Being a Successful Entrepreneur Isn’t Only About Having the Best Ideas

By: Andy Molinsky

Most people think that being an entrepreneur is about having that big idea. And it is. To start something new, you need to have an idea that works:

something people need, something they’ll want, and most importantly — at least for the people investing in your idea — something that’s scalable.

But what I’ve found from interviewing multiple entrepreneurs who focus on consulting, the internet, and software development is that without the capacity to execute an idea — to take an idea and turn it into a living, breathing, viable organization — you’re doomed to fail. And for many entrepreneurs who are thinkers, rather than doers, this is a frightening notion.

For example, an owner of a software company told me about how anxious he felt making sales to customers. He loved developing the product, and he also enjoyed speaking about the product to potential clients, because he truly believed in it. But when it came time to making the “ask,” he’d freeze. He’d stumble, bumble, and in many cases, simply not even ask for the sale.

The CEO of a small consulting firm I spoke with lamented how hard it was for him to spread the word about his company at conferences and networking events because of his introverted and shy nature. And the CEO of a start-up internet company deeply believed in the mission of his company but struggled morally when pitching potential employees on the “dream” without disclosing the full reality: they might not have enough runway of cash to make it through the month.
How can idea-oriented entrepreneurs become doers and learn to raise money, pitch to investors, hire, and fire employees — especially when it forces them outside their personal and professional comfort zones?

The first step is to actually recognize — and own up to — the challenges. None of us likes to admit our weaknesses and flaws, but in order to improve, we have to. Each of the successful entrepreneurs I spoke with ultimately recognized the importance of these necessary but difficult tasks and that, in many cases, they were things they had been avoiding or procrastinating about — to the detriment of their business.

The next critical step is to embrace your purpose and mission, because that is going to give you the motivation and courage to actually take the necessary leap. For example, Maran Nelson, CEO of Clara Labs, said this about the power of conviction with respect to acting outside her comfort zone as a CEO, especially when fundraising:

“The most important thing I’ve learned about fundraising is just really fundamentally believing in what you are doing. Knowing that it is good. You have to know what you are doing is good and that it must exist in the world.”

Conviction is the feeling, deep down, that what you’re doing — and even struggling with — when acting outside your comfort zone is worth it. That the pain is worth the gain. And given the inherent challenge many tasks present to budding entrepreneurs, having this conviction is a critical part of the puzzle.

Finally, the last piece of advice I learned from speaking with entrepreneurs is the importance of finding your own way. Just as there is no one-size-fits-all strategy for becoming an entrepreneur, there also is no one-size-fits-all strategy for learning to act outside your comfort zone.

For example, if you need to pitch to investors but hate asking for money, script out the first few sentences of your message, or bring a colleague with you who makes you feel more confident or who can help with your pitch. Or remind yourself of your mission before stepping into the room, so have purpose top-of-mind, which may make it easier to pitch.
Whatever it is, you can find your own way of handling these necessary but difficult moments. The entrepreneurs I spoke with who were successful at acting outside their comfort zones were able to find simple ways like these to be effective, without losing themselves in the process. In the end, most people equate entrepreneurship with ideas.

But for many, the real entrepreneurship happens internally — with the process of stepping up, having courage, and doing things that you never thought you’d be able to do. By flexing your behavior and learning to act outside your comfort zone, you’ll be well on your way toward achieving your goals.