



Embedding Governance Within the Startup Journey

Virtual Fireside Chat

Wednesday, 29th May 2025

04:00 PM to 05:15 PM

Zoom Webinar

As part of our continued efforts to promote meaningful dialogue on governance and purpose-driven entrepreneurship, the Pearl Initiative hosted a virtual fireside chat with Sophie Smith, Founder and CEO of Nabta Health. Sophie, a serial entrepreneur and one of the region's leading voices in femtech, shared her experience building Nabta Health – the Arab world's first women's health technology company. She spoke candidly about navigating limited infrastructure while putting in place strong governance practices from the start.

Key Takeaways from the Convening:

A. Governance as a Core Foundation

Sophie highlighted how the lack of structure in her earlier ventures led to poor decision-making and slower growth. With Nabta, she took a different approach by building governance into the business from day one. This included:

- Setting up a Board of Directors to guide strategy and ensure accountability
- Forming an Advisory Board to increase credibility and open up networks
- Holding quarterly board meetings to maintain stakeholder trust
- Creating clear reporting lines to reduce confusion and improve operations

These systems helped Nabta stay focused on long-term research and development, while ensuring the organisation stayed aligned and well-managed.

B. Building with Limited Ecosystem Support

When Nabta was founded, the UAE had very few resources for health-tech startups – no grants, no accelerators, and no broader ecosystem. This made it necessary for Sophie and her team to build many things from scratch.

Strong governance structures played a key role in helping the company stay lean, focused, and resilient despite these challenges.



C. Structure Supports, Not Restricts, Innovation

Sophie addressed a common misconception that structure holds startups back. She described Nabta's early phase as "structured chaos," which she believes is more effective than "pure chaos." Governance, in her view, gives startups the clarity and systems they need to innovate safely and sustainably.

D. Leadership Inspired by Parenthood

Sophie also drew a connection between governance and parenting, noting that both require:

- Clear boundaries
- Consistent routines
- A balance of emotional support and practical management

This comparison helped bring out the human side of leadership, showing that soft skills and structure go hand in hand.

E. Choosing the Right Investors Matters

A major point raised was the importance of working with investors who share the company's values. In a purpose-driven business, like women's health, alignment with investors is crucial. Sophie encouraged founders to prioritise long-term vision over short-term funding.