

The Engine That Powers

HUMAN INGENUITY



BY PAUL VITALE

If you have ever known firsthand an individual whose mind is wired with creativity, ambition, intensity and pure ingenuity, then you can identify with the essence of those who are proudly recognized as entrepreneurs. According to Wikipedia, the term entrepreneur, as defined in the English language, is applied to the type of personality who is willing to take upon himself or herself a new venture or enterprise and accepts full responsibility for the outcome. *Webster's* definition falls close, and so do most all other reputable sources. With today's unrealistic student mindset of top-dollar, successful careers automatically waiting for them upon graduation, how do we encourage those soon entering the workforce to entertain the idea of taking a risk on their own ingenuity? We can begin to answer this question by looking at several individuals included in the collection of intriguing people known as "top entrepreneurs," and exploring what can be garnered from the engines that keep them running full speed ahead.

Oprah Winfrey, arguably one of the most admired entrepreneurs of our time, has been quoted as saying that one of her biggest inspirations while growing up was an elementary school teacher. In a 2007 interview with *Parade Magazine*, Winfrey stated that this educator was the first person who really seemed to believe in her, "She would tell me that I was just the smartest little girl she'd ever seen." In an online narrative of the top 20 moments of her television career, Winfrey shares the following about the time her producers surprised her during a show with a guest appearance by the teacher who inspired her self-belief.

"One of the defining moments of my life came in fourth grade—the year I was a student in Mrs. [Mary] Duncan's class at Wharton Elementary School in Nashville. For the first time, I wasn't afraid to

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be smart, and she often stayed after school to work with me...It was in her class that I really came into myself. After all these years, I could say thank you to a woman who had a powerful impact on my early life."

This story is an excellent reminder for all school personnel of their influence, whether acknowledged or seemingly forgotten. For young people to gain confidence and continue to succeed globally, a sense of belief must be instilled within their fabric by those in positions to guide and encourage their progress.

The Role of CTE Educators

Career and technical education (CTE) leaders are fully aware that thousands upon thousands of individuals leave the safe haven of working for someone else annually and enter the world of entrepreneurship—an environment known to be ripe with adventure, excitement and rewards, yet a true test of one's spirit. Whether it is establishing online companies, Internet-related services, or joining the *go green* movement, everything from home-based startups to do-it-yourself businesses are in play. In fact, according to a recent article published in *Spirit Magazine*, the estimated number of new ventures in a year tops 7 million. This number might sound a bit daunting, but in the same article titled, "Your Entrepreneur Handbook," it is stated that more than 25 million small businesses are in existence today.

What does this mean for the Millennial Generation that tweets about the location of their neighborhood lemonade stand, touts their lawn mowing business on Facebook or lines up their next babysitting job via text? The way we communicate may be shifting, but the need for innovative products and services is unyielding; in fact it's expanding into newly chartered territory. Being the first generation fully



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integrated with technology in all facets of their lives since birth, Millennials are best suited to lead the technological, entrepreneurial wave into the future. It's our job to help them get there.

Still, on any given day we acknowledge how easy it is for anyone, particularly entrepreneurs, to become frightened, frustrated and discouraged. Resolve is put to the test. Some fold while others persist in doing what it takes to endure their circumstances and continue positive forward movement. While lack of self-belief has been the demise for many who have chosen the path less traveled; for those who have prospered, encouragement has always been a huge part of the recipe. Guidance counselors, classroom teachers, coaches, librarians and all others who

answer the noble calling of educating the masses are integral in helping students be success stories; as one of the most powerful women of the 20th century has demonstrated, never underestimate your effect on the minds and souls of students who eagerly await your support.

As CTE professionals, what role is played in championing students down the path of self-risk and self-belief? Instilling realistic visions and knowledge while encouraging confidence and tenacity are cornerstones you can provide to the young entrepreneurs who occupy your classrooms. From grit (administrative duties, marketing, taxes) to grace (motivation, drive, passion)—the lessons you provide and the ideas you instill in your students comprise the gears that drive their engines.

Helping Aspirant Entrepreneurs

Taking the leap into entrepreneurship holds risks that are far outweighed by the rewards of a prosperous venture. However, that still doesn't take away from the fact that there are hazards to be considered. In the quest for success, eager adventurers will do themselves a huge favor if they are educated on the importance of scrutinizing their overall endeavor at the onset of their journey.

One effective way of accomplishing this task is by creating a SWOT analysis based on future plans. A strategic planning method used to evaluate the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats involved in a project or business venture, this process helps keen minds identify the internal and external factors that are favorable and unfavorable to achieving the objectives at hand.

"Entering into a business that I didn't really know much about made me realize that there are limits to what one can do," states Wolfgang Puck, founder of Wolfgang Puck Restaurants. "Doing business

if you are an expert is difficult enough. But if you don't know something, you have a good chance of failure. I learned more from one restaurant that didn't work than from all the ones that were successes."

An award-winning chef, celebrated restaurateur, philanthropist and Emmy winner, Puck learned cooking from his mother, who worked as a chef in the

Austrian town where he was born. Her encouragement enabled Puck to take the leap of self-belief, eventually leading him to a country far from his homeland and a brand that has revolutionized cuisine for 40-plus years. What do this gentleman and Oprah have in common? Encouragement from someone who believed in their ability.



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John Altman worked his way from a teenager cleaning toilets at a local country club to serving as senior manager of two multinational corporations. With no family resources to pay for college, Altman relied on ingenuity and help from others to obtain the education that would ultimately determine his life. He recently recalled the guidance and assistance of three Miami University faculty who helped him clear obstacles while setting the tone for his future. These mentors "exposed me to theatre, architecture and public speaking. I experienced incredible development in my written and spoken skills—life began to open up to me. Miami [University] established the developmental DNA within me for thinking outside the box."

Going to work the day after his graduation, Altman began a three-decade-long career as an entrepreneur. Owning, founding and/or partnering in six businesses, he won, lost, and won again several fortunes. Not only did he personally experience the trials and tribulations of entrepreneurship, after a brief retirement

in the early 1990s, he went on to become one of the founding professors of Miami University's entrepreneurship program at a time when fewer than 100 universities were teaching the concept. Altman's career had come full circle.

A plaque on campus containing a quote by Henry Brooks Adams presented to Altman by former students states a belief he holds to be true: "A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell, where his influence stops." John Altman is living proof of educators' influence.

Thinking Beyond the Norm

We can agree that entrepreneurship will always hold a handful of risks; however, having the opportunity to pursue a long-held passion with pure ambition is an experience that is truly once-in-a-lifetime. As CTE professionals, you are in the unique position to motivate, guide and educate students to think beyond the norm. You are the crucial component

in the engine that powers their human ingenuity, bringing the genuine spirit of entrepreneurship to life, giving hope to those who strive toward the fulfillment of their own unique ideas. **I**

Explore More

Many online resources are available to assist students in unleashing their entrepreneurial spirit. To explore more, visit the following Web sites:

Consortium for Entrepreneurship Education
www.entre-ed.org

Young Entrepreneur
www.youngentrepreneur.com

econedlink—Economics and Personal Finance Resources for K-12
www.econedlink.org

My Own Business
www.myownbusiness.org

Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship
www.nfte.com

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Paul Vitale,

founder of Vital Communications, is a professional speaker and author based in Little Rock, Arkansas. He travels the globe presenting seminars and keynote presentations to various organizations. He can be contacted at pvitale@paulvitale.com, and is online at www.paulvitale.com.



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