



WHAT IS ENTREPRENEURSHIP?

Fastest  *Route*

Specifying the domain of action entrepreneurs work in

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What Is Entrepreneurship?

Most people use the words *entrepreneurship* and *business* as though they name essentially the same thing. Start a business and you are an entrepreneur. Learn to run the business well and you are getting better at entrepreneurship. If the enterprise is struggling, the familiar advice is to run the business better: tighten operations, install better systems, watch the numbers, clarify roles, create accountability, hire better people.

I think this confusion causes enormous trouble for entrepreneurs because entrepreneurship and business are not the same domain of action. They coexist inside an enterprise, and both are necessary, but they accomplish different things and require different capabilities.

Business is largely concerned with taking offers that are known to work in the marketplace and making finding and delivering them efficient and reliable. **Once we have an offer that people value and will pay for, the business problem is to find customers for it and deliver it reliably and profitably.** There is tremendous value in turning what we learn about doing that into standard practice. We create processes, establish roles, measure performance, eliminate unnecessary variation, automate where we can, and make the result less dependent on the brilliance or vigilance of any particular person. Good business practice makes the enterprise increasingly capable of producing an inexpensive and predictable result.

Entrepreneurship has a different job.

Entrepreneurship is the domain of action in which new practices are brought into a community to better take care of concerns not adequately addressed by existing practices.

There is a lot contained in that definition. Unpacking it changes both where we look when an enterprise is struggling and what we need to become skillful at if we want to be good entrepreneurs.

A Domain of Action

A domain of action is a recognizable territory of human activity within which people develop distinctions, practices, standards, and competence. Medicine is a domain of action. Accounting is a domain of action. Management is a domain of action. Someone becomes increasingly competent in a domain by learning to perceive what matters within it and becoming skillful in the actions through which results are produced.

Entrepreneurship can be treated the same way.

An entrepreneur, then, is someone acting in the domain of entrepreneurship. Someone can own a company and spend relatively little time acting entrepreneurially. Someone working

inside an established organization can act entrepreneurially without owning anything. What makes the action entrepreneurial is not the person's title. It is the work being done.

The object of that work is a new practice in a community.

"New" does not necessarily mean invented. Entrepreneurs invent, but they also find, borrow, combine, reinterpret, and cross-appropriate. A practice that is commonplace in one community may be transformative when brought into another. Where the practice originated is less important than whether it becomes newly available to people whose concerns were not being adequately taken care of before.

And the concern matters. Novelty by itself is not entrepreneurship. Human beings care about things. They are trying to accomplish things, avoid things, become things, protect things, enjoy things, and produce futures for themselves and the people they care about. They already have practices for taking care of those concerns. Entrepreneurship becomes possible when those practices are inadequate and someone perceives that inadequacy.

Sometimes people complain loudly about it. Often they don't. People are remarkably good at accommodating themselves to the world as it is. They work around things. They tolerate friction. They conclude that something is simply the nature of their industry. They decide they are the problem. Eventually they may stop expecting anything better.

The concern remains even when the complaint disappears.

This is the territory of entrepreneurship.

Entrepreneurship Is Human-Centered

Once entrepreneurship is specified this way, something else becomes apparent. The work is deeply human-centered.

The concern is a human concern. The practice has to work in the lives of actual human beings. People have to perceive the possibility it offers. They have to decide that it matters. They have to take it up. And ultimately they have to become capable of enacting it.

This is one of the reasons ordinary business practices so often fail entrepreneurs.

Business has good reason to behave like a machine builder. Once we know what works, we want to remove unnecessary variation. We want a process that reliably produces the intended result. We create systems so we don't have to rediscover the answer every time. This is not some deficiency in business thinking. It is one of the great accomplishments of business. There is enormous return on making known practices repeatable and predictable.

But entrepreneurial work happens where the answer is not yet adequately known, and the variables we are dealing with are human beings.

You cannot systematize away the human being without systematizing away the entrepreneurship.

That doesn't mean entrepreneurial work cannot be supported by systems or standard practices. Of course it can. It means the central entrepreneurial problem cannot be reduced to machinery. You have to understand what people care about, how they currently take care of it, what they will actually do, what they can perceive, what they trust, what they believe is possible, and what it will take for a new practice to become part of how they live.

That requires a different way of seeing and a different repertoire of action.

I specify that repertoire as four subdomains of entrepreneurship: Listening, Inventing or Finding, Communicating, and Guiding.

They have a logical relationship, but they are not four steps in a process. Entrepreneurial work circles among them. Trying to communicate an offer can reveal that you misunderstood the concern. Guiding customers can expose a defect in the invention. A new invention can reveal a concern you hadn't previously understood. The distinctions are useful because they tell us what kinds of action constitute entrepreneurship and help us locate where our competence or our offer is breaking down.

Listening

The first subdomain is Listening, by which I mean listening for concerns.

This is different from simply asking people what they want. Market research can be useful, but people can only tell you what they are already capable of articulating. Some of the most interesting entrepreneurial opportunities exist precisely where people no longer have useful language for what isn't working.

Their practices tell the story. The concern isn't simply something hidden inside someone's head, waiting for us to extract or intuit it. It becomes visible in how people conduct themselves: in the workarounds they've built, the friction they tolerate, the things they've stopped attempting, and the practices through which they try to take care of what matters to them.

Look at what people tolerate. Look at their workarounds. Look at what consumes more time than it should. Look at what they complain about repeatedly and what they have stopped complaining about entirely. Look at the things they have stopped attempting because they have concluded there is no better way.

The entrepreneur learns to perceive disharmony between what people care about and the practices currently available for taking care of it.

This requires more than analytical skill. It requires a particular capacity for being with human beings. People do not reveal themselves equally under all conditions. Someone who experiences you as judging them, evaluating them, or merely trying to extract useful information from them will behave differently than someone who experiences genuine interest in their world.

This is one reason I place so much emphasis on **cherishing: holding another person's concerns as though they were your own**. Cherishing changes the quality of your listening. If your concern matters to me as though it were mine, I have reason to stay with it long

enough to understand it rather than rushing to impose my interpretation or preferred solution. I become interested in how you actually live, what you are trying to take care of, what you have learned to tolerate, and what the inadequacy of the existing practices costs you.

This isn't a moral requirement for entrepreneurship. It is an extraordinarily effective entrepreneurial posture. If I cannot take the concerns of the people I intend to serve seriously, I will tend to substitute my concerns for theirs and invent solutions to problems they don't have. Listening is therefore not simply gathering information. It is developing the capacity to perceive concerns that other people may have learned to live with.

Inventing or Finding

Once a concern has been perceived, something has to become available that takes care of it better. This is the subdomain of Inventing or Finding.

The "or finding" is important. Entrepreneurship has been so strongly associated with invention that we can easily overvalue originality. I don't particularly care whether an entrepreneur invents a practice, borrows it, combines several existing practices, or notices something working beautifully somewhere else and brings it into a community that has never encountered it.

The question is whether it takes care of the concern.

But even that isn't sufficient.

The governing constraint on invention isn't ingenuity. It's fidelity to how people actually live.

One of the easiest things in the world is to design a solution based on what people ought to do. I have encountered many offers that make perfect intellectual sense and that I can confidently predict people will not use. The designer has solved the problem except for the inconvenient fact that human beings have to adopt the solution.

An entrepreneurial invention has to work for people who actually exist.

Their habits matter. Their identities matter. Their skills matter. Their moods matter. The effort required matters. What they will give up matters. The other commitments in their lives matter. A practice that takes care of a concern brilliantly in theory but that people will not adopt has not yet solved the entrepreneurial problem.

This is one of the places where human-centeredness becomes unavoidable. The entrepreneur isn't merely designing the most technically effective practice. The entrepreneur is designing or finding a practice that can enter the lives of actual people.

Communicating

A new practice can take care of a concern and still go nowhere if the people it is meant for cannot perceive the possibility it creates.

This is the subdomain of Communicating.

Communication is often treated as transmission. I have something in my head. I put it into words. You receive those words and reconstruct my meaning. From that interpretation comes an enormous industry devoted to helping entrepreneurs say things more clearly, polish their messaging, find better hooks, and describe their offers more persuasively.

But entrepreneurial communication has a more demanding standard.

The question isn't simply whether you understood what I said. It is whether you can now perceive a possibility that wasn't available to you before.

That is why describing the structure of an offer is so often ineffective. Sessions, modules, features, deliverables, methodologies, and processes may explain what someone will receive, but people aren't primarily choosing a structure. They are considering a future.

The entrepreneur has to become skillful at disclosing that future.

And again we encounter the human being. People don't receive possibilities neutrally. Someone in resignation does not perceive possibilities the same way someone in ambition does. People have existing narratives about themselves and the world. They have concerns competing for attention. They have histories that affect whom they trust and what promises they believe.

Communication that ignores those things can be technically clear and entrepreneurially useless.

The successful communication of an entrepreneurial possibility occurs when another human being can see something they couldn't see before and begins to orient action toward it.

Guiding

That still isn't enough.

Someone can recognize a concern, perceive the value of a new practice, buy the product or service through which it is offered, and never actually change.

If entrepreneurship is bringing new practices into a community, the transaction cannot be the finish line.

The final subdomain is Guiding: helping people move from seeing a possibility to becoming capable of living the new practice.

This transition is frequently underestimated. Knowing about a practice is not the same thing as having the distinctions and capacities necessary to enact it. People enter an uncomfortable period in which the old way no longer seems adequate but the new way is not yet natural. They are between practices.

Guiding means helping them through that transition.

What's required isn't simply instruction. New practices aren't new arrangements of the limbs, to be demonstrated and copied. They are constituted by distinctions: ways of perceiving a situation that make certain actions available and others obviously inadequate.

An experienced person sees things a novice literally does not yet know to notice. Because they see differently, different actions become available to them.

Guiding is the work of helping a person take on those distinctions until they become embodied. At some point, the new way no longer feels new. The person doesn't have to remember the lesson or consult the instructions. They perceive the situation differently and act accordingly. They couldn't easily go back to the old practice because they no longer see what they used to see.

Now something that previously did not exist in this community exists.

The entrepreneurial work has accomplished what our definition required.

Locating the Entrepreneurial Breakdown

The distinction among these four subdomains also helps explain why entrepreneurs so often misdiagnose their problems as marketing problems. Communicating is the most visible of the four. Listening and invention happen largely out of sight, and guiding occurs after the transaction. When customers don't respond, the language therefore absorbs the blame. The entrepreneur changes the messaging, hires a marketer, rewrites the website, or searches for a better way to sell. Sometimes communication really is the breakdown. But no improvement in messaging can repair a concern that has been misread or an offer people don't want to adopt. The four subdomains give us a way to ask a more useful question: **where is the entrepreneurial breakdown actually occurring?**

Two Domains, One Enterprise

This also explains the changing relationship between entrepreneurship and business over the life of an enterprise.

Early on, entrepreneurship tends to be the center of gravity. Much remains unknown. Which concerns are alive? Which people have them? What practice will actually take care of them? Will people adopt it? Can we make the possibility visible? Can we reliably guide people into the new practice?

But business never disappears from the picture. Even the earliest entrepreneur benefits from standard practices. Money has to be collected. Commitments have to be tracked. Work has to be scheduled. Promises have to be fulfilled. If we discover something that works, there is no virtue in unnecessarily reinventing it every time.

As the enterprise matures, the balance changes. More becomes known. The offer becomes established. Delivery becomes repeatable. Roles become clearer. At that point there is tremendous value in business competence. We systematize, measure, train, automate, and make reliable.

Entrepreneurship creates what business learns to reproduce.

But entrepreneurship does not end when business becomes the center of gravity.

Concerns change. Customers change. Technologies change. Competitors change what people expect. Practices that once took care of a concern beautifully become ordinary and eventually inadequate. New possibilities become available that nobody could have acted on when the existing business was designed.

An enterprise that loses its entrepreneurial capacity therefore carries the seeds of its own decline. Its business practices may become increasingly sophisticated at reproducing an answer to a question the world is gradually ceasing to ask.

This is one of the dangers of success. As an organization becomes better at business, the skills that produced the business in the first place can atrophy. Listening gets replaced by research and metrics. Inventing becomes incremental optimization. Communicating becomes messaging. Guiding becomes standardized delivery. None of those things is inherently bad. The danger is forgetting that they are not substitutes for entrepreneurial action.

A healthy enterprise needs both domains. Their relative prominence changes, but neither becomes unnecessary.

Entrepreneurial Mastery

This distinction matters because it changes what an entrepreneur needs to become good at.

If the problem is fundamentally a business problem, then business practices are exactly what we should reach for. Standardize it. Measure it. Create accountability. Improve efficiency. Automate it. Build a machine that produces the result more reliably.

But if the problem is entrepreneurial, those tools may do very little.

Entrepreneurial mastery requires becoming skillful at Listening, Inventing or Finding, Communicating, and Guiding. And because each of those activities takes place in relation to human beings, becoming masterful requires learning to see human beings and their worlds more clearly.

You have to learn to perceive concerns. You have to understand practices rather than merely preferences. You have to become sensitive to mood, narrative, identity, trust, skills, relationships, and the circumstances in which people actually live. You have to become capable of making assessments about what people will adopt rather than merely what ought to work. You have to use language to disclose possibilities. And you have to help people cross the distance between understanding something and embodying it.

This is why I have come to believe that entrepreneurship requires a profoundly human-centered orientation.

It isn't an ethical decoration added to entrepreneurship to make business nicer. It follows from the nature of the domain.

The medium in which entrepreneurship happens is human action.

Once we see that, much of the advice given to struggling entrepreneurs starts to look different. Better systems may be useful. More discipline may be useful. A CRM may be useful. A better sales process may be useful. But none of them can compensate for listening to the wrong concern, offering a practice people will not adopt, failing to make the possibility visible, or leaving customers unable to embody the change they purchased.

Those are not business breakdowns.

They are breakdowns in entrepreneurship.

And knowing the difference tells us where to work.

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