



IF I KNEW THEN: CHRIS HERMANN

FOUNDER AND CEO, CLEAN HANDS SAFE HANDS



By *Kyra Senese*

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In this ongoing series, we ask executives, entrepreneurs and business leaders about mistakes that have shaped their business philosophy.

Background:

[Clean Hands – Safe Hands](#) is an Atlanta-based company that works to prevent the spread of infections within hospitals through hand hygiene monitoring systems and technology. Founder and CEO Chris Hermann relies on his background as a physician and an engineer to help medical professionals and engineering teams develop efficient and safe technology for healthcare environments.

The Mistake

We spent a lot of time early on trying to develop the perfect one-size-fits-all solution. We took what seemed like a simple concept around washing your hands going in and out of rooms and tried to develop a simple solution, but didn't appreciate at first all the real work required.

As a graduate student working with the hospital Children's Healthcare of Atlanta, one of the physicians there approached myself and some other working on a research team for an unrelated healthcare project and said, "We have this big problem with hand hygiene. Can you help us out?"

The running joke is that my response was “Sure, that sounds simple enough. Let’s give it a shot.” It’s a running joke because very quickly and even to this day, I continue to learn how complex something as seemingly simple as hand hygiene is.

We think, “Oh, yeah, pretty simple. Doctors and nurses not washing their hands going in and out of the patient’s room,” but the reality is when you look at what the physicians actually have to do in a real clinical scenario it becomes a massively complex undertaking.

As we dug deeper, we realized very quickly that there was not a one-size-fits-all solution. We were going in and working with one nurse or a couple nurses and would develop something that would work specifically for them, and two weeks later it wouldn’t work anymore. Then we’d try the technique with another nurse and that wouldn’t work. We thought we were finally developing something that could meet their needs, but we didn’t know when we started that “needs” is very plural.

Based on what’s going on with the patient, those needs change. When the patient changed, all of the sudden what we had built before wasn’t even close to being ready. We just kept banging our heads against a wall trying to find the perfect solution, when the reality was there wasn’t one. Then we realized, “Oh, wait a minute. This is a much more complex challenge, day-to-day, hour-by-hour, the clinician’s needs change and there is not going to be a one-size-fits-all solution. We’ve got to move beyond developing the one perfect solution to develop a very flexible platform.”

“Working with people is very rarely black-and-white, and there are a lot of different ways to problem-solve.”

The Lesson

We took a step back and finally started to build something that was flexible and adaptable. We tried to take a rigid approach to a very complex behavior-change problem. It just was not successful, so we built the technology that was adaptable and flexible.

As an engineer, you’re tasked with a problem and you work to solve that problem. Most of the time you can develop a solution to do what you’re trying to do. If your goal is to build a bridge you can design the bridge to transport that load across that gap. There are very direct, tangible

and black-and-white outcomes: either it works or it doesn't. That sort of approach and mentality is common across all engineers and in their training and is largely how most engineers think. I'm as guilty as anybody else. But when you deal with people and the behavior change of people, there's no right or wrong. There are many answers and you have to be able to navigate and understand what works best for most of the people.

In medicine, it's very rarely ever black-and-white. The key to my success and our company's success has been understanding that working with people is very rarely black-and-white, and there are lots of different ways to problem-solve.

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