



business philosophy

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Can Entrepreneurism Be Taught?

The dramatic increase in the number of schools and universities offering degrees in entrepreneurship is nothing short of an explosion. Recently, I Googled “entrepreneur degree” and the results show literally hundreds of places to get a degree in entrepreneurship. I learned that **DePaul’s** Entrepreneur MBA program ranked third in the nation and even **Grand Canyon University** has opened a College of Entrepreneurship. But the trend raises the question: Can entrepreneurship be taught?

In general business language the terms “entrepreneurship” and “small business ownership” are frequently used interchangeably. However, there is a distinct difference. An entrepreneur takes a new idea and builds a company around it from the ground up, while a small business owner has acquired the company through other means. What is the “spark” that ignites an entrepreneur to start a company, an activity usually performed in spite of great personal risk?

One economist declares entrepreneurs to be lucky fools, while another notes that they are almost a mystery. Author John Gartner has concluded that entrepreneurs are in a constant state of hypomania, highly creative and “brimming with infectious energy, irrational confidence, and really big ideas.” Other research supports the fact that entrepreneurs are stubbornly optimistic. In my 24 years as an entrepreneur, I have come to realize that we tend to interpret and make sense of the world differently than others; we notice the gaps, and each gap represents a possible new business venture. We drive ourselves and those around us crazy with it. I’ve referred to the condition as a “sickness,” whereas Neal Patterson of **Cerner** affectionately refers to us, himself included, as “mutants.” In any case, entrepreneurs have more in common than mere personality idiosyncrasies, and though they can’t be discovered through aptitude tests, they can easily recognize each other.

Carl Schramm of the **Kauffman Foundation** would describe the difference between entrepreneurs and the rest of the population as a continuum between risk tolerance versus risk aversion.

Entrepreneurs are risk tolerant. Certainly there is that element. But looking at it through a different lens, it is also a continuum between being innately creative versus innately unimaginative. Unimaginative people see and accept as-is what there is around them. Creative people see and reject what is around them, instead seeing something as it could be. They automatically see the possibilities because that is the way their brains work. So that is the spark.

Entrepreneurism is creativity applied to the field of business. Can creativity be taught? Certainly art classes teach design basics and technical skills, such as how to paint with a watercolor brush or how to use a paint program on the computer. Even brainstorming can be taught so as to enhance tapping into one’s own creative thoughts. But in the end, successful art students are developing a talent or aptitude that is innate.

Entrepreneurism can be taught in very nearly the same way that creativity can be taught. Certainly business basics in accounting and economics, as well as management and technical skills can be taught. Examples include how to develop a business plan, secure financial backing, and how to manage growth. But the entrepreneurial spark, which springs from within, cannot be taught.

An entrepreneur with very high risk tolerance will start a business, learning as they go, regardless of prior business training. Interestingly, education provides a way to reduce perceived risk for would-be entrepreneurs who are not on the fringes of the risk-tolerance continuum. For this group, a reduced risk level allows them to act on their internal spark and actually start a business. A person without an internal spark could not be persuaded to start a business, even if the risk was zero.

Everything surrounding entrepreneurship can be taught, including business acumen, resources available, and even how to make policy decisions so that entrepreneurs can be more successful in their environments. But the spark that makes them do what they do cannot be taught. **KCB**



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