

The courage to "plant a tree" where there was no forest: A Second Curve School Story

My father used to tell me: *“Don’t wait for people who are just like you or for like-minded companions. If you want to run, don’t waste time looking for someone to run with — just go. By your 20th or 50th run, your people will find you themselves.”* That’s exactly what happened this time.

In 2018, in one of the remote districts of Uzbekistan — a border region with Turkmenistan, home to just around 100,000 residents and no sign of private education — the story of the region’s first private school began. It was an act of courage, as at the time, the concept of private education seemed entirely foreign to what was essentially a rural setting. Remote regions of the CIS are often economically dependent on livestock and agriculture — a well-known fact.

This starting point marked what Charles Handy would describe as the **first curve**: the initial rise, driven by enthusiasm and accompanied by many challenges. In this essay, through several personal case studies, I will illustrate how the **Second Curve** philosophy truly works in practice.

In 2019, the school officially opened, and the team faced a dual challenge: not only to provide quality education, but also to convince local residents of the value of such an initiative. At the same time, we wanted to show how deeply we cared about the future of local children. We began teaching orphans and students from low-income families, ensuring they also had access not only to effective learning environment, as well as to education at an international level. As founders, we actively encouraged our students to learn foreign languages and pursue opportunities to study abroad. A few years later, we began to see the first results of this approach. In 2021, an important step was taken: construction began on our own school building on half a hectare of land. This was the embodiment of the first curve — ambitious growth, credit-based financing, rental issues, but also a deep belief in success. It was hard — extremely hard, in fact. Harsh weather conditions and financial struggles didn’t always allow the construction to progress at full pace. At that time, I was only 20 years old — a university student pursuing my bachelor's degree, while also supporting the school in every possible way. It was winter, and for several weeks it rained non-stop. Continuous rainfall soaked the unfinished roof of the building, and water began leaking into the already-renovated classrooms. We didn’t know what to do. It was impossible to finish the roof under such weather conditions. All we could do was wait for better days. But at that moment, I realized this wasn’t just another obstacle in the construction process — it was a true turning point. A moment where one could either break down or find the inner strength to keep going. That was my first lesson in stoicism. We couldn’t control the rain, but we could control our response to it. Instead of panic — calmness. Instead of despair — a plan: we covered the most vulnerable areas, moved the furniture, created a "dry weather" work schedule, and most importantly — we came together as a team. I made tea for the workers, wrote posts about our situation, looked for help. All of it seemed like small things, but they strengthened our spirit and became the foundation for the leap ahead.

That episode marked the beginning of my own personal second curve: I realized that a project is not just about walls — it’s about people, the atmosphere, and the philosophy we create together. Later, this understanding gave birth to initiatives like **“Go Green Uzbekistan”** — an environmental movement based at the school, helping teenagers recognize their power in changing the world.

We moved into the new building in May 2022. However, the project was still incomplete — the third floor remained unfinished. That same year, the most students who had received free

education were graduating. Despite difficult village living conditions and the challenges of studying without parental support, they were being accepted into the universities they had dreamed of, passing IELTS and SAT exams, and writing their own stories of resilience. We were proud of them — they weren't just graduates. They proved that **the quality of education isn't always a matter of geography; more often, it's about belief — in yourself, and from those around you.**

By 2023, the school was fully operational. But we had entered the stage of saturation: the remote location, once a symbol of boldness, now began to feel more like a barrier than a challenge. The pressure of credit repayments grew heavier. We kept going, but everything felt slower — as if the air itself had thickened. At the same time, our “**Book Café N1**”, which had opened in 2021 as a cultural hub full of books, coffee, and freedom, was moved into the school building — renting space in the city center had become impossible. And suddenly, it felt as if the café had lost its soul. People stopped coming. Books gathered dust. The space that had once breathed dreams became almost silent.

It was a signal. The first curve had come to an end. What could I do at that moment? The first step was to accept that the end of one phase is not the end of the world. On the contrary, it's simply the natural closing of a cycle — and it doesn't mean the idea failed. It's a sign that change is needed, that the old ways no longer work, and the new — is inevitable.

At that point, I asked myself a few important questions:

- Who is this café for now?
- What exactly isn't working? The atmosphere? Or the functions themselves?
- How can we breathe new life into the project without losing heart or enthusiasm?

That's when I realized: we didn't need to rescue the old idea — we needed to completely **transform** the project. We decided to turn Book Cafe N1 into an **educational space**, where teenagers could host debates, film screenings, writing or public speaking workshops. We transformed the café into an **eco-club** in collaboration with *Go Green Uzbekistan*, where students would discuss books on climate, or explore small but meaningful local environmental solutions. And most importantly — we handed over the leadership of the project to the **Students' Council** and volunteers. Let them decide what a cultural center should look like for their generation. Let them shape what truly matters to them.

At some point, we reached the end of the first curve. Everything we had done so far had grown successfully — but it was time to recognize that the old format no longer worked. Acknowledging that became our moment of truth. It wasn't the end — it was the **beginning of a new chapter**. Since November 2024, the school has been preparing to open a branch in Tashkent — a bold, ambitious step marking the beginning of our **second curve**.

Launching a branch in the capital wasn't just about scaling — it meant having the courage to step into a completely different environment: a new audience, new standards, new competition, and new challenges.

But the journey was far from smooth.

At the very same time, we were struggling with foundational issues: recurring salary delays, financial overload caused by accumulated debts, and missteps from previous management. These challenges were only stabilized by April 2025. Yet the deepest wounds were not financial — they were human. In 2022, our director and accountant suddenly left without any explanation. Financial documents were lost, lines of responsibility were broken, and a sense of instability spread through the team. Then, in February 2024, our second director — my mentor

and a man I saw almost as a father — suffered a stroke. He could no longer continue working. I lived through that time with deep pain inside, but I knew I had to be a pillar of strength for the team. Our founder was grieving too: the first director was his sister, the second was his father, and the accountant — his sister's husband. The team seemed to fall apart along personal lines, and we were left without key documents and information about outstanding receivables.

What did we learn from this, from a business perspective?

- 1. Never base key positions solely on family ties.**
Loyalty and trust matter — but transparency and structured management matter even more.
- 2. Every process must be replicable.**
The loss of one person should not put the business on hold. We're now building a backup documentation system and automating processes.
- 3. Emotions should never replace clarity and calculation.**
During hard times, I learned to speak with the team honestly but firmly. A business needs a leader — not someone who only suffers in silence.
- 4. Stress and loss are part of the journey — but they grow you.**
We learned to separate personal from professional, to value documentation, to plan for staffing backups, and to protect ourselves from vulnerabilities.

These challenges didn't break us — on the contrary, they forged us. And opening a branch in Tashkent isn't an escape from problems — it's the continuation of a story where we've already learned how to survive, adapt, and move forward.

Our journey — from a learning center in a remote area to a private school with a branch in the capital — has become an illustration of Charles Handy's "second curve" idea. We didn't wait for the old model to exhaust itself completely. Instead, we proactively began the transformation — organizational, emotional, and strategic. This allowed us to preserve not only the project's stability but also the trust of the team, parents, and partners. Handy wrote that most organizations fail because they start thinking about the next step too late. We took the step at the right time — and it became a point of new growth. The new branch in Tashkent is not just an expansion; it's a leap into the unknown. But this is precisely the second curve — a conscious step beyond the comfort zone for the future. As Peter Drucker emphasized, every organization must know how to "organize death," get rid of outdated forms to make room for growth. We also went through this — first with Book Cafe N1, and then with the initial management model. The departure of the previous team and the painful personal losses were tough, but they became moments of purification and reassembly. We didn't get stuck in the past. We let it go. From a business perspective, this journey showed how important it is to consider not only economic indicators but also human capital, a culture of resilience, and the emotional maturity of the leader. During difficult times, we didn't allow ourselves to lose the core of our team. This confirmed Drucker's thesis that managing by values, rather than by indicators, creates resilience in times of uncertainty. As emphasized in the Drucker Forum blog (Drucker Forum, 2023), modern leadership requires a constant ability to renew — not just technologies and structures, but primarily thinking. This became the foundation of our approach.

We are proud that our school has become a home for many — a place of transformation, where social circles, worldviews, and life approaches are reshaped. In our educational space, students from rural areas encounter an international atmosphere for the first time, communicating with teachers from different countries, including Russian and Indian educators.

The story of our school in Uzbekistan is a vivid example of the "second curve" philosophy proposed by Charles Handy. This process highlights not only the importance of recognizing critical transitional moments, but also the ability to effectively adapt to change while preserving the core values and mission of the educational institution.

Applying the second curve in our case required a thoughtful and strategic approach grounded in courage and a willingness to enter a new phase of development despite challenges. This experience showed us one simple truth: it's absolutely possible to build and grow a meaningful educational project even in the most remote places — even where there's no proper infrastructure, no sense of international presence, and no clear path ahead. We proved that when there's the right mix of vision, strategy, and courage to act, no obstacle is too big. Innovation, adaptability, and humanism — that's what helped us break through the limits and turn uncertainty into opportunity.

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