

Internal Entrepreneurs - Living in a World of Contrast

By Susan Foley

Entrepreneurs inside of existing organizations live in a world of contrasts, where two worlds collide. The core business and the new business they are building. Many of the strategies, structures, policies, procedures and culture required to support the core business are just the opposite of what is required to build a new one. Organizations know a lot about what it takes to maintain and grow the core business, less so when it comes to new growth businesses. The processes and practices that support the core business are often the very things that get in the way of new growth initiatives, impeding progress. It is up to the entrepreneur to find a way to navigate these obstacles. They must co-exist in both worlds.

One internal entrepreneur said, *"She felt like she was playing chess while everyone else was playing checkers."* It wasn't that one game is better than the other. It is that she and the organization are playing two different games. She told me that she would have to stop and shift to the other game when dealing with her peers and boss. Then shift back when working with her team. It is a balancing act. The entrepreneur is forced to operate in both worlds simultaneously. They must be loyal on one hand and independent on the other, poised and passionate, analytical and intuitive, collaborative and competitive. It is up to the entrepreneur to shift gears not the other way around.

What kind of person would want to operate this way? Why set yourself up for working this way? It sounds chaotic, even a little schizophrenic. Who would subject themselves to this if they didn't have to especially given the current economic climate? Many workers are sitting on the sidelines, keeping their heads down waiting for things to turn around. Not internal entrepreneurs, they see opportunity in good times and bad. They are willing to take on the toughest challenges, step up to the most difficult assignments. They thrive in an environment full of complexity, ambiguity and the unknown. They are not afraid to fail they are only concerned if they don't try. Win or lose they learn and grow from the experience.

Internal entrepreneurs possess a unique combination of competencies and behaviors that set them apart from others. They don't fit the traditional profile, the company man or woman that has come to personify the business landscape. Therefore they are often overlooked or worse they are invisible. These internal entrepreneurs are part of a small percentage of individuals in organizations that are actively engaged at work. According to a study by Towers Perrin only twenty one percent of employees are engaged in what they do. Of those engaged only a few individuals have the entrepreneurial skills to work effectively in the core business at the same time they are building a new one.

Internal entrepreneurs are the pioneers, builders and change agents that are moving their companies forward into the future. Yet, many organizations don't understand who they are, why they are different or even why it is important. Look at any organizational web-site or job posting. Where do you see it listed - *Wanted Internal Entrepreneurs*? Perhaps at Google this is the norm, any place else it is an anomaly. The time has come for organizations to recognize that internal entrepreneurs are and will continue to be the most sought after professional in the new economy. *Internal entrepreneurs live in a world of contrast, the place where the old world and new world collide.*

Susan Foley is the founder of Corporate-Entrepreneurs.com, and the author of *Entrepreneurs Inside: Accelerating Business Growth with Corporate Entrepreneurs*.

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