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Entrepreneurial Stereotypes

Stereotypes exist everywhere. In business they're common. A person might be considered too old, too young, too female, too old school, or too new to an industry. Entrepreneurs are commonly stereotyped, and yet what makes an entrepreneur 'entrepreneurial', is often random. At a recent Northwest Entrepreneur breakfast, three entrepreneurs shared insights into what propelled their path into entrepreneurship.

At first glance each entrepreneur seemed to have little in common. Well-seasoned, Brent Frei, the former CEO of Onyx, is currently chairman and co-founder of Smartsheet.com, an online work management software company. Young upstart Kabir Shahani, a former business development executive, is now co-founder of Appature, a healthcare marketing software company that delivers business value while being easy and fun to use. The sole female panelist, Carla Corkern, formerly a chief operations officer at Vykor, Inc., is now CEO and Chairman of the Board of Talyst, a healthcare company that helps to eliminate medication waste and medical errors. Although each is unique, some common stereotypes emerged as they shed light on their road to entrepreneurship.

Accidental entrepreneurs

It's a common perception that most entrepreneurs think and dream about an idea long before starting their endeavor. Interestingly, this wasn't the case with Frei, Shahani or Corkern. Happenstance shepherded each into entrepreneurship. For example, Corkern, while in her twenties, was facing a layoff. Knowing that the company had big client contracts that might be left high and dry if it folded, she took it upon herself to see the

commitments through to completion. Her "finish what we started" gumption and

Executive Insights



Cheryl Isen

▼ "too young to know what she didn't know" attitude was her entry to eventually running the business. Frei and Shahani had equally accidental initial ascents into entrepreneurship. For both, friends had started a business, needed the skills each had to offer, and asked them to join on. In fact, Frei seems to have a track record of starting that way because it happened again in his latest venture.

Defining moments

A common entrepreneurial trait is to relentlessly push through obstacles to make something happen. Most entrepreneurs have this gift, but what inspires it? Turns out many can cite a defining moment that clearly shapes their future success. Shahani credits much of his early success to the lessons and values learned from his parents. Coming from a different culture, Shahani says his parents didn't believe in summer. As a kid he was given two options: take classes or get a job. He opted for a job at 15, distributed resumes, and secured a position in corporate as an intern. Even though he was young and inexperienced, in subsequent years at the position a boss with a sharp eye gave him a shot at selling. This helped him hone critical decision making skills and learn how to quickly articulate value.

One of Corkern's defining moments came at age 25, when as head of the company she stumbled into saving, she rapidly learned that age was a strong

prejudice against her. Street smart, Corkern chose not to put her title on business cards and let others define who she was in their own eyes. As stereotypes go, sometimes people thought she was the boss's wife, other times she was thought to be the lead analyst or a project manager. In the end the title never mattered as long as she secured the loan, contract or whatever else she needed.

For Frei, growing up on a farm helped forge a solid work ethic, however, it was the team sport of football that seared him with a "never quit, can do" attitude and team-style approach to decision making. From a football coach Frei learned never to buy into excuses for failing or losing a game, because if you do, failure will happen. Likewise in business, with countless others telling you why your company might fail, he found that if you don't want to fail, you have to avoid buying into the negative thinking.

True to stereotype

Sometimes stereotypes exist for a reason, and true to stereotype Corkern, Shahani and Frei each share attributes that are often associated with being an entrepreneur. If you're considering a path to entrepreneurship, a few traits of theirs you'll want to embrace:

- Start by solving a problem.
- When opportunities knocks, seize it.
- Don't sweat what you don't know, just forge on.
- Avoid letting others' stereotypes hold you back.

Start-ups are a lot of hard work. They also offer the possibility for significant success and wealth. However, what each entrepreneur acknowledged appreciating most was the opportunity to mold and create a company that represented their

vision of the ideal work environment.
What can be better than that?

These “Executive Insights” are based on monthly presentations provided by leading entrepreneurs at the Northwest Entrepreneur Network (NWEN.org), a non-profit organization dedicated to

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