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Why Entrepreneurship Is So Hard

by [Pooja Dhingra](#)

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Last week, a Facebook memory from six years ago popped into my feed. I was the first female keynote speaker at the Swiss Education Group of Hotel schools and, in the photo, I was standing in front of 1,500 students from seven Swiss hotel schools at the legendary Stravinsky Hall in Montreux. Right before I went on stage, the organizer told me that it was the same stage that Stevie Wonder had recently performed on (no pressure!).

It had only been four years since I started my business, and luckily for me, it had gained momentum. I trained to be a pastry chef at Le Cordon Bleu, Paris. I moved back from Paris to Mumbai with the intention of bringing the French macaron to India. After a few months of trial and error out of my home kitchen, Le15 was born. We broke even within 10 months of launch and made gourmet desserts accessible. The fact that a 23-year-old woman could enter a male dominated industry in India and shake things up gave me the courage to stand in front of all of those students and share my story.

I spoke confidently and told them what made a good entrepreneur. I probably used words like “purpose” and “passion.” I looked at the photographer and smiled.

But so much has changed since 2014. So much has changed in the last 6 months. There have been many times this year when I’ve questioned everything — my beliefs, my values, the people I surround myself with, why I do what I do. What my



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Building my business for the last 10 years has brought me the highest highs and the lowest lows. I've spent these years making almost every vision board I created come to life, working hard, and at the same time, consistently struggling. When I say "struggling," I mean facing all the challenges that I had expected, as well as ones I could have never seen coming.

I looked at the picture of me smiling on stage, remembering and reflecting on everything 2020 has taught me. I asked myself, "Ten years in, what have I learned from becoming an entrepreneur at such a young age? What has come of chasing my dreams? What advice would I give students and people just starting out today?"

Here's what I've come up with.

Building a business is a marathon, and not a sprint. I got this advice from one of my mentors three years ago, when we raised our first round of funding. My expectations were high and I was impatient. I wanted to *go-go-go* without ever pausing to take a breath. I had to deliver, and it meant pushing myself beyond my own capabilities. At one point I remember feeling immense guilt if I was doing anything that didn't revolve around my work. I was always on, always working and that was definitely not the most efficient or effective thing to do.

My mentor noticed and told me that I needed to take care of myself, that I needed to approach my business as a marathon. I've trained for a half marathon, so I understood what he meant. But I didn't take it seriously back then. It was only when I was faced with the realities of Covid-19 that I stopped (or was forced to stop) and analyze what's truly important — for me and for the business.

~~So be patient, be consistent, and build momentum each day. I know it's easy to get~~

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knowledge and experience. With time, I understood that coming to terms with the fact that you actually don't know the answer, and acknowledging that, is the first step to fixing it.

Honestly, it's been liberating to identify what I'm excellent at, good at, just OK at, and those I'm terrible at as well. I didn't come with much business management experience. I studied hospitality and business, but nothing can prepare you for running your own company. I knew little about writing an actual actionable business plan or really understanding the nuances of a profit and loss statement. Once I admitted that, I could fix it.

Over the last year, I've worked with consultants to help me with most of these things. With help, I've been able to streamline my supply chain and put together more efficient processes — ones that would have taken me months to come up with alone. I can even point out mistakes in our P&L statement!

I often regret not having co-founders who could've complemented my skills. I am a skilled pastry chef, but I've had to wear many many hats, and not all of them fit. That's something I could have done more of over the years — work with people who specialize in solving the problems that I struggle with.

Find your balance. When you run a business, you'll simultaneously be pulled in 10 different directions. There's always a fire to fight, there's always a problem that will need to be solved. When I was younger, I would get upset at the drop of a hat, or extremely angry, or be very impatient.

As the captain of the ship, I've realized how I react to situations directly impacts how everyone reacts to it. So it's super critical for a founder to be grounded and

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Always go back to the why. A lot has changed for me and the food and beverage industry over the last 6 months. The pandemic hit us in ways we could've never seen coming. At times, I've felt that I'm losing control over everything. I've had to make tough decisions like closing down a big part of my business and downsizing my team. I often thought about how we'd sustain if people weren't going to come to the cafes.

But if you've watched [Simon Sinek's TED Talk](#), "How Great Leaders Inspire Action," you know that most great companies start with the "why" behind their existence as opposed to "what" they actually do. The more time I've spent in isolation, the more I've thought about the "why." For me, our "why" has always been, "To transport you to a better place with every experience, make you feel love and bring you moments of joy." Looking at this "why" each day cleared so many things for me. I realized I didn't need 50 physical stores to make this happen. All I had to do was focus was on the product, think hard about the new normal, and plan our pivot. People didn't HAVE to walk into my café to drink a cup of hot chocolate, but I could take it to them! That's how our drink premixes were conceived.

Find your "why." Paste it in your room. Look at it when you're lost and confused (this happens a lot). I look at mine every single day and it centers me and puts me back on track.

Surrender. There's so much uncertainty in the world right now. As if running a business and trying to build new things wasn't challenging enough, we now have to deal with the a brutal, deadly virus that impacts work, life, and everything in between. If there's anything the last six months have taught me, it's that we'll often find ourselves in situations we can't control. And in situations we can't control, we must learn to surrender.



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If you're an entrepreneur or are working on giving wings to your passion project, go easy on yourself. Nobody has it all figured out. I hope my story provides you with a little solace as you make your way.



Pooja Dhingra is the founder and executive chef of Le15 Patisserie, which she founded in 2010. In 2016, Pooja was featured on the Forbes '30 under 30' list both in India and Asia. She also hosts a podcast called #NoSugarCoat and has authored 3 best selling cookbooks. Pooja lives and works in Mumbai.

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