

Transcript – Episode 128 - The Government Does the Talking, Your Nonprofit Does the Walking, and Other Lessons from Evan Marwell, Founder of EducationSuperHighway

Dolph Goldenburg: Welcome to the Successful Nonprofits™ Podcast. I'm your host Dolph Goldenburg. Today I welcome a guest who may be the only person we've ever had on this podcast who is not only met President Obama in person, but has also given him advice. Evan Marwell will join us today. And let me share with you, Evan is in the midst of an incredibly successful 25-year career as a serial entrepreneur. And I don't mean like he produced his morning breakfast. I mean he starts company after company and nonprofit after nonprofit and he does it and adjust an amazing way. So one of the nonprofits that he's created is the EducationSuperHighway and that organization addresses the digital divide in American schools. And if you don't think there's a digital divide in American schools, it might mean that you're either an a really well-equipped school or you just don't know what your school should have.

Evan is a remarkable man by anyone's standards. He is a graduate of Harvard University and Harvard Business School. He has founded several companies in the software, hedge fund, telecom and consumer retailing spaces. And he is the board chair of an NGO that's nongovernmental organization that works with subsistence farmers in Mali, Senegal and Tanzania. He's created a summer internship program that links college students from less advantaged communities with CEO members of the Young President's Organization. And so clearly what you see here is that Evan is a busy guy and yet in all of that being busy, he founded a nonprofit that is modernizing the FCC's E-rate program. So what exactly did he do? So we're talking essentially about three elements today because whenever you want to get the government to do something, it probably takes three elements. We're going to be talking about creating a sense of urgency, recruiting top talent, and avoiding mission creep. And by the way, I did not come up with these. I asked Evan what he wanted to talk about? And those are the three things. So if you feel the need to really take your nonprofit of the next level you have tuned in for and you have downloaded the best conversation with Evan Marwell.

Hey Evan, welcome to the podcast.

Evan Marwell: Well, it's great to be here. Thanks for having me.

Dolph Goldenburg: So I've got to ask you, what was the impetus for you're turning your attention to the state of Wifi in American schools?

Evan Marwell: Well, you know, it really was, uh, almost by accident and that's sort of been the truth of my entrepreneurial career is I just keep happening into these opportunities. And I think part of the reason for that is that I'm always open to opportunity, and I think any good entrepreneur or any good leader always needs to, you know, be open to the thing that might come along that can cause you to change direction or present a new opportunity that you think you're the person to take advantage. And for EducationSuperHighway, it, it really was a, what I like to call a series of fortunate events. You know, out here in San Francisco, there's an author named Lemony Snicket who I'm sure you've heard of.

He writes the Series of Unfortunate Events. Well, this has been sort of the opposite experience. And really, uh, three things happened. In 2010 I was finishing up my stance in the hedge fund business and decided it was time for me to move on. And I happened to read this book called Bold Endeavors by a guy named Felix Rohatyn. Now most of your listeners probably won't know who he is, but suffice it to say

he's the guy who saved New York City from bankruptcy back in the 70s. And Felix is a bit of a policy wonk. And he wanted, uh, in the, in the face of the recession in 2009 to convince the government that we needed an infrastructure bank to sort of get us out of the great recession. And this book had 10 vignettes of these infrastructure projects that changed the face of America for things like rural electrification, the Erie canal, the transcontinental railroad.

And his argument was basically: These projects changed the face of the country and only the government was big enough to do them. So we need the government to do these things again to get us out of the great recession. But when I read the book, the thing I took away more than anything was that every one of those projects was one person who had this crazy visionary idea and kept working at it and working at it, working at it until the government showed up with the money. And, and I said, "That would be fun as my next project. Maybe I can find an infrastructure project that, uh, that can change the face of America if I can only get the government to show up with the money." But of course, I had no idea what that was, but that was sort of, you know, fortunate event number one. Fortunate event number two was that I was on the board at my daughter's school.

It was a private cate school here in San Francisco, in the heart of Silicon Valley. And I heard about this great thing called Khan Academy. And for those of you who don't know, Khan Academy was one of the first sort of online teaching resources where this guy, Sal Khan would record these short videos to explain things like how to add fractions or how to factor polynomials. We started with math and now there's all kinds of other things. And I said, wow, that's amazing. We should use that at my daughter's school. And so I went to the teachers and I said, "Hey, I heard about this thing, Khan Academy. We should try that. And you know, the teachers looked at me and they said, "Oh yeah, yeah, we tried that. It didn't work." And you know, a lot of people would sort of stop there and say, oh, it didn't work.

Okay, move on. But as an entrepreneur you have to approach the world with a glass half full kind of attitude and say, well, well what do you mean it didn't work? And you sort of ask the followup questions. And what they basically ended up telling me was that it wasn't that they didn't get the learning outcomes they were hoping to get, but literally it didn't work. And what that meant was they had lousy Internet access. So it turned out that our school had a cable modem for 500 people. I have a cable modem at home for five people, and my kids are always telling you how slow it is. And they had a Wi-Fi network that was about eight years old and didn't reach every classroom. And so teachers would describe it as sucking peanut butter through a straw trying to use the internet.

So that was sort of the second thing is I was like, oh, this is kind of interesting. There's, there's a problem. And so what we did was we brought fiber to the school. We got a lot more bandwidth because of that. We put in a new Wi-Fi network and suddenly the teachers were like, oh, the Internet works. We can actually try using technology in our classroom.

Dolph Goldenburg: So I'm assuming a private k through eight school in San Francisco is probably reasonably well funded. So was this just more, the school did not know what technology they really needed to make this work or was this something else?

Evan Marwell: Yeah, that's exactly right. This was not a money question. This was that they didn't know what it was they needed. And one of the things that we learned once we got going with EducationSuperHighway was they were not alone.

And that was probably the single biggest problem we had to address first in our, in our journey at EducationSuperHighway. So anyway, so I have these two events that have happened and so in the back of my mind I'm going to be great to find a big infrastructure project to work on. And then I like hear about my daughter's cate school not having good Wi-Fi.

And then I get invited to a meeting at the White House to talk about how do we make America better with technology. And it was myself and 14 other CEO's and serial entrepreneurs from Silicon Valley. And the format was we came to the White House, the chief technology officer of America came in, he gave a few remarks and then he started going around the table. And to get ready for this, I had been like, well, what the heck am I going to talk about?

And I thought about the fact that my daughter's school, which had plenty of resources, had lousy Internet access. And I said, I wonder if that's true in the public schools. After a lot of work, what I found was a survey that the Federal Communications Commission had done that said 80% of schools had lousy broadband. So when he comes to me in this meeting, he says to me, "Well, what do you think we should do to, to make America better with technology?" I said, "We should fix the school broadband problem. And he looks at me and he says, "What school broadband problem?" He says, we have this program called E-rate that spends two point \$4 billion a year funding broadband in schools. And I said, yeah, and they all have cable and Lousy Wi-Fi. And he sort of looked at me and he didn't know what to say. And so he moved on and I thought, okay, that's the end of that.

But then a funny thing happened, which was President Obama came in, and the CTO sat down next to me. President Obama's making a few remarks and then he starts going around the table and the CTO leans over to me and he says, you should go fix that. And I'm like, fix what? He's like, that's cool broadband problem. I mean, the one that you said doesn't exist today, you said, yeah, yeah, that one. I said, well, I thought we're here to tell you what to fix. And he looks at me. He leans back in his chair, he gets this little smile, but he says, let me tell you a secret. We're the government. We can't fix anything. And to be fair, what he meant was that the government, and we found this to be largely true of government at every level, doesn't have the ability to execute fixes. They can identify problems and have the bully pulpit to talk about them. They can make policy to hope to change them. They can provide funding, but they don't have capacity to actually go out and make the change happen. And so, he challenged me to go start an EducationSuperHighway. And I said, you know what, this is my bold endeavor. This is the big infrastructure project I can do to help change the face of America.

Dolph Goldenburg: That's incredible. And you know, and I say again and again, but I think so often the government health sources, so much of its work to the nonprofit sector because they know that nonprofits can get it done. But I also think it's because they know that they can give nonprofits 80 cents on the dollar, and they'll go out and find it the other 20 cents. And so also say is the government 20%. Um, so I think there's probably two reasons. So what was this like? So you had just finished up with a hedge fund, and I imagine the hedge fund world is very different from the nonprofit world. So what was that transition like?

Evan Marwell: when I left my job, the hedge fund, I'd help start, I had no intention of going into the nonprofit world. Running a nonprofit meant I was going to spend my time asking my friends for money. And that was not on my agenda. But you know, I like to think about the hedge fund experience that I had as really my third startup than I did. And I'm a startup guy and you talked about this in the intro. And so, I was looking for the next startup, and then I came across this problem. And startups really are all about identifying problems in the marketplace, whether for-profit or not for profit, figuring out a

solution to them and then building the team and raising the funding and building the products and driving execution to solve it.

So you're rewarded either with oodles of money in the for profit world or being able to change the face of the world in the nonprofit world. So in many ways it wasn't that different because of the way that I approached it. And the good news was for me, I had never worked in the nonprofit world, so I didn't know any other way to do it other than to run it like a startup.

Dolph Goldenburg: So, so how did you run when you started this organization? How did you run it like a startup? What did you do?

Evan Marwell: Well, I did what any startup does at the beginning. You bootstrap. So what did I do? I uh, I said, okay, um, I've identified this problem. You know, in the startup world you would say, all right, I need to understand the market better. I need to figure out product market fit.

And I said, well, I'm going to do the same thing. So I called up a buddy of mine who I had worked with in the past and who was between jobs and I said, "Hey, what are you doing?" And he said, "Well, I'm thinking about getting into the Ed tech business." And I'm like, ah, perfect. I've got a better idea. It's right in line with that. There's no point in going to the Ed tech business right now because no schools actually have Internet access. So why don't you come help me with this. So classic thing that someone starting as a startup does is go find some cofounders, find some people who are willing to work for free in the beginning to help sort of get the idea off the ground so that you can then start going and pitching it to people. So what we did is we spent the first six months doing exactly that, which was basically drawing on our skills as management consultants where we had worked together for the first time to figure out what was really the problem, what were the root causes of the problem that we're holding back Good Internet access from getting in schools.

And what we found were four things. Number one, there was an awareness problem like Aneesh Chopra, the chief technology officer of America. Nobody knew that we had a broadband problem in our school because everyone's like, oh, we have the internet. But they just didn't realize that it wasn't good enough to actually use technology in the classroom.

Number two, we had an expertise problem, just like you were referring to earlier. Schools did not know what they needed when it came to broadband. And in fact, in many schools, smaller schools in particular, it was often the gym teacher or the school bus driver who was responsible for the broadband and they really weren't paying for this.

Third, we had a pricing problem. Schools were paying \$22 per megabit per month for their Internet access, which is the same as paying like \$500 a month for your Google Noda.

Dolph Goldenburg: So why were they paying that much?

Evan Marwell: Because they had no idea how to buy and they didn't know. It came back to this expertise problem. They didn't know who else they could go to and that there was actually a really competitive market out there for schools' business. And so the rest of the world, the business world was paying \$3 a megabit. So, so, you know, 1/8 of what schools were paying. So we knew that was a problem. And then finally we realized there was a policy problem, which was that this program he E-rate

that the CTO had referred to was amazing because unlike all those other, you know, visionaries who needed to like get the government to show up with the money, the money was already there, two point \$4 billion of it. But it wasn't being spent very well. \$1 billion of that money was being spent on phone service, and phone service wasn't helping anyone get broadband since the 1990s when you used to have to go on dialogue.

Dolph Goldenburg: So I've got to ask you another quick question. So you've decided to start this nonprofit. You made the smart decision to say I don't want to go this alone, let me find someone else who will work for free with me for a little while. In the for-profit startup world, you've got angel investors, venture capitalists. Did you try to identify sources of initial funding and how did that go?

Yeah. So the good news was that because I'd been successful in my earlier ventures in the for profit side, I was able to be the angel investor for the first, uh, you know, six to 12 months of our work. So, I put the money in up front, but literally my entire team for probably the first six months was a team of volunteers. So we had guys who had been on the sales and marketing side from consulting. We had software developers who, you know, were between gigs and wanting to pitch in and help out. And, you know, the money went for things like travel and some office space. Ultimately, we started hiring our first full-time employees.

Dolph Goldenburg: And, and so part of what's so impressive about that is I have a feeling that the people that you're describing are, we're probably, when they were working in the for profit sector, you know, compensated really well.

Evan Marwell: That's 100% correct. These were super talented people, you know, most of whom I would say where, um, in their forties and fifties. So they were at the peaks of their careers. They had an all accomplished amazing things, but they all were a) between gigs and b) had this desire to do something more, to have a purpose for the work that they were doing. And so they were like, this is a great way for me to spend some time.

Dolph Goldenburg: So now I've got to ask how you organize this team? I'm also picturing a group of probably relatively Type A people who now have decided they all want to self-actualize. So how did you organize this team of volunteers and keep them motivated? Was there any type of a hierarchy? Who did what? How did you figure all that out?

Evan Marwell: Well, you know, in the early days there's not much hierarchy in any startup. I mean, you know, some somebody who's on the hook for it. That was me. But I was only on the hook to myself cause I was writing the checks in the year. Yeah. People had different roles. So when we would bring people in, um, as volunteers we would be very clear about what their job was that we wanted them to deliver. And, and in those days it was very much a project-oriented focus. Right. We weren't like a team all working on like, you know, a bunch of things. We had very clear objectives that we were trying to meet and in that first six months it was a lot about figuring out those root causes. And then in the next six months it was about building the solution that we decided on to solve the awareness problem, which was that a speed test kind of like you use to measure your Internet access at home, but tied to a database of schools.

And so, that's when the tech folks started getting involved when we needed to build that. Everyone had a project and I found early on it's really important when you're dealing with volunteers, especially that

everything be sort of project-oriented so that they can come in and say like, okay, I know what I have to accomplish. I know it when I have to accomplish it by, and then I can manage my time to get that done. Because they're not your employees. They're not necessarily showing up at the office every day. And so they need another way to sort of stay on track.

Dolph Goldenburg: That is so smart. But now I've got to ask you, so you've got this group of roughly like how many? Six 10, 12 volunteers. Just roughly.

Evan Marwell: No, I'd say I was four or five volunteers.

Dolph Goldenburg: I don't want you to call anybody out, but did everybody kind of follow through on their commitments or did you ever have people who'd say, "Oh yeah, I'll do that." And then three months later I was still not done.

Evan Marwell: So now we, we definitely had people who sort of came into the project, said they were going to do something and then pretty quickly you realize actually they weren't that committed. And so you like reassign that work just of what else. You have to gauge, sorted their level of commitment early on and then figure out, okay, given that level of commitment, what can I really use them for? So for instance, we had a woman who is a marketer and she came in and she's like, "Oh, I'd love to help with the marketing." But we quickly realized that she had a bunch of other things going on as well. And so we limited her scope to help bring us do one very specific thing that was really easy for her to do because she already had a network, and it didn't require doing a lot of work. It was more about helping make introductions to people that we needed to get the job.

Dolph Goldenburg: Got It. How did you have that conversation with her? Because I think so many, especially founder directors and early boards have a hard time having that conversation kind of saying, "Hey, you agreed to do this. You're not doing it, but can you do something else instead?"

Evan Marwell: How did we do that? You know, I, I think it was more kind of a natural evolution. Like the first time she doesn't deliver the thing that we were expecting, you sort of say, "Hey, are you sure you can do this? We know you've got a lot else going on in your life..." and you just sort of naturally evolve to a place of like what is comfortable for you because we enjoy having you on the team. We know you can add value. Let's just make that fit. And I think, you know, it's a really good point because as I went along, as more volunteers came in, I think I was really cognizant of finding that sort of time, expertise, availability fit in the beginning and making sure that we sort of walked before we ran with people and didn't give them big, huge things. Yeah. Before we knew whether they could really have the time to do them.

Dolph Goldenburg: I know one of the things we're going to talk about is creating the sense of urgency. So did that also help with, with determining whether or not volunteers, we're going to quickly follow through because you had this sense of we gotta do this, we gotta do this right now. While we have an opportunity.

Evan Marwell: There's nothing more important in my opinion for startups then having a sense of urgency and you know, my own observation, and this is not universally true, but my own observation is that urgency is not a word that I would generally describe about how nonprofits [are] large are managed. Uh, but in the startup world, if you don't have a sense of urgency, someone else's going to

beat you to the thing. And so I didn't know any other way to, to manage an organization that to have a sense of urgency and aggressive goals.

Dolph Goldenburg: Hey, and I'll share with you, I think nonprofits that are in trouble, whether it's financial trouble, programmatic trouble, whatever, I think those that successfully get themselves out of trouble have that sense of urgency, and those that don't, those that just end up eventually just dying, do not have the sense of urgency throughout the organization.

Evan Marwell: Yeah, I agree with that.

Dolph Goldenburg: And so you're growing the organization or you're now ready to bring on, you know, maybe your first, second or third paid staff member, what did you do to recruit not just the right person but you know the best person?

Evan Marwell: So I'll be honest. Um, I made, I made some mistakes early on with my recruiting and the key mistake that I made, and this was one area where running things like a startup didn't necessarily translate as perfectly to the nonprofit world. And that key thing was I didn't understand how critical it was to hire people that were really bought into our mission. In the for-profit world, people are there because they're interested. They want to solve a problem. But to a great extent, they're there to make right. In the nonprofit world, especially in the startup nonprofit world, if they're not bought into the mission, like really bought in, they're not going to be the right employees, especially early on. But really that was a lesson that I had to learn. So for me, you know, a lot of the same approaches to hiring that you would take in in the for-profit world. You know, writing the job description, being really clear about what this person needs to do, understanding the skill sets that they need to have, leveraging all the technology tools that are out there today by, we really had to get clear that we needed to make sure that the person, and we needed to interview for first and foremost. How committed were they to the mission where they just doing this because this was an interesting opportunity or were they doing this because they really wanted to help solve this problem?

Dolph Goldenburg: How many staff people does your organization have now?

Evan Marwell: So at our peak we were 70 people. We're now down to 50 because as I'm sure we'll talk about later. We are getting close to actually completing our mission and are going to be sunsetting the organization in August of 2020. So we're on the back end of our curve as we only have the last, you know, 1% of schools that we need to connect to high speed internet.

Dolph Goldenburg: Oh my gosh. So I love this. So first of all, what year were you founded in?

Evan Marwell: We were founded in January of 2012

Dolph Goldenburg: In eight years, you will have started up, gotten going, achieved your mission and then put yourself out of business.

Evan Marwell: That's exactly right.

Dolph Goldenburg: Awesome. Hi, I, that is completely and totally awesome. At what point, like when you got started in 2012 was was the ultimate goal to go out of business and did you have a timeline or,

or at what point did you all decide, hey, we're gonna, we're gonna meet this mission, then we're going to just wrap up and go away.

Evan Marwell: When we started, I told everyone we were going to go out of business in 2020 .We were going to solve this problem in eight years. Now, I actually had no idea if that could happen, but I knew myself. And as you, as you noted in my background, I've started a number of organizations. Well, part of the reason for that is as an entrepreneur, I need to be on a really steep learning curve or I get bored. And so, I know that my general timeline is about eight years when I need to move on to something new. And, um, and so I said, look, I think we've got to solve this problem in eight years so that I'm not bored.

Dolph Goldenburg: So, Evan, I love this, but part of my I love is that is the definition of a big bold goal. We're going to fix broadband in every school in America in eight years. Like, you know, I, I'm always talking about the importance of a big bold goal that is a huge, like that's a big lift.

Evan Marwell: Well, and importantly, it was a finite goal. It was a big goal. And you know, I'm a huge believer in a, you know, good to great and big hairy objectives as a way of motivating and focusing organizations. But the other thing that's really important is we picked a goal that was big and bold, but also finite. There were only a hundred thousand schools in America. So we could say like, that's our goal. That is actually achievable. And this is something that I think the nonprofit sector and the philanthropic sector quite frankly, really should spend more time thinking about it. You know, to me there's no reason that almost every nonprofit shouldn't define their mission in a way that's achievable and pick a number 10 years. Right? Um, so rather than solving world hunger, say that you're going to solve hunger in San Francisco, or if you don't think you can do that, say you're going to solve it in the tenderloin in San Francisco, but pick a mission that you can accomplish in 10 years, and when 10 years are up, you can always decide to pick a new mission. But I really believe that for a whole bunch of reasons, not the least of which is founder and funder getting tired, that having a finite goal that can be accomplished in that kind of a time period is really, really valuable for an organization.

Dolph Goldenburg: Absolutely. Kind of had that donor fatigue are like, okay, you keep talking to us about this and it's been two decades. So how are you keeping your paid staff motivated? So you're down to 50 staff and they know that next year they're going to be out of a job. So like our, I like, like how are you keeping them engaged and motivated and frankly, how do you keep them from jumping ship?

Evan Marwell: Yeah, no, it's a, it's a huge question. I've been talking about going out of business in 2020 since 2012, but really nobody believed me until about a year and a half ago. And then people started saying, "Okay, what are we going to do next?" And I said, "Well, I don't know what I'm going to do next. But really we're going out of business." This has been a really interesting management challenge and one that I've never faced before. And unfortunately we haven't been able to find many other organizations that have had sort of a planned obsolescence, if you will, as opposed to like, "Oh, we ran out of money. We're out of business," kind of thing. Right? So, you know, we, we've done a couple of things to try to keep people around. So the first thing is we've been incredibly transparent with people, right?

We, we believe that, you know, when you're honest and transparent with people and they know what's coming, you know, you can then engage in a conversation of, well, what's it gonna take to keep you around. Number two, we realized that we needed to make sure that for the last two years that people were here, that they needed to really keep growing. And that meant that we did a couple things.

Number one, we brought in a VP of talent whose sole job was to set up a professional development plan and program for our team members so that they would all keep developing over the next few years. The second thing we did on that front, we started making sure that we were being very thoughtful about who got what assignments, so they would continue to be challenged and they would continue to have opportunities to do new things.

So that was the second thing. The third thing that we did is we made a commitment to them that we were going to help them with the onboarding process. So we've brought, we've got a whole sort of, in addition to the professional development, we've got a career planning and off boarding program that we're bringing in that will start actually this summer as people as we get ready for our last little over a year. And then the last thing we did, I think, which has been super important is we figured out how to make it possible to give every one of our employees with us to the end six months of severance so that they would have time to make that transition.

Dolph Goldenburg: Yeah. I was wondering if there's going to be some type of a retention incentive there and there is, yeah. Really two. One is you get help with off boarding in the other, you get six months of severance.

Evan Marwell: That's right. However, it is that probably the thing that's going to more, I mean all those things are really important, and they make it possible for people to stay. But the thing that is going to make the vast majority of the people who are here to the end stay comes back to what I was saying about hiring commitment to the mission. They want to be here when we're done.

Dolph Goldenburg: Yeah, absolutely. Um, and you know, the other thing I think about, and Evan, I don't know your politics, but you know, I am shamelessly progressive and I talk about that on the podcast. The other thing I think about is, you know, wow, if someone, if someone has done really well there and is maybe interested in moving into a democratic administration, 2020 is a great time to roll out, isn't it?

Evan Marwell: Yeah. And I'm sure we're going to have a few people who go and work on presidential campaigns and things like that.

Dolph Goldenburg: You've mentioned about 18 months or two years ago taht some board and staff members started to saying, okay, what else might we focus on? You know, how are we going to be like the March of Dimes? We've, we've, you know, we've cured polio now what are we going to do? have you kind of channeled that so that there's not this sense of, okay, either let's go find a new mission, or, oh, wait, why don't we now also start working on a, B, c, D or e?

Evan Marwell: Yeah. Well, I've just been really clear that like, we're not doing that. And, and I tell them why. I have a basic theory, which is that in Silicon Valley, companies don't have second acts. People have second x teams have second acts, but companies really don't have second acts. Companies get started with a specific problem or market opportunity that they're going to solve and they go after that and they're built to solve that problem. And there are incredibly few organizations that you can point to in Silicon Valley, you know, maybe Apple that have actually managed to sort of find a new market, solve a new problem, you know, get to scale. Most of the companies that you see that exist for a long time and have had multiple product transitions, they all have acquired them. Google acquired YouTube. Oracle has acquired a number of applications that it's done. Facebook acquired Instagram and WhatsApp, et Cetera, et cetera. So my belief is number one, companies don't have second acts, and it's because

they're generally purpose built to go after one opportunity. They may not have the right people and they have all kinds of legacy things inhibiting them as they try to go after a second opportunity. So that's number one.

Dolph Goldenburg: In the for-profit sector. You know, I think, and you got the experience on this, I do not have enough. But when, when people invest their, their investing wanting to know what the exit strategy is. And I think maybe in the nonprofit sector, more of a focus on that, of being able to say, okay, um, you know, if you invest this, we're going to solve this problem in eight years. And that's how your investment pays off.

Evan Marwell: Exactly. Exactly right. The second thing though that's also really important is, you know, as an entrepreneur, I understand that when you're starting, you need to be lean and you need to be flexible and you don't want to, you know, our budget is about \$10 million a year. If I decide I want to go solve another problem, I don't want to start with a \$10 billion a year budget, right?

I want to start with a \$10,000 a year budget, you know, time and space to sort of figure out what they would call in the for-profit sector of product market fit. Like what specifically is the problem? How are we going to solve it? Can we actually solve it? And uh, you need to be small and lean and flexible in those days.

Dolph Goldenburg: Nice. Very nice. Do you have any advice for someone who's not a serial entrepreneur who is about to or wants to start a nonprofit? What would those words of advice be?

Evan Marwell: So my number one piece of advice would be understand up front, what does success look like and define that in a finite way. Again, back to this finite mission. My number one piece of advice would be to pick a problem where you will know if you've solved it and you believe you can solve it within a 10-year period. So that would be number one. Number two would be spend the first part of your time as a nonprofit really understanding the root causes of the problem that you're trying to solve so that you then can come up with the right strategy for solving it. And then my third piece of advice: it's all about getting to scale. And there are two incredibly important levers in your path to scale. One is **data** because data can help you convince people that the problem exists and that it's solvable.

And so data really helps you do that, which attracts both talent and funding to your mission. And the second thing is expect that you're going to have to partner with government because at the end of the day, for the big problems in this world, only government has the reach, the resources and the platform to really make solving these problems possible, but they need help from nonprofits and others and figuring out the solutions and driving execution just as we talked about it.

Dolph Goldenburg: Yeah. And I think especially for a lot of nonprofit startups, that's the attitude. That's one of those out of the box ideas. You're not gonna achieve your mission unless you're partnering with the government.

Evan Marwell: Yeah. And I mean, sure, there will be a few that do. But my, my takeaway is that the biggest challenge nonprofits run into is how did they get to scale. And the best path to scale, in my opinion, is government, not necessarily federal government. For us a lot of it was about state government, but it could also be about city government depending on, you know, what problem it is and how you've defined success. And to be honest with you, mayors and governors, all they want to do is get

stuff done. And if you can come to them with a clear understanding of a problem, a solution that makes sense and the execution capacity to actually put the solution in place, you're going to have a really open and willing audience department.

Dolph Goldenburg: The more ambitious and mayor or governor is, the more they want to get done. So you know, the mayor governor that wants to be a senator or a president, they want a good resume.

Evan Marwell: And I haven't met a governor yet who doesn't want to be president.

Dolph Goldenburg: it's probably true. Well Evan, I want to save a little bit of time for the off the mat question and think Off-the-Map question. Just give listeners an opportunity to get to know you. Although I have to say, um, you are just authentically you and I think listeners have probably already feel like they know you a little bit already, but I read somewhere that your motto is that it's better to be lucky than to be smart.

You went to Harvard. So we already know you're smart. So that's unusual to say. Tell me about that motto.

Evan Marwell: It actually is by bottom better to be lucky than smart. Look, I believe that this world is populated with a unbelievable number of smart and talented people. And what each of us needs is a little bit of luck to be in the right place at the right time. Starting EducationSuperHighway was luck. If those three things hadn't happened, I wouldn't have started EducationSuperHighway. But I'll give you my best story about why it's better to be lucky than smart and the context of EducationSuperHighway. Shortly after we, sort of done our root cause work, and we realized that, yeah, one of the problems was that this awareness problem that people didn't know that we had a digital divide in our schools.

So we built this speed task because we figured, well, if we test the broadband in, every school will have the data to prove it. And so we did all this work. We built this speed task. We got Arnie Duncan and Janet Kelsey, you are the chairman of the FCC and the secretary of Education to launch it. Um, we got all these nonprofits and for profits that did businesses with schools to send emails to their customers and people they worked with saying, hey, test your broadband. And we went out, and we got about a thousand people to test their broadband. Okay. Now to put this in perspective, we ultimately ended up with 800,000 people testing their broadband. I'm like, "okay, we had a thousand people that wasn't really successful," and here's where the lucky part comes in.

So I'm, I'm talking to my mother about this. A couple of days later I get a call back from her and she's like, Hey, I have an idea for you. I'm like, no, not expecting Jessica by about it. She's like, "Well, I was in the supermarket the other day and I ran into my old boss, and his name was Kurt. And Kurt is now in charge of all education technology for the state of Wisconsin Department of Education. And he asked me, you know, he knew you when you were growing up and he asked me what you were doing and I told them. He said, 'Oh, we're getting ready to do all this online testing and we have no idea if our schools can actually do it. Please have Evan call me and maybe we can work together to figure out which of our schools have enough broadband a test.'" So I call up Kurt and he's like, yeah, I've got this huge problem.

I don't know who let do like to test our schools. So we partnered with the Wisconsin Department of Education, and we got 80% of the schools in Wisconsin to test their broadband in 30 days. And the light

bulb went off, and I said, oh, this is how we get schools to test their broadband. We partner with departments of education, and that's how we ultimately got 800,000 people. So in the category and better to be lucky than smart, it sure was lucky that my mom was in the supermarket that day and ran into her old boss who happened to have the same problem I was trying to work on.

Dolph Goldenburg: She just happened to have worked for him decades ago.

Evan Marwell: Hey, exactly.

Dolph Goldenburg: Very cool. Well Evan, thank you so much. I cannot thank you enough for chatting today. You have given both myself and our listeners so much to chew on and it's been just a tremendous pleasure. Now before I let you go, I want to make sure that all of our listeners know about the two websites that they can go to and check out essentially and learn more about the EducationSuperHighway and of course we're going to link this in the show notes because some of the URLs are a little bit longer. If you're driving you won't be able to write them down. www.Educationsuperhighway.org. This site has great resources for everyone who was concerned about the digital divide. You can see how schools in your area are doing in the soon to be released 2019 State of the States report, and that's going to be on this site.

Just click on resources. The second website, I want everyone to go and check out is www.compareandconnectK-12.org. School districts can use the compare and connect tool to learn how much they should be paying for bandwidth. If you recall, Evan said that a lot of schools were paying way too much for bandwidth because they do not know how to paint, how to buy it. Now service providers can find information as well about how to bid on upgrades at this site. So this is kind of an a one-stop shop if a school wants to get a better deal on their bandwidth.

Hey Evan. Again, thank you so much. I just deeply appreciate your time. Thank you.

Evan Marwell: Yeah, it was great being here, and I appreciate all the work you're doing to help make the nonprofit world more effective.

Dolph Goldenburg: Listeners, if you are busy calling your kids teachers to tell them to check out EducationSuperHighway right now, don't hang up, stay on the line. We'll have all of the information you need in our show notes that www.successfulnonprofits.com. Now, Evan is a busy, busy person. That is for sure and I am going to hazard a guess and say that if you work in a nonprofit, you are probably a super busy person as well. So I am grateful that you took out the time today to hear this conversation with Evan Marwell. If you enjoy the show, please do me a favor and hit the subscribe button on whatever podcast platform you're using, and I know we'll be iTunes much longer, but, and if you're feeling generous, give us a rating while you're at it. And if you've got two minutes on top of that, hey, I love a couple of words of a review. That's our show for this week. Listeners, I hope you have gained some insight to help your nonprofit thrive in a competitive environment.