

Corporate Entrepreneurs – October 6, 2010

Internal Entrepreneurs – Commitment, Conviction and Courage

By Susan Foley and Sarah Fisher

An individual totally committed to their work must have the conviction and courage to act on their beliefs. It is not enough to advocate something you must act on it. If you see that the corporation is headed in the wrong direction you must be willing to speak up and voice your opinion. If you think an executive decision is a mistake, you must defend your position and give them an alternative to reconsider their position. If you feel compelled to take a stand you must be willing to put your job on the line. A true internal entrepreneur will do just that.

What inspires an internal entrepreneur to speak up and speak out? What level of conviction do you need to be so moved that you are willing to go against the grain? What kind of courage does it take to face the consequences of what you believe? What level commitment do you need to sacrifice it all for taking a stand in what you believe to be the best outcomes for the business, irrespective of your own personal outcome?

Internal Entrepreneurs feel the answers to these questions, they know when the time calls for their unique perspective to be heard, while others are closing the books on a project and thinking about their next career opportunity. One internal entrepreneur was contemplating these very same questions when she decided that a monumental strategic decision being made by her company was a mistake.

Strategic decisions are often made by executives who are far removed from the pulse of the market. They see a situation through their frame of reference. They make a rational decision based on the facts or what they perceive to be the true picture. In reality, the decision may seem sound given the current economic environment but sacrificing the future for the present may not be a wise thing to do. Despite their best intentions, a series of obstacles and roadblocks can cause some of the most passionate executives to begin to let go of their large opportunities. They just can't "see" the end game anymore.

Internal entrepreneurs who work closely with clients and customers have a different sense of reality. They understand the rational and emotional side of the market. New innovations require a lot more than a financial justification and process adherence to succeed. They require an emotional commitment by the company and potential clients. This type of emotional commitment can only be felt through consistent connections with these clients, and it can only be realized if the "feeler" stays open to the experience, allowing them to see the opportunity before them.

This particular internal entrepreneur knew both cognitively and emotively that the company's recent decision was wrong. She knew that if she did not stand up and say so, over a decade of work would become another graveyard internal startup project. She did not hold a position within the top level of senior management, but she had the day to day execution experience that this leadership team lacked. She jumped on planes when others stayed back, and she lived the strategic plan in multiple markets, across multiple countries. She coupled that with strong business acumen for delivering her message and sound rationale, and before long, the results of her initiative were making waves internally.

After a phone call and an executive summary email explaining why she felt the business was strategically headed in the wrong direction, she was summoned back to headquarters to justify her comments. She knew full well that she may have overstepped her authority and likely put her job on the line, but she was confident that what she was saying was right for the future of the business, whether she was a part of that future or not. If she did not voice her concerns now, she would be haunted with regret for years to come.

Putting together the business case for keeping the business going wasn't going to be easy. The executives were under a lot of financial pressure, and had already formally announced the new strategic direction across the company. A change in direction would be "backtracking" at this point. She also knew that a rational explanation wouldn't be enough. There had to be an emotional connection to drive the point home. Someone that is passionate enough about the investment to be willing to sacrifice themselves for the good of the company. In many cases it is the internal entrepreneur who takes on this role.

The senior executives were so impressed with her arguments and passion they accepted her proposal. She had successfully turned the strategy around and was told to make it happen. She wasn't fired but fired up to lead the charge.

It took commitment, conviction and courage to do what she did to save a business that had a promising future.

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