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# ENTREPRENEURIAL THINKING AND YOUR RESOLVE

*Clifton L. Taulbert*

Nearly fifty years ago as a young boy working at my uncle's Ice House in Glen Allan, Mississippi, I encountered entrepreneurial thinking. At the time I didn't realize that it would become a strategic leadership asset, but now I know it is.

In 2008, two important events crossed my path, both incredible opportunities. The first opportunity involved having an article published in *Leader to Leader*: "Slow down to Lead." In that article, I spoke to leaders regarding the importance of "slowing down to lead"... with a focus on bringing others along in order to ensure productive followership. I asked the leaders to do this because they are being watched and as such send signals to others as to what will be expected of them. Well, within months of the publication of the article, I was invited to travel to Austin, Texas, to deliver a plenary address to an international gathering of entrepreneurs. It was there that I brought to life the story of my youthful employment with my Uncle Cleve and his indomitable

Entrepreneurial spirit—a way of running his business that still affects me today.

Now, it's four years later and I find that both events are coming together for another meaningful conversation with leaders around the world. The workplace has undergone tremendous change: pressure from financial restraints, increased global competitiveness, and in some cases a lack of employee commitment and accountability. Even so, bottom-line success remains important, and leadership matters.

In view of these workplace realities and the need to remain productive, I have to ask leaders a new question: What assets are available today to rally their people to embrace the vision and the mission of the organization? Not only that, but what do leaders do to encourage their people to commit to ensuring the health and wellness of the company?

In spite of today's workplace challenges, which are headline news globally, in most cases the vision and the

mission of organizations have not changed. Bottom-line success is still expected, and shareholders still demand reasonable returns. And leaders are still being watched. What can you do to turn the ship around? How can you grow lean and demand more at the same time? Your signals are being observed internally and externally. As the leader, we expect you to be strategic and responsive to both the markets you serve and the people who work with you. As your organization becomes lean and mean, as it were, we also look to you to set in place the metrics used to determine the health and wellness of the company – like safety issues. Production cost, and delivery timelines – not only to set them in place, but also to rally your team to embrace them as their own.

## Today's Leader: The Involved Leader

Somewhere between putting the metrics in place and your team embracing them is the need to bring entrepreneurial thinking into the mix—the same type of thinking I experienced while working at my uncle's Ice House, and that successful entrepreneurs embrace today—a sense of personal ownership. You have recognized the importance of the metrics and the need for each person on your team to do likewise. But are they catching the vision and responding accordingly?

Your answer just might lie in whether or not you are intentionally building a workplace culture that gives rise to entrepreneurial thinking, where commitment and accountability at all levels become visible. At the Ice House, such words were not used, but the expectations of my leader were the same. Uncle Cleve was the owner, but he expected me, the employee, to respond to my areas of responsibility as if I too were an owner. In fact, he slowed down so that I could fully understand the competitive nature of his business, the social challenges of our world, and how my continued employment depended not just upon him, but upon my response to the opportunities that would be mine. He brought me into the “big picture.” As we worked

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## *Bottom-line success remains important, and leadership matters.*

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side by side, over time his vision would become my vision.

As I work with clients from manufacturing to federal agencies, and yes, even leadership in the academic world—from K–12 through community colleges and four-year institutions—I am being asked more and more to talk about ways to get the rank and file to take ownership of their responsibilities. My response to them is the subject of this conversation. “Bring entrepreneurial thinking into your leadership.” Of course, I add very quickly that this “thinking” starts with you and your commitment to build the culture to bring such a mindset about. Uncle Cleve worked harder than I did. He believed that his success also depended upon him and the example he set. He sent the signals I needed to see. He built the culture of respect and inclusivity I needed to experience. With such a process in place, I found it relatively easy to embrace the Ice House as my very own. I was never late for work. I took his rules seriously, and I made sure not to cut the ice in such a way to cause waste. I knew that my salary came from his profits.

As the lives of entrepreneurs are closely examined, emerging are the results that come from their personal commitment and accountability—driven by their sense of ownership and resolve. Every organization needs this level of commitment if it is to win in today's highly competitive, challenging, and changing environment. If schools are to be turned around and companies

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## *“Bring entrepreneurial thinking into your leadership.”*

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made more competitive, such a mind-set is absolutely essential.

Today’s leader has to be an involved leader, not afraid to engage his or her team in determining next steps—honestly soliciting their voices. Nothing speaks more to a sense of ownership than being asked your opinion and watching it not only considered but implemented. Such action clearly demonstrates to people that they matter. This becomes the conversation that is taken home, shared on the golf course, in the local pub, and sitting around the television while watching the game with family or friends. It is from such an environment that the critical sense of “ownership” emerges. To ensure this picture becomes reality, leaders must be willing to put in the time and effort to create the culture at all levels that will complement this growing need. The team members will not only be responding to the specific signals being sent, but also to the relationship of mutual trust that has to be in place. at the Ice House, Uncle Cleve made sure that mutual trust existed. We found ourselves intricately together on the same path. This is what sustainable winning looks like.

### **Personal Resolve Can Move Mountains**

To remain competitive in your marketplace and to hold on to your margins—however your margins are defined—the personal resolve of the leader is a key element. Let’s look at a statement from our sixteenth

President, Abraham Lincoln, and his thoughts on the importance of a leader’s personal resolve:

If you are resolutely determined to make a lawyer of yourself, the thing is more than half done already. It is but a small matter whether you read with anyone or not. I did not read with anyone. Get the books, and read and study them till you understand them in their principal features; and that is the main thing. It is of no consequence to be in a large town while you are reading. I read at New Salem, which never had three hundred people living in it. The books, and your capacity for understanding them, are just the same in all places. ... Always bear in mind that your own resolution to succeed is more important than any other one thing.

As a leader, the success of the organization has to be your resolve. This marks the success of entrepreneurs. The embrace of personal resolve is deeply embedded within the entrepreneurial mind-set. In spite of all the failures President Lincoln accumulated, his resolve to be successful won out. I call him an entrepreneurial leader. Such a leader was needed at this critical juncture in America’s history, and I dare say it is needed today. Without such a personal resolve on his part to see the nation remain united, it remains unclear as to how this nation would look today.

What do you want your company to look like? What are you willing to do to ensure your success in your marketplace? Uncle Cleve, a black man in the 1950s in the Mississippi delta, certainly had his roadblocks and barriers to the success of his small business, but his personal resolve was not altered. This is what I witnessed: I saw him swimming upstream as he looked back and beckoned for me to follow. Leaders still send signals. Leaders, you are being watched. I watched Uncle Cleve! Today, some fifty years later, I still benefit from what I observed. In spite of the obstacles he faced, Uncle Cleve refused to give up. And I continued to sell ice until high school graduation set me on a new course.

At some point along the way, it might have been much easier for President Lincoln to simply give up and leave

undone the task of holding this nation together. I would imagine that he'd go to bed each night, weary yes, but at the same time emboldened by his own resolve to see this first-of-its-kind experiment in democracy continue. His personal resolve affected his leadership and in so doing set the tone of what would be expected of others. He was the leader of our nation, and as such his personal and professional actions mattered as he challenged his White House and military teams to embrace a sense of nationalism and ownership of this incredible experiment in democracy. Yes, he was the president, but in order to win at the end of the day, those by his side had to take ownership of the mandate. This has not changed. Leaders: you can't do it alone. Your people remain your competitive advantage.

Each employee must own the vision and the mission statement of his or her organization. By so doing they accept their role in giving life to these wonderfully crafted documents—documents that are of little or no value if not wholeheartedly embraced. This is what I expressed to members of the Wrigley leadership team in Chicago several years ago when speaking with them. I asked participants to create two large four-color posters of the Wrigley vision statement, with one of them put together like a giant puzzle. As I talked about owning the vision, I would pull off the pertinent pieces of the puzzle to give to members of the team. I wanted them to experience what real ownership looked like. They had to hold it. They had to own it.

The need for entrepreneurial thinking in the workplace is important, maybe more today than ever before, as technology and global competition produce a world of shared knowledge. In such an environment, your people matter! They are your competitive edge. So how will you use your position to engage their creativity to ensure the sustainability of the strategic efforts being put in place—efforts to drive your organization to success? Can you lead in such a way to shift the workplace paradigm from being “just” an employee to one of pride of ownership? The reality is that in today's workplace environment, an organization cannot afford to *not* have every employee at every level and at every station committed and accountable—tending to the health of the organization, watching out for waste,

conserving resources, and maximizing their time. This is what Uncle Cleve required of me. I was the employee, but I also watched out for the company.

## It's All About Mind-Set

If it's not entrepreneurial in nature today, can your organization change tomorrow? Have people been doing it “this way” for so long that a new approach might seem impossible? Can you learn a new trick and likewise teach it to others?

I say, “Yes you can.” It's all about the mind-set. According to the extraordinary work of Dr. Carol Dweck of Stanford University, there are two possible mind-sets: fixed or growth. If you have a fixed mind-set, you believe that your talents and abilities are set in stone—either you have them or you don't. If, however, you have a growth mind-set, you know that talents can be developed and that great abilities are built over time. *This* is the path of opportunity and success, and it speaks volumes to the entrepreneurial mind-set. Change and growth are possible.

Extolling an entrepreneurial mind-set might be new to your company, or you may feel that it's too late to even try. Just keep in mind that our mind-sets can be changed. We don't have to do what we have always done, no matter how comfortable and convenient. However, effecting such change starts with you. Leaders, your mind-set—your growth mind-set—defines your perspective and your actions and will determine the signals you send. You are being watched!

The entrepreneurial mind-set brings with it an entirely different way of thinking and planning about organizing and implementing one's workday. I saw

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*Leaders: you can't do it  
alone.*

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## *Your growth mind-set defines your perspective and your actions.*

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this at the Ice House in Glen Allan. As a young boy, I saw the daily consistency of Uncle Cleve. I knew what was required of me. President Abraham Lincoln clearly displayed it. He was relentless in pushing forward his resolve that this nation... so conceived and so dedicated would long endure. It was a new way of thinking, but one that was required to meet the challenges of his day.

### **It's Up to You**

It's a timeless and universal experience—one that is still available to each of you. With such a mind-set operating in your organization, increasing productivity, turning out a quality product, and reducing cost becomes more than a managerial wish list; it becomes the driving mantra of the individual employee. Such response is contagious! When the entrepreneurial mind-set becomes part of the company's operational persona, you will end up with more than a one-time success story—a sustainable model of doing good business, day in and day out.

This is not unlike the mindset that has driven the continuous success of Herb Kelleher's Southwest airlines. From the CEO, to the pilot, to the baggage handlers, they all seem to possess this ownership persona. Such an employee mind-set displays this sense of pride that comes from an intentional attitude of being committed and accountable for the health and wellness metrics of the company and for their areas of responsibility—from cheerfully passing out peanuts as if they were great meals to successfully landing on time.

This way of doing business is built into the fabric of Southwest airlines. It started early, with the company's first flight, and it continues today. Creating such a mind-set was not a project with a completion date, but a process to continue and one to be continually improved upon. Leaders, the power is in the process!

This is what the entrepreneurial mind-set can bring to your organizations: a powerful organization-wide resolve to be an integral part of the success, in spite of the challenging circumstances your organization might be facing. This is the heart and soul of sustainable, long-term success in any industry, and in any business environment.



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