Foreword: Why readers in search of new ideas should make *Entrepreneurship as Experience* part of *their* experience

At the entrance of the gym where I regularly work out stands a bulletin board containing the following message: “Experience is not what happens to a man/woman; it is what that person *does* with what happens to him/her.” I don’t know why this particular quotation (unattributed) was chosen for display, but it is very hard for me to imagine a statement that better captures the essence of this provocative and creative book. Although the book has many themes – all of which might well be worthy of comment here – the central one is that although, in a very real sense, entrepreneurs create their new companies, they, in turn, are shaped, formed, and changed by the experiences they have en route, while attempting to convert ideas generated by their own creativity into something tangible – a product, service, process, raw material, whatever – that is both new and useful, and also creates economic or social value. This, as the authors aptly and carefully note, is at the heart of the process. And as they eloquently put it, this complex journey – from ideas to reality – is “Largely unscripted, unpredictable and uncontrollable” and is *personally* experienced by the entrepreneur. Having been an entrepreneur myself, I could not agree more: in many ways, I *was* a different person after moving through all the steps in the process – formation of the idea, seeking intellectual property protection for it, obtaining required resources (financial, technical, social), and then, finally, founding and running the company. And it was indeed a rich and absorbing experience or, more accurately, set of experiences.

Interestingly, the idea that we are shaped by our experiences – and, more importantly, what we *do* with these events as they unfold – was central to the field of psychology when it emerged more than 100 years ago. Learning was viewed as *the* central process, and it was – and still is – defined as *relatively permanent changes in behavior* resulting from experience (with the term “behavior” meaning everything we do, feel, or think). Moreover, these experienced-generated changes are distinct from one produced by factors such as physical maturation, and temporary causes

such as illness, fatigue or, even, the effects of several glasses of wine! So powerful was the faith of early psychologists in the central importance of this “change through experience” idea, that by the 1920s, John B. Watson, one of the key founders of the scientific side of psychology made the following claim: “Give me a dozen healthy infants, well-formed, and my own specified world to bring them up in, and I’ll guarantee to take any one at random and train him to become any type of specialist I might select – doctor, lawyer, artist, merchant-chief and, yes, even beggar-man and thief, regardless of his talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities, vocations, and race of his ancestors” (Watson, 1924/25, *Behaviorism*). In his view, then, experience clearly trumped everything else in forming human behavior.

This somewhat extreme view has, of course, been called into serious question by growing evidence that even complex forms of human behavior are, in fact, influenced by genetic factors. Indeed, some researchers in entrepreneurship (especially Scott Shane and his colleagues) even propose, and find evidence for the view, that genetic factors underlie even the decision to become an entrepreneur. Such claims remain controversial, but regardless of their ultimate fate, they do not in any way detract from or contradict the primary logic developed in *Entrepreneurship as Experience*. Even if genetic factors do somewhat restrict the impact of what happens to us during life, there can be no doubt that to a large degree, we *are* a product of this intricate web of events, and – of course – our interpretations of and reactions to it.

This raises an intriguing question that, in a sense, might be viewed as a subtext of this book. Are entrepreneurs really different from other persons, and, if so, *why*? Several branches of management (e.g., human resources management, organizational behavior) would answer: “Of course,” they would argue, “entrepreneurs *must* be different for the same reasons that the members of any given, highly-selected occupation or career group are different from those in other occupation or career groups.” Are emergency room physicians different from accountants in their personal characteristics and preferences? Of course. Are professional politicians different from, for instance, scientists? Again, the answer is “almost certainly.” How, in fact, could it be otherwise? Each of these groups has contrasting motives, different goals, and are attracted to distinct kinds of work and situations. As expressed clearly in the well-known attraction-selection-attrition model, various occupational or career groups are indeed different from one another because (1) only some individuals are attracted to a given profession or activity, (2) only some find that they actually enjoy or are suitable for these careers or activities, and (3) only some of *these* succeed and remain in their chosen field. Entrepreneurs can hardly be different in this respect, but as the authors of this book note,

entrepreneurship itself *is* different. Unlike dentists, military officers, or even CEOs, entrepreneurs, at least during early stages of the process, must perform a hugely varied array of tasks and activities. Moreover, unlike fields such as medicine, accounting, architecture, or engineering, there are no firmly established principles or rules they must acquire and follow as they proceed. This virtually assures that entrepreneurs' experiences will be incredibly varied – much more diverse than those of persons in other fields or professions. In a very basic sense, entrepreneurs are “mavericks” when they start, and as a result of their enormously varied experiences, almost certainly become more so – more unique, more varied – as the entrepreneurial process unfolds.

And so I come to a final key question: what can we learn from adopting the experience-focused perspective recommended in this book? Like the authors, I believe that the answer is “many valuable things.” First, the field of entrepreneurship itself may finally learn to stop treating or viewing entrepreneurs as a homogeneous group. On the contrary, entrepreneurs probably show greater variability along almost any chosen dimension than any other group. (Although perhaps there are a few exceptions to this general principle: entrepreneurs may actually be somewhat less varied with respect to creativity, the capacity to persevere, and passion for what they do – basic requirements for starting and completing the journey). As the authors note, however, great variability among entrepreneurs in terms of many other dimensions is reflected in the kinds of ventures they start. These do not all fit the “high-growth, high-profit” model that is widely accepted in the media and even in our own entrepreneurship courses. Rather, while many new ventures do fit this model, others involve many different approaches, for instance “survival or extra income” ventures – ones in which the entrepreneurs simply want to earn extra income or merely enough to maintain their current lifestyle; “cocktail party” ventures – in which entrepreneurs don't expect to generate significant profits, but enjoy living the lifestyle of an entrepreneur, and telling others (e.g., other guests at cocktail parties) that this is what they do; and “start-sell-and-get-out” ventures, where entrepreneurs who enjoy the process itself start with the intention of an early sell so that they can repeat the process! In a sense, entrepreneurs who adopt these different models for their new ventures are doing what the authors of this book suggest – they are not merely being changed by their experiences, they are also actively selecting or creating these experiences.

Similarly, the experience-based approach recommended in this book directs attention to the key point that human beings are truly *active*-information processors: they are involved in constant efforts to understand and interpret what happens to them so that they can make sense out

of it, adapt to it, and move on from there as stronger and more competent persons than before. Such “sense-making” activities are important for everyone, but may be especially important for entrepreneurs, who often find themselves facing highly uncertain and unpredictable environments in which accurate interpretations of their experiences are essential. Perhaps this is one reason why entrepreneurs are often strong supporters of the view that “what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.” They, even more than most other persons, recognize the need for, and benefits of, accurate understanding of their own experience.

In sum, this is indeed a thought-provoking book and one that provides the proverbial “breath of fresh air” to a field that, by its very nature, views creativity, flexibility, and adaptability as very close to the top of any list of desirable human attributes. Readers who perform the hard cognitive work necessary to integrate this volume’s many intriguing ideas into their own thinking, will, I’m sure, find that they themselves have been changed, in constructive ways, by *that* set of experiences.

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