



GameChangers
Season 1: Episode 8
Manita Wang

Seth Robinson: Welcome to GameChangers. The show that's about playing by your own rules when it comes to your career. Join us as we speak with people who've taken the road less travelled and found their niche. I'm your host, Seth Robinson.

Manita Ray: I would love a world where the word social is taken out of it, where every entrepreneur is a social entrepreneur, every business is a social business.

Seth Robinson: Manita Ray is the CEO of YGAP, one of Australia's most successful not for profit companies. You might have heard of YGAP in recent years through the Polished Man campaign, which supports causes to counter violence against children. Today, Manita is joining us to speak about her work and what it takes to make change happen. Manita, thank you so much for joining us today.

Manita Ray: Thank you Seth, and it's great to see the homework you've done. I much appreciate that.

Seth Robinson: Can you tell us a little bit, to start, about YGAP and what it is you guys do?

Manita Ray: Sure. YGAP, we're 10 years old. We are an international development organization, but as you pointed out we do things a little bit differently. Instead of us imposing our ideas on solutions to alleviate poverty, what we do that's really different is we actually find local leaders, people who are living in the communities who actually understand what the issues are. They've lived it. They've breathed it. They're still there. They're the ones who come up with innovative solutions to the problems they see, and then we back them.

Manita Ray: What do we mean by that? We find these entrepreneurs. We put them through our accelerator program, and then we support them longer term, so they can actually achieve the maximum impact in their communities.

Ultimately, our aim is that these local leaders can transform their communities, and then we walk away. We are a touch point in their journey.

Seth Robinson: It's really about building agency from the inside, it sounds like.

Manita Ray: Absolutely. This comes from my background as well. I'm from India and my parents are from a really poor part of India, so I've seen poverty from the day I was born. Because of that, I've always been told by my own family, "You can't come. You're from Australia. You can't come and tell us how to fix things here." It's the people living on the ground who are seeing it every day that know what the answers are. That's exactly the philosophy we have at YGAP. It's bringing in my personal experience as well as my professional experience.

Seth Robinson: One of the things you mentioned in there was the accelerator program. We've had a few of our guests who've come in and done startups themselves, and they've talked about going through accelerator programs. Can you tell us a little bit more about what that means? What is an accelerator program?

Manita Ray: Yeah. Absolutely. We have an accelerator which focuses on social impact. Again, that's different from some of the other accelerators around. Why that's different is we make sure that every single entrepreneur that comes into our program has a defined social impact, and that they are working towards alleviating poverty. Some of them might have a financial return, and obviously we want them to in the end. The real aim is for them to have a really deep, broad impact and something that is scalable. Not scalable so they can become rich and famous, but scalable so they can transform the communities and really shift the systems that they are actually suffering under.

Manita Ray: Our accelerator program has, I guess, four rough components, but we spend a lot of time finding these entrepreneurs. That's a really important part of our program, because so many of these entrepreneurs come from very marginalized backgrounds. They're often living in poverty-stricken areas themselves. They are head down doing their work. They don't actually think about, "I need some assistance to make myself better."

Seth Robinson: A lot of the time they would have started these projects already.

Manita Ray: They would have. Yeah. They need to have started their venture before they come to us. We say you don't need to have any revenue coming in. If you do, that's great, but you definitely have to have some impact. We say between one to ten people they would have had to have impacted by the time they come to us. We spend a lot of time finding these entrepreneurs. They go through a really diligent application process, and then we select the ones coming into our program, and we have a really strong focus on gender and marginalized groups, because we know that entrepreneurs who come from marginalized backgrounds tend to have a better impact model, believe it or not, because they have great innovative thinking.

Manita Ray: Our accelerator program is a five-day intensive. We take them offsite. This is across the four countries and two regions that we work in. We take them offsite, there's 15 of them. Basically what I say, we help rip apart their model, and then they hate us, and then they love us, because we get them to put it back together to make it even stronger. By the end of it they have a strong operational model, and a model that can generate scalable impact. After that, we support them.

Manita Ray: Usually about two out of the fifteen are what we call rock stars. They're the ones who come in and we're like, "Wow. These guys are game changers." We support all these entrepreneurs. Those roughly two out of each one, we bring them into growth, and that means they are eligible for either growth funding, around \$25,000, maybe a bit more, or investments. They're the ones who we hope are going to impact, say, around 50,000 lives within three to five years.

Seth Robinson: That's incredible. One of the campaigns I think people would know YGAP from the most is probably the Polished Man campaign, which just wound up for this year. I just took my nail polish off actually.

Manita Ray: Fantastic.

Seth Robinson: That has really gotten quite huge. It has a lot of celebrity endorsement. Could you tell us a little bit about how that project came about, if you know? I know it probably predated you as CEO.

Manita Ray: It did predate me. That was actually founded by our founding CEO, Elliot Costello, who he actually went on a tour and met this little girl called Thea. She sat down with him and during a conversation painted all his nails blue and drew a love heart. He found out through that process, through that conversation that she had been subject to severe violence as a child. From that, he came up with this idea of Polished Man. Let's get men, mostly, but also women to polish a nail to start that conversation around ending violence against children. It started off as an idea, and then this year we've raised just over 1.7 million.

Seth Robinson: Wow.

Manita Ray: It's been fantastic. In addition to all the celebrity endorsements, there's a real movement of people who are doing the right thing, and who actually want to stand up and say, "No, we don't stand for violence against children." That is what we've seen evolve through the campaign. It's not just starting a conversation, which has been really, really important, but it's actually empowering most of the people who are saying, "We don't believe in this. We are proud." We don't try and disempower them. We don't try and make people feel bad about it. We're like, hey, you can actually do something about it.

Manita Ray: The other great thing that this campaign's done is it's actually given a voice to many people who otherwise would not have spoken. That was a surprising thing for us, but it's actually so amazing. We have a couple of

individuals who for the first time in their lives is talking about stories about how they were sexually abused as children. They've come and spoken at our events, and it's often the first time they've done it. For us to be able to create that change for them is so powerful.

Manita Ray: We are also committed now to run an accelerator which is going to focus on ventures that are working towards ending violence against children. That's a huge thing that's come out of our work, and we're hoping to launch that in the next 12 months.

Seth Robinson: As well as offering the services that you do as an accelerator program and funding, it sounds like the team at YGAP has real experience in developing a startup that aids the cause as well.

Manita Ray: Yeah. Absolutely. YGAP started as a startup around 10 years ago. It's a beautiful story, so YGAP in Melbourne, I think it was by six friends, Elliot and his mates and a whole lot of volunteers. There was a really strong focus on impact, and they wanted to do good in the world. Then about four years ago they merged with Spark* International which was our impact arm basically. Then only this year we've rebranded as a whole as YGAP. We're all known as YGAP now.

Manita Ray: The great thing that happened is there were two startup organizations wanting to do the same things but with very different skill sets. YGAP in Melbourne had really strong, innovative fundraising initiatives. Spark* International had the curriculum and had a really strong impact focus working in the countries that the model is now executed in. They needed fundraising, so it was like a marriage made in heaven.

Seth Robinson: That's perfect.

Manita Ray: Two startup cultures, two very different cultures, and by doing so our fundraising became stronger and our impact grew. It was a very, very exciting time about four years ago.

Seth Robinson: It's fantastic you mentioned the startup culture there, because that segues into my next question really nicely. There's been a lot of talk in the media lately about how the new millennial generation want work that's really meaningful for them, and they feel like they're making a difference and having a social impact. I think that's particularly relevant when it comes to startups. People are social entrepreneurs. They want to make that difference in the world.

Seth Robinson: How do you think a social entrepreneur might differ from someone who just wants to do a startup and get a business going and generate capital, and that sort of thing?

Manita Ray: This is something, I guess, that holds a lot of meaning to me. I would love a world where the word social is taken out of it, where every entrepreneur is a social entrepreneur, every business is a social business, or an environmental business, and they have really strong roots in making a profit

and doing the right thing. I actually think we're on the way there. I know this is the big hairy goal, kind of thing, but the rise of social entrepreneurship and how exciting it is, we're on the way there.

Manita Ray: People are changing their views. The great thing about millennials and kids growing up is to them this is real. It's not a new concept that's introduced to them. This is what they always think about with social entrepreneurship. Social entrepreneurship is really hard still, because you're driven by your heart and you're driven by that impatience of something needs to be done to change this.

Manita Ray: Unfortunately the places and the communities where this change needs to happen, things are failing. The government doesn't protect them. Systems don't exist. Infrastructure doesn't exist. Policies don't exist. Money doesn't exist. Guess what, even in those kind of places the entrepreneurial spirit exists. That fire up so strong. What they need is support. What they don't have is what YGAP can give them. They are driven by a need to make a change, but what they don't have is the structures to support them.

Manita Ray: Whereas another entrepreneur will want to definitely solve a problem and make a difference, but they'll also have that financial drive. I'm not saying social entrepreneurs don't have that financial drive. In fact, we encourage them always to think commercially, because you have to have sustainability in your operations. Social entrepreneurs find a problem, they find a solution. They don't wait for anything to happen. They just act on it, and that's probably the key to what makes a social entrepreneur so innovative.

Seth Robinson: Do you think there is any particular piece of key advice you would offer someone in that position?

Manita Ray: Yeah, and this is what we say to everyone, and this is what I check in with myself nearly every day if not every week, which is what is your why? Why are you actually doing this yourself? It has to be something that really, really ticks you off, because when everything fails and things fail. Your team will let you down, or you're going to run out of money. The school that you built is going to burn down. The business that you run is going to go under. You have to go back to that why, because that never changes, and that is what's going to keep you waking up in the morning. That's the first thing.

Manita Ray: The second thing is, is there really a problem to solve? Is this something that you think is exciting? Great. That's really good. If it's not a real problem that you're solving, then the reality is it's very unlikely that there's going to be take-up on that, and that there's going to be customers for that.

Seth Robinson: Do you find that people sometimes are looking for a problem?

Manita Ray: All the time.

Seth Robinson: Like just want to create something for the sake of building.

- Manita Ray: All the time. I think that's human nature, and that's part of everyone's creativity. That's not a bad thing at all. The reality is you can do that, but it's very unlikely it's going to scale. It's very unlikely it's going to have a deep impact. You might get a great startup with great financial returns. A lot of things we buy and we like, we use our disposable incomes for that. They're not necessities. The analogy we always use is make sure the problem you're solving is like a painkiller, not a vitamin.
- Seth Robinson: That's a really fantastic analogy. I really like that. Tell us a little bit more about yourself and your background. You studied as an engineer initially and worked in that field. How is it that that led to the not for profit sector for you?
- Manita Ray: As I said, my family come from India, from a place called Calcutta. I've seen poverty from a young age. I think I knew from a very young age it wasn't right. I used to work with, not work. When we used to go and visit, there was a little boy called Ramu who used to come and help us, and do our groceries and things like that. That's very normal in India. He was the same age as me, and yet he had a very different life to me.
- Manita Ray: For example, he wouldn't eat at the same table I would eat at, and he would sit on the floor. I was like, "I don't understand why." He goes, "No, because I'm coming to work for you." I don't know. I used to just hang out with him. That kind of fueled, I guess, the thought process in my mind that the world is unequal, basically, because of where we're born, and what's been made available to us.
- Manita Ray: My father basically made his way out of the communities that he grew up in, and he became an engineer. I swore on my life I would never study engineering. Not that I don't love my dad. I was like, "I don't want to do that," and then I became an engineer. It was a very thought-out process. At that time I wanted to work in international development. I knew I was really good at maths and science.
- Seth Robinson: That was the interest from the get go.
- Manita Ray: Yeah. Absolutely. I did a lot of research. I knew that water was a big issue, sanitation was a big issue, and how could I contribute to that. I did environmental engineering to build really big toilets as my friends like to describe it, or water infrastructure in places that needed it. I did that and then I took a year off to travel, as we all do. I actually spent some time in Costa Rica.
- Manita Ray: That's, I guess, when I found my element, because I was volunteering over there. I was finally with a group of people who never questioned purpose and working for purpose. We were building water tanks and pipelines, and literally digging things up with our hands, because there was no electricity or hot water. There was nothing actually there in that community. This is what I want to do.
- Seth Robinson: It brought all the things together.

Manita Ray: Absolutely. I did that for a while, and then I did my MBA as well with the intent to move into the not for profit sector, again, from following all my research. Then I basically volunteered with a charity until they gave me a job, because they said, "What is an engineer doing coming to work with refugees and asylum seekers?" I volunteered with them, and then I worked with them for a couple of years, and that was my foray into the not for profit social sector.

Seth Robinson: Which led eventually to YGAP. Now, we've come full circle again.

Manita Ray: Yeah. Absolutely. It's been an interesting journey, because in the pure not for profit sector you're very much donor funded, and you're delivering services. I have a very strong business mind. From a very early age, my very first engineering job was in wind farms. We were building wind farms, so generating profit, but doing incredible good in the world. This is before people knew about it, before talks about climate change and renewable energy were attractive. We were called tree hugging hippies, and I was one and I probably still am.

Manita Ray: That business for profit and purpose for profit concept was embedded very early in my life. Then that's come full circle here at YGAP, because that's exactly what we do. We encourage businesses to operate commercially but with a really strong purpose.

Seth Robinson: I suppose in its purest sense, often innovation would really be taking place before people were discussing it. When you were still a hippy, as you said, if you're truly at the cutting edge, you're well out there.

Manita Ray: Yeah. Absolutely. To give you some examples, the word entrepreneurs and startups, everyone's using them now. The reality is in communities stricken by poverty, in war-torn areas, entrepreneurship is survival. Everyone is an entrepreneur. I've seen my uncles and my aunties have amazing little businesses because they need to survive. It's not something that's sexy and cool. It is survival. It's fantastic that we're capturing that and we're embracing that, but that is what gets these communities out of poverty.

Seth Robinson: YGAP now has been around for about 10 years, as you mentioned at the start of the recording. What kind of challenges have come with reaching that mark? I suppose you're scaling continuously and growing bigger. How do you feel like it's evolved in the time that you've been with the organization and challenges you think you might have to tackle in the future?

Manita Ray: Great question. I guess, the need is always there. I have an incredible team who are not just purpose-driven, but they're incredibly hard working. We just had a team come back from visiting some of our communities in South Africa. Even now we see how big the problems are. We have to just sit there and go, "Oh my goodness. Are we actually making a difference?"

- Manita Ray: It's a really important thing to acknowledge. Because, as I said, we are a touch point in these journeys. We always regroup, so in a couple of weeks we are all meeting as a team to look at the strategy for the next couple of years. I think what's always important to look at is are we actually doing what the community is telling us. We are always being informed by the need. We don't go and build projects. We don't go and do things that the communities don't tell us that they need.
- Manita Ray: That is a real challenge, because we're relying on our country directors who are local. We make sure that our South African country director is South African. She will tell us, "This is the need." The need always seems much bigger than what we can actually do.
- Manita Ray: What's happened with YGAP which is an amazing thing, and now that we're 10 years old is when I started, I guess, we had a really strong model and a team. We probably wouldn't have been able to do the scale of work that we're doing today. Now, hand on heart, we can say we've got a really strong model that we can tweak and change and it's still going to work. We've got a really strong team to be able to deliver that.
- Manita Ray: We've got an organization that's strong enough that we can stretch ourselves and really go into even tougher communities and go into even tougher countries and know that if that fails, us as an organization isn't going to fail, and the entrepreneurs we've supported aren't going to fail. We've built strength as an organization, and we're ready to stretch ourselves and do things even tougher.
- Seth Robinson: It sounds like a really exciting point to be at, where you're able to adapt.
- Manita Ray: It absolutely is. It's really easy for us to go, "Oh, we want to do this, and we want to that. All we need is money to do it." We always go back, and we do need money to do it, but we always go back and go, "Hang on. Are we filling a gap?" The entrepreneurs and communities we work in, no one else is doing that or very few. We call them the missing middle. No one is looking at these early-stage entrepreneurs because they're very high risk, and they need a lot of support. They are the ones who are game changers. That's what we're doing, and we have to keep checking in.
- Manita Ray: The challenge is the problems are still there. The opportunity is we've got a strong team and a strong model that we can actually service this need and continue servicing it. Wouldn't it be great if one day we were like, "We actually don't need YGAP, because the communities are completely transformed?" I think that's when we know we've achieved what we wanted to achieve.
- Seth Robinson: One last question, and then I'll let you go. This is one that we ask all of our guests as we're wrapping up the interview. What's one thing that's not on your resume that has gotten you to where you are today?
- Manita Ray: There's a lot of talk about doing things because you're passionate about it. I don't like the word passionate. The reason I don't like it is that is one

component of it. What you don't see in my CV is the crazy amount of hard work that goes into every step of the journey, the yeses and the nos and all the rejections, and the continuous determination and the late nights. I say this because working in a field where the number one focus is purpose is hard.

Manita Ray: Yes, you can have passion, but you have to, have to work hard. It doesn't come easy. Never getting let down by the word no, or when things aren't going to plan. It's that hard work and determination, I think, that has fuelled me. It's also burnt me out, but that's probably the main thing.

Seth Robinson: Manita Ray, thank you so much for joining us today.

Manita Ray: Thank you Seth. Much appreciated.

Seth Robinson: This has been GameChangers. I've been your host, Seth Robinson. GameChangers is recorded by Chris Hatzis and produced by Sophie Thomas.