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The Beginning Entrepreneur: Avoiding the Pitfalls

Becoming an entrepreneur is a challenging journey for some, and a disaster for others. The idea of becoming your own boss is exciting, at least until the realization hits you that you are beginning a journey into uncharted territory. What drives an individual to take this first step toward business ownership? Is it to test your ability to lead people and manage resources, the satisfaction of experiencing a new venture, or is it the pursuit of money? Regardless of your motivation, one thing is quite certain: You've moved into a group of risk takers and the decisions you make will determine whether you succeed and how far you go.

I first imagined becoming an entrepreneur as an elementary school kid playing marbles on the playground. As a left-handed marble shooter, I was unique. My early teachers encouraged me to use my right hand; in fact, they insisted. Being left-handed was natural for me, and I resisted the change as hard as my tormentors insisted on changing me. I prevailed with a little help from my father, a left-handed minister, a school principal, and my own ability as an excellent student and a first-rate marble shooter. I soon realized that I should take advantage of my newfound position as the only left-handed marble

shooter in the—school—and my ability to win despite (or perhaps because of) my difference. Sudden fame was not, however, without its pitfalls. I soon became the target of the not-so-popular marble shooters, as well as of others. To remedy this situation I shared a portion of my marble winnings with the school bully, who could not hit another marble a few inches away but who provided me with all the protection I needed to keep on winning. I'd learned the art of identifying the power structure in the school and using it to my advantage, but not without compensation, and sometimes even at the risk of envy. My position on the school ground changed abruptly when the bully relocated to another city. Knowing that I would be vulnerable, I quickly announced that I was going to sell off my marble collection. This came as a welcome announcement. With the help of my homeroom teacher, my treasured collection of marbles was distributed to the highest bidders, bringing in the modest sum of ten dollars and seventy-five cents. Ten dollars was donated to my homeroom for a Christmas party and I was allowed to keep seventy-five cents, which I lost at a traveling circus to a ball-shuffling con man who was very good at what he did.

Over a period of about one year, I had gone through many phases that an entrepreneur may undergo. I had, in my elementary way, exercised leadership skills, managed resources in an acceptable manner, and encountered a few pitfalls that I turned to my own advantage. I also learned that I couldn't do what I wanted to do without some help from others, and I realized that even the most carefully

planned strategy doesn't always work. I had just turned ten years old.

Relating this anecdote to becoming an entrepreneur, one thing is certain: an individual needs a vision that must be converted into an action plan, a vision that evolves into a well-thought-out journey, a vision built upon an inner motivation that drives a person to go beyond expectations—almost to the point of an obsession. Once on the path to a goal, there will seem to be no way of turning back.

Individuals with a vision don't let obstacles conquer. Instead, they use these obstacles to strengthen resolve and advance toward success. People with a powerful vision believe in their ability to overcome adversity. They seek ways to bring something to fruition rather than talking themselves out of moving forward. In his book, *Tough Times Never Last, But Tough People Do*, Robert H. Shuller puts it another way: "Every beginner is a winner, at least he won over inertia and procrastination and a fear of starting."

The purpose of this book is to provide you with some practical, reliable, and workable guidelines made through careful observation over many years of experience. Although I will outline the critical aspects for becoming an entrepreneur, I will not overwhelm you with scare tactics that might prove discouraging. Simply put, I want to convince you that you can become successful in business by exercising good common sense. The rules are simple:

- Don't spend more than you take in.

- Avoid taking unnecessary risks in the hope of turning a quick buck.
- Start small and gradually build up until you can sustain your business at a comfortable level.
- Open a small savings account and make a deposit after you pay your bills.

The last point illustrates how common sense can be truly profound. Paying your bills on time makes you credible not only as a businessperson but also as a responsible individual. It is imperative that you be honest and ethical in all of your transactions. Although painful, you should always face your creditors. Negotiate with them, compromise with them, and make good on your promises. After all, your creditors could easily be going through the same problems with their creditors, as you are experiencing with them.

Whatever venture you decide to undertake and whatever product you market to sell, ensure that the product is of high quality and that those individuals responsible for distribution, including yourself, are competent, efficient, honest and trustworthy. Remember, especially in a sole proprietorship, all eyes are on you. Therefore, don't attempt to overplay your hand. Accept the fact that you are small and have a limited amount of working capital. You may only have a cubicle in which to transact your business, but if you can accept these conditions, at least for the short term, you will help yourself in the long run. For instance, don't rent or lease too much space or purchase new office furniture when used furniture will serve your purposes just as well.

It is now time to stop, assess your situation, and ask yourself two simple questions: Can I afford to be an entrepreneur? Owning a business—a want or a necessity? Aim high but ensure that the goal is within your grasp. Your expectations should always be realistic and attainable.

Finally, I hope that this book will serve as a road map for you and as an evaluation tool if you choose to take that first step forward. If you have reached a crossroads in your business, I would like this book to help you decide whether you are willing to endure the pitfalls that may lie ahead.