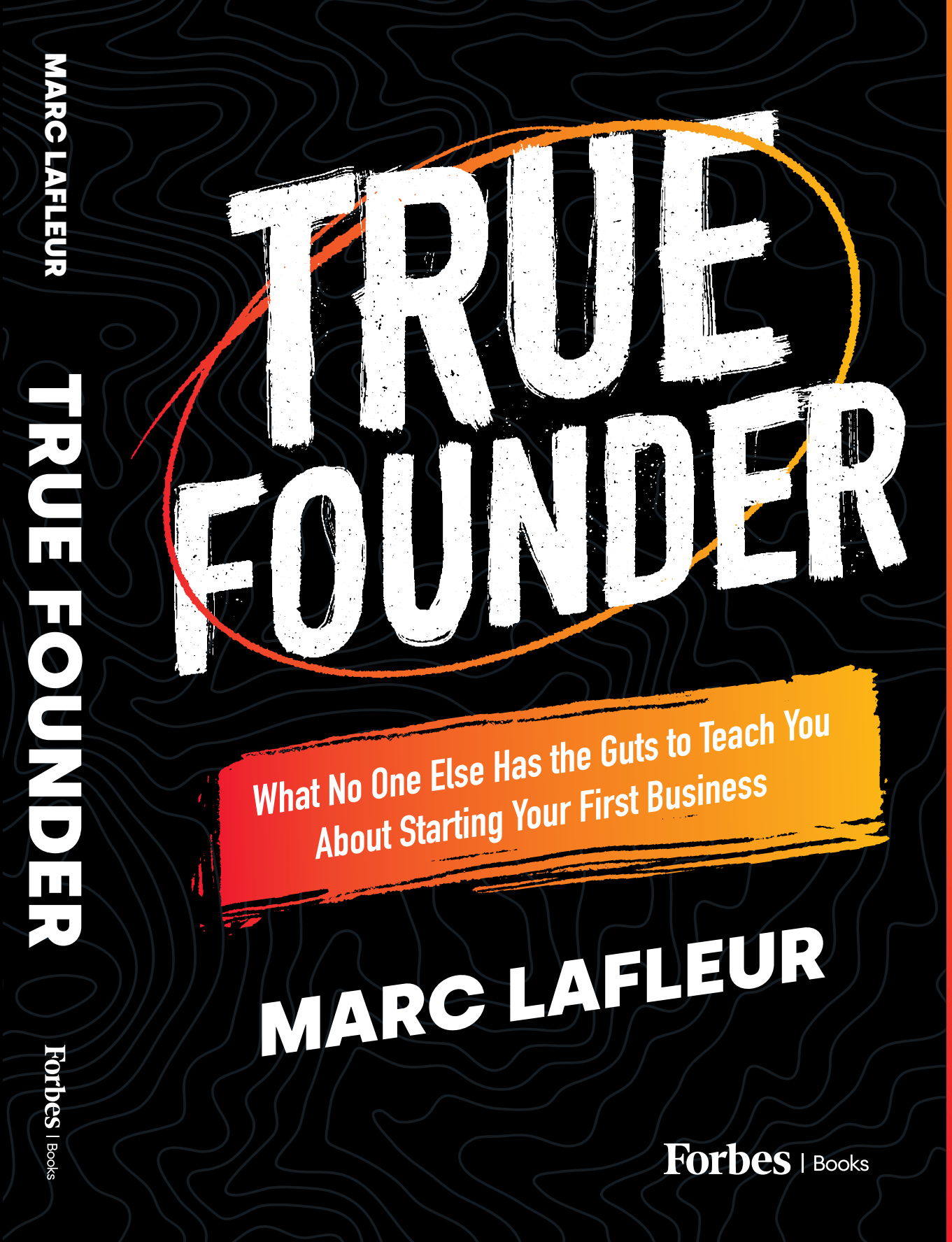

WORK-LIFE BALANCE IS A MYTH, AND THAT'S OK.

It doesn't take someone special to succeed in business. What it takes is absolute dedication, the willingness to sacrifice in the pursuit of your goals, and a little bit of luck.

No doubt you've had someone make a comment about how you work too much or you need to take a break. As a first-time founders, you're guilted for giving up your work-life balance. Yet anywhere else in life, sacrifice is encouraged. Think about a ball player who decided to go to the league after one year of college. Or a billboard artist who spends every night and every last dollar in the studio working on their debut album. Even a PhD student who's given up on even starting life until they're done their 10 year specialization. In all these situations, you get a pat on the back for your risk and sacrifice

Well it's time to stop feeling guilty, instead it's time lean into it. Your willingness to chase your dreams is what sets you apart, it's your own personal competitive advantage and True Founder is here to arm you with the strategies you need to double down on that.

WHAT READERS ARE SAYING

TRUE FOUNDER

"*True Founder* is a must-read for aspiring entrepreneurs! Starting a business is hard, and Marc Lafleur does a great job of capturing the truth behind what it takes to be a successful first-time founder. If you want a leg up on the competition, *True Founder* serves as your tactical guide to getting started."

—Michele Romanow
Dragons' Den
CEO, Clearco

"This book was written by someone who has actually made money. These tips are real. Marc is an incredible business person who has strategies for first-time founders that are invaluable. It's a must-read if you're considering starting your own business, if you want to know tricks of the trade, or if you just want to be successful."

—Mikhaila Peterson
Host, *The Mikhaila Peterson Podcast*

"Any founder who is truly serious about taking their business to the next level must read *True Founder*. It's filled with valuable insights and lessons. No fluff or filler, only to the point, practical, and actionable takeaways that can be applied to nearly any business regardless of industry. After reading *True Founder*, I found myself immediately taking many of the valuable insights and putting them into action. Marc's

journey of success from zero to a $16 million deal is broken down to the most critical lessons and learnings that any founder can relate and aspire to."

—Sheena Brady
Founder, Founders Fund

"*True Founder* is honest, entertaining, and practical. All first-time founders looking to get a sense of what their early years might look like will get tremendous value from this book. Marc Lafleur provides founders with actionable tips and tricks, all the while keeping readers engaged with his stories about the highs and the lows of building a $20 million business at the age of thirty."

—Giovanni Marsico
Founder, Archangel Academy

TRUE FOUNDER

TRUE FOUNDER

What No One Else Has the Guts to Teach You About Starting Your First Business

MARC LAFLEUR

Forbes | Books

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This book is dedicated to every kid who's being counted out for going against the grain. If you've got a passion, go for it. We're living in the future—you can make a career out of anything. Don't let life tell you otherwise.

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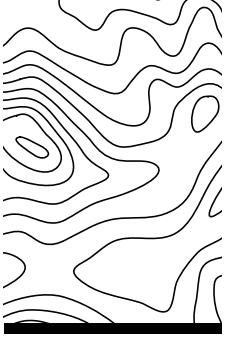


CHAPTER ONE

Becoming a Professional Problem Solver

Don't fight in the North or the South. Fight every battle everywhere, always, in your mind. Everyone is your enemy; everyone is your friend.

Every possible series of events is happening all at once. Live that way and nothing will surprise you. Everything that happens will be something that you've seen before.

—LITTLEFINGER, GAME OF THRONES

Like I mentioned in the introduction, out of all the skills you can learn as a first-time founder, there's one that stands out above the rest. You're going to have punches thrown at your head each and every single day. It doesn't matter how well you can code, create great content, or close deals. If you can't problem solve at a high level, you're not going to make it.

A lot of people talk about what it means to be a first-time founder. But I'm here to break it down to *one* thing that you can always remember: You're not a CEO, CMO, or CTO. You're not a head of sales or a president. As a first-time founder, you are a professional problem solver. The sooner you realize this fact, the more confidence you'll have and the less stressful your mornings will be. The

more you'll lean into who you are and what you're good at as a first-time founder. And the quicker you'll be able to react when something inevitably goes wrong.

Things are always obvious in retrospect. Looking back on what mattered in the early days is very different once you've had time to reflect with a clear mind. It's easy to see what mattered, what helped, and what you would do differently. But looking at it when you're just starting off and embracing your journey as a first-time founder, it can be hard to anticipate what's going to help you along the way and what's going to be a waste of time. The biggest piece of advice I'd give myself looking back is that in the early days, you don't have time to think a month or a quarter ahead. These early days are your most important and most formative. These early days are about survival.

You need to deal with the problems that are showing up on a day-to-day basis. That was my mistake—I always wanted to brush up on skills that I thought would help me in the future. Like most people, I wanted to cherry-pick what I focused on and spend most of my time on the things that I thought were cool or interesting. But what I didn't realize back then was that if I didn't focus on solving the problems that were right in front of me, I'd never make it to a point where I'd be able to work on the so-called "cool" or "interesting" problems.

It's not glamorous, but working on becoming a professional problem solver is effective and the most efficient use of your time. You need to learn that things never get easier in business. We have this idea that once you hire your first employee, or once you raise your first round of funding, things will get easier. But that's not the case. You might have a day or even a week of relief, but soon you'll realize the problems are still there—they're just bigger. Starting a business by definition means you need to continuously solve problems. Ideally, your business is either improving on something that already exists or

providing something that doesn't exist yet—inherently trying to do either of those things mean you're venturing into unknown territory and going to be dealing with problems head-on.

Understanding that your problems are never going to go away will not only help you deal with these problems in a systematic way, which we'll touch on shortly, but it will also help reduce stress. I remember the days where I'd wake up, and as soon as I realized that I was awake, I'd immediately feel that shot of cortisol race through my veins. If you've been in that situation before, you know exactly what I'm talking about. It's hard to describe because it doesn't hurt, but at the same time it's like ice and fire just got injected down your spine. The hair on the back of my neck would stand up, and I'd immediately start searching my mind for answers as to why I would ever pursue anything that ever made me feel this way. I just wanted to roll over and go back to sleep. This was a daily ritual in my first year, and probably one that most first-time founders go through. It was hard, and it was sad, but what other option did I have? I was a first-time founder. It was either win or go bust.

There were a lot of times where I was "playing" founder rather than actually being one.

It took getting to the finish line and finally getting acquired to realize what really served me well. There were a lot of times where I was "playing" founder rather than actually being one. And one of the things that stood out the most were the skills I would focus on developing. I remember when I went down the data-analytics rabbit hole. I'd spend hours on LinkedIn, following whichever LinkedIn expert was relevant at the time to learn how to properly incorporate a strong data infrastructure at truLOCAL. This was hilarious, because at the time the business consisted of myself and my business partner, Greg.

Why the hell was I spending my days learning about advanced data warehousing and how to properly standardize data between departments? It definitely wasn't helping me deal with the day-to-day issues we were having. It didn't help me deal with the fact that we were packing customer orders off Excel spreadsheets, which led to boxes being packed incorrectly, which led to a mountain of customer service issues. And it definitely didn't help us develop new value propositions to deal with the wave of copycat competitors popping up on a weekly basis in our main markets.

I remember other times where I'd spend my days on the phone with our couriers trying to get an understanding as to why a couple hundred of our perishable packages didn't leave their sorting facilities on time, only to find out that the dangerous goods labels we had printed on our boxes were the wrong color. To keep our products frozen while they were in transit, we used dry ice. This worked really well, except for the fact that shipping companies consider dry ice as a dangerous good, which means we had to have special labels on our boxes indicating the fact that there was dry ice inside. Usually these labels are stickers that you have to manually slap on each box. We got crafty and decided to just print our boxes with the label design already in place to save time. But seeing as our boxes were black, the labels printed onto our boxes came out black and white, rather than white and black. This mess up led to a few thousand dollars of our products going to waste. And, of course, a mountain of emails from customers canceling, threatening bad reviews, or just letting us know in general how disappointed they were.

It wasn't until about a year into the business that I started realizing there didn't seem to be any rhyme or reason for the problems that popped up. They didn't seem to discriminate based on time, discipline, department, scope, or theme. They just happened. But I also

noticed that, over time, we'd gotten pretty good at dodging those bullets. Eventually, after a prolonged bombardment of daily issues, I just started anticipating it. It went from *I hope we don't have any issues today* to *I wonder if I'll make it to noon without having to put out a fire*. It went from hearing about a problem and having my whole world come crashing down around me and wondering how I was going to pull the energy to even diagnose the issue, let alone put a solution together, to hearing about a problem and it immediately triggering this muscle memory reaction of survey, triage, and execute.

It's easy to say while looking back, and I'm sure the version of me that was living through this time would hate me for saying this, but it almost got to the point where I was excited when I'd hear about a problem (when people say you need to be a little psychotic to be a founder, that's the part they're talking about!). All it took was swallowing the truth that I was never going to reach a point where problems didn't stop coming. That revelation led me to adopt a mindset of anticipation.

That was a real turning point for me. Anticipating problems made my mornings better, because instead of waking up and praying that I didn't have a ten-ton megabomb of an email sitting in my inbox, I'd wake up knowing that there was. And for me, just accepting on a daily basis that was what I was going to have to deal with saved me a lot of unnecessary stress.

I'll never forget the first time I received an email from our old company threatening to sue us. When you're a first-time founder and have never dealt with another business legally before, waking up to an email like that is almost enough to make you want to throw up, shut down, and go back to bed until next month. That's what it was like dealing with problems in the early days, where I was just hoping for things to get easier. Contrast that to about a year later when we had

been through a couple battles and finally became pretty good problem solvers. I woke up one day to an email from a buddy showing me an ex-employee who had literally copied our entire website. Not just the business model but all the way down to the pictures, descriptions, and FAQs. Trust me, that's a really shitty feeling as well, but the difference between this morning and the morning when I woke up to that email from our old company was, that particular morning, I was already expecting a problem to deal with.

Anticipating problems made my reaction time better and, therefore, the time it took to solve a problem significantly shorter. Anytime you're prepared for something, you're going to be able to react faster. If you've just dodged a bullet, solved a problem, and had a major accomplishment, and you're now hoping that's the last of it and that nothing bad is going to happen anymore, how are you going to react when that bad thing inevitably does happen? You'll start with depression, probably go through a little bit of denial. And if you're in a really dark place, you'll probably avoid it altogether before getting your shit together and starting to tackle the issue.

Whereas if you're *always* anticipating, waiting for that problem, knowing it's a few minutes, hours, or days away from coming, when it does come, you're ready. You'll lean into it, and you'll immediately triage the issue—which means you'll come up with a game plan significantly quicker. And if you really lean into sharpening your iron as a professional problem solver, you'll get to a point where anticipating problems means that subconsciously you'll start gaming out scenarios to problems that don't even exist—yet. Which means that when those problems do pop up, you might already have an answer to it without even having to spend the time or resources dealing with it.

So how do you actually become a professional problem solver? Well, if I had to break down my process into words, it would be this:

SURVEY → TRIAGE → EXECUTE

Survey the problem, triage your best options, execute your solution, and, most importantly, understand that there is always a way out. Always.

Survey

Once you understand that there's always a way out, you can start tackling the issue. Start by taking stock of your resources. Is it just you? Do you have a cofounder or team you can lean on if you need to? If you're fortunate enough to have a cofounder or a team, make sure to tap them in. As a professional problem solver and a first-time founder, your job is to leverage all assets, and your team is your *best* asset. So if you've got a team or a partner, make sure that you're using their problem-solving abilities to amplify your own.

Once you've taken stock of your resources and you know how much or how little you have to work with, survey the problem. Does this problem require time, money, or finesse? Maybe all three? Is your problem one that can be solved in one step? Or is it a problem that needs to be solved in multiple steps? If you're a visual person, literally write this out. If you can game out the entirety of the problem and try to solve all of it in one go, do that. But personally, I've found this to be pretty hard, and you need to be pretty lucky to come up with one solution for the whole problem. Most problems seem to be broken down into parts, which require you to solve them in multiple steps. If you survey that there are three parts to a particular problem, depending on how you deal with the first part, it may open or close doors to the second and third parts of the problem. So instead of

making assumptions on how to deal with parts two and three, start by just dealing with the first part of the problem. Once you have an answer for that, you can narrow down and focus your options for step two, then apply the same process to step three.

Now that you've got a good understanding of the problem, it's time to start listing out solutions. At this point in the process, it doesn't matter if they are good ideas or bad ideas; just list them all out. I can't stress this enough, even if the solutions don't make sense. As long as they're doable, make sure they're on the list.

Triage

By triaging your list of solutions, this is where you'll figure out what solution is either the best or the *least worst* for your problem. Some problems let you generate a long list of solutions; other problems leave you with fewer viable solutions, or sometimes even just one. But one thing I will promise is that it may not be an ideal solution, but you'll always have at least one.

At this point, you've listed out all possible solutions, and now it's time to run a process of elimination. Start scratching out the ideas that are not viable due to cost/expenses, legal risk/reputational risk, resources, or operational limitations. If you've turned over every stone and tapped into all resources (and I mean *all*—make sure you're also thinking outside the box), in a perfect world, you'll be left with one optimal option. But don't forget, optimal can still mean less than ideal or, in some cases, overall bad, and that's okay. Solutions to problems are meant to be better than letting the problem run wild. It doesn't always mean it's an ideal solution. It just needs to be better than the issue at hand. I can remember a number of times where I'd have to say: "Look, we're in a critical situation; this isn't supposed to be easy

or fun. These solutions both suck, but they're better than what we're dealing with right now."

Execute

This is the simplest step in the process. But with that being said, simple doesn't always mean easy. At this point you have your solution, and your job is to now start executing against it to solve your problem.

Having the mindset of a professional problem solver isn't easy. I find myself constantly needing to remind myself why I'm a problem solver. And I have kept that mindset sharp, especially in the later years of truLOCAL right before our acquision, where I felt like I had built up a team and resources that would help shield myself and the business from the major existential threats. But, of course, it was in those moments of weakness when all sorts of problems somehow found cracks in the armor.

An example of this was dealing with our refrigeration units. As the universe would have it, for some reason our refrigeration units always seemed to decide to break down on long weekends. I wish I had an explanation for it; these units typically only require a yearly inspection or servicing but tend to be pretty hands off and reliable otherwise. But this recurring problem was like clockwork. If there was a long weekend, our freezers would go out. As a company that sells frozen food, you can imagine how bad this can be. For those of you who don't know, when you're dealing with industrial freezers, you've got a small window of time for how long the area will stay below 0°C once you have a failure. What I can confidently say is

Solutions to problems are meant to be better than letting the problem run wild. It doesn't always mean it's an ideal solution.

that it's not a long weekend's worth of time. And because this issue happened on a long weekend (a.k.a. a holiday weekend), no repair companies were available to deal with emergencies.

I'll never forget when this happened on the Saturday night of a Canada Day long weekend. My now wife, but at the time girlfriend of five years, Irma, and I were getting ready for bed. After about a year of building truLOCAL with just Greg and myself, we decided that we needed someone else that we trused to help us with the day-to-day. Because we lived together, Irma saw the ins and outs of what we were going through to grow truLOCAL, and she was already helping me problem solve on a regular basis, so she became truLOCAL's first employee.

It was around 11:00 p.m., and after a couple years of trying to build truLOCAL, 11:00 p.m. might as well have been 3:00 a.m. to us. There was nothing that we cared more about on our weekends than just shutting down early and getting some good sleep so we could recover for the upcoming week.

The notice came to my phone first. After a refrigeration unit scare the previous year, we installed monitoring systems in the freezers, and they were showing the temperature rising. This was our first stroke of luck and an example of anticipating problems before they happen. We didn't even know exactly what the issue was, but we just knew there was a freezer issue, partly because of the fact the temperature was rising but also because of the simple fact it was a long weekend. You can probably assume, but neither of us are technicians. Nor do we know anything about freezers outside of how to turn them on. Our warehouse at the time had two industrial-sized freezers, each of which probably contained about a hundred fifty-pound boxes of frozen meat. We didn't know what to do. But we did know we had to get our asses down to the warehouse ASAP to see what was going on.

When we arrived, we immediately started surveying the problem. One of the two freezers had iced up and wasn't circulating air because it was stuffed so full of meat. Every so often as a regular maintenance task, we needed to de-ice them, which obviously we had failed to do on time. Now there was a five-inch-thick wall of ice clogging up the back where the air was supposed to blow, putting stress on the compressor. With our problem understood and surveyed, we jumped into triage mode. We called suppliers to find a refrigeration truck. We called every freezer rental company in the area. No luck.

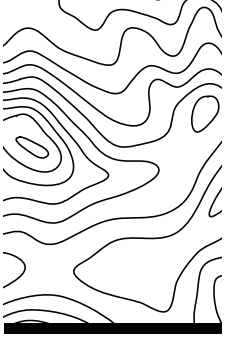
Realizing we had zero outside help, we had to figure out a solution ourselves. Ultimately, we decided we needed to move the boxes over to the other freezer. Sounds simple enough. But remember, we're talking about me and Irma moving over a hundred fifty-pound boxes by ourselves.

Honestly, it's hard to put in words, but just assume it was brutal. Plus, it was now 2:00 a.m. After hours of breaking our backs, we noticed that the good freezer was now losing proper circulation because it was getting too full as well. We started panicking that we were suddenly going to lose both freezers! We didn't know if the other freezer's compressor was broken or not, but we decided to chip away at the ice and try to get air circulating again either way. Now, I've got to explain something here: this ice isn't cute, little fragile pieces of ice. This is thick, frozen blocks of ice melded onto metal. It took some serious effort and digging to get this chipped away. It got to the point where we eventually needed to use a blowtorch and a crowbar. But it started working. The first freezer began getting airflow again, and the temp was dropping. That's when we went back to hauling boxes, refilling the first freezer with what we had removed just hours earlier.

This is just one small example, but things like this are what it's like to be a first-time founder and professional problem solver. There

isn't a formula or equation to follow. It's not a specific skill you can learn. It's just a mental toughness you need to face the problem and realize nobody else is going to save you. You either solve the problem, or you fail.

There's a lot of pressure that comes with being a first-time founder, but the sooner you realize your role is to be a professional problem solver, the sooner you'll become a more effective leader.



BONUS CHAPTER

Scan the QR code for a link to Web3 introduction.

I wanted to add something that would help keep this community alive. A book is either an interpretation of the past, perspective on the present, or speculation on the future, but regardless of where the focus lies, a book is always a snapshot in time. Once it's printed, it's out. Unless you decide to do multiple editions, it's difficult to update or find ways to continuously add value to your community. That's why I figured, for those interested, I'd add a QR code here that will lead to updated and exclusive content on my web page. I'll be adding resources like "The Bullshit Conversation Checklist" so that, as we keep adding content, you can quickly and easily access it.

It won't all just be about *True Founder* though. There's a lot of things that I find interesting, and I also want to use this code as a way for you to access some of my other thoughts and interests as well.

Some of you might have picked up while reading *True Founder* that I've been leaning pretty heavily into Web3. I truly think that, outside of the speculative value of tokens and PFP (profile picture) NFTs, the tools Web3 provides to enable digital ownership, as well as some of the philosophies that properly structured and incentivized communities are the businesses of the future, are where most first-time

founders should be focusing their time. At the time of writing, I have spent about two years researching the space, and I'm excited to start diving deeper.

So the first additional piece of content I want to provide you is my article introducing first timers into my perception of Web3. If you're interested, scan the QR code to find "Introduction to Web3: A Comprehensive Resource Guide for Getting Started."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marc is a University of Waterloo honors graduate who went on to find his niche in entrepreneurship. After two failed start-ups, Marc cofounded truLOCAL and led the business to a successful acquisition in 2020 for $16.7 million.

Marc built the team to sixty-plus employees and expanded across Canada, landing the cover story of *The Globe and Mail's* Report on Business for being Canada's fourteenth top growing company along the way. Over five years, truLOCAL accumulated a series of wins, including a successful pitch on CBC's *Dragons' Den* in 2017.

Marc is a founder at heart and has taken a particular interest in mentoring up-and-coming founders. A series of successful angel investments has helped Marc make a name for himself as a value-added investor among early-stage start-ups. Building a business from the ground up has given him a deep understanding and hands-on experience of what it takes to succeed in a competitive environment, ranging from growth to management development.

Through truLOCAL, Marc set up the "truLOCAL Equal Opportunity Grant," which awarded four black entrepreneurs with $5,000 business grants. As a Black founder, Marc had become accustomed to having doors closed on him growing up and has spent the past two years empowering minorities to understand that they don't just deserve a seat at the table, but their unique challenges give them an

advantage. "We're used to being told no. That's exactly why we're even better prepared to take on the challenges of growing a business."

In addition to sharing this message for companies and academic institutions like Lululemon, Google, FedEx, and the University of Waterloo, Marc has taken a special interest in speaking to today's youth.

If my story can inspire even one kid to take a risk and go after something someone told them they couldn't achieve, then I've done what I'm here to do.

—MARC LAFLEUR

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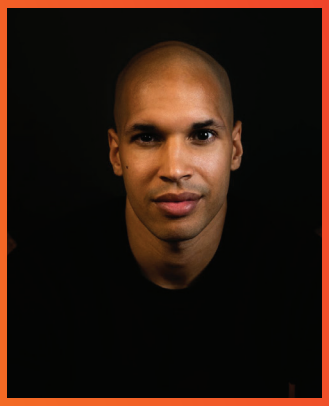

MARC LAFLEUR

had holes in his shoes at sixteen. As the only Black kid in an all white catholic school, life was tough. His entrepreneurial journey didn't happen until he heard that Snapchat turned down a $3 billion offer from Facebook. That's when everything changed. By 2016, at the age of twenty-five, he founded truLOCAL—an online marketplace for consumers to connect with local farmers and producers. Over the course of five years—as cofounder and CEO—he grew the business to over sixty employees and expanded across the country. Following a successful pitch on *Dragons' Den*, truLOCAL became a runaway success culminating in a $16.8 million dollar acquisition in 2020. Marc was thirty years old at the time.

Today Marc shares his unique perspective on business from the lense of someone who nobody thought would make it. He has been asked share his knowledge with the likes of Lululemon, Google, FedEx and various academic institutions. Marc is currently doing keynote talks at conferences across the United States and Canada.

THE ULTIMATE PLAYBOOK FOR FIRST-TIME FOUNDERS

BEING A FIRST-TIME FOUNDER IS HARD. DON'T LET ANYONE CONVINCE YOU OTHERWISE! *TRUE FOUNDER* WILL HELP YOU NAVIGATE THE CHALLENGES OF STARTING YOUR FIRST BUSINESS.

"***True Founder*** is a must-read for aspiring entrepreneurs! Starting a business is hard, and Marc Lafleur does a great job of capturing the truth behind what it takes to be a successful first-time founder. If you want a leg up on the competition, True Founder serves as your tactical guide to getting started."

—MICHELE ROMANOW
Dragons' Den
CEO, Clearco

WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR: First-time founders—all first-time founders. If you're looking to pull the trigger and quit your job, this book is for you. If you're trying to figure out whether you should hire your first team members based on experience or take a chance on hiring friends, this book is for you. If you're trying to decide between angel funding, VC funding, or debt, this book is for you. If you're sitting there reading this feeling like you're about to burn out and that you're doing everything wrong, this book is for you.

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