

The Manifesto

There really is no better experience than the adventure that is unfolding in front of you right now as you build your company and chase success. I've done it 11 times before. It's a unique experience and I'm so grateful for everything I learned along the way.

In fact, it took me two decades and the sale of one of my businesses for over \$150 million to learn that success wasn't delivering the happiness I expected. As it turns out, I had been playing someone else's game. All the time thinking I was blazing new trails, bettering my position in the world, and seizing every opportunity. Instead, I was at rock bottom. Exhausted. Anxious. Feeling foolish. Feeling helpless.

I was in a terrifyingly sad and lonely place we entrepreneurs call in between companies. Without the public spotlight, not oozing all the traditional signs of progress and success, and void of constant attention I knew there was only one way out. I should start another company. And I looked at the deeply ingrained pattern cut by my life so far. Start a company. Ride the highs publicly. Suffer the lows in silence. Failure. Success. It didn't actually matter. The personal experience was one in the same. Give the company everything I have. It'll work out in the end. It seemed obvious after closing a failed company that I would feel low. But my big breakthrough came right after my biggest success. I felt even lower.

Hang on. What the hell have I signed up for? In the past it had seemed possible to give each of my businesses everything I had. Sweet success just on the other side of the horizon must be pure bliss. I'll do anything to get there. I've dreamed about it. I've heard great entrepreneurs tell their stories about how they got there. We're all aiming for the same thing. It must be incredible. I lost my innocence when I sold my company and came crashing back down to earth. A hollow shell of the bright-eyed, hopeful dreamer who had launched on the other side.

The only path I had ever known was now closed. Instead of starting another company I began a process of self-discovery. A new type of challenge free from the security that comes from a brand, a team, and the typical signs of capitalist progress. For the first time since I was seventeen years old, I wouldn't have a business card. I wouldn't have a list of twenty reasons why I expected revenue to grow next year. I wouldn't be pitching anything. I started asking questions.

I told people I was writing a book. I couldn't fully detach myself from some type of outcome-based validation. But the safe context of being an aspiring author allowed me to begin talking to other entrepreneurs as peers. Mostly, I wondered, did anyone else know the secret? That the light at the end of the entrepreneurial tunnel is in fact a quickly approaching train. That the first time we think about our personal health and wellbeing cannot be after we sell a company for millions of dollars. For most of us that day never comes. Or is everyone blindly sacrificing their minds and bodies toward the false idol of success as I had for so many years?

I started by sharing my struggles with mental health, anxiety, depression, physical health, energy, motivation and mood and then I sat back and listened. What I heard was absolutely incredible and it has changed my life forever. Entrepreneurs are suffering. Few of us have any answers and many of us have entirely lost hope. The number one response given to me by entrepreneurs when I ask if they have any pure, unbreakable, die-hard

rules for managing their personal behavior when they encounter times of extreme pressure and stress is “they work harder.” There is no self-respect in this level of self-abuse.

If you treated me this badly, I would leave you. But I treated myself like this for two decades.

We as people, as entrepreneurs, have to do better. We have to give ourselves the level of respect we deserve for being the ones who step up to change the world. We are worthy simply because we started. What happens from here, despite how often our ego tells us we’re in charge, is mostly a game of chance. I’ve had one great financial outcome across eleven companies over twenty years. One. Is it possible one of my failures could have been an even bigger success had I not stood in its way? Maybe. Was my one big exit just good luck? Maybe. Only one thing is for sure. All of those companies are in the past. And I’m still here.

I’m now five years into this journey to better understand myself and other entrepreneurs. One thing that has become clear to me is that entrepreneurship is a long game. Bottling up all our resources and blasting them off into space may increase our odds of being successful today. But it also sentences us to the certainty of deficits tomorrow. It’s no wonder entrepreneurs are eleven times more likely to be diagnosed with bi-polar disorder than other types of professionals who work in high pressure fields. It’s not just casual conversation in the back rooms of entrepreneurship anymore. Research now proves that this job is making us sick. And that’s not just our problem. This is everyone’s problem.

The world relies on entrepreneurs to deliver solutions to every one of our problems. The global economy is actually underpinned by expectations of the efficiency we’ll gain from new technology that entrepreneurs haven’t yet invented. Without those gains our currencies will eventually fail. The climate is changing. Communities are collapsing. And kindness is at an all-time low. Problems are abundant and solutions are scarce.

An entrepreneur who is suffering is not going to invent the new healthcare technology we need that will save lives. An entrepreneur who is suffering cannot comprehend the innovative new way we’ll need to grow food in a hundred years. An entrepreneur who is suffering will collapse when we need them to prevail. What type of people do we need at the helm to guide this bouncing ship called humanity safely into the future? We need strong, resilient, healthy entrepreneurs.

As entrepreneurs we need a new code. A new creed. We need to help ourselves first so we can then help everyone around us. We need to hold each other accountable to answering the questions that really matter. How are you doing does not mean how is your company doing. We need to track our personal health alongside our company health. We need to know exactly where our emotion, physical body, and energy stand at all times. We are simply not qualified to do our jobs if we do not learn to manage our most critical personal resources just like we manage our corporate balance sheets.

And we need our teams and partners and investors to understand that healthy entrepreneurs are better entrepreneurs who will reach their goals and change the world because they’re living their best lives every day. And that it’s never okay to sacrifice an entrepreneur now, because we will need her mind and ambition to fix our future later.

Entrepreneurs have suffered in silence for a long time. Maybe it's because the economy relies on thousands of willing new entrepreneurs showing up ready to start the experience every day. Maybe it's because the work we do is idealized in mainstream media. Maybe it's because it takes fifteen years to really know if a single company is going to be great. The average age of a successful startup founder is 45 years old. Starting at that age, how many cycles can you learn from before you run out of time?

The problem itself is not actually unique. Other types of people endure extreme pressure with even higher consequences. Professional athletes perform highly specific tasks with millions of dollars on the line. Entertainers have their every move and word critiqued by billions of onlookers. Soldiers risk their lives under fire. From each of these disciplines have sprung great coaches and leaders who teach personal health and performance under the scenarios their operators might expect to endure.

Soldiers aren't expected to remain in combat endlessly. Professional athletes don't play in games eighty hours per week. Entertainers don't stand on stage all day every single day. But entrepreneurs do. Other disciplines have adopted models that allow for preparation, performance, and recovery. Entrepreneurs just keep on performing. And when things get hard, we perform harder. The most experienced entrepreneurs boast of their ability to work on their businesses instead of in their businesses. Yet so few entrepreneurs actually work methodically on the greatest opportunity for leverage in their businesses, themselves.

It's easy to find examples of entrepreneurs performing. We're constantly selling our ideas in the office, over drinks with friends, and in late night conversations with our spouses. We even stand up on stages and perform stories about all the other performing we've been doing recently. But what about the other two thirds of the equation? Preparation. Recovery.

So, I started digging to learn how entrepreneurs prepare and how they recover. I uncovered incredible stories of resilience from founders who have learned to value themselves ahead of their companies. Much of it was learned the hard way through crisis. Medical trauma. Burnout. Deep depression. Debilitating anxiety. The fire of each experience hardening a belief into a rule they now use to keep themselves safe. Each of these rules part of a collective toolbox that I hope will lead the way as we all try to keep entrepreneurs healthy.

This process of discovery has become my own personal form of therapy. Hearing entrepreneurs' stories of triumph and terror makes me feel more okay about my own experiences. And I've put their tools to work in my life practicing them as part of my overall personal approach to health and performance as an entrepreneur.

The result of that work is the Founders First System. A framework of practices, disciplines, and metrics for keeping founders healthy. We've been using frameworks to organize and track our businesses for years. It's time we bring that same level of attention to our most important asset. Our selves.