First published in Great Britain in 2021 by Endeavour, an imprint of
Octopus Publishing Group Ltd
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ
www.octopusbooks.co.uk

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

Published in the United States of America by
Little, Brown and Company
Hachette Book Group
1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104

Copyright © 2021 by Suneel Gupta

All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Suneel Gupta asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

ISBN 978-1-91306-835-6

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in the United Kingdom

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This FSC® label means that materials used for the product have been responsibly sourced.



INTRODUCTION

I wanted to bail, but it was too late. In a few moments, I'd be telling a story to a packed house of Silicon Valley overachievers. It was a cautionary tale of a career that had gone off the rails through canceled projects, missed promotions, and near-bankrupt startups. It was ugly, but also entertaining. So why was I having second thoughts? Because this story was my own.

A few weeks earlier I'd received a call from a restricted number. I answered it, hoping it was one of the many investors who hadn't gotten back to me. But instead the person introduced herself as the organizer of an event called FailCon, which stands for Failure Conference. "It's funny," she said. "You've been nominated twice to speak at our conference." Funny to her, maybe, but I wasn't laughing. I deepened my voice as much as a little Indian guy can and tried to express my credibility as a professional and an entrepreneur.

I told her about my new startup idea. Rise was a telehealth service that matched you with a personal nutritionist right over your mobile phone. What I didn't tell her was that it wasn't going very well. I hadn't been able to recruit people to join me or find investors to fund the idea. She seemed to intuitively pick up on my desperation and mentioned that there might be investors in

the audience. That was all I needed to hear. I agreed right then and there to be the keynote speaker for FailCon.

Moments before my speech I began to question my life choices. How did things turn out this way? I grew up in suburban Michigan, finished college there, and took an IT job in downtown Detroit. The pay was decent, but each day was the same as the last, troubleshooting issues, building spreadsheets, and maintaining databases. It was simple, mind-numbing work. I was waiting for someone to point in my direction and say, "That kid's a star! Let's find a better way to make use of his talents." That didn't happen. In a sea of cubicles, I sat at my desk waiting to be discovered.

Eventually, I did what some people do when they feel directionless – I went to law school. In my third year, I received a job offer from a chest-thumping corporate firm based in Midtown Manhattan. The signing bonus itself was twice the salary I was earning in Detroit. But I got a sinking feeling that taking the job would send me back to the same headspace I was in three years earlier...restless and bored. I might not have known exactly what I was looking for, but I knew this wasn't it.

So I turned down the offer and began cold-calling people in Silicon Valley. I wanted to be part of a company that was building something, creating something. I eventually landed a job at Mozilla, the maker of Firefox. I was supposed to be working on legal matters, but I found myself drawn to the other side of the building, where

the engineers and designers sat. I'd peek over their shoulders and ask if I could help with anything, no matter how small. Eventually, they gave me the chance to lead and launch a new product feature for Firefox. Collaborating with those engineers and designers to create something new fueled a fire in me. I had finally found what I was meant to do.

What I learned at Mozilla taught me enough to be recruited to a little-known startup as its first head of product development. That startup grew into Groupon. Within two years, we employed more than ten thousand people around the globe. We were making hundreds of millions of dollars a year. We were growing faster than Google, faster than Facebook, faster than Apple. A *Forbes* magazine cover named Groupon the "fastest growing company...ever." The company went public in the largest internet IPO since Google.[1]

Then it all came crashing down. Within one year, Groupon lost nearly 85 percent of its market value, plunging from a high of $13 billion to less than $3 billion.[2] The co-founder and CEO Andrew Mason – who hired and took a chance on me – was fired and replaced.[3]

It was time for me to leave Groupon too. After years of working inside other startups, I realized what I really wanted, but had been afraid to do, was to start my own. I now had the experience and what I believed was a winning idea. But I was struggling to get other people excited about the vision. Meanwhile, every day I'd read

about new founders receiving funding and wonder, "Why not me?" Even in Silicon Valley – the land of ideas – I was starting to feel the same frustration I had felt sitting in a cubicle in Detroit. I was waiting for someone to pay attention – waiting to be discovered.

More than a year later, standing stage left at FailCon, I felt my phone vibrate. It was my brother, Sanjay. He's an Emmy Award-winning television reporter, a *New York Times* bestselling author, *and* a neurosurgeon to boot. I'm still trying to make my dad proud, while he's done enough to make an entire subcontinent of fathers proud. "Call you back," I texted. I, too, was very busy. I was about to keynote a conference on failure. I got through my speech as quickly as possible. Scanning the crowd opportunistically for investors, I somehow missed the reporter scribbling notes.

More than a year passed, and I had completely forgotten about FailCon. By that point, I had recruited a small team to work with me on Rise, but the idea still hadn't gained traction. We were struggling to find customers and rapidly running out of money. My co-founder and I needed to raise funding so that we could expand our team, release a great product, and build fruitful partnerships. And if we didn't find that money soon, my startup dream was over.

Then something happened that changed everything. It was a Saturday morning, and I overheard my wife, Leena, on the phone with her mother. "No, we're not moving home, Mom," she said. "Yes, I know San Francisco is very expensive." When I walked into

the room, Leena was holding that day's *New York Times* open to a full-length story on failure, with my face at the top.

I had seen mug shots that were more flattering.

The piece went viral. If you googled "failure" at the time, one of your top results would be a full-length *Times* article featuring me. I had spent an entire career trying to craft an image of success. Now I was the poster child for defeat. My inbox was jammed with consolation messages. My parents offered to help pay that month's rent. Old law school professors reached out to help me find a job. Friends I hadn't spoken to in years simply messaged, "Are you okay?"

Realizing I could no longer hide behind a fake-it-till-you-make-it attitude of success, I decided to give this new identity a try. I began emailing highly successful people using the *Times* article to break the ice. I'd write things like, "As you can see from the article below, I don't know what I'm doing. Would you be willing to grab coffee and give me some advice?"

It worked. That article paved the way to hundreds of open, honest conversations with fascinating people. Founders of unicorn-status startups; producers of Oscar-winning films; culinary icons; members of Congress; executives at iconic companies like Lego and Pixar; even military leaders at the Pentagon.

In the end, I was left with a life-altering discovery. People who change the world around them aren't just brilliant...

they're backable. They have a seemingly mysterious superpower that lies at the intersection of "creativity" and "persuasion." When backable people express themselves, we feel moved. When they share an idea, we take action.

You will probably know someone who seems to be naturally backable. For the record, I am not one of those people. I'm an introvert by nature, I look comically young for my age, and I'm prone to caving under pressure – like the time I tanked an interview with Jack Dorsey. I was interviewing for a product development role with the Twitter founder's newest company, Square. By the time we sat down together, I had spent years leading product teams. Yet I couldn't give a coherent answer to any of his questions – not even the softballs. I was anxious, sweaty, and tongue-tied. During our thirty minutes together, I watched Dorsey's smile fade to neutral and eventually sink into straight confusion.

I was qualified for the role, but I didn't get the job.

We've all had our fair share of Dorsey moments – when something sounded exciting inside your head but uninspiring when it left your mouth. It can feel a lot like trying to insert a crumpled dollar into a vending machine.

But your dollar is worth the same as a crisp, clean bill. We are all within striking range of becoming backable. We just need to make some adjustments to our style, without losing our edge – without sacrificing what makes us who we are.

Inside this book are those adjustments: seven surprising changes that course-corrected my life and career. By taking these steps, I went from feeling embarrassed to speak inside team meetings to confidently pitching ideas inside the offices of people like Michelle Obama and Tim Cook. I went from being the face of failure for the *New York Times* to being named the New Face of Innovation by the New York Stock Exchange magazine.

I went from being rejected by every investor I pitched to raising millions of dollars. The *Today* show featured Rise, and Apple named us the Best New App of the Year. The Obama White House chose us to be its partner for tackling obesity. And ultimately, One Medical, a thriving company en route to an IPO, acquired Rise for multiple times its original value.

Once I realized the power of these adjustments, I couldn't keep them to myself. I had to share them with the world. And not just entrepreneurs, but people from all walks of life – from physicians to musicians, educators to fashion designers. The artist who wants to be featured by her favorite gallery, the accountant who needs a client to act on his recommendation, the nurse who has a new method for lowering her patients' risk of addiction to pain medications. Today I teach the seven steps to becoming backable in hospitals, companies, charities, and studios. I joined the faculty at Harvard University to teach students how to launch backable careers.

Because I'm convinced we all have a brilliant idea tucked away

somewhere. Yet most of us are afraid to share it and have it be dismissed. We all know how it feels to be unseen or ignored. To feel like we don't have what it takes.

Untapped genius is not just inside you; it's everywhere. And it comes at a huge cost – to our well-being, to our society, and even to human life.

The morning the space shuttle *Challenger* was launched, NASA engineer Bob Ebeling pounded his car's steering wheel and, with tears in his eyes, said, "Everyone's going to die."[4] The day before, Ebeling had sounded the alarm that the cold temperature expected overnight would stiffen the rubber O-ring seals, causing them to malfunction. He assembled the data, called a meeting, and attempted to persuade his colleagues to delay the launch. It didn't work.

Seventy-three seconds after takeoff, the shuttle disintegrated, killing all seven crew members, including Christa McAuliffe, who would have been the first teacher to travel to space.[5] Ebeling spent the rest of his life blaming himself for his inability to convince the people in that room. Before his death he told NPR, "I think that's one of the mistakes God made. He shouldn't have picked me for that job."[6]

Compare Ebeling for a moment to Billy McFarland, who convinced celebrities, governments, and investors to dump millions of dollars into an idea called the Fyre Festival. McFarland's pitch

promised the world's hottest musicians, white-sand beaches, and five-star accommodations. Instead, when guests arrived, they were directed to a disaster relief tent, given a cheese sandwich, and struggled to find clean drinking water. Today, McFarland is serving a six-year prison sentence for fraud – and people are still scratching their heads wondering how an unknown founder with an unsuccessful track record convinced reputable people to give him $26 million in funding.[7]

The world would be a better place if we could transport Billy McFarland's persuasiveness into people like Bob Ebeling. That's why I wrote this book. We need more high-integrity people who know how to sell a good idea.

Damyanti Hingorani, a woman whom *Time* magazine called a "groundbreaker," is one of my favorite backable stories.[8] Hingorani spent her early childhood as a refugee near the border between Pakistan and India. She lived in a home without running water or electricity yet still managed to teach herself how to read. And the first book she read from cover to cover was the biography of Henry Ford. That book inspired a dream, some would say an impossible one, for a young girl in that particular place and time. Hingorani wanted to become an engineer building cars for Ford Motor Company.

She was fortunate to have parents who believed in her. And they

saved every penny they had to get her on a boat to America. Years later, on the day she graduated from Oklahoma State University, she boarded a train to Detroit, ready to apply for her dream job.

But this was the 1960s, and while Ford Motor Company was still in its heyday, employing thousands of engineers, not a single one of them was a woman. So when Hingorani finally found herself in a room with a hiring manager, he told her in a polite midwestern kind of way, "I'm sorry...we don't have any female engineers working here."[9]

Deflated, Hingorani picked up her slightly crumpled résumé, grabbed her purse, and got up to leave the room. But then something clicked. It was as if she suddenly remembered everything it had taken to make it this far. All the sacrifices she had made, that her parents had made. She turned around, looked the hiring manager directly in his eyes, and told him her story. Reading about the Model T late at night by a kerosene lamp... waving goodbye to her parents one last time as she boarded her ship, not knowing if she'd ever see them again...bicycling off campus to use the restroom because her engineering college didn't have one for women. All of it to be here, in this very room.

Then she said, "If you don't have any female engineers, then do yourself a favor and hire me *now.*" It was in that meeting, inside a plain-looking office, that a middle-aged manager from suburban Michigan decided to take a chance on a twenty-four-year-old

refugee from the India-Pakistan border. And that's how on August 7, 1967, Damyanti Hingorani became Ford Motor Company's first female engineer.[10]

In the years that followed, Hingorani became a guiding light for immigrants who, too, wanted to believe in a better day. She helped reshape an industry's hiring practices and mentored women of color inside Ford. When she retired, after thirty-five years with the company, she became an inspiring force for Girls Who Code, an organization that has provided technology training to more than three hundred thousand girls around the world.[11]

Hingorani changed everything – for the workforce, for immigrants, for women. She also changed things for me. If Damyanti Hingorani hadn't inspired the hiring manager in that room, if she hadn't made herself backable, I wouldn't be here to write this book. And that is because Damyanti Hingorani is my mom.

When I struggled to be seen, when I was literally a top search result for failure, it was Mom who pushed me to keep going. And it was Mom who made me understand that the opposite of success isn't failure – it's boredom. That you can't wait to be asked to share your ideas, because that day may never come. That in order to succeed, you need to get out and inspire people to see in you what you see in yourself.

This book will show you how.