

URL: <https://ecorner.stanford.edu/clips/how-color-pivoted-from-genetics-to-covid-clip/>

Color co-founder and CEO Othman Laraki explains his company's abrupt shift from an exclusive focus on genetic testing to COVID testing in March of 2020. As the company realized that their cutting-edge lab was well positioned to help address the country's critically under-resourced testing capabilities, they decided to apply their technology to COVID testing, and further build the company's focus on disseminating healthcare solutions to large populations.



Transcript

- So because we're in the space.. 00:00:03,730 And so in general, in the healthcare space, I think we're very attuned, for example, we shut down our office way before, all the kind of other companies and so on in order, initially actually we shut down our office to protect our lab team because we were like, okay just the density of humans increase likelihood we'll have an outbreak.. And who are the people that have to be here to do their work, we wanna keep them safe.. And so we initially, but we kind of deep into what's going on with COVID and trying to understand that, just to protect our own people, progressively as that was happening, I think one of the things that kept being really striking is like, and one thing that struck me, I feel the time was like, we feel when the world is kind of running, you always think that there are people behind the curtain that make stuff work and I think a lot of us were convinced that we see all the movies and we think like, okay, something like this happens, someone in DC is gonna press a button and people in hazmat suits descend, and they're gonna solve everything, in a few days and it's fine.. But you realize there's no one behind the curtain and it's like it's just us.. It's like people like us.. And one of the things that, well for us that really started, taking for us, it was like, this is increasingly seeming like a singular event like probably the biggest health crisis of our generation.. And it was increasingly being clear, like early March that was like very clear.. That was probably where we're heading.. And be, we felt like we were like one derivative away, one degree away from being able to have a very big impact..

Like the question we're asking ourselves is like, okay, clearly no one has a clue what's going on right now.. And so if not us who, right? Like if it's not people like us who can make a difference and who will? And we couldn't come up with a better answer at some level.. And so we just started like, there's initially a very small group of people, cause it was like literally it was four people where we were spending about 18 hours a day calling everyone we knew who was somewhere in the space just to get their perspectives and to understand like their hypothesis where things were going.. And after like a couple of weeks we came up with a few conclusions, like one was, we felt on the testing capacity side there was a big dearth of just basic testing capacity.. And we felt we could actually, we had built, we run an incredible lab in bowling game, like because of all the work we do in genetics which is actually much more involved than COVID testing where we actually are running one of the most interesting high complexity labs in the country.. We think we can take a relatively unique approach to actually running COVID testing.. And then equally importantly was like, from our genetic experience, like what I was talking about earlier, it was like, you can make all the beautiful technology you want but you can't get it to people in the US because we don't have a public health system.. And that to us was actually a much bigger blind spot that we felt was very generalized and we felt we had a better answer for, and I think that ended up transforming the company in a very deep way where right now we're running some of the biggest COVID testing programs in the country, we're some of the biggest vaccine programs in the country where it's all about that simple last smile.. How do you disseminate very basic healthcare building blocks deep into people's lives.. And to us that felt like actually there was gonna be a repeated version of that as we all kind of evolved through the crisis..

And so, but initially it started off as four people.. We then started working on building our lab side and then working on the software side again, like a small grassroots effort.. I mean, at the initial, they went from four people to maybe about 20 people that were involved in that kind of a core thing.. And then it kind of like spiraled through there.. And so it just kept growing...