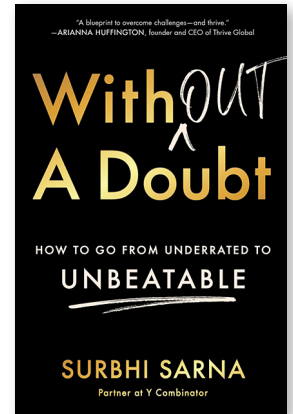


Without a Doubt

How to Go from Underrated to Unbeatable

by **Surbhi Sarna**



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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Author Surbhi Sarna knows what it's like to feel underrated...to have the weight of doubt pulling at you while trying to reach your goals. The route she took culminated in selling her medical device company for \$275 million, but was fraught with such heavy moments. There are no easy answers or quick remedies to combat it, but her experience managing to overcome it to great success can shed light on how to do it yourself.

Maybe you've been overlooked because you were born a certain color or gender, or into a certain socioeconomic class, or because you have unconventional ideas. Her experiences and the insights she learned will show you that the very qualities that put you on the outside with certain people or in certain environments are, in fact, your strengths. That your power lies in being able to recognize those qualities, define them, and leverage them in the pursuit of your dreams. They can help you build your own ladder and propel you forward from being underrated to unbeatable.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- How to gain the right experience for the next rung up the ladder.
- Why storytelling is vital when seeking connections and forward momentum.
- What role the team around you will play in your success.
- How to recognize when it's time to make a change.

Finding a Problem You Want to Work On

At the age of just thirteen years old, Sarna found herself facing a potential cancer diagnosis, the result of a complex ovarian cyst. She started to research her condition and realized that something didn't add up.

The protein that would be measured to confirm or rule out cancer was not reliable. CA-125 fluctuates in a woman's body, making this test accurate only 50 percent of the time. The only way to confirm cancer was to perform an invasive exploratory surgery, which carried significant risks including infertility.

In the end, Sarna and her family opted to forgo surgery and the cyst resolved on its own. But as her fear faded, a new emotion took its place. She was angry. They'd had to do too much guessing and waiting. They were forced to make so many impossible choices. And this passion carried forward.

When applying to Berkeley, her personal statement, which emphasized her health journey and how it fueled her desire to make a difference, was strong enough to get the attention of an admissions officer who decided to give her a chance. There, she dedicated herself to learning more about women's health. And the more she learned, the more her indignation grew.

From the early 1900s, women have often been subject to lengthy diagnostic times or solutions. When it comes to ovarian cancer, for example, each year 300,000 women have their ovaries removed but only 21,000 of them ultimately are found to have had ovarian cancer, making it a life-altering and unnecessary surgery for most women.

In fact, many medical procedures that are painful and inaccurate are still the standard of care and haven't been replaced for more than one hundred years. The evidence is everywhere. Women have long been suffering under a second-class medical system.

This realization was when Sarna's dream started to take shape for her. She wanted to spend the rest of her life improving the quality of care women receive. She would focus on replacing antiquated approaches with cutting-edge innovation and providing women with the standard of healthcare they deserve, starting with a better way to detect ovarian cancer.

She had a passionate stake in the problem she set out to solve. When you are trying to find your way, start by finding something you *really* want to work on.

Gaining the Right Experience

After interviewing for positions in finance and consultancy within corporate settings, Sarna realized that starting with a technical, scientific path—the kind of work she'd enjoyed since childhood—was right for her. She would get to apply the theory she was learning at school and be able to work on what interested her, but for half the salary of what an investment bank or consultancy would pay.

That was fine because at the time she was not interested in making money. She wanted to feel financially stable enough to help support her mom if necessary, but it was not a driving force. She learned that what really mattered for her first job wasn't the money: it was gaining the right experience.

This is what you often see with other entrepreneurs, too—even if they don't end up on the business end, including running a startup. They often begin on a technical path so they can learn the skills needed to actually create the product.

If you want to create a jewelry brand, for example, learn how to make jewelry ahead of founding a small business, thinking of designs before launching your own company.

If you want to be part of bringing the next big app to the public, take courses in coding or teach yourself, so that even if you are not doing the actual coding in the long run, you know what the people who code are doing, and you have the experience to ask the right questions and judge the results.

Business skills can be acquired while you're building your company. But mastering the technical skills needed to execute the business you want to be in—whether that's retail, art, healthcare, organic farming, or green energy—begins with an understanding of that field from a technical perspective.

It's hard to stay focused on gaining the experience you need to get when that sometimes means turning down more money and or security. The lures of high-paying jobs, of well-trodden paths and systems are hard to ignore or easy to be seduced by. Many brilliant minds have been sucked into conventional corporate structures and academia. It seems that the more brilliant you are, the more hard-working, the more people want to put you in their system to climb their ladder to help them chase their dreams.

When those dreams align with yours, this works. There's nothing wrong with taking a job because you need a job, or using a job to help you gain the kind of skills you need to facilitate your own long-term dreams. The risk, though, is that as time passes, you forget about your dreams. No

The higher up you get on someone else's ladder the harder it is to jump off. Entrepreneurs are people who build their own ladders while also climbing them.

one wants to wake up and realize it could be too late in the process, feeling in too deep—too dependent on the money or the structure or the prestige to find a way out.

The higher up you get on someone else's ladder the harder it is to jump off. Entrepreneurs are people who build their own ladders while also climbing them. It's difficult, sometimes perilous, sometimes disastrous, but in the end, it's your ascent to your dream.

Networking Without a Network

Ten years after her own medical odyssey, Sarna found herself pitching her idea for a medical device that could diagnose ovarian cancer to her own gynecologist, during a pelvic exam.

She watched as the doctor's head slowly emerged from behind the white sheet draped over Sarna's knees with a "deer caught in the headlights" look in her eyes. Despite the doctor's clear surprise, Sarna pushed forward. She was obsessed with creating a product to identify cancer. And to do that, she needed to know that she was developing a product that gynecologists would want to use.

Entrepreneurs sometimes believe that the ultimate validation of their idea comes from an investor who agrees to put money into the concept. In reality, if you're solving a real pain point for your customers, investment will come. Therefore, the most valuable endorsement comes from potential customers.

For Sarna's particular product, the customer was the gynecologist. Though the patient would ultimately benefit from the device, physicians would be the ones buying and using it. Sarna didn't know any gynecologists professionally, so she started with the one she did know: her own.

Networking at the start of your career can feel a bit like staring at a blank page. For some of us, just the thought of introducing ourselves to strangers in a large, crowded room or convention hall is the stuff of nightmares. But networking isn't limited to professional happy hours, where you go from person to person shaking hands, business cards at the

ready, hoping that something or someone useful will come out of the exercise. Meaningful networking doesn't have to feel like speed dating, nor must it consist solely of reaching out cold on LinkedIn.

Valuable connections can be made in smaller, more natural situations and through a series of one-on-one conversations with people whom you already know or to whom you have been introduced through colleagues, friends, or even family. You never know where good advice will come from.

And if you talk to enough people, you'll get advice that's often conflicting. It's actually beneficial to hear different thoughts and opinions on whatever task is in front of you. But remember no one knows the situation like you do—so ultimately go with the advice that resonates most with your gut.

Also, sometimes people who are supposed to be experts in a certain field tend to be the most jaded about it—they've seen the most failures. Listen carefully to what they have to say—no need to repeat mistakes—but use your optimism and fresh eyes as a strength. Just because they couldn't figure out a solution doesn't mean that you will not.

The thing with startups and career success more broadly is that you don't need everyone to believe in you. You just need a few people with the right backgrounds and enough conviction to allow you to stand on their shoulders. If you keep those people close by providing them an inside look not only on your wins but your losses, they will be invested and continue to stay by your side.

Telling a Story and Developing Thick Skin

After successfully securing \$250,000 in the first round of funding for her now-established company nVision, Sarna set her sights higher, securing a pitch with venture capitalist firm Catalyst Health. The firm was focused on early-stage funding of disruptive solutions for unmet healthcare needs, which made them a perfect potential investor.

Before this meeting, Sarna had been rejected by at least fifty

investors. She had developed a thick skin, but needed this one to be a “yes.” During the meeting she could see the investment team intently lean forward when she talked about the clinical need for the device.

They were fully engaged, which made her even more enthusiastic. She was taking them on a journey, and their facial expressions hinted that they were connecting to her message. She could see that her indignation over the dismal reality of women’s health was starting to become their indignation.

When pitching or describing a topic, it’s easy to rattle off facts about the marketplace opportunity or the exact approach you’ll take when creating your patent portfolio. But remember that investors, potential advisors, and employees are all people, and people are easily bored. Instead of simply bullet-pointing your ideas, engage your audience with a story that helps them understand what you’re trying to achieve relevant to their interests. It is possible to find interesting transitions between even the most seemingly mundane facts, weaving them into a compelling narrative.

The people considering your idea are giving you their most valuable asset—their time—so make it count. When you pitch, describe the problem in such a way that people can feel that the issue you are solving is real. Remember: you’re making the case that they should choose your company or project over other opportunities.

If you feel underrated, you need to be better than those who are privileged—more knowledgeable, quicker thinking, and stronger. It’s the unfair reality. Sometimes, you can fight against the system from the outside. Other times, you have to play by certain rules to break into the existing system in order to get what you need—and then, eventually, work on changing the system.

As unfortunate as the situation is, the underrated have to be more prepared than others to achieve the same level of attention and respect. You won’t always be given the benefit of the doubt like others might.

Building a Team that Lasts

When Sarna set out to create a company, she would have never believed that the best part would be the people and the culture they created together. After all, what could top seeing a concept scribbled on the back of a napkin come to life as a prototype? Or watching an idea evolve into a fully functioning device that works in people?

But it is true—for Sarna, building and working with the nVision team was more rewarding than the first check they received from an investor. It was even more gratifying than the company’s eventual acquisition.

Hiring the right team is the most make-or-break aspect of any project. How do you go about making sure that you’re hiring the person with the appropriate technical or operational background? Who also has the right mindset and attitude? Finding the balance of experience and values is not an easy task.

Furthermore, how do you make sure that the people you bring on will mesh with and enhance the culture you want to craft? It can be a surprisingly difficult, all-consuming experience if you hire the wrong person. The flip side to this, of course—and the opportunity—is that finding the right person can lead to magic.

When you have an overwhelming amount of work, it’s easy to fall into the trap of hiring the first person willing to take the job. Although your immediate network is a great place to start recruiting, you may not find the most qualified people for the particular jobs you need to fill.

Founders and leaders should flip the script and do things the other way around. The first step is not to think about who you know, but what you need. Think through the milestones you are driving toward. Then, think about the type of people you want in your corner to accomplish those specific goals. Once you start creating these ideal profiles, it’s easier to understand the kinds of people who might be a good fit.

In addition to the operational experience that you’re looking for, it’s never too early to think about the cultural values you want your company to have. Discovering this means getting together with your co-founders or early employees and having an open discussion about what’s important to them. What type of environment do they want to create that will make them look forward to coming into every day?

A company culture happens by design or default. If you aren’t deliberate about the type of people you want to hire and the culture you want to build together, you will still have a culture—it just might not be the one you want.

Establishing values is a personal call—do what feels right to you, what feels natural—and your cultural beliefs will help to establish a day-to-day experience that employees look forward to and that will help keep people together when things get rough.

What type of environment do they want to create that will make them look forward to coming into work every day?

Keep Going Through Life's Ups and Downs

Sometimes bad things happen that are troubling and distracting, and sometimes good things happen that are equally distracting but wonderful, like when Sarna realized she was pregnant with her first child right in the middle of her company's most critical deal.

“Work-life balance” is a misnomer, implying they should be given equal weight, with a balance between the two. Instead, work is just a part of life. When trying to give equal attention to everything, you can miss prioritizing another thing that's important—you.

It's easy to forget about your own health, both physical and mental, when trying to keep all the balls in the air. If you've had to face down doubters your entire life, getting those balls into the air in the first place is even harder. What are you supposed to do now? Let them all fall to the ground so that you can sleep more or have a little time to yourself?

The more you feel you have to prove, the more likely you are to make decisions that seem impressive and ambitious in the moment but can be self-sabotaging in the long run.

If you're working on building something that satisfies a good indignation, you often will try to make it all work and push everything forward. But you have to be okay with the fact that most likely, something unplanned, something that commands your attention, is going to crop up somewhere. If you can be flexible and accept that there will be curve balls, you'll be better prepared to handle them—and potentially let certain things go. This can be a challenge for many industrious personalities, especially when surrounded by doubters, as the pressure to prove oneself is a fierce driver.

When you are doubted by others, you end up doubting yourself as well. Find that inner voice telling you what your gut wants to do, and listen to it, even though it can be difficult. When bad things happen, you have to make hard calls and be willing to accept the consequences. Remember: the worst possible thing to do is to not do anything at all. Make a decision and follow through on it.

Knowing When to Make a Change

Four weeks after giving birth prematurely and on maternity leave, Sarna realized that she had not left clear directions in terms of who would make decisions at the company, and the organization was struggling as a result. With the delineation of tasks and responsibilities unclear, frustrations mounted and tensions boiled over between the teams.

Sarna returned to work, torn but determined to keep the company thriving, and within a week or so, things normalized. As happy as she was with the turnaround, she was constantly worried about her baby at home and constantly anxious about the company.

Stretched to her limit, she eventually decided to enlist the help of her mother, who moved in to not only care for the baby, but to manage the entire household. But despite that, Sarna was burning out, repeatedly. There are many tricks you can implement that help you avoid a similar experience.

First, determine what a fulfilled life looks like for you. Once you've decided what you want out of life, determine what that means for what you can give to work and your other pursuits and what has to give, because something does, and it could be hard to let go.

Be deliberate about how you spend your time. Determine how much time you want to spend with your loved ones each day. Once you know how many hours, schedule them into your daily life. If you don't start with determining how many hours you want to spend with your family, work will slowly creep into absolutely everything.

There is no limit to how much work you can do, or how much you feel should be done, if you're building your own ladder and have doubters around you. It is unending: so decide how much time you want to spend doing things besides work and make that a hard line.

The next part is even more difficult. Once you've decided how much time you want to spend with your family, and you start to implement it, try not to feel guilty. remind yourself of the complexities of the situation and that

you're doing your best given the circumstances. Guilt uses an enormous amount of emotional currency that is better spent in other ways.

Be thoughtful when you come up with the number of hours you want to spend, and then make peace with it. This isn't to say that you can't adjust, but don't second-guess yourself constantly. This strategy will enable you to do one thing better—focus on what is in front of you. Being present is not only better for you, but better for everyone and everything around you, including your work.

Though we may never be, nor should we be, free of all doubt, we shouldn't ever be defeated by it. Let that doubt fuel you. But be kind to yourself. The trick to success is not to doubt yourself too much.

It's an art to keep doubt in its place, and wield it—both other's and our own—as necessary. The most damaging thing doubt can do is prevent you from trying, from building your own ladder. Go ahead and take that step. Maybe you'll fall on the floor. But you will get back up and keep climbing.

The Most Important Product is You

Four months after the deal to sell the company was secured, Sarna decided the team deserved a victory lap.

They celebrated.

When the deal closed, every employer, investor, advisor—anyone who had equity in nVision—had money wired to their bank account. It was a funny thing to stare reality in the face, in black-and-white numbers, and simply not believe what they were seeing.

Despite all odds, they pulled it off. Hell yes. And after a time of maintaining involvement, they stepped out to let the acquiring company take over fully.

No matter what you do, eventually, you have to leave your great passion behind. Maybe life provides you with other priorities, or someday, you retire. And sometimes you're forced to let go before you're ready.

However it happens letting go is especially hard when you've been doubted the whole time you were building your ladder.

You have something to prove. As a result, whatever you were striving for became so deeply embedded in your identity that it's hard to separate your passion from your person.

After all, *you are your most important product*, the one that you need to scale, not whatever you happen to be working on at any given point in time. You almost have to reestablish your identity. A big part of what made you is gone.

But the next thing will come along and it will be an opportunity too compelling to pass up. Too meaningful an opportunity to let your doubts, or the doubts of others, get in the way. Because the biggest lesson of all, without a doubt, is that if you don't try, you can't make anything happen.



Surbhi Sarna is an entrepreneur, partner at Y Combinator, advocate for innovation in healthcare, and investor. She has worked as an engineer before becoming CEO and founder of nVision Medical. nVision developed a catheter-based device for early detection of ovarian cancer and after obtaining FDA clearance, was purchased by Boston Scientific. Sarna also sits on both nonprofit and for-profit company boards, has been featured in publications such as Bloomberg, Forbes, Entrepreneur magazine, and Inc., and has received numerous awards, including being named on the Forbes 30 under 30 list and the Inc. Female Founder 100 list. She lives in the San Francisco Bay area with her husband and two children.

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