

Introduction

Have you ever had one of those moments where you look around and wonder, “What am I doing with my life?”

For me, that moment came in March 2016. I was bagging groceries in a supermarket chain I had just purchased in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania when a customer yelled at me for crushing her lettuce by putting it at the bottom of her shopping bag.

Now I knew I had a lot to learn about the business, but bagging groceries? I couldn't even do *THAT* correctly? Needless to say, the life of a grocery store titan was not starting off as well as I thought it would.

After three apologies and the embarrassing involvement of the cashier and store manager, this regular customer left, but not before clearly expressing doubts about my future in the supermarket industry. Little did she know that at that exact moment, I was having those same doubts myself.

There I was, having graduated top of my high school, graduated with honors from McGill University in Canada, graduated again with honors from Harvard Business School just five years prior, having worked at some of the largest banks and financial institutions in the United States and India... failing at bagging lettuce in a grocery store. How did my life get so far off track?

Well, believe it or not, it was all part of the plan.

* * *

Of my graduating class at Harvard Business School, more than 75 percent went into either financial services, consulting, or technology, earning six-figure salaries. By that time, some were even earning in the seven-figure range. They were negotiating multi-billion-dollar deals at Blackstone, strategizing about the future of e-commerce at McKinsey, or building Airbnb in Asia. That is the expected path to pursue when you graduate from a top business school: big deals in big places.

And that's what I did too... at first. Right after school, I moved to India in 2011 and joined a real estate private equity fund. I thought that was the place to learn and immerse myself in business. It was, to an extent, but my most important lesson came not from negotiating a deal with a difficult counterparty or meeting with investors and describing the deep analysis we had done on our latest investment. No, the most invaluable guidance I ever got was at dinner in India on a cold January night.

As I did multiple times a year, I took our investors and advisors on a tour of the various properties the fund owned across the country. In Udaipur, we spent the day touring hotels and the evening debriefing over a meal. During this dinner, I happened to sit next to Professor Segel, my Harvard real estate professor and an advisor to the fund. He was describing where he was in his career at my age, right after the big Savings & Loan crisis that left bankrupt a myriad of commercial properties across the United States.

Convincing a few investors to put down startup capital, he went around the country purchasing small, run-down properties for pennies on the dollar on the hunch that if he spent time, money, and effort renovating them, they would be worth more than he'd paid. He was right about the profits, but boy did he put in the effort. He was traveling most of the time and working relentlessly.

"Did you enjoy yourself?" I asked.

"I loved every minute of it! Those were the best times of my life, and I probably learned more in those few years than anything I ever learned at school."

He told me about how he bought the wrong properties in the wrong parts of town after being oversold their value by very convincing brokers and how he tried to turn them around. He was losing cash on one of his properties, but because he was honest and transparent with his banker, they gave him time to work it out. And he told me how many times he got rejected by potential investors, tenants, and brokers and how he learned to identify the real risks of each deal.

I was fascinated by his stories, and if I'm honest, a little jealous. I remember thinking just before dinner that I was on a clear path to learning business. Now I was being inspired to rethink that assessment. Professor Segel did all those things when he was around my age, during the early days of his career, and he had to do everything himself—find deals, negotiate them, arrange financing, manage properties, deal with tenants, etc. That's when he worked the hardest, toiling every day to make sure his properties would return a profit to his investors, but that's also when he enjoyed himself the most. He learned the business, and he gleaned life-long lessons that he still shares to this day.

So I started asking myself some tough questions: Should I be doing what I'm doing now? Am I doing the right things to further my learning? What else could I be doing now to become an effective business leader?

Out of all the stories he shared that night, two lessons stood out:

1. Work at a small, growing company; you get to do things and have responsibilities you "don't deserve."

2. Typical MBA graduates don't get their hands dirty. If you are committed to learning, go into leasing or property management, where you have to do and learn everything yourself.

Those lessons taught him a sense of responsibility and ownership, and how different departments in a company interact with one another to create value and grow.

"Do something small." Now, that's not the typical advice you hear as a graduate from one of the most prestigious schools in the world.

How are we supposed to do something small when the signing bonus from the big firms that hire you right out of school is enough to buy a car or put a deposit on a house? People do not pay you car-money in signing bonuses expecting you to come in and "do something small." No, they expect earth-shattering advice and analyses gleaned from your years of experience and exposure to some of the brightest business minds you could ever meet, such as the late Harvard Business School professor Clayton Christensen.

His Innovator's Dilemma theory—that big successful companies neglect potential customers at the lower end of their market and are, thus, ripe for disruption from smaller, nimbler competitors—shaped the strategies of late Apple CEO Steve Jobs and was responsible for turning around Intel.¹ There's nothing small about such an idea. Doing something small after studying at a place so big would be anathema to everything it stands for.

After hearing my former professor talk about his early experiences, I had an intuition of what I needed to do. I had to get my hands dirty and sweat what would look to others like small stuff. I needed to learn business by struggling with its nuts and bolts and learning from the people involved at every level.

Marked by the words I heard that night, I knew I needed to take a detour from the common post-MBA path I was following.

So when an opportunity came, I bought a supermarket chain in Dar es Salaam and moved from New York to run it. I did all the seemingly small things alongside the team to understand how the business ran and put into practice all those courses we were taught in business school. I saw what the real life of a business owner was all about from the ground up.

Was it worth leaving a city I loved for the complete unknown? A country I had never been to, a continent I barely understood, and an industry I wasn't familiar with?

¹ Clayton M. Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma: When New Technologies Cause Great Firms to Fail* (Boston: Harvard Business Publishing, 1997).

Yes, a million times yes. It was the best thing I ever did. I learned to love business not for its big moments but for all of its spirit and the people in it. And today, it has made me a better businessperson, manager, and investor. I get to put into practice daily what I learned during those years running a supermarket chain in East Africa.

This is a story about what a customer complaint on the price of corn flakes teaches you about the logistics of a supply chain spanning nine countries; how promoting a cashier earns the trust of all the employees; why designing uniforms and wearing a name tag helps everyone feel like you're part of the same company; and why showing up at the bakery at 4:00 a.m. makes you a better leader.

In the life of any business, there are three phases: learn, manage and grow, and sell.

Through my experience, we will explore those three phases. I will share stories that shaped my journey in each of those key moments and give you tips on what I learned along the way.

I will also share thoughts on my journey as an entrepreneur, what I learned from it, and how it has helped me grow.

Ultimately, I want to show you how sweating the small stuff made me look at business in a new light and led to the company's success and my personal growth.

Whether you are an ambitious college graduate thinking about your first job or an experienced professional wondering about your next move, I hope this book will give you a different perspective on what it takes to be successful in business.

Hint: You don't need to move to Africa and run a grocery store.

But you do need to listen to everyone in and around your business. From the truck drivers to the accountants, the customers to your suppliers, they all add critical viewpoints to your business, and you need to learn and process that information. And yes, you even need to learn that lettuce, like eggs, should be packed at the top of the grocery bag. Focusing on the small things ultimately teaches you the most, and that will make you a better businessperson in the long run.