



How to
SPREAD
IDEAS

Think Like
an
Entrepreneur,

Not Like
a
Crusader

John Vespasian

In each century, defenders of new ideas have been the source of disruptions.

The characteristic unrest that affects the lives of many philosophers and innovators is too well known to be ignored. Indeed, many thinkers in history have led lives of constant fight with the world. Even Confucius is known to have devoted 13 years of his life to travelling around China preaching his ideas to the public, all to no avail.

However, the fact that most philosophers and innovators have acted like crusaders does not prove that this is the right way to live. In fact, the opposite is true. A life of constant conflict is exhausting, counter-productive, and far from ideal.

When it comes to practical wisdom, entrepreneurs are light-years ahead of the rest of the population, and ahead of crusaders.

An entrepreneur is focused on what he can manufacture and sell profitably because he understands that his success depends on the willingness of other people to purchase his products. An entrepreneur wants to improve the world as passionately as any crusader, but he knows that each step must be carefully weighed, and that he has no right to force his products or services on anyone.

Customers Only Buy What They Want to Buy

While crusaders waste their time trying to impose their views on other people, entrepreneurs prefer to avoid conflict. Their goal is simply to make exchanges that are beneficial to all the parties involved.

Individuals who want to improve the world and their own situation should definitely avoid the ways of the crusader. Hostility and conflicts tend to make collaboration impossible, and aggressiveness never leads to happiness. Anyone who wants to attain happiness and effectiveness must start by adopting an entrepreneurial attitude.

A Powerful Lesson From History

The life of Ignaz Semmelweis (1818-1865) offers a compelling illustration of this principle.

In 1847, while he was working as an obstetrician in Vienna, he was surprised to learn that the infant mortality in one of the two local maternity hospitals was lower than in the other. The difference in the mortality rate was almost a factor of five.

The large difference in results had been occurring for years and was known to hundreds of people, but nobody had made the effort to investigate the cause.

Semmelweis compared the equipment and the procedures in both hospitals, but did not observe anything unusual. The only difference that he detected between the two hospitals seemed at first irrelevant: the hospital with low infant mortality was being used as a training facility for midwives, while the other hospital was being used for training medical doctors.

Formulating the Right Question Is the First Step

Semmelweis reflected extensively about the problem, but he did not know what to make of that detail. In the meantime, newborns continued to die at an appalling rate.

Shortly after, one of the surgeons at the medical-training hospital cut his finger with a scalpel during an autopsy and died. What everybody saw as an unfortunate accident was actually a clue for solving the problem.

The accident awakened in Semmelweis the suspicion that there might be a link between the surgeon's death and the elevated infant mortality. During their studies, medical trainees often walked from the autopsy room to the obstetrical facilities. Was it possible that the students were unknowingly causing the death of these babies?

Drawing the Right Conclusion

Then Semmelweis came up with the theory that it was the contact with the corpses what explained the higher infant mortality at the medical-training hospital. In the other hospital, the midwives had no contact with corpses because they did not have to perform autopsies as part of their training.

In order to demonstrate the validity of his theory, Semmelweis had to remove the link between the autopsy room and the obstetrical facilities at the medical-training hospital. If he was right, the infant mortality was bound to decrease after removing the link. If he was wrong, the results would remain at the same level.

Despite the general scepticism, the experiment was a resounding success. By having students wash their hands in a chlorinated solution before entering the obstetrical area, Semmelweis achieved a drastic reduction of the infant mortality.

With his powers of observation and his ingenuity, he had finally found the correct explanation for the mystery. It was all a matter of hygiene. What happened later is what makes the story fascinating.

Against all expectations, a great part of the experts reacted with scepticism and contempt. Instead of honouring Semmelweis for his discovery, his colleagues began to view him with open hostility. Physicians simply refused to accept a theory that implied that their hands were not clean, and that they did not know what they were doing.

Facts Alone Are Often Not Enough

Although uncontested hard facts supported Semmelweis's discovery, many doctors continued to ignore his recommendations for decades, and as a result, thousands of newborn babies continued to die unnecessarily.

To make things worse, Semmelweis himself became the object of massive attacks from his colleagues, was forced to quit his job in Vienna, and had to accept a position at a less prestigious hospital. It did not matter that he was right and that he had the facts to prove it. His ideas did not spread because too few people were willing to listen to him.

What would you have done if you had been in Semmelweis' place? Would you have despaired due to the lack of public support for your theories? Would you have become despondent if you had had to face such a level of opposition from your colleagues?

In those situations, a man has two options: he can become a crusader or an entrepreneur. He can fight against the world and waste his time in bitter disputes, or he can take the entrepreneurial route, shrug his shoulders at the critics, and look for a feasible way to exploit his ideas commercially.

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Crusaders are motivated by the desire to win over their opponents. Entrepreneurs want to find buyers for their products, even if the rest of the world laughs at them.

Crusaders tend to fight on all fronts and waste their resources. Entrepreneurs concentrate on the market segment where the demand for their products is the strongest.

Unfortunately for Semmelweis, he possessed all the psychological traits of a crusader and did what crusaders usually do. He became obsessed with his mission, adopted an antagonistic tone, wrote offensive letters to other physicians, and increased the ranks of his enemies. He also began to drink heavily and his behavior became erratic.

What would have Semmelweis done if he had possessed an entrepreneurial mentality? On the one hand, he could have acknowledged the difficulty of convincing others and would have taken their rejection philosophically instead of personally. It was, after all, not the first time in history that an innovation was rejected, and would not be the last.

He could have looked for a job at another hospital, which he would have turned into a model of cleanliness, efficiency, and good health that attracted like-minded, talented physicians. Eventually, the benefits of his methods would have spread by word of mouth and other hospitals would have been pressed to adopt his ideas. All this would have happened naturally without the need to fight any battles.

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If he had taken an entrepreneurial approach, the victory of his ideas would have been irresistible. Regrettably, he decided to become a crusader and wasted the last years of his life in constant fights. He died in a psychiatric hospital when he was only 47 years old, a victim of his crusading philosophy.

The Rational Approach To Overcoming Failure

The career of the controversial film director Luis Buñuel (1900-1983) constitutes an impressive example of the best strategy in periods of adversity, when obstacles are so overwhelming that progress seems impossible.

Few artists have experienced resistance and negative criticism to the extent that Buñuel did, and even fewer have proven so skilful at overcoming opposition, stagnation, and scarcity of opportunity.

Born in Spain, Buñuel moved to Paris when he was twenty-five years old. There, he took a secretarial job while he attempted to enter the incipient French film business. After a while, he managed to land an assistant position in a film production. The experience allowed him to get an idea of what was needed to get into the business.

Buñuel took part as an assistant on several productions and then set out to make a film himself.

His initial attempt resulted in a 16-minute movie whose surrealistic scenario drew some attention, but earned him no money. The experience served Buñuel as a calling card to raise funds for a full feature film, which he finished by the time he turned thirty. That project was a financial disaster, a total loss for investors.

The press attacked the irreligious character of some scenes, and the film was quickly banned from exhibition in France. Unable to make a living as a film-maker in France, Buñuel returned to Spain, where he made documentaries that earned him some recognition, but little money.

Disaster Follows Disaster

When the Spanish Civil War broke out in 1936, he decided to emigrate again, this time to the United States.

Buñuel was 36 years old when he arrived in Hollywood. He was full of enthusiasm, ideas, and hopes for the future. Little did he know that he was going to spend the next decade dubbing other people's films into Spanish instead of making his own. Finally, in 1946, Buñuel quit the United States and moved to Mexico.

A Fundamental Mistake To Avoid

Most men approach the fifth decade of their lives with the feeling that their best years are already behind them. This was not the case of Buñuel, who was ready to take advantage of every opportunity to exploit his abilities.

He knew that he still had many productive decades ahead of him, and that sooner or later, he was going to find a suitable opportunity to improve his lot.

The films that he had made in France and Spain could not be counted as successful, and the ten years that he had spent in Hollywood had not helped him advance his career in the least. Buñuel was already a middle-aged man, but he remained full of creative ideas.

Despite all the difficulties that he had encountered in the past, he was still looking for an outlet for his talent.

He found work in Mexico, directing conventional films that had been conceived as vehicles for local stars. The stories were undemanding, almost trite, but Buñuel did them all the same. The pay was good and those productions allowed him to learn more about budgeting and editing.

After directing two formulaic scripts, Buñuel had accumulated enough credibility and contacts in Mexico to allow him to raise funds to make a film of his own. He was already fifty years old when he finished *Los Olvidados*, the film that would make him famous.

One Opportunity Is More Than Enough

That project marked the beginning of a series of extraordinarily innovative movies. During the next twenty-seven years, Buñuel continued to make films in Mexico, Spain, and France, including major successes such as *Belle de Jour* (1967) and controversial stories such as *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977).

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He was the archetype of the man who can get ahead in good and bad times.

His life contains important teachings for anyone who has unrealized ambitions—at any age and in any circumstances. If we take into account that he started his independent career when he was already fifty years old, his accomplishments look even more impressive.

How did he do it?

His achievements are certainly not the result of good luck. Did he follow a well thought-out plan? Which lessons can we draw from his career? Here is a summary of the strategies that Buñuel employed and that you can also put in practice yourself:

1. **Stay loyal to your ideals, but seize the available opportunities.** Buñuel held the same artistic beliefs all his life, but was wise enough to wait for the appropriate opportunity. During the periods when he could not yet do his own productions, he simply took the best job that was available, even if it consisted of dubbing Hollywood films into Spanish.
2. **Learn everything you can about your trade.** Buñuel never received any formal training as a film-maker. He acquired his skills by watching other people work and by his own experience. The lack of formal education did not prevent him from becoming one of the most famous film directors of the 20th century.
3. **Become amazingly efficient at what you do.** Buñuel used to shoot his films in only a few weeks and always made sure to stay within the budget. Many of his films awakened massive negative criticism and opposition, but that did not prevent him from finding backers for his next project. His stories became increasingly polemical, but the financiers continued to trust his astonishing efficiency as a film-maker.

4. **Drop everything that is not strictly necessary.** Buñuel knew that he had to deliver his projects quickly if he wanted to survive as an independent film-maker. To achieve this goal, he dropped everything that was not absolutely necessary. This is why he used to put his films together with only a minimum of editing and why most of his soundtracks do not contain any music.
5. **Find simple solutions to problems.** All film directors have to face unexpected difficulties during production, but Buñuel was particularly good at finding inexpensive solutions. For instance, since continuity and lighting tend to demand extensive efforts in a film production, Buñuel simply avoided problems in those areas by shooting long scenes that did not need any editing.
6. **Turn trouble into an opportunity.** On one occasion, Buñuel encountered major problems with an actress and had no choice but replace her in the middle of the production. Her part was difficult to play and central to the story, but Buñuel took the surprising decision of hiring two actresses to play the role at the same time, which they did. The unexpected result, a stroke of genius, can be seen in *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977).

It Is Much Better To Be an Entrepreneur Than a Crusader

Bunuel's career demonstrates that it is better to be a successful survivor than a frustrated crusader. If he had insisted on doing nothing but ground-breaking films, he would have found the road blocked at every stage. If he had adopted an all-or-nothing attitude from the very beginning, he would have had to give up his ambitions. His remarkable accomplishments owe as much to his talent as to his ability to make stride in good and bad times.

The Advantage of Rational Living

The idea that most people have of philosophers is a grim one. The thinker, much too busy with abstractions, is considered out of touch with reality and unable to function normally, a situation that is similar to that of the innovator who feels so enthusiastic about what could be done that he forgets that his resources are limited.

Rational individuals are able to pursue their goals with passion and serenity. They are inordinately focused and persistent. They build meaningful, stable relationships. They accept the inevitable hassles of life. They do not blow problems out of proportion.

Rationality is a methodology, a way of thinking, not a fixed system of beliefs.

Logical thinking does not consist of a list of precepts that you have to learn by heart. Reason is a way of looking at the world with curiosity and independence, questioning inconsistencies and searching for truth. It is a process of discovering what is right and implementing it day after day.

Living rationally is not going to guarantee that you will attain success and happiness, but it will increase dramatically your possibilities to do so. **The first step is to think like an entrepreneur, not like a crusader.** 📌

Info

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | John Vespasian has lived in New York, Paris, Madrid and Munich, and is the author of *When Everything Fails, Try This* (2009), *Rationality Is the Way to Happiness* (2009) and *The Philosophy of Builders* (2010). *The 10 Principles of Rational Living* is his fourth book. His work reflects the values of self-reliance, tolerance and entrepreneurship.

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