

Tinybots: “We’re here to make history, not a quick buck.”

What is the key to success? Is it about personal traits, like talent, intelligence or creativity – and what about your resources, like money, a vast network and power? Some think it has everything to do with grit: the passion and perseverance one dedicates to reaching long-term and meaningful goals. In *Going Grit* we explore the stories of innovators in health & high tech. We dive into their inspirations and motivations as we try to understand their leitmotiv. Will we get a glimpse of their grit factor? This edition: Wang Long Li, founder and CEO of health innovation company Tinybots.

At a very young age, Wang became an informal caregiver. Together with his mother, he had to take care of his father, who became seriously ill when he was just 16 years old. “That made me really want to improve healthcare. I became particularly interested in patient behaviour. If you pay attention to behaviour early in the process of an illness, you can truly impact your clients’ health.” This motivated Wang to do doctoral research on new technologies in healthcare, and that is where his journey in making a meaningful change to healthcare really took flight.

Tessa: the robot that cares

“During my PhD research, I studied new technologies in healthcare and how to use them meaningfully. We focused on the elderly and people with cognitive impairment. Based on this research and contact with clients I found that, in addition to physical needs, people also have psychological needs. People really want to be involved with others, remain competent in their actions and retain autonomy over their lives.”

It was during that time that the idea for Tinybots started to take form. “I designed a new robot based on these needs. A robot which provides guidance in crucial situations, but in a homely and warm manner. Clients very much want to maintain their autonomy, so our robot will never give out commands. The robot will ask a question or might give a suggestion at the right moment, in such a way that the client is encouraged to take the right decision themselves.” Their first care robot was born, named: Tessa.

A sticky note away

Wang explains that Tinybots is more than a robot company. “In the end, it’s all about understanding our patients. Only a few weeks ago we met this elderly man who was ‘running away’. Yet, once we understood that he was not running away at all, but he was actually running towards something, it changed everything. From his perspective, he was looking for his wife who had just gone grocery shopping. So we

put up a sticky note on the fridge, saying: “I’m out for groceries, be back in a minute, have a cup of coffee” - and the man didn’t leave the house any longer. It’s about this switch in perspective, that allows you to interact with your patients and actually help them. Technology enables us to provide this help.”

Wang recognises some of these situations from his own experience as an informal caregiver. “When I was 16 years old, my dad got seriously ill and I was one of the only Dutch-speaking members of my family. I supported the medical trajectories with my father, performing administrative tasks and helping with basically all less physical needs. This experience confronted me early on with the impact a disease has on the people surrounding a patient. For example, if you have to be the one who brings bad news to a relative, in this case, my father. This really takes its toll, both on the patient and his or her (informal) caregivers. Tinybots aims to make things a bit easier for those people too.”

“GRIT IS ABOUT SHOWING COURAGE AND DETERMINATION DESPITE DIFFICULTIES”

Driven from the inside out

Wang’s personal history and experience launched his mission to make a difference in healthcare and are still affecting him and his business day after day. “My personal drive particularly affects the way I make decisions. Imagine if I had not felt connected to our mission: I’d have to look elsewhere for guidance. Like in our metrics, the sheer growth of the business.” Wang says there are many ways to fulfil this goal. “And there are many ways that dilute your original mission. At difficult moments, my purpose helped me to make up my mind. So that now, looking back, I am proud of my choices.” And it allows him to lead with authenticity. “Because I use my own mission to make decisions, I know that I am consistent.”

“IN THE END, IT’S ALL ABOUT UNDERSTANDING OUR PATIENTS”

Next to this, his drive is also a way to survive with his company in a highly challenging and competitive market. “We operate in an industry where innovation is in full swing. So as a new company, you really have to earn your place. In the first few years, we were just working on making our business viable. That means working hard. In healthcare, you’ll meet a lot of resistance. When facing these types of hurdles, it’s crucial to be internally driven, so you won’t give up. As a matter of fact, and I’m sorry if I’m being cliché here, but to us, turnover is just a means to an end.”

A winning team

In building and growing his team, Wang is always looking for people who fit the philosophy and core values of Tinybots: improving healthcare. What is driving someone, how deeply are they motivated to make a change and what will they do to actually make that happen? “A shared internal motivation, in a trusted and safe environment, creates connectedness. And it’s this connectedness that makes us stay together and drag each other through it when the going gets tough. To me, that’s what Grit is all about: to keep moving forward and showing courage and determination, despite difficulties and struggles.”

Wang’s pride echoes through his story: “There are many companies out there trying to use robots for people with dementia. We just do it and help those people. We’re here to make history, not to make a quick buck.” Tinybots once started with the dream of one PhD student. “Now, we look towards the future together, with a close-knit team that shares a vision. Our drive is what brought us together and I’m convinced that this is what will keep us together and bring us even further on our journey of making a difference in the world of healthcare.”