



Stanford eCorner

Characteristics of Entrepreneurs

William A. Sahlman, *Harvard Business School*

May 01, 2007

Video URL: <http://ecorner.stanford.edu/videos/1806/Characteristics-of-Entrepreneurs>

William Sahlman, professor at Harvard Business School, argues that entrepreneurship is not about possessing the right psychological traits, but that it is about a way of managing that is focused on opportunity pursuit, future orientation and relentless execution regardless of the resources one actually possesses. Sahlman emphasizes that relentless execution is the most important part?there are many ideas but what matters is who most successfully executes.



Transcript

When you raise the word "entrepreneurship," many people talk about psychological traits. There was research some years ago that said, "You have to have a domineering mother to be an entrepreneur." How many of you have a domineering ... no, I really don't want to know. My mother won't let me raise my hand at that question. There's also the notion that entrepreneurs are risk seekers, or risk bearers or something. I really don't know anybody who gets up in the morning and says, "Where can I find risk?" It's sort of, "Where can I find reward? And on whom can I foist all of the risk?" My colleagues and I like to think about entrepreneurship in the way Edgar described it, frankly, which is: "Relentless pursuit of opportunity beyond the tangible resources currently controlled." The basic idea is not to focus on what's there from the past, what you've accumulated and what you need to protect, but to always think about opportunity looking outwards, and looking at what customers are doing, and understanding how that process evolves. And indeed, success becomes your enemy and causes you to protect what you've done before. We have the view that in today's world, you actually can't protect the status quo. It simply is not possible. And we think of entrepreneurship not as a personality trait or as an economic function like innovation, but rather as a way of managing.

And it's got some differences from being a bureaucrat or an administrator, and we'll try to describe some of how that operates. I'll also tell you ... I've now screwed up the picture ... but it's "Believe, Listen, Act." I was trying in real time, Edgar, to capture your definition because I actually think it has a lot of wisdom embedded in it. Because entrepreneurship, at the end of the day, is not about thinking of outcomes, but it's about acting. And indeed, I'll try to make the argument that ideas are a dime a dozen, and execution is all that matters. I've seen so many people with the same idea, and I have seen a team, like John Osher's team, outexecute every time.