



Podcast Episode #2 - Empowering women in Nepal by a woman entrepreneur, with Anya Cherneff of Empower Generation, USA

RAW TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW

Balint: In this episode I am thrilled to talk to Anya Cherneff, CEO of Empower Generation. Welcome Anya to the episode.

Anya: Thank you, I am excited to be here!

Balint: First thing first, Anya, you are experiencing some thrilling times due to your eminent delivering a baby, you are due in about two weeks, right?

Anya: Yes, in about two and a half weeks I am due with my first human child although I would say that my start up is my first child.

Balint: And baby-boy or baby-girl?

Anya: It is a baby-girl.

Balint: It is pretty exciting! An extra thanks for being available for this interview.

Anya: No problem!

Balint: I met you Anya about two years ago at TEDx Zurich where you delivered a presentation that really swept me away. I encourage you, listener, to search for it on youtube. You Anya clearly articulated your message, your compelling vision and you had a high level of passion for social cause which is exemplary. Can you tell us some more about your fight and how you fight and how it is different from other companies, competitors on the market?

Anya: Sure. So I run a company called Empower Generation and Empower Generation is a social enterprise. It empowers women in developing countries to distribute clean energy technology in their remote communities. I do this because my real passion is empowering women and providing women the opportunity to increase their social value through out the world, fight for gender parity and reduce women's overall risk to excitation like being forced into prostitution or trafficked into other labor situations. So I guess, unlike other clean-energy distribution companies that are more focused on technology distribution or really access to energy which is very valid and valuable cause, our organisation and my passion has just one more added component and that is we really seek clean energy, technology as a platform to



create empowered, strong female leaders in societies like Nepal where we work, where women are disadvantaged and marginalised.

Balint: I know Anya that in Nepal you are basically a sole provider of clean energy. Is that right?

Anya: We are the only women-led clean energy distribution network in Nepal that reaches the rural and remote end customers. There are overall about a hundred other solar companies working in Nepal and they mostly focused on upper-middle class urban areas and do larger installations, like commercial installations or work with schools or hospitals etc. We are the only one that is really focused on reaching the rural areas in a sustainable manner.

Balint: Very interesting. I know that you visited together with your husband, Bennett, and you met Sita, your co-founder, in Nepal. Can you tell us this story and going even more back in time what was the source of your passion and your motivation? You mentioned it already but maybe we could go back even more to your time when this passion really started. Maybe it started in your childhood or even at the university where you studied.

Anya: Sure, if you wanna go all the way back, I guess I attribute my passion to, when I was born I was born with a condition that required me to have surgery at two days old and my parents were told that I have less than a 10% chance of survival. Obviously I survived and thrived and was able to grow up and never actually felt disadvantaged in any way as a result of that. So I think that although not like overatly but more just inherently within my nature I have always felt extremely grateful for the opportunity that I was born into and the privilege that I was born into. I think that is really like put me on my path in terms of how I want to contribute to the world, what areas and how I want to support other people who have been born into situations that are way less privileged than mine. So that I would say is my initial source of passion for why I at school got very interested in the developing world, especially in the developing Asia. I lived in India, Malaysia and really loved that part of the world. I studied cultural anthropology, undergraduate and then got my graduate degree in International Human Rights. I think that is the underlying reason why I do what I do, my real passion for women developed when I was working in the anti-trafficking or abolitionist movement in several different non-profits and really came to understand that human-trafficking affects everyone, everywhere and it is a real social issue that needs real systematic change in the way that women and people around the world, poverty is addressed so that the demand or the supply for victims of human-trafficking can be stemmed if you provide people with local options for income generation as well as the leadership and sustainable development within their own communities.



Balint: I see. What were the steps of founding your company, Empower Generation? I think your listeners would be very much interested in learning what the steps were so from the idea generation through validating the idea, coming up with the plan, following the plan execution, getting support and funding, then also generating revenue and having an impact on this big number of people, 250 000 people, that you have reached so far.

Anya: We are still definitely a work-in-progress, especially the revenue generation part. So we had this idea, my now husband Bennett and I. I was working on women's empowerment issues and Bennett was working in alternative energy and we had this idea to combine our passions and see if we could provide some sort of solution for the communities that we were trying to reach. Before we started anything we took about a year off of our studies, our jobs and decided to go travelling on, what we call, learning tour. We travelled all through out south, south-east Asia, just linking up with other great organisations that were doing work in fields that we were interested in. Whether that was solar, any type of clean energy distribution, community development, women's empowerment, anti-human-trafficking, really anything, we just wanted to learn what was out there because we really did not want to re-invent the wheel and we really wanted to see if our idea fit a certain cultural, certain context in a proper way. We did not want to impose an idea that we had on a community where it would not make any sense for them. So we took this year to kind of like explore what was out there. While we were in Nepal we met my business partner Sita as you mentioned, and we also recognised a real need and a good cultural fit, contextual fit for what we were doing. We decided to start there and we followed the lean start-up method of starting a company, where you develop what is called a minimum viable product, so like a micro study, or a mini-product or a mini-application of your idea and you test it out in a microcosm.

We started with helping Sita become a solar entrepreneur. We raised a small amount of money through an online crowd-rise platform. From our friends and family raised just 7000 USD and this was enough money to help us register our company in US, help Sita register her company in Nepal and get Sita connected with a clean energy technology distributor that had solar lights available in her country, give her a small start-up loan so that she could purchase her first few orders in the inventory, get her some business skills training so she could understand what steps she needed to take to be an entrepreneur and help her write her business plan. In the meantime Bennett and I wrote our business plan and did a bunch of start-up incubator and accelerator programs right along with Sita, so we were all kind of learning as we go.

Balint: Interesting. Can you describe the business model?



Anya: Sure! Empower Generation has a hybrid business model, so we work both for profit and non-profit. What we do is, we identify women that are living in energy poor communities. In Nepal it is really everywhere, Nepal is one of the most poorest countries in the world, where less than half of the population has access to reliable electricity. We provide these women with business skills, mentoring, training and support so that they can register and run their own solar or clean-energy distribution company. So these companies are distributing solar at a house-hold level to customers that are using dangerous and dirty fuels, like kerosene and candles because it is the only thing they can afford and the only thing that they have access to. So by supporting these women led businesses and starting more and more of them across the country we create a distribution network or a supply chain for clean energy technologies to reach these remote communities in a way that they never had access before. We take care of the entire supply chain, so from importing and selling products, whole-sale, our company does that in Nepal and then our retail entrepreneurs sell the products, retail to their last-mile customers.

Balint: I remember that in your TEDx-talk you mentioned that one of the reasons why you chose women to support and not men regarding funding is that in case of women there is a higher chance of the loan being paid back and in Nepal they are the real leaders so the energy leaders of the family because they are the ones who take back home the collected wood with which they fire. Are there some developing countries where men are as reliable paying back loans or we are just hopeless?

Anya: I really like that question! I definitely would not say that men are hopeless and I am sure there are lot of great men that work with our distribution network as well as I am sure around the world they are participating in distribution of clean energy. So not just saying that men are hopeless. It has just been kind of proven in micro-finance that women are more reliable than men in terms of paying back their loans but also in the way that they invest their income that they earn from micro-finance. So women are more likely than men to invest their income or their returns in their families and in their communities which leads to a greater, spreading-up development benefits, as you would say. So it is not that men are not reliable in terms of paying back their loans but they tend to spend their income on something that is more self-involved. That is one of the reasons why we work with female entrepreneurs. The second reason is like you said, women in Nepal are their household energy managers which means that they are responsible for the collection and use of most of the household energy inputs, like fire-wood, kerosene and candles so they feel the most pain from energy poverty and they stand to gain the most from the transition into clean energy. That is not just say like I said before, that men do not participate



and do not benefit. A lot of our village level sales agents are men and they are very effective in making sales because they do also understand the benefits that clean technology brings them.

Balint: Regarding other people that are doing interesting work, are there some individuals that you look at for sources of inspiration in your fields or outside, CEOs, innovators, scientists?

Anya: I think there is a lot of companies like Off Grid Electric or M-Kopa that are working predominantly in Africa, to do clean energy deployment and we really look to those companies as like the guiding light in terms of how they developed a good business model that is earning income and every points of the supply chain and providing customers with the types of energy services that they really need. Personally I am always inspired by women that are rising up their wings and leading their own companies and doing start-ups as well as pushing through politics etc. any woman that is not afraid to speak her mind and demand an equal foot at the table is inspiration to me.

Balint: I actually fully support your initiative and your drive. I remember a talk that I listened to where Peter Thiel and Chris Sacca participated, that was from last year 2015, it was I think New York Times, Deal Book, where Peter Thiel mentioned that there should be more women who are leaders to raise awareness and to be inspirational figures for other women and this is the way we could as a society attract more women into engineering, leadership roles. I absolutely support what you are doing and I hope that you with your initiative will empower more women to follow you and to do similar activities outside of your companies and of course inside of your initiative. Switching gears, can you describe your happiest and saddest entrepreneurial moments because there are ups and downs as entrepreneur so I am pretty sure that you had very happy and very sad moments?

Anya: Definitely! It is never a final point, I go through a lot of emotional moments, both sad and happy, throughout the course of the day, let alone the weeks and the months and the years that we have been working on this but some of the happiest moments while doing Empower Generation have really come from the women that we worked with and watching them succeed so seeing my business partner for example, become a recognised subject matter expert on clean energy technology in Nepal and being really called in to provide her expert opinion on pico solar voltaics and how Nepal's government should address and support the companies that are working to distribute them and seeing her lobby for different rights, policies around this has really made me so incredibly proud, just as proud and inspired as any of our



entrepreneurs who when I first meet them are shy and quiet, do not believe in themselves and then if I come back a year later see them bravely talking with anybody and everybody in their communities and see how they are thriving and how they really gain self-confidence in themselves to go out and do anything, not just within their business but also take incredible leaps in their personal life, like going back to school after 15 years, or running for a local community office or some sort of community recognition programs, that is really what is most inspiring for me.

Balint: What about sad moments? How do you come over sad moments, for example psychologically?

Anya (19:39): The sad moments are mostly around panic, around fund raising, and running out of money and not being able to continue to support these amazing women and feeling this kind of sense of responsibility and it is not just me, that is in this business, we have 18 businesses, we support 21 entrepreneurs, over 200 village level sales agents. Having this feeling that I fail them by maybe not getting a big grand application that we worked on for a year and a half or not winning some challenge that we worked very hard for, those are definitely the saddest moments. Also if there is ever like some sort of miscommunication with partners that can be pretty challenging as well and getting over those emotional valleys, I mean the only thing that you can do is just keep going and show up to work on the next day and work even harder to overcome whatever challenge is and not giving up and not allowing yourself to feel that failure is, maybe a small failure within your company is like an end-off failure that you should take upon yourself is the only way that you can really get over. Get over that and knowing that failure is not an important part of running a start-up is really how you get through those valleys.

Balint: Yes, and sometimes I keep it in mind failure is not permanent, it is temporary.

Anya: Exactly, makes you better.

Balint: To empower yourself. You mentioned that basically you created this platform where you distribute energy sources. Regarding these products that you distribute do you see further products or innovations that you could make use of in developing countries so South-East Asia, the region that you concentrate on? Is there a call by you for specific product innovations?

Anya: We really focus on distribution because like you said we want to create a platform through which all types of life-changing technologies can flow and solar lantern is just the beginning. There are a whole host of opportunities, now we are moving into larger solar home systems that provide more than just light but also enough power to power a rural household's entire home energy needs so that



includes running a television, or a fan, charging mobile phones, charging tablets so there is an unending demand for power and with that comes the need for affordable technologies that can provide that power for communities that are struggling in the dark. Other technologies that can help communities have access to clean and safe drinking water, health benefits such as sanitary pads and medicine, refrigeration for medicine is definitely needed in an affordable, sustainable way. Clean cooking is one of the no. 1 needs in the communities that we are working in right now. So an affordable, clean cooking method is always necessary. Communities and the customers that we work with want to be connected to the global world, just like you and I, they want to be able to have their own podcast and be able to broadcast it and develop it and listen to your podcast, so providing accessible, affordable internet access, I think, is really the next step forward what I would call on, the tech innovators to focus on.

Balint: Very interesting. Anya, I want to go into now the ultrafast round of questions so I am gonna ask four questions and it would be nice if you could give us some short answers to these. First question is, if you could time travel like in Back to the Future movie, which is one of my favourites, to the time when you are twenty years old what notes would you give to yourself?

Anya: Good question! I might probably tell to myself to go to class more during my undergraduate and pay more attention, make some good connections that would help me later on down the road.

Balint: Regarding books that I guess you read which one had the biggest impact on your entrepreneurial career?

Anya: There are so many books that have really helped me in terms of developing my entrepreneurial spirit but I think one of the books that really changed my outlook in terms of supporting and highlighting the leadership of women is „Half the sky” by Nicholas Kristof.

Balint: I have to check it out! I am fascinated about habits and how these can influence people, how they can help us to reach our goals and also simply to positively affect our lives. Do you have a morning routine that gets you out of bed and gets you going for the day and are there any habits that help you in your work?

Anya: I actually have some bad habits, like checking my emails first thing in the morning, which I do not think is that great for me but I do have a dog that I love very much and she gets me out of bed first thing in the morning so we can go on our morning walk and then I try to take a little bit of time for myself on that walk to think about what I have coming up on that day and how I would attack it.

Balint: So you check your emails before going out with the dog or after? I guess after!



Anya: No, before!

Balint: Even before?!

Anya: Which is a bad habit that I am trying to change!

Balint: I see. The last question. In your work because you have to work cross borders, if you had to pick one or two critical cultural differences which ones you wish you knew before and how did you resolve those issues?

Anya: There is a lot of cultural issues that we definitely struggle with. I think the biggest one for us is just the kind of like motivation and the working ethic around working with different culture can be very different, in terms of the speed, the level of confidence and efficiency at which we are used to working. I guess I would be more aware of that going into it and be a little bit more forgiving and understanding about that and try to identify areas where a Nepali culture could be more appropriate and not be so resistant to that as well as areas where we would promote American work ethic and work culture in a stronger way.

Balint: So basically raising cultural awareness on both sides would be very beneficial.

Anya: Accepting the strengths and weaknesses of both and figuring out where in the business one over the other fits most appropriately.

Balint: Before we depart, finish this interview I guess some of you listeners might want shout out to Anya because you were touched by her story or you see a chance of collaborating technologically or even just donating which, I guess, is very much welcome based on Anya's story, that funding is always appreciated. What are the best channels for reaching you, by emails, you said you are checking emails or I guess you check also social media?

Anya: I am about to go on maternity leaves so emails probably not the best way at least not for the next few months, not for me, but you can follow us on Twitter @empowergrid or you can visit our web site: www.empowergeneration.org, to give a donation, sign up for a newsletter or our mailing list and stay contact that way and you can always email us at info@empowergeneration.org. We also have a Facebook page where you can like us and follow our stories.

Balint: I will put all of these notes, addresses, email and website into the notes sections of this episode so that you listeners can get this information. I appreciate very much Anya that you could join us and share us your story about your company and I wish you all the best so that you can empower women in Nepal and also surrounding countries in the very close future! Thanks very much!

Anya: Thank you so much for having me, it has been a pleasure!