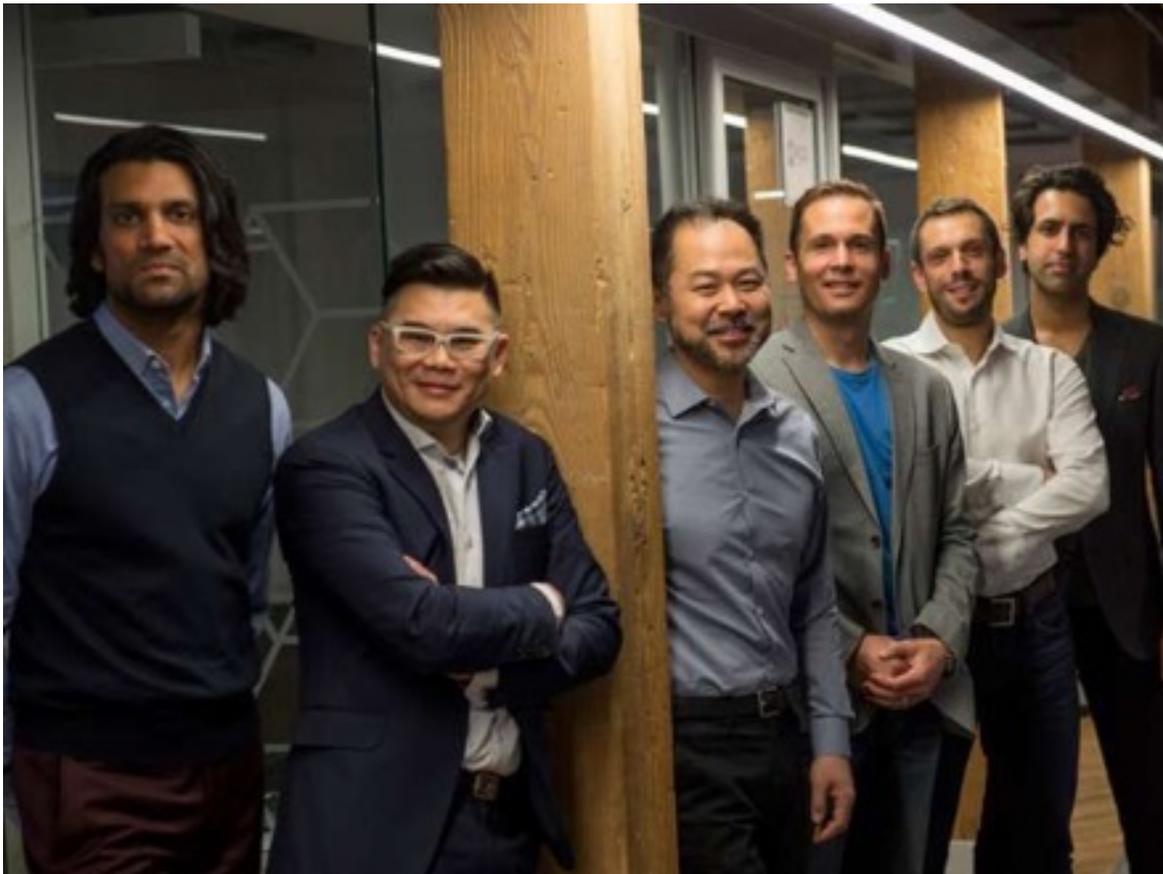


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Five ways multiple founders can run their startup smoothly



Left to right: Parag Desai, Ambles Kwok, Joon Nah, Adam Brown, Luca Fornoni and Jas Chahal, who are all managers at Therapia Health Management startup.

Tyler S. Anderson, National Post

By Suzanne Wintrob
Special to Financial Post

They say that too many cooks can spoil the broth — it's true not just in the kitchen but in the workplace, too.

That's something orthopedic surgeon Dr. Jas Chahal wanted to avoid a couple of years ago when he and three fellow students — another doctor, a tech whiz and a financial analyst— at Rotman's Omnium Global Executive MBA program decided to collaborate on an online platform to connect registered physiotherapists with patients for in-home appointments. At the same time, it would also manage medical records, billing and scheduling. After bringing on two experienced physiotherapists to the team, they were six men from varying professional backgrounds with different strengths, weaknesses and pre-conceived biases when it came to running a business.

Still, they all had a passion for improving healthcare access to Canadians and were excited to see what they could do with their combined talents. So, without quitting their day jobs, they built the software and launched their startup, Therapia (therapia.life). Over the past six months, they've beta-tested and validated the platform, brought on more than 50 physiotherapists in the Greater Toronto Area and raised \$750,000 in seed funding from strategic investors in the healthcare space.

Now, as they make plans to roll out the platform to other Canadian cities and the U.S. by the end of the year, they've elected physiotherapist Adam Brown full-time CEO and have learned to listen to each other's ideas, respect each other's decisions and celebrate each other's differences.

"If bravado gets in the way, you're in trouble," warns Chahal of the peril of too many bosses. "That has to be checked at the door."

Putting the right management team in place is critical, especially with Industry Canada reporting that half of small businesses are unlikely to make it to their fifth birthday. Startups, by their nature, are often the brainchild of several ambitious minds, so multiple founders can be the norm. And since successful startups tend to grow quickly, it's especially important to make sure those bosses mesh well.

"In the beginning, everybody does everything and it can get hard, particularly if the company is growing, because then the co-founders have to start to specialize," explains Becky Reuber, professor of strategic management at Rotman. "It may be that they don't know everything that's going on. If you go from two to 10 to 70 to 200 employees, it just becomes a lot harder to know all the details. So you really have to trust not only the integrity but the competence of the other person, so that if you're not there, they're going to make the decision you would have made."

You also have to know when to listen and lead and when to trust and follow. Marc Hurwitz, associate director of undergraduate programs at the University of Waterloo's Conrad Business, Entrepreneurship and Technology Centre, says starting a company can be fraught with disagreements over what the founders are trying to create, their target market, objectives, culture, how to spend money and how much risk they're willing to tackle.

However, things can run smoother if multiple founders possess five key traits:

- deeply shared goals, “or the team will disintegrate”
- similar levels of risk tolerance
- incessant communication “to build trust, respect and get you through the tough times”
- social intelligence such as turn-taking, active listening, empathy, equality of voice and respect for each other’s skills
- collaboration skills whereby each person within a specialty takes on the leadership role when required, with the others being “the best follower they can be at that moment”

Therapia’s six founders seem to have found their groove. Spurred by their MBA training, they work in pods based on their areas of expertise but are quick to report to the entire team.

They’ve developed an etiquette of what’s acceptable — such as being quick to respond to customers and each other — and what’s not, and they’re not afraid of calling each other out on inherent biases. The full-time CEO is their “clear leader” and the other five respect that.

“When you have six opinions or a situation where there may not be agreement, it’s important that somebody is able to move the ship forward,” says Chahal. “Otherwise, as a startup, you’re no longer agile, you can’t move quickly enough.... Having a working constitution on how you kind of play together and live together is important from the start.”