

Alexis Bonnell: All right. Are you ready for really who are the champions of this week and of these couple days? I'm very pleased to introduce you to the Million Lives Club winners, and our friend Sean. Ladies and gentlemen, please join me. I won't bite. It's all safe. This tells you the type of people we have. They're even willing to sit on boxes for us. I told the tall ones, "Can you sit on a box?" This tells you how flexible they are. All right. Have you got this? Everyone's got a mike? We're all good. Okay.

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[00:01:00] First of all, these are amazing people. I'm in awe of them, they are my heroes. For those of you that did not understand or hear what Million Lives Club was, one of the things we really wanted to do is to just recognize those innovations that are truly at scale and growing. In case you missed it last night, these innovations account for impacting the lives of more than 129 million people. You talk about scale, it is possible. Again, I'm not going to point out who's who in the zoo here, but the smallest amount of scale we have on stage is close to two million. The largest amount of scale we have on stage is 50 million. So when someone tells you, "Oh, innovation is just a little thing here, it's 10,000 people there, it's a hundred thousand people there," it's not. It can be much more, and our goal is really to put out these folks as an example, and to be making that million or more mark a north star.

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[00:02:00] All of that being said, their voices are much more important than mine. The way this is going to work, I'm going to throw out a question. I've told them to be totally candid, totally honest, even if they say they hate my boots, that's okay. Anything goes. I'm asking each one ... I'll throw out a question, I'm not directing them to anyone, and so what that means is that anyone who really feels they have a powerful response is able to do that. We probably won't do more than three responses per question, and I've asked them to just be really candid and honest. With all of that being said, just really quickly we're going to go down the row, and I would just ask you to say your first name and organization, and then we'll get on with it.

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Lisa McCandless: Hi, my name's Lisa and I'm with Living Goods.

Chris Calvosa: My name is Chris and I work with VisionSpring.

Benjamin U. P.: My name is Benjamin. I work with HarvestPlus.

Ana Pantelic: I'm Ana with Fundacion Capital.

Nat Manning: Hi, I'm Nat with Ushahidi.

Shivi Chandra: Shivi with Learning Equality.

David Hong: Hi, I'm David with OneAcre Fund.

Peter Scott: I'm Peter with Burn Manufacturing.

Sean Blagsvedt: My name is Sean Blagsvedt. I started babajob.com.

Alexis Bonnell:
[00:03:00] And the reason Sean's here is because Sean actually sold his company. Who knew it's possible to have a social venture that you can actually sell? We're going to try to coax Sean into his next gig, but he doesn't know it yet. So we thought it would be great to have insight as well. The first question I'm going to throw out there is what was your best day and why?

There are no good days when you're doing social impact.

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Lisa McCandless: I'll jump in. This might seem really obvious, but I would say my best days have been in the field with our community health workers, and going door-to-door with them and seeing the lives of the families they're impacting. It's just incredibly motivating and inspiring. I think we all sometimes are heads down and we're focusing on the work and we just don't get out into the field enough to see our clients, to hear our clients, to really just connect us with the work. So for me, whenever I spend time with our clients, just that's what really motivates me and inspires me, and it's incredibly important.

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Benjamin U. P.: I think the best day is the day after the worst day, because those worst days, you're banging your head against the podium trying to figure something out, and if you can, if you can figure out a solution to one of these intractable problems that you're dealing with, that next day is the best.

Alexis Bonnell: Amen. Can we get a hallelujah?

Ana Pantelic: Hallelujah.

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Alexis Bonnell: Woo! All right. Who is the person or the position that you hired as you were growing that you didn't realize how critical they were until they had joined?

Sean Blagsvedt: I'll take that. I hired a chief of staff, and a kind of head of HR, and that was great. It was like the first time. I'd been talking to my board for a long time, and they're like, "You know, you're kind of interesting with this visionary piece. You can get people to come on board, but you really need kind of like an operations match." I felt like I never had that sort of partner where we respected each other's skills tremendously, but were in very different domains. With her, I finally had that, and we did a lot more, and we did it better, and we were very consistent. Suddenly, we had this great kind of united front. That was a big one.

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Chris Calvosa: I think I'll take a shot at that. I'll say that we hired an optometrist, and as part of our-

Alexis Bonnell: Not the answer I expected.

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Chris Calvosa: It's rather unassuming role, but for the work that we do, because VisionSpring goes into communities and we work in workplaces and we work in schools, the optometrist turned out to be an extremely key role for us, because not only does it extend what we can provide to potential partners, it also allows us to extend the work that our partners are already doing. We can help a hospital screen more people, or we can use an optometrist to train employees of our partners, so that they can then go on to do screening. It was a magnifier.

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David Hong: I'll just chime in. I mean, it's not a particular position, but more of a department. We had started a government relations department a few years ago, to work with governments both at the local, national, and regional level, also the global level. Before that had happened, we sort of took the Uber approach to new country expansion, which was a terrible idea. We would go in and we would basically not ask for forgiveness, or ask for forgiveness, not permission, and it got us in a whole lot of hot water.

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Alexis Bonnell: I think it's an important question. Anyone else?

Ana Pantelic: I recently heard something that I'm going to steal, from the folks at Google's X, where they talked about the key for innovation is thinking sometimes like Peter Pan, and sometimes like a PhD. The founder of Fundacion Capital is often himself like a Peter Pan, going around with some really big ideas, and that's where I come in, with a PhD mentality of figuring what is this going to look like. I really like the juxtaposition, and it's part of the reason why we work really well together, because you need to have the big visions and the big ideas and to dream and to think beyond the challenges of the day-to-day implementation, but then you also need to think through, what's it going to take to implement, and to learn from others, and to see what's worked well. I really like that juxtaposition of Peter Pan and the PhD, because we need a little bit of that creativity in all the work that we do, and also being grounded.

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Alexis Bonnell: Who was the most, maybe underestimated, or unexpected ally, to your growth?

Peter Scott: I'll take that. When I started Burn, I was on a little island called Vashon Island, and I went into a room full of people and kind of pitched the idea, and someone stood up and gave me their credit card, and said, "Okay, we're going to start this thing right now." Actually at that time, I was sort of living illegally in the country and didn't have a bank account, and I mean, I think I was living in a homeless shelter. No, I'm just kidding. I wasn't living in a homeless shelter. It was very much that whole community rose up to support my vision, and that person played a key role through the whole course of the business, so yeah.

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Alexis Bonnell: No more key allies?

Ana Pantelic: I think for us, we were spending a number of years working essentially in the global south, and we had a really strong network in Latin America, and then we had the

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[00:09:00] opportunity, we were recognized by the School Foundation, and that just opened up a whole new world for us. Being part of these networks, the School Foundation, the Schwab Foundation, and the World Economic Forum, as well as Ashoka, it just connects you to other social entrepreneurs including many of the ones here on stage. It affects your vision and your work in itself. It opens up new funding networks and mechanisms, so we're doing pay for results and started working with USAID, and none of that would have been possible if we had stayed in our little bubble. While it's great to be doing amazing, powerful work in country, if you want to go to scale, if you want to go global, being part of those networks can really make ... It can be a game-changer, so that you can achieve the equilibrium change you're looking for.

Sean Blagsvedt: [00:09:30] For us, this is going to sound like a weird one, but the telcos themselves. If you sort of rewind seven, eight years in India, there was no really mobile internet, and the only way to get sort of broad distribution of the digital product was through the telcos. So we partnered with them to basically send out lots of job alerts to lots of people, and in one sense, it wasn't a great partnership, because they really just pushed of say, "Get everybody to sign up, and get them to commit to give you 20 cents a month for this service." They weren't really caring about the quality of what was happening.

[00:10:00] But because of that partnership, they really pushed us to say, "And you should also make sure that you have job content from all over the country." Even though that partnership didn't work, it pushed us to make sure that we were really relevant at a national scale. Once the search engines began to essentially index all of that, we suddenly did have content that was really useful to everybody. As more and more people got on the mobile internet and could make good profiles and kind of doing it themselves, it was really beneficial. They didn't intend it, but they sort of pushed us into a prominent position on the web, and the kind of content strategy that was, in the end, super useful.

[00:10:30] Alexis Bonnell: What's something that you learned about yourselves in going through this process and trying to grow these organizations?

Nat Manning: [00:11:00] I'll take that. One of the things, I think at the beginning of Ushahidi we were innovative, right? That's why a lot of us are here. We got good at being innovative. We learned how to fundraise by being innovative. What we learned about ourselves was, over time, was that can have some negative consequences as well. We get pretty good at, say, fundraising can be innovative. At one point, we get to a point where every time we needed new money, we'd come up with a new idea, because that's how we knew how to raise money. We ended up with six products and a team of 60, or a team of 30. That becomes really hard, because you can't take a product to market for half a million dollars. So we had to kill a bunch of them. [00:11:30] We learned that sometimes our greatest assets, of being innovative and being able to solve problems all the time, can also come back and bite you. You've got to also focus on the things like the long term, even if it's not necessarily your immediate skill.

Alexis Bonnell: I'm seeing a lot of head shaking. Anyone want to add anything?

Shivi Chandra: Yeah, I'll take that. At Learning Equality, our origin story was a bit of a California Cinderella story. We put our product on the internet over holiday break, and then came back to find that people were using it all over the world, and it had dispersed to the point where our co-founders decided that this might be worthwhile doing as a non-profit. It's kind of interesting to be sitting here, because I'm technically the newest hire of our team. But something that we've all learned is that coming from that kind of ethos, you get really terrible at saying no.

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[00:12:30] You hear a proposal from a new agency, or a new government partner, or something like that, and in your warm, sunny, San Diego office, where everything seems possible, because wonderful things have already happened, you just dash off, you know, "Of course we'll implement in 7,000 schools next week. Of course we can have a fully aligned curriculum for you by next month." Then you quickly run into why exactly people looked at you with such incredulity when you said you were going to be able to do that. I think that that's a transition we've all had to navigate together at our organization. Going from not saying no to more things, but figuring out the best things to say no and yes to.

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Alexis Bonnell: I love the part that you talked about stopping things. Because I think that is actually really hard, especially when you have maybe the Peter Pan, or the good idea person. What are some things that you all feel, or an example where you had to make a tough decision, or you had to kill something?

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Chris Calvosa: I have a good one for that, in that VisionSpring had a very active operation in El Salvador, and we had to make a really hard choice. For any of you that happen to come by our booth, we actually had a case study that was done on this recently by Duke. Essentially, we realized that in El Salvador, we were reaching the wrong people. We were getting to people who were earning more money than our target customer should be earning, and we were essentially getting away from our mission. Along with our board members, we had a hard decision to make. In the end, we wound up going back to donors, basically saying, "We know you gave us money to grow this program in El Salvador. We have to close this program. Do you want your money back?" A lot of the donors were incredulous that we were actually offering to give them their money back. Some of them said, "No, put it towards something else. Keep growing, keep scaling." But it was a tough decision, and somewhat unprecedented seemingly. We made it, and it got us back on mission. Let us focus where we need focus.

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Sean Blagsvedt: I worked at Microsoft for a long time before starting Babajob, and one of the things that was our kind of initial insight is that people get jobs through their friends and family. When we started, we said, "Well, we'll have two websites. We'll have Babalife, a social network for people where you could do blogging," and you could basically make that social graph to basically see how somebody is connected to their maid's sister, and then we had Babajob. We very quickly realized, "Do we

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really want to compete against Facebook to build a social networking site?"

[00:15:30] In many ways, we probably overestimated the importance of that social graph versus just are they nearby and do they have the skills. The one thing that I would encourage you guys to think about is, a lot of times the skills that you'll get from a very large organization, which talks a lot about integrated innovation and doing multiple things simultaneously that could then be helpful to each other, those are actually terribly unimportant and not useful lessons, often times when you're starting a startup, when you just need to do something simple incredibly well, and make sure that all of your energy is behind that. We gave that up, and I'm very glad. It made things a lot simpler.

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Lisa McCandless: I'll add one thing as well, similar to your story at VisionSpring. At Living Goods, when I joined, we were experimenting with a different model in Kenya. We were trying to see if we could really push the boundary on financial sustainability. We gave it a go for about a year. That required us to think about our health impact a little bit differently. What we quickly realized is we weren't on as clear or as quick of a path as we would like to be on financial sustainability. In Uganda, we had this amazing health impact, and so we had to ask ourselves, "Why are we doing this, and who are we, and what is our core reason for being?" If impact is going to be cut so much, what's the point of financial sustainability? We ultimately decided to bring our health model from Uganda to Kenya, and since have been growing rapidly in Kenya with that health model.

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Alexis Bonnell: I've noticed that you're all human. I'm very observant. Describe for me your hardest human moment, because obviously you're entrepreneurs, you're innovators, but maybe you're also fathers, mothers, sisters, et cetera. Give me an example of somewhere where that became hard to do both.

Sean Blagsvedt:

[00:17:30] One of the things that sucks about scale, especially inside of an organization, is sometimes statistics catch up. We had a lot of young employees, and one day, one employee went out on a Sunday and was driving his motorcycle, and he got into a car accident, or a motorcycle accident, and he died. Then he was dating another woman in our office, and the next day, the next morning, she threw herself off of our building.

Peter Scott:

Oh my god.

Sean Blagsvedt:

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You know, and so she didn't make it. And so, then I needed to stand up and talk about how do we as an organization survive that. How do you provide appropriate counseling services? Basically, still make a cohesive organization and deal with the trauma that everybody's going through. Those are very real and human moments that, I think, happen unfortunately, when you start to hire a lot of people, just because humanity does catch up.

Ana Pantelic:

I can continue with another personal story. When I was working at Fundacion

[00:18:30] Capital, I got the news that my father had passed away, and a year before, my mother had passed away, before I joined Fundacion Capital. I moved from Serbia to Colombia, and was in a completely different country and environment, with now very limited family, and a lot of new friends. I was recently listening to a podcast where they were saying, "You know, Netflix they're like, we're ..." What are they saying? "We're a team, not a family," something like that. But ... Yeah, we call ourselves a tribe. You have many different names, but when you're in a startup culture, it is your family. It is your world. It is everything to you. I was at a conference for work. At 4:00 in the morning I got this call, and it was just really incredible how much my colleagues embraced me, and helped me, and continued to check in on me. Unfortunately, we've had similar situations happen with various colleagues.

[00:19:30] That's why I think, and I know this is another one of your questions, about the human resources stuff, but if you really choose people that are good people, not just good technicians, but people that, maybe they don't have the skills today, but they're willing to learn and put blood, sweat, and tears, and these are going to be your family or friends. I mean pick people that you want to work with, that you want to spend a lot of time with, that you know are going to be there to give you the hug when those things are happening, to recognize what your colleagues are going through when tough things like that happen.

[00:20:00] I think there's, in our worlds, there's no separation between work and life. It's all blended. If you think it's differently, then maybe a corporate lifestyle is more appropriate for you. I really, I think without that support, I wouldn't really be where I am today. That's kept me going, and that's fueled my own passion and fire to stay with the organization for six years, despite all of the difficult times. It's leaders and friends and co-workers that really make those things important, so thank you for reaching out. It's for those kinds of opportunities.

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Nat Manning: I really identify with a lot of that, in that, when you're starting up, and when you're feeling innovative, in that early stage, a lot of the people on the team are going to be there, because they're just incredibly impassioned. You're going to work really hard. People are going to work all the time. It's really fun. It's also exhausting, and it's really fun. We're built as an open source software company. Our people joined in and contributed to the code from all over the world. It was just this incredibly exciting moment. As you scale, there's a point where that will change, and you will become an employer, and it's really hard. I don't know exactly when it is, but there's a moment where you're suddenly not the scrappy bunch of people staying up late all night in the room. Now you're like, "I have to have HR policies, and I have to have accountability policies."

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[00:22:00] Someday you might have to fire someone who feels like they're part of that family. Not maybe because of accountability, maybe just because of just a down tip in funding. Those are the hardest times, and where you have to be the most human. It's something else that I recommend to really think about. I think it's somewhere around the 20 people range, and it will be a tension in the company. If the new people coming in being like, "This is the way we did it when we were at Google and

it's so cool." You go, a bunch of people are like, "We don't want to do it that way. We're just going to do it the way we always did it. No one needs to, we're a flat organization." You're like, "Well, what does that mean?" It's hard. Those will be the challenging moments.

Alexis Bonnell: Burn?

Peter Scott:
[00:22:30] Yeah, I just remember one time when I was going to a conference, and I was saying goodbye to my five year old daughter, and she was all sad. I said, "Oh, it's okay, we're still a family. I just have to go do this." She's like, "Oh no, Papa, we're not a family anymore." It's fine, five year olds, they're ... They'll say anything to manipulate you. But I think looking back, if I had done my life a little bit differently, I thought I could start this thing up and it would be running stable ops in a couple of years. It's really, it's not a sprint, it's a marathon, all that. There's all these key moments that you have this choice. Do I work, do I check my email, or do I play with my daughter? I think it's hard to look back and know what the right answer is, but I think often as entrepreneurs we end up slightly on the other side of it, where it's not being with our families, and things like that. I wish that I had known that it was going to be like seven or eight years, or 20 years, and not just like, "Oh, next week it'll be fine. The funding will come in." Yeah, so it's ... Anyways, yeah.

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Alexis Bonnell: What would be a piece of advice ... I mean, we had almost a hundred amazing innovators today over in the marketplace. I think from the donors represented in the Global Innovation Week, we represent hundreds of innovators, many of which are trying to get to that million plus mark. So for each of you, I'm going to ask each of you to answer, what would be kind of the seminal piece of advice, understanding you may change the opinion on that tomorrow? But for today, in this moment, what is the piece of advice that you would share that you feel is practical to tell and to share with us?

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Lisa McCandless: The first thing that comes to mind is, we've really been thinking a lot about our endgame. How do we make sure every decision we make is based on that end game? We've gone through several evolutions of what we thought that end game would be, and so you might not know in the beginning, but that's really become our compass. In our case, it's government adoption. For a long time, we kind of were, similar to OneAcre Fund, avoiding government, or just doing the minimum to get permission. Really know what that end game is, and design with that in mind. Prioritize your resources with that. Know that it may evolve and change, but use that as your compass. Been very helpful to us.

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Chris Calvosa: I think what I would share is something that flows from one of VisionSpring's core principles, the idea of a beginner's mindset. In the beginner's mind, there are many, many possibilities. In the expert's mind, there are very few. By maintaining that beginner's mindset, something that we constantly remind ourselves to do, you keep yourself open to possibilities. The rain is going to fall. It will happen, and when unexpected things come up, having that mindset just makes it a little bit easier to pivot when you need to pivot, and make hard decisions when you need to.

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Benjamin U. P.: We're at 26 million right now, but we're trying to get to one billion. Now, as you get towards scaling, sort of as Larry Cooley was talking about earlier, it becomes a very unwieldy beast. Something that you really can't control anymore. I think one thing that we're faced with is responsibility, because we started doing this to ensure that rural, malnourished farmers could have access to this tool. But if you're scaling across an entire agri-food system, a lot of different people are going to be involved. How do we hold onto that responsibility of what we started out this organization to do in the first place? I think reminding yourself of why you do what it is you do, every single day, is a way to ground yourself in that.

Ana Pantelic: We may be one of the rare social entrepreneurs that actually started by working with governments, which sounds a little bit crazy, because we all want to move quickly.

Alexis Bonnell: Who wants to work with government?

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Ana Pantelic: We do. Through that, we were often seeing ourselves and taking the role as being sort of the [Spanish 00:26:36], the consultant there in the shadows. Never really wanting to be seen and be visible. That's sort of for two reasons. One, because when you're working with governments or with corporate partners, whomever, you want them to shine. But then when you're knocking on doors for funding, you also want the recognition, right? Recognizing that you're not the first to come up with some of these things, and that governments have been doing it for a lot longer, I think it's really key to stay humble. Despite that desire to be humble, you also have to be true to yourself and stay hungry. That's something that for us as entrepreneurs, I think is an important part of us. We're all, I think, generally hungry. Sometimes, not so humble. If we can stay both hungry and humble, I think that's a really important key to success, especially in partnership.

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Nat Manning: I think I would say to have a really good idea of who ... have a defined idea of who the person you serve is, or your user, and a way to stress test that all of the time, and build a system that you're constantly doing so. The reason why is, we were interested ... we were our users when we first launched as a tool to just understand what was happening on the ground. Made it open source, it grew to have hundreds of thousands of users, and our deployments went about redesigning the product.

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At first, it was for a very specific reason, trying to understand what was happening on the ground in a post-election violence situation. As a platform, there were hundreds of thousands of use cases, from people figuring out where bicycles were in DC to crisis response to environmental response. Suddenly, we're trying to design for a whole bunch of different people, and got completely lost. We had to really go back to the beginning, and figure out what to say no to, and test and ask questions all of the time to the people that you're serving. So yeah, ask questions consistently to those that you're serving.

Shivi Chandra: I want to point out a juxtaposition that is particularly acute for us, but I think is true for everyone working in the social sector space who's likely to be in this room. At Learning Equality, we design educational software for people without the internet. We're all a young office. We've all grown up on the internet. Everything we know about learning is influenced by the internet. Putting ourselves into the mind of the user who we're designing for, we realize often that we're in an uncomfortable position of speaking for users whose minds we'll never be able to understand, and trying to represent their interests most fairly. In this regard, being mission driven has been very difficult, in the sense that we've had to undo a lot of our own assumptions that are very dearly held, that led us into this field, about how learning works, about what the best thing is to generate learning experiences. In being mission driven, realize that you might have to undo a lot of who you are, in addition to being true to yourself. Striking that balance has been a challenge that we've all enjoyed at our company working towards together.

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David Hong: It's no surprise, I'd say, that great organizations always start with great people. While that isn't Earth shattering, it's difficult to achieve. For us, we kind of take in the view of getting the right people on that bus. We have a really rigorous recruitment process. It's probably akin to hazing at a fraternity or a sorority. We lose a lot of people in the process, but we also retain long-term leaders. A lot of our staff have been with us from the very beginning. That culture has become really strong. I think we credit a lot of our growth to the people that we have on the bus.

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Peter Scott: I guess we're almost out of time, so I'll just be quick. It's a kind of a platitude, but the best piece of advice I ever got was that startups only fail for one reason, and that's when the founders quit. There's a thousand times where I wanted to quit, and those words came back to me. It's like we only lose if we quit. That's the thing, is just yeah. I think if you're in this space, you'll realize the deep well of persistence and fortitude. It's much stronger in us than we think, than we imagine. Yeah, that's my words of wisdom.

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Sean Blagsvedt: I would just say, know thyself, right? The more you can be honestly self-reflective about what you're good at, what your organization's good at, what it's bad at, what problems are super important that you're just ignoring, I find that the better you're going to be able to survive and thrive.

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Alexis Bonnell: First of all, I want to thank this amazing group of people. I want to remind all of you that they're humans, just like you, just like me. What they're doing is entirely possible with the right team, with the right focus, with the right mission. Hopefully, that you'll feel comfortable reaching out to them. In closing, the events that are happening today, they're reminding you there's things happening in other rooms.

We just want to thank, with incredible gratitude the partners, all of which, again, are listed. Australia, Bill and Melinda Gates, Center for Global Development, the Douglas Marshall Foundation, I can't even read that far. Grand Challenges Canada,

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InterAction, National Academy of Science. Everyone there has just, Hewlett Foundation, has been absolutely amazing, have been great thought leaders with us on this. Most importantly, we couldn't have done it without them, or without you. We hope that this has been an interesting two days, kicking off Global Innovation Week, and most importantly, we hope you will go innovate. Thank you so much.