
CAROL CAIN: Cultivating the next entrepreneurs

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Entrepreneurs are described by Webster's as people who organize and direct a business undertaking, assuming the risk for the sake of the profit.

The term "entrepreneur" was coined by Richard Cantillon, a French economist during the 18th Century. Today, very successful entrepreneurs are lauded for their maverick leadership styles and often grace magazine covers or dominate best-selling book lists, telling the rest of us how they did it.

Indeed, 99.9 percent of entrepreneurs toil away in relative obscurity, never rising to the epic proportions of a Bill Gates or an Oprah Winfrey.

Still, that reality hasn't dampened the enthusiasm of a growing number of Americans who are looking to join their ranks.

But as more people are looking to run their own businesses and decide whether they have the right stuff, a question worth considering: Are entrepreneurs born, or can they be made?

The State of Michigan released a report last week from a blue-chip panel of business, political and civic leaders who examined the topic of education and our state's economic future. Gov. Jennifer Granholm had asked the group -- led by Lt. Gov. John Cherry -- to figure out how to double the number of college graduates over the next decade.

Among the report's conclusions: Training our youth to become more entrepreneurial is so vital that it should be formally incorporated into school curricula.

Certainly if a recent survey by the Boys & Girls Clubs of "tweens" -- people ages 11-13 -- is a barometer, then the Cherry commission report is onto something.

The survey asked 850 tweens at clubs across the country about their career aspirations. Sixty-six percent wanted to become entrepreneurs, while only 34 percent aspired to work for someone else.

Considering some alums of the club (former President Bill Clinton; Gen. Colin Powell; baseball's Derek Jeter; actors Brad Pitt, Martin Sheen, Bill Cosby and Denzel Washington; singer Neil Diamond, and sprinter Jackie Joyner-Kersey) responses of those tweens bear watching.

Teaching the skills

Academia is starting to step up. About 1,500 American colleges offer entrepreneur classes, according to the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation in Kansas City, Mo.

The Samuel Zell & Robert H. Lurie Institute for Entrepreneurial Studies at the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business, which opened in 1999, is among those providing entrepreneurial training. Zell, a U-M alum and Chicago billionaire, along with his deceased partner, Lurie, gave U-M \$10 million to help fund the institute.

Its mission: to focus the capabilities and resources of the university to provide education, experience and opportunities in entrepreneurship; serve as a catalyst for new venture development, and contribute research in the field of entrepreneurship.

Timothy Faley, managing director of the institute, says students can be taught skills that will help them as entrepreneurs.

"We believe it is a learnable skill," said Faley, though he does acknowledge some skills you just can't get in the classroom.

When asked about the numerous personality tests available to determine whether one has the mettle to become an entrepreneur, Faley says he isn't a fan.

"I don't believe in the personality-traits portion" of those tests, he says. (If you want to get an idea of what's out there, go to Google, type in "entrepreneur skills test" and see how many questionnaires pop up.)

From his years of academic training and experience with entrepreneurs, Faley says there is one trait that helps determine those cut out for it: dealing with ambiguity.

"You have to be OK with making decisions and not always having the information you need," says Faley, adding that some of the best students find this the toughest challenge to overcome.

"Some people just can't do it. They have to have all the information -- and that isn't always possible. People are paralyzed by the possibility of making a wrong decision," Faley says.

Tamara Door, senior vice president at the Detroit Regional Chamber, who oversees the organization's small-business outreach programs, agrees.

"You can learn how to run a business, or the technical skills, or how to handle finances," Door says. "But the biggest difference between the entrepreneur and a person who is more comfortable working for someone is their ability to live with risk. It's that simple."

Taking a broader look at the state and where we are in fostering an environment that embraces entrepreneurs, Barb Shoffner, longtime entrepreneur advocate and current director of leadership and learning at the Ann Arbor Area Chamber of Commerce, sums it up this way.

"We are not at the point where the two coasts are. We have a long way to go to build the infrastructure. Funding is an issue, and another is personnel -- the management team and the culture. But we're moving toward that, though."

ACE MEETING: The fifth Annual Collaboration for Entrepreneurship (ACE) meeting will be Jan. 27 at Washtenaw Community College, Morris Lawrence Building. Dwight Carlson, chairman and CEO of **Coherix Corp.**, will be among the speakers.

ACE began in 2001 as a joint meeting of New Enterprise Forum and MIT Enterprise Forum of the Great Lakes. It has evolved into the Annual Collaboration for Entrepreneurship and includes these entrepreneurial groups: New Enterprise Forum, Ann Arbor IT Zone, Eastern Michigan University Center for Entrepreneurship, Michigan Small Business Technical Development Center, Small Business Administration, MIT Enterprise Forum of the Great Lakes, Great Lakes Entrepreneur's Quest, Washtenaw Community College and the Samuel Zell & Robert H. Lurie Institute for Entrepreneurial Studies.

For information on the meeting, call Jill La Liberte at the Ann Arbor Area Chamber of Commerce, 734-214-0107.

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