

# ENTREPRENEURSHIP: WHY DON'T WE TEACH IT?

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## BEYOND BUZZWORDS

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Entrepreneurship and innovation have fascinated me for a long time. Whenever I have the opportunity, I talk to business owners, especially people who have started or purchased businesses and personally grow them, to learn more about the subject from those who've "done it".

I had often heard that entrepreneurs and innovators were "unique", that it required a special personality or birth order or whatever to be successful in this arena. There is no doubt that performance in this arena requires an attitude for success...and lots of hard work. But I also learned that entrepreneurship is not, as management guru Peter Drucker reminds us, "...a mysterious gift or stroke of genius, but a series of purposeful tasks that can - and need to be - organized as systematic work."

Good entrepreneurs know how to make things happen. They see opportunity in the world around them and they act on it. They search purposefully for the sources of innovation, the changes in our lives that indicate opportunity for successful innovation. They don't shy away from change; they seek it out and build on the opportunity it brings.

Don't misunderstand. I am not discounting the personality and self discipline it takes to quickly close the gap between what we know and what we do. That trait will always be a contributor to success. But if we can understand what techniques can be used to enhance innovation, if we can break that process down into systematic work or strategies, then innovation can be learned and practiced. And that means it can be taught.

Drucker teaches numerous strategies for this - seeking out incongruities, examining industry and market changes, following certain areas for trends and new activity, not to mention the creation of business and marketing

plans, the procurement of start-up capital and the other necessary steps to starting a new business. Even the attitudes can be identified and developed. So why don't we teach more of it? I think part of the reason is that we still think innovation and entrepreneurship are only the job of the chief executive. That couldn't be farther from the truth. In today's environment, innovation and entrepreneurship must be everybody's job.

Anyone who's working anywhere right now knows how the world of work is changing. Organizations are not run like they used to be. Work is structured differently, flexibility and problem solving and seeking creative ways has become part of what all of us can and must do. And there's more changes to come.

I recently read an article comparing the Industrial Age we are exiting with the Information Age we are venturing into. It talked about the Industrial Age being about the concentration of power - big business, large factories, mass markets, mass media... The Information Age, the article explained, is about de-massifying things. *Big causes slow.* This new age requires that we be flexible, thinking, nimble individuals. If the Industrial Age is about powerful organizations, then the Information Age is about powerful individuals.

Are we ready to handle that kind of power? To take the responsibility that comes with it? Are we ready to take responsibility for ourselves, to develop and market our skills? In the "old" world, we needed the resources provided by our organizations in order to do our work. In the "new" world, knowledge is the resource. It's transportable, it's ours, to do with what we want, to market or share or combine with other knowledge. That resource gives all of us a power that we've never had before. And my fear is that we won't know what to do with it.

Seeing opportunities for new products, creating new advances in the way we work, coming up with new applications of our capabilities or knowing when to let go of the old way and espouse a new approach will all take a new set of skills. The kind of skills most entrepreneurs I know already have. We've got to start teaching these skills and reinforcing how necessary they are to sustaining our quality of life in the future.

As adults, many of us are having enough

trouble with the new ways of working. Will our children be ready for the inevitable self-responsibility that they face? They won't be unless we help them get ready. This isn't just a school issue, a question of whether we should teach entrepreneurship and marketing as part of the curriculum. Some schools do and I have supported them in any way I can.

As parents, we're the real teachers of our children. As managers, we are the role models for our fellow employees. We have to stop talking - and acting - like our companies (or our governments) owe us something, like all we have to do is show up and it's someone else's responsibility to train us, to develop our skills, to promote us, to support us. We have to break the mind set of entitlement and build the mind set of responsibility.

Maybe courses on entrepreneurship and marketing need to be required for high school graduation. They sure are life-long skills. But the techniques and practices taught in the classroom won't make a difference if we don't do our part as parents and citizens. Perhaps the simpler solution is to go home and look in the mirror. We have to take the job of role model seriously. We have to learn and practice these skills ourselves.

If we aren't taking responsibility for our own happiness, if we aren't looking for the new opportunity in every change we encounter, if we aren't practicing innovation and flexibility and self-reliance, who will teach our children? Who will teach our workers? They won't be prepared to succeed in a changing world. And we'll be responsible.