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ENTREPRENEUR'S BYLINE

By Harry Vardis

Listening to Your Inner Entrepreneur

When a problem defies all the obvious solutions, step back, take a whole new tack, and inspiration will come. It always does for me

An entrepreneur's job is all about feeling lost and finding a way back. It's about, as I've discovered in my six years since starting a qualitative research firm, Creative Focus, Inc., maintaining altitude. It's about correcting, as does a pilot, for the inevitable ups and downs in order to stay airborne.

A lot of what enables company-builders to confront logic-defying problems -- and solve them in order to move their ventures forward -- has long been ascribed to hard work and a passionate belief in one's goals, to say nothing of unbridled optimism. However, there is another quality that bears acknowledging: a willingness to meet change with creativity.

It is in creativity, that the solutions are found to the incessant issues that arise in the course of building a company. And, as I have discovered, creativity is all about attitude. To maintain the altitude that keeps a company going, you must work on attitude. What follows are five steps for forging an attitude that invites creativity into your entrepreneurial pursuits.

1. Find the Opportunities, Don't Wallow in the Problems

Problem solvers though they may be, even entrepreneurs get the blues. Especially when it comes to the heavies, such as, "We have no budget," and, "We ran out of money."

Now the above statements appear to suggest an obstacle, whereas, if presented differently, the matter at hand might well appear to be an opportunity, like so: "How might we obtain a budget for this project?" And "In what ways might we find money for this project?"

Transforming problems into opportunities leads to solutions. Having restated the questions above, for example, you might then look for the right person to take as much ownership in the issue as you have. Together, you both might explore further questions that nudge you closer to a solution, such as: "In what ways can we convince a bank to lend us money? Or, "In what ways can we cut costs?" Solutions are apt to arise more frequently when the right questions are posed.

2. Separate Idea Generation From Idea Evaluation

At the heart of creativity is the notion that the more ideas you have the better. When ideas are initially thrown out on the table, however, they are often discounted as being unworkable or unreasonable.

When I worked for a large advertising agency, for example, a friend suggested that I teach the techniques I practiced. Instinctively, I said that wasn't a good idea because my time was better spent with clients.

The suggestion might not have been right for me at the time, but the idea itself was good, and my resistance was insisting on judging it before I had a chance to let it germinate in my mind. (What I am doing now, in fact, is the very teaching my friend suggested years ago.) The moral for the entrepreneur: Set aside a time to generate ideas, and a completely different time to evaluate each one. Don't mix the two, or you may be killing the babies before you know what they might grow up to be.

3. Change Lenses

Now let's get to that evaluating. You must, like the photographer who takes 1,000 shots for that one ideal image for the book jacket or advertisement, compile a broad array of ideas. The more you have, the better your chances for finding just the right one for your company.

However, numbers aren't the whole story. Creativity also involves a practice called "forced association." If you're in the business of, say, remodeling bathtubs, you might think of several ideas for doing so, such as making tubs deeper or wider. Next, though, forget about the tub and consider a completely different object -- let's say, a banana. It's yellow, slippery, has a jacket, and contains potassium, which makes it nutritional. Now apply the characteristics of the banana to your tub business. You might then think about introducing a line of colored tubs, for example, or enabling your faucets to release nutrients into the water for a healthier soaking.

When evaluating ideas, in other words, a simple technique is to listen to all of them, clear your mind, and then open a dictionary and pick a random word. Think about how that word or its attributes relate to your company's issue, and, just as banana to bathtub, you will find yourself with a new perspective. Be assured that you needn't confine yourself to a dictionary; anything unrelated to the issue at hand, such as an article in a magazine, could produce the same result.

4. Avoid the Trap of Entrenched Thinking

Are you having fun yet? Now I'd like you to try an exercise. First, repeat the word "joke" six times (Don't read further until you do that!) Second, what do you call the white part of an egg? Quickly! Third, did you say, "yolk"? Go ahead, you can admit it. You know that the yolk is the yellow part, not the white part, but you were led astray by the entrenched pattern -- joke, joke, joke -- and you couldn't think freely.

That's what often happens when it comes to being open to new ideas. Humans operate 92% on autopilot, and only 8% consciously -- even, sadly, those entrepreneurs among us. The challenge is to break from those entrenched patterns so that you don't -- subconsciously or consciously -- eliminate new options. You need to be aware that new patterns exist and that you must make an effort to embrace them.

OK, try this exercise to get yourself going: Fold your arms and note which arm is on top. Now refold them so that the other arm is on top. Does the new way feel comfortable or strange? Ideas are analogous -- new ones do seem strange. The lesson is to give them a chance!

5. Risk Something Big

Write a poem about your work. Or paint a picture. Or tell a story. Once, when I was faced with one of my biggest challenges, I went into a children's toy store, bought hand paints, and created a mural. The task released my negative energy and focused my thinking. Now, when I look at the mural, I am reminded of how I solved the problem.

The point is that what might be considered silliness when juxtaposed against the serious job of company building -- humor, physical activity, or the creative arts -- might actually work to loosen you up in times of stress. There is a similarity, after all: It takes a lot of passion to act silly -- and to create a company.

These days, top business schools are teaching the liberal arts, as well as painting, poetry, and improvisation, so that students can better express themselves and experience the differing perspectives that lead to creative thinking. Entrepreneurs would do well to do the same.

At the very least, silliness reminds the focused entrepreneur that every undertaking has a human side, and that rewards don't always have to be monetary. In fact, as the old saw goes, if the rewards are coming at the personal level, the financial might just follow.

Are you soaring yet, entrepreneurs? Surely, from these five techniques, you're beginning to understand that creativity can be unleashed -- and that once you embrace it, you will be better able to release the change-producing energy that builds companies. You are, in sum, at least maintaining altitude!

Harry Vardis, 62, founded [Creative Focus, Inc.](#), an Atlanta-based qualitative research company, in 1997. The firm utilizes four professionals and 16 faculty trainers to offer a course, entitled "Odyssey Business Workshop," which focuses managers and entrepreneurs on creativity in business dealings, in universities and corporate training settings. Vardis also teaches the material at The Goizueta Business School at Emory University and Kennesaw State University, both of which are based in Atlanta, and at Anahuac University in Mexico City.

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