



FROM DIAGNOSIS TO DOMINANCE

After beating cancer as a teen, Dr. Andrew Abraham created a start-up to bring good nutrition to the masses via Orgain. Now, Nestlé wants a taste.

By Engie Heidelberg

For many of us, the path toward discovering our life's purpose, and by extension, our life's work, can be an elusive pursuit. Yet, there are always outliers; those who are able to create a future for themselves based on their passions, personal histories, and even challenges and setbacks. Dr. Andrew Abraham, CEO and founder of Orgain and managing director of Humble Growth is indeed one of those rare outliers.

While still a teenager, Dr. Abraham was diagnosed with an aggressive form of tissue cancer—a truly disruptive event that few are ever prepared to face, especially in adolescence.

After months of intense chemotherapy treatments and radiation Dr. Andrew became dangerously malnourished and struggled to maintain his weight prompting his doctor to hand him an off-the-shelf nutritional shake. A look at the label revealed dozens of artificial ingredients, many of questionable nutritional value. With his health in turmoil, Dr. Abraham got inventive.

By utilizing organic ingredients, he began to blend his own nutritional shakes at home. Before long, he was gaining weight back and his health steadily improved. Finally, and most excitingly, his cancer went into remission.

"I was obsessed with learning all about nutrition," says Dr. Abraham, who dove into reading hundreds of books on the topic of nutrition until it became part of his life. Moreover, it may have saved it.



"Focusing on nutrition helped me pull myself out of a hole," he says.

With his cancer in remission and his life ahead of him, Mr. Abraham focused on becoming the next *Dr. Abraham*, following in his father's footsteps to become a physician. After successfully reaching that goal, the now freshly-minted Dr. Abraham was appointed chief resident of family medicine at Kaiser Permanente.

And yet, somehow, overcoming a life-threatening disease and securing a career with one of the premier healthcare systems in the world wasn't enough. Although his passion for caring for people was firmly ingrained in his DNA, Dr. Abraham envisioned a scenario where he could be a force-multiplier for good health across the masses.

"As a doctor, I could see up to 60 patients in a day," notes Dr. Abraham. "It was a breakneck pace, and I began dreaming of ways I could treat hundreds of thousands of people, if not millions, by way of something bigger than myself."

The solution Dr. Abraham envisioned was a remedy he had used to save his own life years prior: the power of good nutrition.

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Organic Lifecycle

Founded in 2009, Orgain's first product was a powder modeled after the organic nutrition shakes that Dr. Abraham had blended for himself during his battle against cancer. Now, nearly 15 years later, Orgain's product line includes a wide-ranging portfolio of organic nutrition shakes, protein powders, shakes, and more. Available online and in over 30,000 stores nationwide, the company became widely successful due in no small part to Dr. Abraham bootstrapping the organization for the first decade of its existence. As a result, Orgain is currently the No. 1 plant protein powder brand in the U.S.

"I was the sole employee for four years," says Dr. Abraham. "I was the customer service guy, the sales guy, marketing guy—even the janitor."

In order for his effort to be worthwhile, and to see his business bloom, Dr. Abraham needed a strategic partner to bring his product to the masses. Fortunately, he found that resource with Whole Foods.

"When Whole Foods accepted our product in all of their stores, it was not only extremely surprising but also daunting," says Dr. Abraham, who recalls the experience as a "trial

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Great Minds

Orgain founder and CEO Dr. Andrew Abraham and Oscar, Emmy, and Grammy-winning artist, actor, author and activist Common (left) partnered together to develop a content series aimed at unlocking the power of healthy, plant-based eating and its impact on performance and overall wellness.

by fire." And yet, without any marketing or sales support to speak of, the purchase orders kept arriving and the company started to hone their go-to-market strategy within the Whole Foods ecosystem.

"Early on, we didn't launch many new products," says Dr. Abraham, who notes "instead we focused on the one shake in the beginning. Thankfully, that experience served me well because I was focused on going very deep with the best product on the market and then expanding from there."

While their early traction within the natural grocer was promising, the company's timing was precipitous.

"We had all the odds against us in every way; we launched the world's first certified organic, ready to drink shake in 2009 in the middle of the global recession. We also didn't have anywhere near the resources of multi-billion-dollar conglomerates who were also struggling at this time," says Dr. Abraham. "And yet, we persevered."

Perseverance, for Dr. Abraham, meant being able to point to the company's success at Whole Foods for what other retailers could expect by stocking Orgain on their shelves.

"I took the Whole Foods story and began to replicate it," he says, which turned out to be a solid strategy for skyrocketing the business. After years of steady growth, Dr. Abraham and team recently attracted the attention of Nestlé Health Science, who has been working to develop innovative, holistic nutritional products.

"Both Nestlé Health Science and Orgain believe that good nutrition can change lives," says Dr. Abraham. "We began working with their team to explore their capabilities, resources and learn more about their dedication to nutrition."

Then, in February 2022, the company announced that Nestlé Health Science would be purchasing a 51% stake in Orgain, with



Naturally Nutritious
 Launching with just one product in 2009, Orgain has grown to offer over 120 different organic nutritional products.

Dr. Abraham retaining a significant minority ownership position and continuing to lead the company as CEO.

“Nutritional protein plays a key role in supporting our health and wellness, whether we enjoy an active lifestyle or are facing health challenges,” said Greg Behar, CEO of Nestlé Health Science, in an official press release issued by the company following the acquisition. “Orgain’s emphasis on clean, all natural, plant-based, organic ingredients has made it a leader in the U.S., and we look forward to combining our companies’ expertise to bring Orgain to more people around the world.”

Although terms of the acquisition were not public, trade media outlet *Fooddive* says,

“Nestlé’s investment [in Orgain] accelerates the company’s efforts in recent years to grow its health and wellness business.”

“Through its deal with Orgain, Nestlé is deepening its presence in trendy categories popular with consumers who increasingly value clean, all-natural, plant-based, organic ingredients—the very same areas Orgain focuses on with its portfolio of protein powders, shakes and bars,” writes Christopher Doering in *Fooddive*.

In addition to their initial investment, the majority stake affords Nestlé Health Science the option to fully acquire Orgain in 2024. With so much on the line, ensuring you select the right partner is paramount.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ORGAIN

“Anytime that you approach working with a strategic partner, especially one as large as Nestlé, the biggest concern is if both organizations are strongly aligned,” says Dr. Abraham. “In the case of Nestlé Health Science, they understood our purpose and were supportive of our culture. In fact, if you were to read our mission statements, they’re nearly identical.”

Dr. Abraham says his conversations with Nestlé Health Science not only assuaged any concerns he may have had prior to securing a strategic partner, but left him with an overwhelming sense of anticipation regarding the future, given their ability to help Orgain scale effectively.

“Today we have over 120 SKUs and our business is expanding by leaps and bounds,” says Dr. Abraham. “We see a very clear path to a billion dollars in revenue in the very near future and I believe that we’re just scratching the surface on what we can do.”

Perfecting Your Paradigm

Orgain’s success is not only attributable to great tasting products made with top-quality ingredients, but also the strength and effectiveness of Dr. Abraham’s leadership. Whereas many executives and start-up founders may feel like their life is on the line when battling it out in the boardroom, Dr. Abraham began creating his personal leadership paradigm while fighting for his actual life.

“I would say that both in my life and in business, there has been absolutely no shortages of hardships—but I will tell you that you really don’t grow as a person or leader when things are easy. You grow when you face tough challenges,” he says.

For Dr. Abraham, the result of that hard-earned growth is a sense of resilience that is nearly impossible to manufacture.

“We’ve had production failures, product launches that I thought would be winners that ended up being failures, financial setbacks, and we even went a decade without taking on any outside capital,” he says. “Quite frankly, there were times that I really questioned if this was all viable.”

But, despite the myriad setbacks, Dr. Abraham and team refused to relent.

“You have to grit your teeth and you keep going,” he says. “I think that’s made us successful—pushing forward through the hardest of challenges.”

When asked if grit is the key quality that defines him as a CEO, Dr. Abraham is quick to turn the question on its ear.

“My approach to leadership may be a bit different because, even though my title says CEO, I really don’t consider myself one in the traditional sense,” admits Dr. Abraham, who quips that he’s only CEO because he was the company’s first and only employee. “I see myself more as a ‘chief everything officer’ in the sense that there’s no task too small for me. Anything that I can do to help move the business forward and empower the team is my job.”

With over 160 people under his leadership, Dr. Abraham no longer has to wear all the hats in the organization, which frees up his attention to building the next generation of leaders within the company.

“I think a true leader is one that produces more leaders,” he says. “My job is to hire the best of the best and get out of their way, while empowering and supporting them any way I can.”

From his perspective, Dr. Abraham has seen a sea change in leadership within his industry in recent years, with more and more executive colleagues pulling back on ego and leaning in on service.

“There is a shift happening now; leaders are growing more comfortable with collaboration at the top-levels of an organization, and many refuse to let their egos stand in the way,” says Dr. Abraham. “I have found that as our business has grown and the more success we’ve had, the less I’m needed for certain responsibilities, which is an incredible testament to the strength of our people.”

Dr. Abraham’s “open-door policy” isn’t lip service: “Whenever I hire anyone, I tell them, your job here is to make us better,” he says. “If there is something that we are doing that could be done better, I want you to walk in my office, text me, call me, and tell me, ‘Hey, I know you’re doing it this way, but I believe we could be better if we do it this way.’ In my opinion, that’s how you succeed as an executive while making the organization around you even better.” **IQ**



BIO: Dr. Andrew Abraham
 CEO and Founder, Orgain & Managing Partner, Humble Growth

Dr. Andrew Abraham is CEO of Orgain as well as managing partner at Humble Growth, a firm dedicated to propelling disruptive companies that are changing the ways we eat, drink, feel, and live.

Prior to founding Orgain, Dr. Abraham was appointed chief resident of Family Medicine at Kaiser Permanente, where he had 18 medical doctors under his supervision.

Dr. Abraham received a B.S. in Biology from the University of California, Irvine and completed his medical residency at Kaiser Permanente in Riverside.