

What Entrepreneurs Can Teach Us All About Life

By Stephen R.C. Hicks

We often think of entrepreneurs as larger-than-life characters. They take big risks. They make their own rules. They innovate and experiment, questioning things everybody else takes for granted.

It can almost seem like entrepreneurs are a breed apart. But they're not. All of us are born with the ability to take risks, think creatively and challenge the everyday way of doing things. And as hokey as this can sound, we would all do well to tap into those traits in both our lives and our careers, whether we work for ourselves or not.

What does that mean? In every aspect of our lives, it's easy to get stuck in a rut unless we think creatively and take some risks. Without imagination, for instance, family life can seem confining and limiting—but, if we apply some entrepreneurial spark, it can become an adventure where we are committed to each family member's development. Leisure activities—arts, sports, travel—can be mechanical and routine if we approach them in the usual way. Or we can experiment and try new things, so that we approach our extracurricular time with a renewed zest.

There from the start

Sure, everybody knows on some level that it's good to try new things and look at the world from a fresh perspective. But we don't often live that way. So it's important to remind ourselves from time to time that we have much to gain by taking on that challenge.

It helps to remember that all of this once came naturally to us.

Think of a three-year-old struggling with a project. A well-meaning adult tries to help her—but the three-year-old rejects the help, fiercely, saying, "I do it!" She owns the project and is absorbed in it. Her satisfaction turns on her overcoming the challenges.

Of course by adulthood life has become complicated and sometimes we find ourselves stuck. We all know the grind of jobs that we're not engaged with. The same holds for ruts in any area of our lives.

That is exactly why an entrepreneurial outlook on life is essential. We can always ask "Why?" of any aspect of our lives. We can imagine alternatives, experiment and commit to finding the best new way.

With a growing child or an adult committed to self-development, the entrepreneurial principles are the same.

Start with the difference between starting a business and working for someone else. The startup entrepreneur owns the business and feels responsible for defining its purpose and strategy. Employees come into a pre-existing business and follow along. And while working for someone else might be a perfectly good career option for me, being an employee with respect to my own life isn't. My life is my project to initiate and maintain—and I can't simply follow someone else's script for it.

Children grasp this point when they say, "You're not the boss of me!" Rightly or wrongly in the particular circumstances, children who say this are asserting the basic entrepreneurial attitude in their lives: It's theirs and they're in charge of it. Well-meaning authorities—parents, teachers, and older siblings—can overstep and so be on the receiving end of the kids' assertive push back. As adults, reminding ourselves that we are our own bosses can be an equally helpful self-corrective.

Our attitude to rules is a closely-related aspect of the entrepreneurial mind set. Entrepreneurs are rule-makers and often rule-breakers.

Games are a good metaphor for life here, as games are constituted by their rules. Kids learn that a game like basketball has official rules. But those same kids on playgrounds are endlessly inventive in

making up or modifying its rules—two-on-two, horse, no three-point line, and so on—and discovering that it's fun to experiment.

Or when we're very young writers our teachers might tell us a rule: Every paragraph must have five sentences. But as we grow as writers we come to understand that such rules have targeted, limited purposes and that often they are breakable. As mature writers we select only those rules that help us achieve our purposes and ignore the rest.

The same is true in the game of life. It's important to cultivate our ability to think about the basic rules and assumptions: Which ones can be changed? Which ones could or should be broken? As a personal experiment, invent a variation on basketball or whatever sport you play. If you play card games on the weekend, change a rule and see what happens.

Children also tend to be deciders rather than permission-askers. They're doing their own thing their own way, and that is what absorbs them and helps them learn perseverance. Similarly, entrepreneurs make judgments and act on them. Bad judgment and failure are always risks, but their rule of thumb is do it and—if necessary—to ask forgiveness and fix their messes after.

Fears and reluctance

So what holds so many of us back from maintaining the basic entrepreneurial way of being we started off with as children?

Sometimes it's a fear of making the self-investment. It takes energy to do something for yourself, to not just go with the flow that others dictate. Yet we know from our important commitments—friendship, marriage, parenting—we only get out what we put into them. No guarantees, but the entrepreneurial spark of risk taking and willingness must be there.

Or sometimes it's a fear of failure and disapproval. Yet we know that safe and indecisive lives turn us into automata. And everybody wants to be with people who are really into what they do.

Sometimes we're stalled by feeling that it's too late to change. But Ray Kroc was in his 50s when he set McDonald's on its trajectory. Abraham Maslow was almost 60 when he had a heart attack—and then wrote movingly about how he suddenly realized how free he was to pursue what truly mattered in his life.

Now, this doesn't mean turning your own life upside down. It doesn't mean discarding your traditional ways of doing important things and coming up with entirely new methods. It means making small experiments with everyday routines, little things that we often think are set in stone but can be changed with just a bit of effort and experimentation—and make us feel like we really own our lives.

Practice doing something risky every day. Go to a new restaurant and eat something different or weird. Take one dancing lesson and then a drawing lesson and then a kayaking lesson. Wear a pair of bright yellow pants. Do something different every day—and make that a habit.

Get to know some entrepreneurial people—travelers, those who like unusual music, those who play charades and can laugh at their hilariously failed attempts. Talk with children and try to answer the offbeat questions they ask.

With your family, try a new board game—or, when the children roll their eyes at that old-fashioned suggestion, explore a multiplayer videogame. Make a holiday meal together, with each family member responsible for a different dish. Listen to your children's music. Say yes to almost any new idea your spouse suggests.

Leisure options, including travel, can be expensive. But you can pretend to be a stranger in your own town, and visit the attractions tourists come for (but locals never get around to exploring). Find a new one each month. Or sample one of many courses schools and organizations offer just for fun—electronics, volleyball, Greek history, bird watching, taekwondo, you name it.

And break at least one rule every day.

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