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How to solve a mixture problem

Image: Jose Luis Pelaez Inc / DigitalVision / Getty Images When something goes awry in your home, what is your first instinct? Do you make a call and pay an expert to come fix it? Or do you move to the self-sufficient response — asking what it would take to do it yourself? If you have a self-sufficient mindset, it doesn't matter whether you already know how to fix something. You just know that you have the capacity to figure it out, and you break the task down into manageable steps and take them in stride. When you get a sky-high water bill, for instance, how do you react? You might first call the water company for advice. When they tell you that the problem is definitely on your end and not a leak on the street side, you'll need to figure out how to find the leak. Start by checking any appliances for leaking in a pool underground. The DIY mindset means that, over time, you'll acquire a wide range of skills and the ability to take on any challenge that comes your way. How far along are you in that process? Tackle these problems and find out how self-sufficient you really are! 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What is an octane rating? And how do you use a proper noun? Lucky for you, HowStuffWorks Play is here to help. Our award-winning website offers reliable, easy-to-understand explanations about how the world works. From fun guizzes that bring joy to your day, to compelling photography and fascinating lists, HowStuffWorks Play offers something for everyone. Sometimes we explain how stuff works, other times, we ask you, but we're always exploring in the name of fun! Because learning is fun, so stick with us! Playing quizzes is free! We send trivia questions and personality tests every week to your inbox. By clicking "Sign Up" you are agreeing to our privacy policy and confirming that you are 13 years old or over. Copyright © 2021 InfoSpace Holdings, LLC, a System1 Company We hope you love the products we recommend! All of them were independently selected by our editors. Just so you know, BuzzFeed may collect a share of sales or other compensation from the links on this page if you decide to shop from them. Oh, and FYI — prices are accurate and items in stock as of time of publication. March 18, 2021 11 min read This story appears in the March 2021 issue of Entrepreneur. Subscribe » "Software and snacks seems like a crazy combination," Julia Collins admits. But in truth, it's just the beginning of a crazy-big idea. Collins is the founder and CEO of Planet FWD. Its focus on software and snacks can be seen in two ways — the practical, and the philosophical. The practical is strategy for how a tiny startup can scale up to massive change. Collins has built big ideas before — she helped grow a big, buzzy startup that raised \$375 million in capital and achieved a valuation of more than \$1 billion. It was supposed to revolutionize the food industry. Instead, after Collins' departure, it burned through that capital and burned out on its original goals, too. It's a lesson that even with the best intentions and a powerful network of support, creating change is very hard — and it must be approached with delicate precision. Related: Creativity Is Your Best Problem-Solving Tool -- Here's How to Harness ItNow she's building that lesson into Planet FWD, the actual goal of which is to revolutionize agriculture and food production to help stop climate change. But with a goal that big, where do you even begin? It's too much. So Collins approaches problems with patience — she baby-steps her way up the mountain. "One thing that makes it easy for me to digest huge issues," she says, "is to start with something tangible that I can build around." And so, she started out with what's reasonable: software that helps create more eco-friendly foods, and a snack to prove that it's possible. Software and snacks. Now, as Collins sets out to build this company in a methodical way, Planet FWD serves as a test case for big-thinking entrepreneurs. Is slow and steady the right way forward? "The first thing for us is imagining one climatefriendly snack," Collins says. "From there we can multiply — and multiply impact." Planet FWD began with a problem: Globally, nearly 30 percent of greenhouse gas emissions come from food production. At the current rate of soil degradation, caused by reliance on fertilizers, scientists suggest that we could actually run out of topsoil in the next 60 years. Collins became interested in a potential solution called regenerative agriculture, a practice that's gaining increasing attention from scientists and activists. In simplest terms, it describes a farming system that prioritizes soil health and water management, and can actually sequester carbon. But of the 930 million acres of farmland in America, just about 5 percent is managed this way. As Collins dug into why that might be, she learned that communication played a big role. Murky, varying definitions of regenerative agriculture had left growers without any finite guidelines or metrics to track. "It wasn't only hard to understand what was already available from suppliers, but what might be available," she says. "The information just wasn't there." Related: How Entrepreneurs Can Help Developing Countries Hard Hit by Climate Change That's a common story when startups try to tackle giant problems, says Dawn Lippert, CEO of Elemental Excelerator, a growth accelerator that has funded and supported more than 100 businesses that focus on addressing climate change. (Planet FWD is one of its portfolio companies.) "The beauty of working with startups is that you get to see the entire system, and where the barriers are to creating real change," Lippert says. One of those barriers is information; as an entrepreneur tries to understand a marketplace that's in need of change, they often discover a massive information gap, and therefore don't know where to begin in solving a problem. That's why she advises founders: Before doing anything else, fill in that gap. "You have to step back and build that research if it's not there," says Lippert. "Create structured market intelligence work. Learn what brands need from suppliers. Learn what suppliers need from brands." Starting in 2019, Collins did just that. She discovered that food producers and regenerative agriculture farmers wanted to work together but did not know what to ask for to help them reach their sustainability goals, either. To solve this, Collins assembled a brain trust of agronomists, climate scientists, and farmers, and built a list of metrics to collect from growers — facts and figures that would help potential brand partners understand their agricultural practices and benefits. "Moving forward on a big idea is really process-driven, and you need to build a stable of coaches with a lot of really specific experience," Lippert says. "Talking to the right person at the Individuals Snacks came first. She wanted to produce a provable model, where ingredients from a regenerative farm made their way through a factory and onto store shelves. She created a brand called Moonshot Snacks, which would begin with three flavors of crackers. In December 2020, Moonshot launched with D2C sales and through specialty retailers; Collins plans to increase distribution and offerings in the future, moving beyond crackers into, say, bars or cookies. Simultaneously, she got moving on her bigger idea — software! — by building a digital marketplace for brands and farmers to connect. Planet FWD's software is now being piloted with seven brands, giving Collins a chance to observe and adjust its matchmaking abilities. If it works, it will push her closer to creating real impact. If not, she'll adapt as needed. "It is very different verticals," Collins says. "But the automation and adoption of regenerative practices is what Planet FWD can do, and what Moonshot can do is use consumer demand to accelerate that adoption." Collins became obsessed with the health of the planet FWDCollins' obsession with food started as a child, growing up in a family that welcomed its community around the table. She attended Stanford's business school and, after graduation, traveled to Southern Italy to live on a water buffalo ranch. The region struggles with poverty and access to resources, but unlike in the United States, where poor communities increasingly rely on cheap, processed foods, it used a different approach. "There's something called la cucina povera — poor people's food, essentially," Collins says. "I saw all these people eating well and locally and with joy without spending a lot of money, all while there are very low incidences of diabetes and obesity, and residents live well into their 90s." It planted a seed of curiosity in her mind — are Americans approaching food all wrong? Back in the States, she built a career at food brands like Shake Shake Shake, Mexicue, and Murray's Cheese. In 2015, she met Alex Garden, an entrepreneur who'd spent years working on a patent for en route cooking — basically, a pizza delivery van that would cook your pizza on its way to your home. To Collins, it was a game-changing idea. Related: 9 Social Impact Models That Entrepreneurs Can Learn From "It would certainly create a better customer experience than how food is currently delivered," she says. "But we also saw ways to improve efficiency, safety, and sustainability." That same year, the duo founded Zume Pizza. Soon, pizza-making robots were cooking pies in mobile kitchens, delivering them throughout the Bay Area. Zume became a darling of the tech world, and in late 2018, the company raised a stunning \$375 million. Zume was valued at more than \$1 billion. But within weeks, Collins exited. It was an unusual time for a cofounder to leave, though she insists it was coincidental — she was a new parent at the time and says she'd become obsessed with climate change. Still, it turned out to be a bad omen for Zume. The company has severely declined since then, having to cut more than half its workforce in January 2020. It is now pivoting to a B2B model, creating efficiencies for other food-delivery companies, Collins seems to have learned from Zume's mistakes. With Planet FWD, her approach to business building is starkly different. Related: Meet the Female Founders Who Are Making a Huge Impact in 2020Zume's primary funding came from SoftBank's Vision Fund, which famously invested in WeWork, Uber, and Brandless, pushed them to grow guickly, and suffered from multiple collapses or deflated valuations. Now Collins is intentionally choosing to grow slowly. She has raised just more than \$5 million and created a network of investors made up primarily of women and people of color. It signals a more deliberate approach to growth, one Collins says is grounded in trust. "In the past, I really felt that I had to perform, and I think that's true for so many underrepresented people," she says. "This time around, I feel so much more trust, and that allows me to be vulnerable and really turn to my investors for guidance. And that doesn't just mean I'm a happier founder but that the company will be more successful." Solving big problems one step at a time can help founders create a reliable road map for building — but it also means that every moment of success begets a new, bigger challenge. Getting Moonshot Snacks into shoppers' carts and the Planet FWD platform into the hands of brands and bigger suppliers onto her platform. Brands may be the easier sell. In 2019, General Mills announced plans to work with farmers and suppliers with the goal of transitioning one million acres of farmland to regenerative practices by 2030. "Companies used to think talking about climate could alienate their customer base, but no one is afraid anymore," says Michael Wironen, a senior scientist of agriculture and food services at The Nature Conservancy, which works in part to help businesses like General Mills embrace better agriculture practices. Sustainable products once were novel. Today, consumers expect them. For farmers, it's a different story, "Producers are constantly asked to adapt to demands that are set by people who don't farm," Wironen says. "Farmers have to manage time and labor. Changing those practices, even if they'll lead to payoffs, is a risk." Related: Designing for Sustainability to Address Climate ChangeIt doesn't help that the true meaning of regenerative agriculture can depend on whom you ask — some experts take a strict approach, and some are more lax as a way to encourage adoption — and the science on its impact is still early. This all creates hesitation within the industry, where growers have already been squeezed economically and feel disconnected from the end user they're feeding. "We often hear from farmers that they want the reality of their work to be closer to consumers," Collins says. So she's using the playful packaging of Moonshot Snacks to entice customers to learn more about the folks growing our food. Simple explanations about what "climate-friendly" means as it relates to food are presented in bold, graphic fashion on the Moonshot box. Shoppers are encouraged to learn more on the brand's website, where the full mission is detailed along with tips on zero-waste living, and explainers on regenerative agriculture and shorter supply chains. Alone, that move may feel insignificant. But turning Planet FWD into a success — as a business, and as a potentially impactful idea — requires relationship building with multiple communities, unprecedented levels of trust from the agriculture industry, a mix of speed and caution, and what can feel like countless moving parts chipping away at a shared goal. "There's certainly pressure to deliver, but we see a clear path," Collins says. "Our entrance to the market is well-timed. The groundwork has been laid by scientists and other entrepreneurs, and there's going to continue to be increased attention and investment to create actual change." And she'll work to how to solve a percent mixture problem. how to solve a mixture problem.



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