

Sir Richard Branson is an English business magnate, investor, author and philanthropist. He founded the Virgin Group, which controls more than 400 companies. Branson expressed his desire to become an entrepreneur at a young age. Read the full bio [here](#).

Following is the full text of his conversation with Scott Budnick at TEDxIronwoodStatePrison.

TRANSCRIPT:

It is my pleasure to introduce Mr Scott Budnick founder of the Anti-recidivism Coalition, along with Sir Richard Branson, founder of the Virgin Group.

Scott Budnick: When they sent me Richard's bio I didn't think I would need to read it because I didn't think there was anyone in this room that didn't know who this incredible man is. But as I read through it there were a few facts that I thought were truly unbelievable.

First, there're now more than 100 Virgin companies worldwide employing approximately 60,000 people. Which means he's in charge of the livelihood of 60,000 families around the world. I found that incredible.

Number two, he's about to start commercial space travel. This year?

Richard Branson: Yeah

Scott Budnick: We're going up. He's United Kingdom's number one Twitter user. And he's the world's most followed person on LinkedIn.

But what I thought was absolutely incredible is that in 2004 he established his non-profit Virgin Unite to tackle both social and environmental problems and strives to make business a force for good. Most of his time

now is spent working with Virgin Unite his non-profit.

So — Richard, 5 years ago I read a blog on Virgin.com which completely blew my mind. You wrote and sent it out wide that talking about how you hired former offenders and what great work they did for your company and how hard they worked and you encouraged other CEOs to hire former offenders.

And then throughout the years I saw you really dive deeply into the discussion around the drug war. And every time I told somebody that you were coming to speak today the first thing everyone asked is why does he care? I'd really like to know why Richard Branson cares about this issue.

Richard Branson: Well, first of all I'm not an expert at all on this issue. I've come here to listen, to learn, and hopefully from learning to try to do more. I think so many of us mess up in our lives. I was lucky, I messed up when I was 19 years old. I thought I could get away with not paying some taxes. Not a good idea.

And ended up a night in prison. I was fortunate, my parents had a house they were willing to mortgage the house so I didn't have to spend longer in prison. And I think that's the system that's flawed. Why should people, while they're waiting on bail, who can't afford it, go to prison, and people who can afford it, not go to prison. But that's another subject.

That moment, just being in prison, made me first of all realize I didn't like the idea of going to prison. So, from then on I think I've managed to make sure I make decisions where I can sleep well at night and avoid that.

But I've also just learned that if you give people a second chance in life, and I had a second chance, I wouldn't have been employing 60,000 people, I suspect, if I had spent 2 or 3 months in prison. If you give people a second chance they can do great things. And I think if you can give people

the dignity of work when they leave prison, if you don't just dump them on the street and tell them to make their own way to the nearest city.

If you give them a chance to stand on their own two feet, make people realize that they're loved and that they're cared for. And I thought what the lady said earlier about looking forward not looking back is fantastic. So I think as many companies as possible need to get out there and take people on and give them a chance, and I think they'll be surprised how successful it is.

Scott Budnick: Thank you.

So, some might say employing someone coming out of prison is a risk. Some might argue it isn't. I read you sold Virgin Records which was your core business and leaped into the airline business which was not your core business and that was a risk.

We have a couple of hundred inmates sitting in the crowd today that took some stupid risks and have made some good decisions. What advice would you give them in terms of what risks are worth taking and what risks aren't?

Richard Branson: Well, look, I've met maybe 50 or 100 fairly superficially when I came in. And it's fantastic that I think pretty well everybody in this room is studying.

Because a), I think it will make their time in prison a lot more interesting to study. And b), it's going to give them that much better a chance of getting a good job when they get out. It may even turn them into an entrepreneur. Basically an entrepreneur is somebody who comes up with an idea that can improve other people's lives and make their lives better. That's all a business is.

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O'Sullivan (Transcript)

And I think, you people got time here to think about when they get out, do they have a hobby? What could they do to make other people's lives better? And so possibly, rather than working for somebody else people here could actually start a business when they leave. And start in a small way.

I started literally in a really small way. Like handing our leaflets outside — outside concert halls and selling music. Getting the money in from the leaflets and then sending the music out. Just one thing led on to another. So you don't have to dream big straight away, just try to get the nuts and bolts of your business going.

Scott Budnick: Great. Sitting in this room today we have a lot of the decision makers in the Governor's office and the Department of Corrections who are really guiding this system. And working with them I know that they really believe strongly in turning people's lives around. But there's obstacles, political obstacles. A recidivism rate of around 60%, 74% if you're 18 to 25.

If you're spending billions of dollars and failing 7 out of 10 times I'm sure you would shut that company down really quickly. As a business man and a concerned human being what advice would you give to lawmakers and decision makers about how to run this differently?

Richard Branson: Well, I've spent the last 3 years on something called the Global Drug Commission. The Global Drug Commission was setup by President Cardoso of Brazil. It has 14 other presidents on the commission. It has Kofi Annan, who used to be secretary of state. And it has myself as a business leader.

And we've spent two years looking at the war on drugs. And by the way,

the reason that I'm going straight to drugs is that so many people in American prisons started because of some element of the drug problems.

And what we've found is that, in particular in America the war on drugs has failed. It's failed in particular in the poorer communities in America. There are alternatives and yet America seems to continue locking people up. Having the most people in prison - More people in prison in America than in China which has got a much bigger population and you would have thought would be much more draconian.

So as a businessman, what we did was we went and looked at other countries. We looked to see whether anybody else was doing it better. Portugal had a major drug problem. And 12 years ago a very forward thinking president said, "We've got it all wrong. If somebody has a drink problem we help them. If somebody smokes too many cigarettes we do our best to try and help them stop smoking too many cigarettes.

What's the difference between that and other drugs?" They said okay, we're not going to lock anybody up ever again for taking any kind of drugs. What we're going to do is help them.

So learning from that, the National Drug Commission are urging countries all over the world to treat drugs as a health problem not a criminal problem. Someone like Russia, draconian treatment of people on drugs. They've got the biggest HIV problem in the world.

If you give people clean needles you can make sure they don't contract HIV. There are so many benefits I think of taking that approach.

Scott Budnick: Thanks.

So, now I really want to open it up to you guys, specifically the inmates in the audience. Let's now open it up for anyone that wants to ask Sir Richard Branson a question.

Richard Branson: I'll tell you what the first prisoner to ask when they get out they can get a free ticket to London.

Scott Budnick: Boom, right there.

Richard Branson: All right, we've got over here.

Inmate1: Hello mister Richard. Thank you for coming. My question is what inspired you or gave you the heart to hire an ex-convict?

Richard Branson: I think - we were talking about this earlier and I think — What's surprising is just that not more people are doing it. The people in this room could be my children. They could be myself. They could be my brothers, my sisters.

When somebody slips up in life, and I suspect quite a few people in here didn't slip up, they wouldn't be here incorrectly anyway. But when somebody slips up they should be given a chance. It's not only the right thing to do but I think it's the right thing for society as well.

And instead, in America when people come out of prison they continue to be punished. They can't get food stamps or I think getting mortgages and other things are difficult. Which puts people on a path to re-offending again. And it works. Some of our best employees at Virgin are people who've been in prison, including myself.

Inmate2: Mister Branson, Mister Budnick thank you. I'm a parent. I have 3 children. I've been in prison for 19 years now. And the biggest difficulty that we face is communication between myself and my children.

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This is 2014 and the world is changing technologically. Have you ever considered tying together social good with an entrepreneurial opportunity to bring modern day communications to prisoners to help between prisoners and their children?

Richard Branson: Well, I hadn't considered it until you just mentioned it. A lot of the best ideas come from discussions like this. It must be incredibly tough for all of you in this prison. It's so far from anywhere. For families to have to leave to come and live close to you is heart wrenching for them and the kids. And obviously a lot of families will not — will not leave wherever they are to come and live close to you. So it must be horrendous.

The burden on the families to stay close and the burden on you to lose your families from staying close. So I think that anything that can be done to enable fathers, mothers to stay close to their children is obviously really important.

I would urge the warden who's very liberal minded thinking to maybe work with you in trying to come up with a program that maybe could be an example to other prisons in the years to come. If we can help a bit we would love to try to help a bit within whatever we're allowed. I can see how important it is.

Be entrepreneurial. Maybe get a few of the other students together. Try to work up a plan. It may be too late for you, but it can help other people later. Good luck.

Scott Budnick: I think it's important to note too that this prison is the first prison in the entire state to bring in technology and start an online college program. It's now planning to be replicated to all the different yards of this prison and then throughout the department. So it's the first time in the history of the California prison system where they let inmates

touch a computer, especially a computer that's connected to the Internet to take college classes.

I know there's talks about having Skype visiting for families that can't come here. There's also a new program that Millicent Tidwell and Rodger Meier started where you can read a book to your child and send it home on disk. That's being rolled out in the next couple of months. So I think the ball's rolling slowly, but rolling as it relates to technology.

And I think with Mr Branson's idea and his help I think we can really kind of push the system to move this quicker.

Richard Branson: The Skype idea just seems like a no-brainer. Because it doesn't cost the prison anything. And for families that can't travel is quite a strain on the families to travel hours and hours from other cities.

Inmate3: You mentioned the draconian sentencing that we have in this country. My question to you is, do you think our behavior while incarcerated should be considered in regards to our release date?

Richard Branson: Look, I'm certain that the behavior whilst you're in prison, you should get benefits from it. Would you mind telling me what you think?

Inmate3: Well, I think that seeing that we're a part of such a groundbreaking idea as far as the educational system within California Department of Corrections being able to obtain degrees now, to really change our aspect and the way we think and what we're able to accomplish, I think that it would be even more motivational for us if there were — if it was considered for instance we have, like I said, the college program here has completely changed not only the way I feel about learning, but the way I look at life.

I understand now that what I do as an individual affects not only me but everyone around me. I didn't understand that when I got locked up. I thought it was just all about me, me, me. But now that I have some type of education I understand that we are all part of, or equally a part of, a bigger whole.

So I think that if those behaviors were considered, you know, I came in, I didn't have a college degree, now, thanks to the system, in June I'll be receiving 4 degrees, I think that that should matter.

And if I have a pattern of not being disciplined, no disciplinary actions or anything like that I think that that should be considered on an individual basis.

Richard Branson: You put it far more eloquently than I could. It is fantastic what Ironwood's doing. It seems to be setting an example to the rest of the prison system in California as far as the educational policy it's got here. It'd be great if other establishments could learn from it anyway.

Scott Budnick: Thank you.

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Recommended Book/Course for Further Reading:

[Losing My Virginity: How I've Survived, Had Fun, and Made a Fortune Doing Business My Way](#)



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