

Theory E²: Working with Entrepreneurs in Closely-Held Enterprises

VII. The Thoughtful Entrepreneur

William Bergquist

Contemporary closely-held enterprises need both assertive and inspiring entrepreneurs. However, today's enterprises also need decision-making entrepreneurs who are thoughtful about both the current resources of the organization and specific needs that the organization can realistically meet. While the inspiring entrepreneur prefers to live on the high plains, looking up at the sky, the thoughtful entrepreneur prefers to live in the forest. He prefers to dwell among things that he can touch and cultivate. The thoughtful entrepreneur likes to focus on tangible matters and likes to alter his world in a responsible and systematic manner.

While the assertive entrepreneur tends to consume resources and the inspiring entrepreneur attracts new resources, the thoughtful entrepreneur tends to conserve and cultivate existing resources. While the inspiring executive tends to create dreams and asks simple questions, the thoughtful executive asks for information and poses hard, analytic questions. While the assertive executive encourages risk-taking and leads the closely-held enterprise toward irreversible, transformational change, the thoughtful executive encourages reflection and leads the organization toward small, incremental changes that can easily be reversed if needed.

Focus

The thoughtful entrepreneur focuses on information and grows impatient when members of an organization ignore reality. For example, the thoughtful entrepreneur encourages his

closely-held enterprise to be grounded in knowledge and information. She asks: What do we now have? What is distinctive about us? What do our customers need? How will our employees react if we take this action?

The thoughtful entrepreneur also tends to look for technical expertise and wants people around who know what they are doing. Visionaries often have compelling but impractical dreams precisely because they are not aware of what is feasible. Wheatley describes a thoughtful executive's perfect setting when she writes of the *wave of information* spreading broadly in an closely-held enterprise and the rich interweaving of data and interpretation.ⁱ

While most thoughtful entrepreneurs would hope for the blending of reality and action, they have little tolerance for people who want to take action without reflecting on lessons learned from the past. The thoughtful executive also looks for substantial documentation and measurement once action is begun, suggesting that only with careful monitoring of new projects will the organization know how successful it is in achieving its goals. Thoughtful executives urge members of their closely-held enterprise to learn more about themselves and their organization while in the process of enacting their project and achieving their goals. They will be effective learners, however, only if they assess what is happening and compare their performance to that of previous work groups.

Appropriate Uses of Strengths

The thoughtful entrepreneur offers wisdom to his closely-held enterprise and assumes that the questions he possesses are often just as important as the answers. Frequently, the questions being asked by the thoughtful executive encourage a reconceptualization of the problem being addressed. This *reframing* process is particularly important in a world filled with complex and often paradoxical problems. The thoughtful executive recognizes that the meaning of any event or problem depends on how this event or problem is framed.

Many difficult problems can be reframed as incentives or goals, so that people are motivated to try harder or create something new and innovative. Alternatively, the problem can be framed as a symptom of some much deeper issues. Perhaps the organization should quit providing this particular service or manufacturing this particular product. What if we quit serving this troublesome customer and looked elsewhere for a more appropriate clientele?

Thoughtful entrepreneurs also realize that it is very difficult in complex and often fragmented situations for any one person to have all the information or knowledge about the closely-held enterprise. Information and knowledge tend to be dispersed, leading the thoughtful executive to focus on asking the questions and helping to identify appropriate sources for receiving valid and useful information upon which responsible answers can be based.

The thoughtful entrepreneur often assumes the role of teacher. He may also define himself as a co-learner with other members of the organization, given that the lessons learned today may not be applicable tomorrow. In his role as learner, the thoughtful executive tends to emphasize reflection on one's own practices, as well as openness to alternative interpretations and perspectives regarding complex and recurring problems.ⁱⁱ In order to make progress in solving these recurring problems, "the task of executive functioning consists of choreographing and directing learning processes in an organization or community."ⁱⁱⁱ

Inappropriate Uses of Strengths

The thoughtful entrepreneur is often criticized for never going beyond data gathering and analysis. The assertive executive is particularly inclined to be critical of the role played by thoughtful executives in slowing things down and often keeping the closely-held enterprise from taking any risks. Assertive executives suggest that the organization can best learn by doing and that most of the information is only speculative at best.

Sometimes the thoughtful entrepreneur is also criticized (usually by the inspiring entrepreneur) for seeming to be insensitive. Just as the assertive entrepreneur may fail to take

into account human needs and feelings when moving an organization to action, so may the thoughtful entrepreneur fail to take into account the human factor when exclusively focusing on facts and figures.

Inspiring and assertive entrepreneurs are also likely to be critical of the thoughtful entrepreneur's overriding concern for being realistic. Unless some attention is given to the ideal state and to what people really want, rather than just to the current state and what people already have, there will be no incentive to take risks or get on with the job of improving the current state. We can only learn by making mistakes, and the thoughtful entrepreneur is often unwilling to make mistakes, despite his emphasis on learning. The assertive entrepreneur will suggest that an organization only learns by engaging the real world; the inspiring entrepreneur will suggest that an organization only learns when it tries to improve itself and move toward some desired state. There is truth in both these approaches and both offer an important correction to the cautious tendencies of the thoughtful entrepreneur.

ⁱ Wheatley (1992, p. 65)

ⁱⁱ Schon (1983)

ⁱⁱⁱ Heifetz (1994, p. 187)