

Thinking Like an Entrepreneur in a Time of Crisis

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The coronavirus pandemic has left us all with a heap of uncertainty. Endless cancellations and postponements, from school classes, sports games and proms, to graduations and internships, have created a new world view where our hours, days and weeks look very little like they used to. What's more, it's difficult to plan anything when you don't know what tomorrow will bring.

This reality we're living resembles that of an entrepreneur, or somebody who is starting a business. "Extreme uncertainty faced by most start-up companies is closely related to the situation we are currently in," says Serguei Netessine, Wharton's Dhirubhai Ambani Professor of Innovation and Entrepreneurship and vice dean for Wharton Global Initiatives. "The outcome of the innovation process is very hard to predict, which is why my favorite quote here comes from boxer Mike Tyson: 'Everybody has a plan until they get punched in the face.' Start-up founders get repeatedly 'punched in the face' by market realities, customer responses, competitors, and so on."

Many of us are absorbing the blow right now, and it is sending us off course. An entrepreneurial mindset will help us to adapt. "Start-up founders try to stay agile and react to information as it comes," adds Netessine, whose daughter Victoria, a high school senior, has had to respond to change in the past several weeks. "In these times of extreme uncertainty...we need to be ready to change the direction depending on how the situation evolves."

'A Lens of Hope and Change'

Flexibility is key in this time of uncertainty, and so too, says Tyler Wry, is creativity. "An entrepreneurial mindset is about embracing pain points as opportunities to create novel and productive solutions. This may result in a business idea, or it may not: the important thing is that entrepreneurs don't just sit back and accept the status quo," notes Wry, who is a Wharton associate professor of management. "Entrepreneurs tackle adversity through creative thinking and experimentation... they actively look for solutions and approach problems through a lens of hope and change."

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Students at the University of Pennsylvania, for example, have been creating the Penn campus on the virtual platform Minecraft, after the COVID-19 crisis forced them to continue courses remotely (*see photo with article*). The plan is for students to log on and be able to experience some of the traditions they're missing in-game, like Quaker Days for accepted students. Penn student Damian Owerko, a co-creator of the Minecraft campus, told *Business Insider*, "The pandemic not only separated our student community but also caused widespread anxiety. I hope that this will prevent people from feeling isolated."

Like these students, entrepreneurs do something different, stresses Jax Kirtley, a Wharton assistant professor of management who studies early-stage entrepreneurial firms. "Entrepreneurs aren't just identifying solutions, they are figuring out how to enact them and ensure that people can, and will, gain value from those solutions. To think like an entrepreneur in a time of crisis, don't just think about which tool could solve the problem, think about how you can get that tool into the hands of the people who will create the most value with it."

How specifically can high school students put these entrepreneurial lessons into practice while at home? Time is your most precious asset, suggests Lori Rosenkopf, Wharton's Simon and Midge Palley professor of management, who has

studied how to be an entrepreneurial manager in a larger company — so, developing an entrepreneurial mindset in a different context.

“In this time when our social activities are switched to virtual, we have more time for learning,” notes Rosenkopf. “What kinds of skills do you want to develop beyond structured schooling? You can even use your time socializing not just to commiserate with friends, but to develop some skills in a group way. For instance, try to build some kind of app that is going to solve a need.”

Experimentation and Empathy

That learning will often involve trial and error, just as it can in entrepreneurship, says Rosenkopf. “There’s buzz around the lean start-up mentality, which is all about experimentation to see what will work. Now you actually have the time to experiment,” she observes. “Look at this time of being confined and restricted from your typical opportunities not just as a crisis and a problem, but also as an opportunity to experiment with different ways of behaving and different operating procedures or routines. What’s a way you can maximize your personal performance under these admittedly challenging circumstances? It might be about what you eat, balancing creative and productive time, or even figuring out if it’s better for you to sleep late or get up early.”

Rosenkopf also encourages high school students with an eye toward entrepreneurial action to apply one of the key principles of design thinking, a process companies use to figure out innovative solutions to problems of all kinds. “It’s a great time to practice empathy,” notes Rosenkopf. “How are others feeling? How are your friends? How are your parents? If you can put yourself in their shoes, understand how they’re feeling and think about their needs, then it’s only a short step to figuring out how you can help them. Maybe that’s building an app, getting groceries for a neighbor, or unifying needs in the community where you live. Maybe those kinds of things can scale? How can you build them in a bigger way? You need to understand your users and empathize with them if you want to develop a product and think like an entrepreneur.”

Ultimately, says Netessine, it’s important to stop assuming that your old way of life is the best way forward. “This is unlikely to be true for a while,” he says. “Keep your mind open to changes. Who says drum lessons or yoga lessons can’t be done over the internet? Sure, it is unusual for most people in normal times, but times are not normal now.”