something on a page” (Neeleman, *Faster Than Normal*).

This sort of encouragement gave Neeleman the confidence he needed to pinpoint what his unique strengths are. “I can distill complicated facts and come up with simple solutions. I can look out on an industry with all kinds of problems and say, ‘How can I do this better?’ My ADHD brain naturally searches for better ways of doing things,” Neeleman told ADDitude. “With the disorganisation, procrastination and inability to focus, and all the other bad things that come with ADHD, there also comes creativity and the ability to take risks,” he explains. “If someone told me you could be normal or you could continue to have your ADHD, I would take ADHD,” said Neeleman, who refuses to take medication for his condition. “I’m afraid of taking drugs once, blowing a circuit, and then being like the rest of you.”



[*How to use your ADHD to Start an Airline, with JetBlue Founder David Neeleman.*](#)

Faster Than Normal
July 26, 2017

JO MALONE

Jo Malone London



OVERVIEW

Jo Malone grew up in public housing in the 1960's with her mom, dad and sister. She left school with no qualifications and severe dyslexia, before building her cosmetics empire Jo Malone London which she sold to Estée Lauder in 1999 for “undisclosed millions”. After being diagnosed with breast cancer in 2003, she made a triumphant return in 2011 with Jo Loves.

MALONE ON FACING CHALLENGES AND RECOGNISING STRENGTHS:

“My dyslexia wasn’t diagnosed until I was in my teens and, in many ways, I’m glad. I struggled to tell the time and even now when I read certain letters they run around the page. I just couldn't keep up – I couldn't keep the words in my head” (Malone, How I Built This with Guy Raz).

“I struggled above and beyond with mathematics, English, and languages. I would literally be thrown out of the class and I was told I was lazy and stupid – and I knew I was neither of those things. I just couldn't follow an exam paper. Multiple choice to me was the worst thing in the world because I would put my cross against an answer and then I'd watch all the sentences and letters move around on the page. And by the end of it, I would probably have answered 3 or 4 questions out of 20, and I would fail and then I would pick up a book and I would read it and there will be no problem also and I would think ‘I'm cured!’ and then sure enough it would happen again. It still happens to me today, not as much as it did when I was a child and I can manage perfectly well now but that's probably because I'm not so anxious about it anymore” (Malone, How I Built This with Guy Raz).

"I was really good at things like biology because it's visual. I was very good at history because I could listen to the stories and I would memorize those, and I was very good at religious studies, believe it or not, because, again, that is based on stories." This strength is something Malone has carried on to her business ventures, and suggests that anyone who prefers to communicate visually rather than through words should "tell your story in pictures in your business plan."

"We've learned how to see around walls, climb ladders and spot the potential in something that others don't. We struggle in some ways but that is a good thing in business. If everything came naturally and easily, we wouldn't build "business muscle" — that strength you need to succeed."

—
Jo Malone
Evening Standard

Resilience

"Nothing ever goes 100 percent anyone's way, so when tough times come, resilience allows you to dig deep. I needed more resilience building Jo Loves than anything I've ever done. I wanted to quit every day, but now I'm the happiest I've ever been. I was in Marbella recently where I was a guest speaker alongside Barack Obama. How did I get there, a girl from the council estate? Resilience." (Malone, Standard)

An important part of Malone's success is recognising her strengths and accepting her weaknesses. She writes in the Evening Standard, "Many entrepreneurs, including me, are dyslexic — it's not a hindrance, it's a help. Dyslexia makes us creative. We've learned how to see around walls, climb ladders and spot the potential in something that others don't. We struggle in some ways but that is a good thing in business. If everything came naturally and easily, we wouldn't build "business muscle" — that strength you need to succeed." Most importantly, "When you lose your fear, over say dyslexia or anxiety, it stops having a hold on you."

MALONE'S ADVICE:

Building a support network

"With products such as fragrances, food and music, you need potential backers to smell, taste and enjoy. Invite some for dinner. Remember — it's your passion, vision and resilience they want to see, not your reading and writing skills." "Numbers are important but find someone to work through them with you. Ask your friends, bank manager or child's maths teacher. With writing, say what you want to with all your passion into a Dictaphone and ask a friend to write it down. You'd be surprised at the amount of friends whose resources you can call on. Just say 'I've got this great idea but I need some help. If I treated you to a pizza and a glass of wine, would you help me go through the figures?'... Numbers and charts are my biggest struggle. But once they're done, they stop being frightening." (Malone, Standard)

MALONE'S ADVICE:

Negotiation

“Both in business and in a relationship ... when you have a situation where people are at each other’s throats, silence is a great negotiator. Calm the situation down. Leave it 24 hours then go back to it. Silence can cause uncertainty on the other side and lead them to move towards you first.” (Malone, Standard)

Being proud

“Ultimately, be proud, as I am, to be one of the thousands of SMEs who have had the passion, courage and tenacity to start their own business, create employment, help the economy and build for our future.” (Malone, Standard)

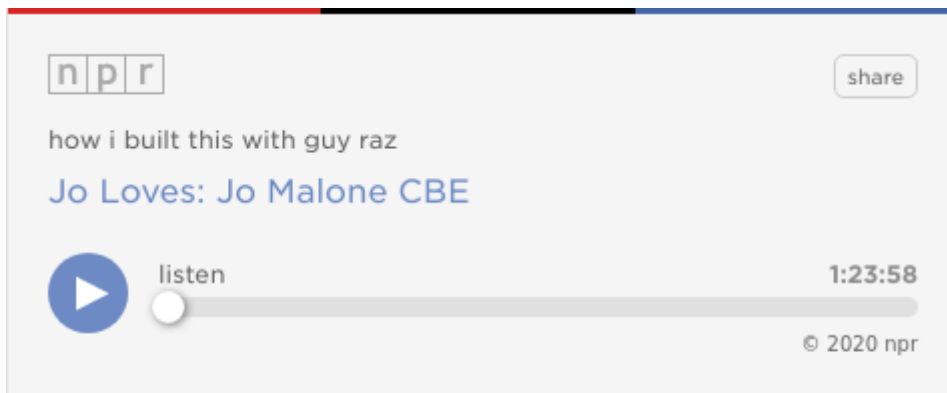
“When you lose your fear, over say dyslexia or anxiety, it stops having a hold on you.”

—
Jo Malone
Evening Standard

Making mistakes

“If you make a mistake, never blame someone else. It’s your responsibility, take it on the chin and learn from it.” (Malone, Standard)

PODCAST INTERVIEW:



Jo Loves: Jo Malone CBE

How I Built This with Guy Raz
May 18, 2020

INGVAR KAMPRAD

IKEA



OVERVIEW

In 1943, at age 17, Ingvar Kamprad's father rewarded him with a small sum of money for achieving good grades at school, despite being dyslexic. Ingvar used this money to found IKEA, an abbreviation for Ingvar Kamprad from Elmtaryd, Agunnaryd, his childhood home. He revolutionised the furniture market by introducing 'flatpacking,' a cost efficient method that lets consumers purchase their furniture in pieces and assemble it themselves. IKEA now has over 370 stores in 47 countries and is worth \$11.8 billion.

INGVAR ON FACING CHALLENGES AND RECOGNISING STRENGTHS:

Kamprad's entrepreneurial journey began at the mere age of five, when he discovered that he could buy matches in bulk at a very low cost and then re-sell them individually at a good profit. Initially, he was selling matches to his nearby neighbours but by the time he was seven, he started riding his bicycle to reach more customers. He eventually expanded to selling flower seeds, greeting cards, Christmas tree decorations, and pencils and ball-point pens.

Ingvar's struggles with dyslexia are actually what led him to develop a number of innovative ideas which drove IKEA to become the billion-dollar company it is today. For example, he often struggled with remembering product identification codes which are typically a series of letters and numbers that indicate what the nature and origin of an item is. To overcome this challenge, Ingvar decided to replace product identification codes with names. That is why IKEA beds have Norwegian place names, sofas are named after Swedish towns, kitchen tables have Finnish geographic names, chairs mostly have male names, rugs mostly have Danish names, and glasses and cups are given adjectives as names. In this way, Kamprad personified furniture items, which helped him visualise and memorise different products with ease. Today, the creative names of IKEA furniture are an iconic feature of the brand.

*"Only those who are
asleep make no
mistakes."*

—
Ingvar Kamprad

Another creative solution Ingvar developed due to his dyslexia is IKEA's simple DIY assembly instructions. He knew that convincing customers to assemble their own flat packed furniture would only be possible if it was both cheap and simple. To achieve this, Ingvar replaced convoluted written assembly instructions with illustrations and included all necessary Allen keys, screws and fixings so that customers wouldn't be distracted from the task at hand by having to search for tools and equipment.

PAUL ORFALEA

Kinkos



OVERVIEW

Paul Orfalea founded Kinkos, a shipping, printing, and copying company, in 1970 with a \$5,000 bank loan co-signed by his parents. The idea for Kinko's came to Orfalea when he noticed many people would line up to pay 10 cents a page to use the library photocopier, and wanted to provide the service at a cheaper rate. The first Kinko's was a converted hamburger stand near his university, and it was equipped with a lone Xerox machine. People told him the store would never work. "I didn't listen," he says. "I knew what I was going to do" (Orfalea, ABILITY Magazine). Today, his copying empire, which FedEx now owns, has 1,200 locations, 23,000 employees in ten different countries and is worth \$2.4 billion.

ORFALEA ON FACING CHALLENGES

Due to his dyslexia and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), Orfalea ran his company in a manner much different from most – his office had no statistical charts, no stacks of business reports, and no files inside filing cabinets. Most of the time, he didn't even have a pen in his hand – he had his co-workers help him with written correspondence. In fact, Orfalea says there isn't a machine at Kinko's he can operate.

From an early age, Paul fit the profile of ADHD, but was never diagnosed. He struggled in grade school and had trouble learning the alphabet. He didn't pay attention in class and flunked the second grade, did poorly in high school, and got C's and D's in college. He was labeled as a problem child and his academic future seemed doubtful, even though he was later tested and found to have an IQ of 130. He didn't learn until years after that he also had dyslexia which made reading difficult.

"How many innovators, I wonder, are lost to us simply because their talents and skills cannot be accurately perceived or measured? And why are we so hung up on measuring everyone, anyway? The very bedevilment we are so eager to cure in a person may hold the key to his genius."

—
Paul Orfalea

As a result, the company captured many more customers, from small business owners, to individual customers, to the self-employed. Similarly, "Because I have a tendency to wander," he explains, "I never spent much time in my office. My job was going store to store, noticing what people were doing right. If I had stayed in my office all the time, I would not have discovered all those wonderful ideas to help expand the business" (Orfalea, ADDitude Magazine). A 24 hour store is one of the many ideas he picked up from his customers.

Looking back on his own education, Orfalea says that different children have different learning styles, and that the education system needs to recognize that fact before more children are left behind. "If No Child Left Behind had been around when I was in school," says Orfalea, "I would still be in third grade, because that's how bad a speller I am."

He writes, "Kids often come up to me and say, 'I am ADHD,' as opposed to 'I have ADHD.' What does that do to their self-esteem? Drugs like Ritalin and Prozac are prescribed as quick fixes... I am not against those drugs. In fact, my life improved dramatically once I started taking Prozac a couple of years back. But before giving drugs to our kids, we need to better understand what the drugs are trying to erase: the highly varied ways people think and process information." (Orfalea, ABILITY Magazine).

ON RECOGNISING STRENGTHS:

"My learning disability gave me certain advantages, because I was able to live in the moment and capitalize on the opportunities I spotted," says Orfalea, as he looks back on his career. "With ADHD, you're curious. Your eyes believe what they see. Your ears believe what others say. I learned to trust my eyes" (Orfalea, ADDitude Magazine). So when customers came into his store looking to use a computer — not to copy documents — Orfalea saw an opportunity and he expanded Kinko's to include computers.

"I can't write a letter and I can't fix a machine," says Orfalea. "My biggest advantage is that I don't get bogged down in the details, because of my ADHD. I hire capable people to handle that." (Orfalea, ADDitude Magazine). Adrianna Foss, a longtime colleague at Kinko's, says that Orfalea's temperamental style worked for Kinko's: "There is no doubt that Paul is brilliant," she says, "The speed at which his mind moves also causes him to be impatient and frustrated, emotions that he admits he is not good at holding in. But his impatience motivated all of us to get to the point and focus on the headlines of situations, not the minutiae. It also created a sense of urgency that kept propelling the company forward" (Foss, ABILITY Magazine).

"I learned how to depend on other people, appreciate their strengths, and SHOW my appreciation ... Of course we all depend on other people; I think my struggles taught me not to take them for granted."

—
Paul Orfalea

ON BUILDING A SUPPORT NETWORK:

"There were two types of support very important to my success: One was the support I got from my parents, and the other was the support I provided to my friends.

Among the blessings of my youth were the fact that I couldn't read, I couldn't sit still, and I had no natural mechanical ability. Today we know about Dyslexia and ADHD, but in the fifties and sixties I was just a problem to teachers and administrators. My parents knew better; especially my mom. My folks knew me, whereas the schools – and I went to a lot of them – only knew that I didn't fit their mold. My parents never lost faith in me. They knew I wasn't dumb or lazy. They tried everything to help me succeed in school and in life... They stuck with me and I think that's a big reason I never gave up.

But the other kind of support, that which I gave to my friends, was also really important. All success depends on relationships, but for someone who can't read, can't sit still, and lacks mechanical ability, relationships are critical. I developed a sixth sense for finding synergy. For example, my friends took exhaustive notes during lectures. I couldn't take notes, but I listened very attentively. They collected the details, and I garnered the meaning. We needed each other, so I would organise study groups where I provided pizza or beer or whatever, and we would share information in my learning style, which is spoken word. I learned how to depend on other people, appreciate their strengths, and SHOW my appreciation. That got woven into the Kinko's culture. As I hired coworkers and then partners, I was never shy about telling people how happy I was to have them with me. Of course we all depend on other people; I think my struggles taught me not to take them for granted" (Orfalea, Forbes)

ORFALEA'S ADVICE:

1. "Take an accounting class. Be "on" your business instead of "in" your business. And always remember the advice I read in a fortune cookie: "Your eyes believe what they see; your ears believe others." You don't have to do your own accounting, but you need an accounting class because you want to speak the language. No matter how much you love being a designer or a baker or a company president, you won't really own the company until you understand the accounting" (Orfalea, Forbes).

"Being "on" rather than "in" your business means you cannot let yourself be consumed by the day-to-day dramas."

—
Paul Orfalea

2. Being "on" rather than "in" your business means you cannot let yourself be consumed by the day-to-day dramas. My father used to say that the mundane is like cancer. Sure, you need to visit the trenches, but if you live in the trenches you'll never have time to dream about the future, to see through the customer's eyes, to identify and remove the obstacles that prevent your coworkers from doing their best for every customer. That's your job: to see the future, empathize with the customer, and remove obstacles" (Orfalea, Forbes)

3. "Earlier I said I was blessed with the inability to sit still. That restlessness really helped me build Kinko's, because I was out in the stores all the time, seeing the business with my own eyes. Too many executives manage by spreadsheet alone. I think you've got to be out in the world, looking for obstacles to remove and new opportunities to exploit. The world doesn't stand still. Why would you? As much as you crave candor, a lot of people will tell you what they think you want to hear, or what they want you to hear, so get out and see things for yourself. With practice, you'll learn to see new opportunities everywhere you look" (Orfalea, Forbes).

"I think you've got to be out in the world, looking for obstacles to remove and new opportunities to exploit. The world doesn't stand still. Why would you?"

—
Paul Orfalea

RICHARD BRANSON

Virgin Group



OVERVIEW

At 16, Richard Branson embarked on his first business venture in publishing. Two years later, he set up an audio-record mail-order business, and then he founded Virgin Records, a chain of record stores that would later become one of the top six record companies in the world. Today, Virgin Group consists of more than four hundred companies in 30 countries, making Branson the only person in the world to have built eight billion-dollar companies from scratch in eight different countries.

BRANSON ON FACING CHALLENGES AND RECOGNISING STRENGTHS

Branson, who dropped out of school at 16, said his dyslexia was "treated as a handicap: my teachers thought I was lazy and dumb, and I couldn't keep up or fit in" (Branson, *Independent*). "I got bored easily...thinking of all the things I could do once I left school. I couldn't always follow what was going on. On one of my last days at school, the headmaster said I would either end up in prison or become a millionaire. That was quite a startling prediction, but in some respects he was right on both counts!" (Branson, *Washington Post*).

"It is time we lost the stigma around dyslexia," he wrote. "It is not a disadvantage; it is merely a different way of thinking... Once freed from archaic schooling practices and preconceptions, my mind opened up. Out in the real world, my dyslexia became my massive advantage: it helped me to think creatively and laterally, and see solutions where others saw problems" (Branson, Independent).

"Once freed from archaic schooling practices and preconceptions, my mind opened up. Out in the real world, my dyslexia became my massive advantage: it helped me to think creatively and laterally, and see solutions where others saw problems."

—
Richard Branson

Branson joked that "ever since then, I've been name-dropping net and gross and feeling very pleased with myself. Nobody's been that impressed." He admits that "it sounds too unbelievable that you could build a company with 80,000 employees not knowing the difference....The thing is, at the end of the month, you can get somebody else to add it up. As long as there's more money in than going out, your company survives" (Branson, USA Today).

"If you have a learning disability, you become a very good delegator. Because you know what your weaknesses are and you know what your strengths are, and you make sure that you find great people to step in and deal with your weaknesses. And actually, whether you are dyslexic or not, I think delegation is such an important thing for a good leader to be good at doing. Too many leaders want to cling onto everything themselves and do everything themselves and never let go. Therefore, they never grow a group of companies like Virgin" (Branson, Business Insider). "That's how Virgin is run. Fantastic people throughout the Virgin Group run our businesses, allowing me to think creatively and strategically. This isn't a skill that comes easily to some, but when you're dyslexic, you have to trust others to do tasks on your behalf. In some cases, that can involve reading and writing. You learn to let go" (Branson, Washington Post).

Branson recalls a board meeting some years back where a director presented some figures to exemplify his point. Branson asked whether the numbers were good or bad? A director took Branson outside and asked him, "Am I right in thinking you don't know the difference between net and gross?" This director then drew a picture of a fishing net on a sheet of paper and showed him fish in the net. "Richard, your profit is what's left in the net, and everything else is gross turnover.' I was disappointed because I thought it was the other way around; I thought I was making lots more money than we were" (Branson, USA Today).

Branson told Bloomberg West's Cory Johnson that his dyslexia has also helped him keep communication efficient: "I need things to be simple for myself. Therefore ... when we launch a financial service company or a bank, we do not use jargon. Everything is very clear-cut, very simple. I think people have an affinity to the Virgin brand because we don't talk above them or talk down to them...When we launched a new company, I reviewed the ads and marketing materials and asked those presenting the campaign to read everything aloud to test the phrasing and concept. If I could grasp it quickly, then it passed with muster. We would get our message across only if it was understandable at first glance" (Branson, Bloomberg).

"If you have a learning disability, you become a very good delegator. Because you know what your weaknesses are and you know what your strengths are, and you make sure that you find great people to step in and deal with your weaknesses."

—
Richard Branson

BRANSON'S ADVICE:

Branson writes in his 2014 book "The Virgin Way" that he learned as a child that if he ever had a chance at remembering anything, he'd need to jot it down. To this day, he says he carries a notebook everywhere. The handwritten note habit has come in handy in management, negotiation, and even legal situations — he's submitted his notebooks as evidence in lawsuits, he says. It's one of the "most powerful tools" in his "bag of business tricks," Branson writes.

He also underscores that dyslexia is not something that needs to be "overcome" but rather "embraced." One thing Branson would like to change is the word dyslexia itself. "DYS" is very negative, dys-anything," he says. Even "-lexia" he says, would be a more attractive name. "We'll work it out" (Branson, USA Today).



Richard Branson: Dyslexia actually helped me
Graham Bensinger
January 31, 2018



Richard Branson talks to Made By Dyslexia
Made By Dyslexia
August 2, 2017

VANESSA CASTAÑEDA GILL

Social Cipher



OVERVIEW

Vanessa Castañeda Gill's mission is to unite her passions for art and stories in innovative ways to help people. Learning from her experiences growing up with ADD and autism, she co-founded Social Cipher: a social-emotional learning platform that connects neurodivergent youth and their advocates (counselors, teachers, mental health professionals) in an immersive virtual world. The empowering, game-based approach helps autistic youth fail safely for social-emotional success beyond the screen. Vanessa and her team have earned recognition as Forbes 30 Under 30s, AT&T Aspire and Camelback Ventures Fellows, and Facebook Global Gaming Citizens.

GILL ON FACING CHALLENGES AND RECOGNISING STRENGTHS

When Vanessa was diagnosed at the age of fourteen, she felt like she was being told that she “would never be able to connect with people.” This took a huge toll on her mental health, and led her to hide her diagnoses for over six years. During these difficult times, her family played a vital role in shifting her mindset, and helping her see that “I am not broken, and I do not need to be fixed – I just learn differently.” This crucial change in perspective enabled her to tap into her passion for games and art, and utilise them as a mechanism to connect with others.

During her time at college, Vanessa, with a tight-knit group of friends and a strong neuroscience background, decided to finally open up about her experiences with neurodiversity and help others in a similar position. Upon disclosing her diagnoses with her closest friends, she received an immense amount of support and encouragement for her vision from them, and they later became the co-founders of Social Cipher. Now, together with a team of designers and autistic advocates, they have been working hard to develop the first series of the game: Ava, a space- pirate adventure that explores social challenges through the eyes of an autistic protagonist. The game is set to launch online with downloads available for Mac and PC in November 2020.

“Self- awareness is both what controls every part of your life and is the only part of your life you can control.”

—
Vanessa Gill

What Vanessa credits her success and leadership style to today was also once the biggest challenge she faced: being vulnerable. While being authentic and transparent about her mental health was initially intimidating, it now forms the foundation of the culture of psychological safety Vanessa is trying to foster at Social Cipher. One way in which Vanessa sets herself as an example for her team is through explicitly communicating what her weaknesses are, the behaviours which indicate that she is struggling, and the most effective ways to keep her accountable.

The first step to achieving this level of openness for Vanessa was her own introspection. She would put herself in situations that made her uncomfortable, like big crowds, and take comprehensive notes about her reactions and how she felt. This helped Vanessa to process and understand her behaviours better, and ultimately learn to anticipate them. “Self- awareness,” Vanessa says, “is both what controls every part of your life and is the only part of your life you can control.” She also encourages the same openness in the relationships she has cultivated with her playtesters, whose feedback and advice have played an integral role in developing the characters in Social Cipher.

Another challenge Vanessa has learned to navigate during her entrepreneurial journey is the discomfort and anxiousness she associates with change. This is a common challenge for autistic people, who tend to prefer routine and predictability. To address her difficulty with change, Vanessa likes to list as many details as possible about the change, specifically in relation to the key dates the change involves, the implications of the change on everyone involved, and how she can prepare for the change accordingly. After listing all the relevant details down, Vanessa then forces herself to narrow everything down to top three priorities and top three needs so that she doesn't get overwhelmed. Making a daily list of things to do to achieve these top three priorities and top three needs also helps to ensure that she is staying on track through small, actionable steps.

“own your diagnosis and reflect on your past, even if it's painful, so that you can learn to love yourself and embrace your quirks.”

—
Vanessa Gill

ANDY CLAYTON

Sweetspot and Petra Coach Europe



OVERVIEW

Andy Clayton, Oxford-educated and based in the UK, was the founder and CEO of LNP China before selling the \$10M-turnover company to his largest competitor in late 2017. Andy then founded Petra Coach Europe, a team of coach-consultants who work with entrepreneurial businesses to improve their lives and companies – in that order. Andy also started Sweetspot, a one stop shop for learning “How to spend more time doing what you love, are great at, and adds most value.”

CLAYTON ON FACING CHALLENGES AND RECOGNISING STRENGTHS

Andy recalls that during his time working in big corporations he would often find himself caught up in office politics because of his forthright nature and difficulties navigating interpersonal relationships as a result of his autism. Thus, despite Andy’s abilities to rationalise and analyse complex data, which he often felt enabled him to reach logical conclusions faster than his colleagues, he did not thrive in a traditional job which required him to fit a mold that did not embrace his unique thinking talents. So, in 2007, Andy turned to entrepreneurship.

In 2009, Andy joined the Entrepreneurs Organization (EO), a support network of over 14,000 business-minded leaders across 61 countries. He recalls fondly how during his first session at EO, which was on 'how to share your feelings', he quickly realised "how little [he] knew about how to be an entrepreneur." Andy describes being an entrepreneur as "completely different to having a job." "In entrepreneurship," he says, "your entire mindset has to change. You can no longer blame other people for the way things pan out – you are now responsible for everything." This includes a responsibility over both you and your team's emotional well-being. He explains, "the big roadblocks people encounter during the entrepreneurial journey are almost always due to emotional barriers, like a fear of risk-taking or lack of psychological safety, even if on the surface they appear to be merely functional challenges." This is an important lesson that Andy learned from participating in monthly forums with other budding entrepreneurs, where he discovered his knack for helping people reframe their issues in a way that made them feel much more approachable.

A rule instituted by EO, which Andy lives by in his work and in his personal life, is to "never give advice, only share experiences." The benefit of this approach to collaboration is that it prevents the people who assist others from doing so in a judgmental, condescending or commanding manner. Instead, the person who receives the assistance is able to retain ownership over overcoming their challenges and also take responsibility for any hiccups along the way.

"never give advice, only share experiences."

—
Andy Clayton

"autism diagnosis has to become socially acceptable, we are living examples that entrepreneurship can be a great choice for autistic people who want to have an impact."

—
Andy Clayton

Andy credits his journey toward self-awareness as playing a critical part in his success today. Becoming sober and being formally diagnosed with autism in his 30's were huge turning points that pushed Andy to pour his time and talents into helping businesses thrive and advocating for neurodiverse entrepreneurship. Now, as well as running both his companies, Andy is also one of EO's most senior trainers, having served on the boards of both the Beijing and London chapters, and has brought together a group of autistic entrepreneurs from around the world to regularly collaborate, just like he learned to do in EO. Andy is driven by the experience that you can be autistic and a great entrepreneur: "There are many examples of autistic entrepreneurs who have turned their unique skills to the advantage of themselves, their customers, and the world. However, autism diagnosis has to become socially acceptable, we are living examples that entrepreneurship can be a great choice for autistic people who want to have an impact."

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