

Elevating Business To Serve Humanity

An Interview with Payam Zamani, Founder, One Planet Group

EDITORS' NOTE Payam Zamani is an entrepreneur, investor, and the founder of One Planet Group, a closely held private equity firm that owns a suite of online technology and media businesses. Born in Iran, Zamani was forced to flee at the age of 16 due to his religious beliefs as a Baha'i. He was offered asylum in the United States in 1988, settling in the San Francisco Bay Area. Upon graduation from the University of California, Davis, he and his brother founded AutoWeb, one of the first online car marketplaces, which they took public in 1999. Since then, he has built and currently owns multiple technology and media businesses, has invested in more than 50 companies, and is striving to redefine capitalism in an attempt to elevate business to serve humanity. He has been named the "Best CEO for Diversity," is the recipient of Tabirib Justice Center's Hope Award, and received an Award of Distinction from UC Davis in 2018.



Payam Zamani

FIRM BRIEF One Planet Group (oneplanetgroup.com) is a closely held private equity firm that owns a suite of online technology and media businesses while also investing in early-stage companies. Its mission is to support strong business ideas while building an ethos that helps improve society and gives back to communities. One Planet Group is committed to investing in companies run by women and/or people of color, and 55 percent of their investments meet that standard. Forty-six percent of the companies in their total portfolio are led by women, which compares to an industry standard of 2.3 percent of VC funding going to women in 2020. One Planet Group sets aside multiple "Service Days" a year for all their employees, offering paid time off to volunteer. Employees have spent over 25,000 hours donating their time. In lieu of spending funds on traditional holiday office parties, One Planet Group uses these funds for their "Holidays with a Purpose" initiative. Over the years, the event has raised over \$2 million for organizations supporting women's rights and education.

Will you discuss your life journey?

I was born into a family in Iran that was persecuted simply because we followed the Baha'i Faith, the largest religious minority in

that country. In the 1980s, hundreds of Baha'is were kidnapped and killed despite the fact that it is a peaceful religion and its main tenet is love for the entire human race.

My life was constantly in danger. At age eleven, I barely survived a violent and bloody attack by a mob of classmates spurred on by teachers whose aim was to "get rid of" all Baha'i children. As much as I loved my home country, my treatment by the newly founded Islamic Republic made any future in Iran impossible. When I was

16, my parents gave their life savings to smugglers to help me escape the country by crossing one of the world's hottest deserts, Dasht-e Lut (the Emptiness Desert in English), to find my way to the closest UNHCR outpost in Pakistan. If you've ever seen Star Wars, this region looks like the surface of the planet Tatooine.

A year later, my brother and I were granted refugee status in the United States. We arrived in the Bay Area with only \$75 between us. Ten years later, we launched a billion-dollar IPO on Wall Street. Where else but in the U.S. would that have ever been possible?

After AutoWeb, the company I co-founded, had its IPO, I should have had everything I'd ever wanted. Instead, what I found was a feeling that capitalism as we knew it had failed me and my employees, but that's a much longer conversation. I was no longer the CEO of the company and eventually had to make the difficult decision to also walk away from my seat on the board. I quickly launched another company, which fell victim to the dot-com boom.

Ultimately, I realized that a large portion of myself was missing from my business life, which led me to found my current company, One Planet Group. Today, I have the luxury of working with some of the best people in the world, all of whom are deeply committed to elevating business to serve humanity.

What was your vision for creating One Planet Group and how do you define its mission?

After the experience of building a company and taking it public, seeing the major flaws in our current definition of capitalism, and also seeing the founders and executives who had benefited from these events, it became clear to me that windfalls of financial gain were not making any of us any happier. Instead, it was

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“Infused with foundational values that promote diversity and inclusion, unity, service to humanity, and excellence in all things, One Planet Group strives to foster an environment that promotes equality, love, and empowerment. Our tagline, ‘Innovation + Intention,’ encapsulates these core values and is at the epicenter of everything we do.”

an endless cycle of always building and selling, believing that the next would finally bring joy and happiness. This, of course, was never true. What was missing? A higher cause, the service to humanity was missing, the beliefs of truthfulness and equity, of unity through diversity, the beliefs that remind us that we are all members of the same human race. The point is that the spiritual values that bring joy to our core have been sucked out of business, leaving behind what often feels like a cold game, one focused on only money.

The company I currently run makes a sincere and humble attempt to embody these values. A closely held private equity firm that owns a suite of online technology and media businesses while also investing in early-stage companies, One Planet Group supports strong business ideas while building an ethos that helps improve society and gives back to communities. We believe that good ideas and profitable businesses are not enough. Making a positive impact starts with aligning our efforts with the right intentions.

Infused with foundational values that promote diversity and inclusion, unity, service to humanity, and excellence in all things, One Planet Group strives to foster an environment that promotes equality, love, and empowerment. Our tagline, “Innovation + Intention,” encapsulates these core values and is at the epicenter of everything we do.

Will you highlight One Planet Group’s focus on developing and investing in companies that can combine innovation with intention?

The big question I’ve been trying to resolve in my own mind is why is it that nonprofits stand for the betterment of the world, and for-profits primarily for greed? Shouldn’t we, as humans, always stand for the betterment of humanity? With that in mind, I feel that we have

a real opportunity to build companies that don’t just build our pocketbooks, but also feed and elevate our spirits.

If we are able to realign our businesses so that the business itself and the way it is operated becomes a form of service to others, then that realignment is going to bring joy. We’re still talking about capitalism here – capitalism but with a heart. My vision is to help every business consider its role in making the world an ever-so-slightly better place.

At One Planet Group, we invest primarily in innovative, high-growth seed-stage companies and some later-stage entities. Our portfolio contains a diverse group of innovative tech-enabled products and solutions, with a focus on companies that aspire to the concept of “Innovation + Intention.” Specific areas of focus include the future of mobility, education technology, health technology, and environmental solutions.

Our goal is to help high-capacity entrepreneurs elevate their ideas into successful, sustainable businesses, with an emphasis on the vision that financial success can be aligned with principles that promote the belief that all businesses can be elevated to serve humanity.

What interested you in writing the book, *Crossing the Desert: The Power of Embracing Life’s Difficult Journeys*, and what are the key messages you wanted to convey in the book?

Considering my own journey and the challenges that I faced, I wanted to write a book that would speak to the early versions of myself – the teenager who was losing hope, the immigrant who had just arrived in the U.S., the young entrepreneur who was building his first business, and the CEO who is trying to get more out of his business than just financial success. As challenging as my journey has been, my hope is that it can provide hope and a blueprint for

taking advantage of these lessons. Lessons that can hopefully be learned without enduring the same level of pain.

It’s my belief that, in the end, we will be remembered only for the way we made others feel. My humble goal is that this book will help more people find more ways to bring light to lives beyond their own and, through that, brighten their lives as well.

Did you always know that you had an entrepreneurial spirit and desire to build your own businesses?

Yes. There is no question that I loved entrepreneurship even before I knew that the word existed. The biggest thing I ever asked my mom to get me was a Monopoly set. I soon found myself assessing my various belongings to find out my net worth – two pencils, one baseball hat, etc. In many ways, I always knew that entrepreneurship was going to be my path through this life. But also, I was watching Baha’is in Iran being denied basic rights, like getting expelled from schools, losing their jobs, and getting denied business licenses, which also made me much more interested to set out upon my own path in life and in a sense own my own destiny. Like everything else, the associated challenges turned out to be great blessings.

What do you feel are the keys to effective leadership, and how do you approach your management style?

I’m 53, and I feel that I am still in a humble posture of learning, trying to figure out how best to lead an organization. My leadership style has evolved tremendously over the years. There was a time when I believed in growth at any cost, but those days are long behind me. Today, I believe that the key to building strong organizations is by connecting our leadership with timeless spiritual values, putting the love of humanity at the center of everything we do – by caring for the well-being of the ecosystem that we are a part of, our communities both local and global, and by remembering that we are all a part of a single human race. I’ve by no means perfected this, but it is what I am trying to embody. Don’t get me wrong, I’m an entrepreneur and attempt to build strong, profitable businesses, but not at any cost, and the business has to deliver more than just profits. Oddly enough, I have learned that this approach actually helps us build better companies, and even more profitable ones.

What advice do you offer to young people beginning their careers?

Don’t shy away from crises. Crises are inevitable, but they are always followed by victories. In the same vein, don’t get too comfortable in times of success, for these are inevitably followed by crisis. Similarly to the seasons of a year that take us from spring to winter, these cycles are continuous and will always be experienced in both our professional and personal lives. These cycles prepare us for bigger victories. The key is not to let the opportunities go to waste. Use your crisis as a foundation for the next stage of your growth.

So trust yourself, and always continue to move forward with as much optimism as you can muster. ●