

Entrepreneurship-Visioning the Process

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Thank you Neal and thanks also to the Community Supports Programs Branch and Mary Blake for inviting me here today

You all have set out an ambitious agenda for these two days and I am so pleased and honored that you've asked me to talk about entrepreneurship to set the stage for the work ahead

Usually when we talk about entrepreneurship, we equate that with business development.

But today I won't be talking about how many people with disabilities get the help and support they need to become small business owners.

Even though nationally, only 1.8% of all VR closures are for self-employment.

And I won't be talking about the elements of creating business or marketing plans.

-Even though many non-profits as well as small businesses fail because they lack solid business planning.

And I won't be talking about what we know works in helping people with disabilities translate their personal vision as entrepreneurs into the reality of owning a business.

-Even though in Syracuse, our US Department of Labor funded 'StartUP NY initiative has provided business training to over 165 people with diverse disabilities, registered 50 businesses and helped 40 people operate their small businesses.

And we didn't even begin to enroll people until a year after the three year program began.

So-while it's true that many great businesses were and continue to be built by entrepreneurs-you don't necessarily need to be an entrepreneur to start and run a business

And likewise, many great entrepreneurs never started or ran businesses

So let's begin by defining our terms: What is an entrepreneur? Would you know one if you saw one?

I like Greg Dees' definition as a good place to start:

“Entrepreneurs are innovative, opportunity-oriented, resourceful, value-creating change agents”

Entrepreneurs not only create value by developing practical solutions to the world's social, civil and economic problems they are also visionaries that forever change the ways we view these problems

Let's take Muhammad Yunis – developer of the Grameen Bank as an example fitting Professor Dees' description.

He saw the failure of existing institutions to alleviate chronic poverty and the preconceived ideas that limited creative thinking.

He observed that financial institutions created a world-wide system of apartheid without anyone being horrified by it.

Not a banker by trade-but a true visionary and leader, Muhammed challenged the practices of the traditional banking industry.

Through first-hand observation and by enlisting like-minded partners, he determined that investing in small businesses operated primarily by women micro-entrepreneurs was the best means of alleviating poverty.

Today in over 2,500 branches throughout the world the Grameen model is being used to seed small enterprises that are helping poor families increase their standards of living.

Muhammad Yunis demonstrates how visionary leadership that effects changes in power can effect positive and lasting change.

How will you in your organizations and through these new grants confront longstanding problems with new insights and solutions?

Mimi Kravitz also fits the description.

She spent time being homeless and was in and out of psychiatric hospitals throughout much of her life.

Her vision was twofold-first she had a personal vision that she would become a lawyer. She overcame traditional thinking that mental illnesses means a working life spent in food, filth, flowers and files types of jobs and she got her J.D.

She also challenged the ineffectiveness of traditional vocational programs and systems in reducing unemployment among people with psychiatric disabilities.

She demonstrated that by helping to instill hope for a better future; by providing both practical training on business development and by using the power of peer support and networking, people can be successful small business owners.

She created InCube that throughout the life of that organization helped start over 50 small businesses.

Mimi and Incube not only helped people realize income as business owners but also helped them realize their own individual hopes, dreams and aspirations that they could take charge of their own economic futures.

Mimi demonstrates how visionary leadership that redirects money to individuals not to programs and systems can effect positive change.

How will your organizations and your new grants not only help people obtain the skills and supports they need for healthy and happy lives, but also help to instill hope that such futures are even possible?

But Mimi did more than help develop businesses.

Not content with demonstrating how an entrepreneurial vision could result in new small business enterprises, she challenged the constructs of what it means to live with a psychiatric disability and to change pervasive habits of learned helplessness.

After leaving InCube she met with consumers across the country and throughout the world and urged them to think in innovative and opportunity-generating ways about their own life experiences not as deficits, but as sources of strength.

She said that “If you have any of the major mental illnesses...”

You have strength

You can cope

You have patience

You possess spirituality and hope

You have courage

You have humility

You have imagination

She said that “If you have been hospitalized...”

You have survival ability

You can tolerate pain

You can deal with the unknown

You have interpersonal skills

She said that “ If you have survived hearings for SSI, Food Stamps, etc....”

You have anxiety tolerance

You can organize documentation

You can negotiate systems

You can persevere

And she said that “If you’ve taken medication...”

You can handle risk

You can adapt to adverse conditions

You can compensate for induced physical disability

You might have gained some knowledge of introductory chemistry

Muhammad Yunis and Mimi Kravitz each in their own way embodied the core of entrepreneurship and fulfilled what another great social entrepreneur, Mahatma Gandhi advised: “Be the change you want to see in the world”

Your challenge is harnessing the spirit of entrepreneurship, but also reflecting that spirit in demonstrable, practical change.

Paraphrasing a passage from Paulo Coelho’s masterpiece the Alchemist provides both a caution and inspiration of the challenges that await us in striking a balance between vision and practicality.

A young man visited a wise man in his palace home seeking answers to the meaning of happiness.

The wise man couldn’t instruct him until later but asked the boy to do something for him in the meantime. Giving him a small teaspoon with two drops of oil in it, he asked the boy to wander around the palace, carrying the spoon without spilling any of the oil.

The boy wandered up and down staircases, along the great halls and through rooms keeping his eye fixed on the spoon so that the oil would not spill.

After two hours, he returned to the wise man who asked him what he saw in the palace.

Did you see my fine Persian rugs hanging in my dining hall? Did you see my magnificent gardens or the rare parchments in my library?

The boy was embarrassed that he saw none of these things because his only concern was not to spill the oil the wise man entrusted to him.

Then go back and observe the marvels of my world the wise man said.

The boy picked up the spoon of oil and explored the palace once again-observing all the wonders he had missed the first time. When he returned, he related in detail everything he saw.

He talked about how well the gardener planned and planted each row. How the Persian carpets were so tightly woven and the dyes so vibrant.

He also observed that the parchment scrolls were written in a most exquisite hand and on the finest vellum.

“But where are the drops of oil I entrusted to you?” the wise man asked

Looking down at the spoon, the boy saw that the oil was gone.

Well, there is only one piece of advice I can give you said the wise man.

The secret of happiness is to see all of the marvels of the world, and never to forget about the drops of oil on the spoon.

So as entrepreneurs seeking to establish a new vision, open yourself up to new ways of seeing the marvels of the world and create new value driven by the power and experience of recovery, but also be attentive to the practical elements that you might need to address when you seek to bring your vision to reality.

I have two possible frameworks that you can use that I have also provided to Mary as power point slides that you can refer to later on. Or if we have time-after I am finished with my remarks.

They both came from a document on the elements of systems change created by the Corporation for Supportive Housing and they identify the key elements that we need to consider when we are changing systems, organizations or services:

FIRST: What are the fundamental changes in POWER that we need to effect? How do we gain power by giving power to those that are now powerless?

SECOND: What changes in MONEY are necessary to accomplish our goals? Are there sources or uses of money that we can identify that can be directed towards our vision?

THIRD: What HABITS need to change to achieve the vision? What ways of ingrained thinking do we need to challenge within ourselves; among those that we struggle against, but also among our friends and allies as well?

FOURTH: What TECHNOLOGY AND SKILLS do we need to bring our vision, mission to market? Must our organizational infrastructures change, must we market in new innovative ways and how do we build sustainable market-driven capacity?

And FIFTH: we must challenge traditional IDEAS AND VALUES-But it's more than just challenging them.

We- like Muhammad Unis and Mimi Kravitz need to put in place sustainable processes and programs that fundamentally shift the ways that we, and those who support us as well as those that do not – need to think and act to address the challenges facing organizations serving people with psychiatric disabilities.

If these then are some overarching and entrepreneurial-driven goals-how do we get there? What are the building blocks we might need to consider?

Again from CSH, I challenge you all to recognize the POWER OF LEADERSHIP.

Are there leaders that we can identify or need to get to our table to tip the balance in favor of our vision?

Where do we find our Muhammeds or Mimis?

We need to recognize the need for COLLABORATIVE PLANNING.

Who else besides us and the 'usual suspects' has a stake in helping people with psychiatric disabilities own houses, raise families, start businesses and obtain jobs and careers and how can their vested interests and ours be met at the same time?

How do we LEVERAGE THE MONEY to support change? Is the mental health trough the only one we need to feed at or are there sources of funding we may not now use nor have not anticipated that can be leveraged in entrepreneurial ways?

And let's remember that not all resources are money-what human resources and new talent can we enlist to our cause?

Having a vision is great and having a mission is essential. But without the organizational INFRASTRUCTURE we cannot effectively bring our vision and mission to market. What internal accounting, human resources, marketing, organizational development and yes-business planning mechanisms do we need and need now?

Without credible DATA it is difficult to make the case for change. In your communities do you even know how many people with psychiatric disabilities are out of work, looking for work, lost the hope of ever returning to work or are working?

And last but not least, by FORGING NETWORKS FOR CHANGE, we embed the structures that can sustain change for the future, and that keep innovation abreast of future need.

So your challenge over the next day and a half is balancing vision with practice, being change agents but also being managers and tacticians and being innovators while aligning the personal, organizational and systems elements that sustains positive change.

In other words-be open to the marvels of the world and its possibilities that are around you, and take care not to spill any of the oil on your journey.

Thank you and good luck!