

Introduction

I recently read an article in *USA Today* about entrepreneurship. It addressed the debate of whether entrepreneurs are *born* with some kind of innate ability to start and grow a business, or whether they are *taught* how to transform good ideas into successful companies. This is a hot topic in today's business school and boardrooms because of the important role entrepreneurial firms play in creating jobs and boosting productivity. The result has been an onslaught of new courses on entrepreneurship, designed to teach students how to become something many experts believe is inborn and can't be taught.

I don't fit either of these definitions. I certainly wasn't *born* an entrepreneur. For many years my goal was to reach a weekly wage of \$90 so I could support my family. But I also can't say I was *taught* how to be an entrepreneur. Although I did learn helpful skills and knowledge in law school and in my first two full-time jobs, I had never even heard the word, 'entrepreneur,' until after my schooling was finished.

I became an entrepreneur out of necessity. I wanted to "make it;" to cross over from the proverbial wrong side of the tracks. Out of necessity, I figured out how to do it. No college classes or personal traits could have prepared me for the situations I would face and decisions I would have to make in my career. Experience became my teacher, imparting lessons I could never have learned inside a classroom.

After more than 50 years in the business world, I am often asked to share my experiences with college and MBA students and explain how someone who started with nothing can build a successful business. Sometimes friends will ask me to speak to their sons or daughters. Other times, like at the 2003 commencement address at the

Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University (CWRU), I address larger groups. The questions they pose are often the same:

- “How did you decide you wanted to start your own business?”
- “Who were the most influential people in your life and how did they influence your success?”
- “What advice would you give a student looking to start a new business?”
- And the most popular question, “To what do you attribute your success?”

The answer to the first question is that deciding to start my own business evolved out of my desire to cross over to the other side of the tracks, in my case Taylor Road. After years of working hard, I wanted to create something and have a personal stake in its financial success. For me, the entrepreneurial route was the way to achieve this. It put me in control of my own future.

Throughout my career, there were many times I wish I would have had a mentor, especially during my early years as an entrepreneur. Of course there were many people who would teach me valuable lessons, but there wasn't one person whose advice and guidance I could seek. I had to learn the hard way, by figuring it out for myself how to deal with the complex issues entrepreneurs face when building their companies. How can I get funding for a new business venture? How can I get an inside track into making an important sale? How can I balance work and family? These are the types of questions I might have asked a mentor. These are the questions I'm asked when I talk to student groups and try to answer in this book. No one took the time to offer me advice when I was just entering the workforce, so I feel a responsibility to take the time to help young people today.

I've found that young people seem to be most interested in learning about what makes an entrepreneur successful in the business world. I could cite hard work, persistence, patience, perseverance, and a roll-up-your-sleeves work ethic as significant factors. But my answer is simpler, more fatalistic than that. For me, the fear of failure was a great motivator. What was my alternative to success? The obvious answer is failure, which I never considered an acceptable option. It was a matter of survival, and I knew it. I'd better work harder than anyone else because if I didn't do it myself, who would help me? Nobody. It was strictly up to me.

My advice to students and would-be entrepreneurs is not rocket science. First, never lose your common sense—there is no substitute for it. Common sense and instinct play an important role in the decisions entrepreneurs need to make each day. Look within yourself for the answers. Listen to other people, but make your own decisions because you think it's right.

Second, if you want to be successful you have to work hard and do whatever it takes to get the job done. Don't let your title dictate which tasks you will and won't do. Life is a race to the finish line, walked very slowly by most people. To succeed, all you have to do is walk a little faster than everyone else.

Third, never give up or take no for an answer, even when others tell you something can't be done. There were many times when it seemed I was embarking on what everyone was telling me was an impossible task. In 1959, when I started developing houses in Twinsburg, Ohio, the local media and the real estate establishment pointed out that it was too far from Cleveland to draw a significant number of new home buyers, that the quality of the homes I was building was too high for the area, and that the water line didn't even go out that far. People laughed when I announced I would raise \$1 million in one day for Cerebral Palsy by taking over Sea World for a charity fundraiser. In 1979, when I bought Cleveland's professional indoor soccer team, the sports pages called it possibly the worst sports franchise in professional sports. In 1992, when I decided to build a world-class country club and spa in Canton, Ohio, all the experts said the small town would never support such an ambitious venture.

But Twinsburg became my first real estate success, we raised the \$1 million for Cerebral Palsy, we turned the Cleveland Force into the best soccer franchise in the league, and the Glenmoor Country Club in Canton is now a smashing success. In each of these cases, and many others, there was something inside me that told me I could succeed if I worked at it hard enough. Sometimes it was having a little more common sense than the next guy. Other times it's been a personal mission to prove the nay Sayers wrong. And still other times it's been a sense of urgency to prove to myself that anything is possible with a steadfast commitment to hard work and a vision of what is achievable.

I've made my share of mistakes in the past fifty years. I've been swindled by an art dealer, flummoxed by uncreative city governments, outmaneuvered by one of the largest real estate developers in Cleveland, and lost control of my life's work while I wasn't paying attention. But through it all I've tried to maintain my focus, deciding

quickly on the best exit strategy when necessary, or just waiting out the bad times, taking my lumps.

Crossing The Road to Entrepreneurship is my life story. It chronicles the most important events I've experienced in both my business and personal lives. But I hope this book is more than an autobiographical timeline. Instead, I hope by relaying how I reacted to the pivotal moments in my life I am able to help would-be entrepreneurs who may be experiencing similar situations. I've tried to show how I've applied an entrepreneurial approach to all aspects of my life—not just business, but also to Iris and my charitable giving, our personal relationships, and our approach to our own healthcare. It also, on every page I hope, evokes my most significant relationship, my partnership with Iris, my wife of 55 years. Most entrepreneurs would agree that starting and then growing your own venture often creates tremendous pressures and stress, and sometimes loneliness. I've never experienced that last problem because I've been very fortunate to have Iris as my confidant, my friend, and my unwavering partner. Together we have weathered a few storms, lived many adventures, and shared a lifetime of happy occasions.

I really don't know if entrepreneurs are in fact *born* or *taught*, but I do know that I don't fit either of these molds. I also know that there isn't a magic formula of knowledge and personal characteristics that can insure success in the business world. That is the beauty of entrepreneurship. It doesn't close its doors to anyone. You don't have to have a certain grade point average, be of a certain religion, or come from a wealthy family. If you want to be an entrepreneur, you can try, regardless of race, gender, or I.Q. It most likely won't be an easy road, but it will be filled with lots of opportunities.

In the end, only you can determine your future. It is up to you, just as it was up to me many years ago. My solution was to be focused and to work hard every day. Every day I tried to cross the road to entrepreneurship.