Rob Lalka: Growing the Entrepreneurial Ecosystem

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In many ways, Rob Lalka has had a ringside seat for the tech revolution of the past three decades.

As a teenager, he surfed the internet on AOL and coded a website for his church. He was attending Yale University when Facebook hit campus from nearby Harvard. Later on, as a venture capital advisor, he rubbed shoulders with Silicon Valley founders.

“My life story has been watching these people become successful, learning with and from them,and thinking about the decisions they made,” he says.

Today, he draws on their stories to teach a new generation of entrepreneurs, at Tulane University’s Freeman School of Business, where he’s Albert R. Lepage Professor in Business and executive director of the Albert Lepage Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation.

He draws on them, too, in *The Venture Alchemists: How Big Tech Turned Profits Into Power*. The book tells origin stories for figures like Mark Zuckerberg — whose Facebook evolved from a Halloween prank — and Larry Page and Sergey Brin, whose Google arose from an anti-corporate master’s thesis.

Lalka encourages readers not to view his subjects as heroes or villains, but as human beings. By understanding how they made their decisions — for better and for worse — today’s students can imagine how to shape a different future.

“If you think about social media, and you're not happy with the way that it's turned out for our children, then you get to go build something better,” he says. “What kind of world do you want to create?”

Technology and Community

Growing up in Roanoke, Virginia, Lalka had an early passion for technology. He won a computer in an art contest, took it apart and put it back together. He taught himself the website coding language HTML.

“I was curious about the way that technology could open up worlds, the ability of the internet to be able to connect you to people around the world,” he says.

In his tight-knit town, he also learned the importance of local connections. His mother, aunt, and grandmother all taught in public schools.

“Where I got my start is very important to me,” he says. “It informs the way that I try to be a good member of my community.”

After graduating from Yale in 2005, with a bachelor’s in history and English, his passion for community service took him to New Orleans. Hurricane Katrina had devastated the city, and he volunteered with AmeriCorps, where he helped to connect social service groups with businesses that had resources.

“I realized here in New Orleans that the public sector couldn't rebuild it alone,” he says. “The private sector and the philanthropic sector couldn’t do it without support either. I had an epiphany about the need for cross-sector partnerships to solve problems.”

The Power of Partnership

Ever since, Lalka has been making those kinds of connections. After getting a master’s in global public policy, he put it to work in the U.S. State Department, where he was part of the team that started its Office of Global Partnerships.

His office connected entrepreneurs in countries like Tunisia with U.S. executives and investors, as well as other funders and nongovernmental organizations. Over four years, it brought in $829 million in public and private resources.

“The frontline of American diplomacy wasn't just the good work being done by our diplomats overseas, but it was also helping to connect the inspiring entrepreneurs they met with investors who wanted to learn more about innovative ideas from all around the world,” he says.

Moving to the Howard G. Buffett Foundation, he aided small farmers in Africa in adopting conservation-based and no-till agriculture. He partnered with companies like John Deere, to provide equipment, and DuPont Pioneer, to provide seeds.

“If that part of western Africa is ever going to be the breadbasket again, you need philanthropic and private partnerships to catalyze that activity, and it needs to be done in concert with local leadership,” he says.

Lalka continued working on global entrepreneurship at Village Capital, which taught entrepreneurs in 28 countries how to build their ideas into high-growth ventures. It also raised its own $18 million fund to invest in some of them — with the startups

themselves voting on which of them would get the investments.

Entrepreneurs in the Big Easy

Throughout his globe-trotting career, Lalka maintained his affection for New Orleans. Most years, he returned for its Jazz and Heritage Festival. In 2018, he got the chance to stay for good, when Tulane recruited him to run its center on entrepreneurship.

“Everything I’ve talked about in terms of networks and cross-sector partnerships I’ve brought to this work,” he says.

One of his classes surveys the entrepreneurial ecosystem of Greater New Orleans. Another is a venture accelerator, in which student teams spend the year building companies from scratch.

One such company, Harry Gestetner’s Fanfix, became a platform that connects content creators with monthly subscribers. In its first two years, its creators earned more than $100 million from more than 15 million users.

Such a business fits in with Lalka’s vision of a more inclusive internet, in which more people can earn money from their creations, and social media bring more social benefits.

That vision is partly inspired by his two young sons. “I want them to grow up in a world where the internet they experience is far healthier, freer, and fairer for everyone, ” he says.

He hopes his new book will contribute to building that world. If budding tech founders can learn from the achievements and mistakes of pioneers, he believes, they can become better entrepreneurs.

“I really do believe that academia is about seeking the truth, as close as we can get to it, and inspiring people to be the best versions of themselves, especially through their creative endeavors,” he says. “And that's what entrepreneurship is all about.”

Explore Entrepreneurship in Theory and Practice

To launch a business in today’s competitive economy, an entrepreneur needs a wide range of skills, from writing a business plan and pitching to investors to hiring and

consumer marketing. Entrepreneurship programs like those at the Freeman School of Business at Tulane University can equip a company founder with many key skills.

Beyond the classroom, it offers mentoring from established entrepreneurs, as well as an incubator to provide practical experience in launching a business. Learn more about how such a program can prepare you to help create the successful startups of the future.