



A Journey from Surgeon to Surgeon Entrepreneur

Subhash Khanna

Swagat Hospitals Pvt. Ltd., Guwahati, India.

Abstract

We all have the idea that entrepreneurship is something best left to the businessmen community, and doctors, being in a profession that demands so much of personal time and effort, and without any formal training in business management, should steer clear of it. However, our society demands that people from all walks of life, doctors included, should show innovation and enterprise, and be capable of making the best of available opportunities so as to commercialize new technologies, create new jobs, open new markets and create value by combining resources in exciting new ways. Here, I share my own experiences and also express my thoughts and ideas which I feel can help the newer generation of doctors become successful entrepreneurs.

Keywords: Entrepreneur, Surgeon, Doctor

1. Introduction

“If you want to lead an extraordinary life, find out what the ordinary do—and don’t do it.”-Tommy Newberry

During the course of my service as a young surgeon in Gauhati Medical College over nearly two decades, I got the opportunity to develop technical expertise, operative skills and surgical acumen. I also realized that while you may perfect yourself in your service in the public sector by years of your hard work and experience, things are not so easy in case you want to enterprise and innovate and bring your dreams into reality in the private sector. You are exposed to a multitude of challenges in various fields like recruitment, funding, financing, clinical data, legal and marketing innovation and development, all of which cannot be achieved overnight. Although I now run two speciality hospitals in the private sector, I had very little idea about entrepreneurship when started my surgical career. It was basically my gut feeling and urge that I should do something that can change the image of the dying art of general surgery in the world of technology-based boom of super-specialization.

“Success is not an Accident, It’s a choice.”-Tommy Newberry.

2. Who is an Entrepreneur?

If we look at our day-to-day life, we will realize that every day we come across several people. Most of them are people with whom we have some sort of business. Starting from the vegetable seller, shopkeeper, fishmonger or the newspaper boy to the financial service providers like the life insurance agent. The list could be unending. If we happen to avail public transport, we find people selling different items. Often because of their impressive lectures and marketing skills in expressing the virtues of the products that they are selling, we end up buying what we actually do not need.

The other side of the story is about privileged, powerful and much more informed set of entrepreneurs having registered formal sector enterprises. These are the entrepreneurs who know their potential, possibilities and are aware of the opportunities available.

There are however certain things common in both the groups. They all may not be educated and may or

may not have gone to school and apart from that the most common factor that binds them together is that

- They are all enterprising
- No one has taught them entrepreneurship/business management but still they are successfully running their business/profession and given support they can grow in the pyramid.

We as doctors although do not fall in any of these groups but possess qualities to perform much better if we take the challenge.

An entrepreneur is someone who exercises initiative by organizing a venture to take benefit of an opportunity. The entrepreneur is commonly seen as an innovator—a designer of new ideas and business processes. Being a surgeon I am fully aware that medical promises are only fulfilled by skill, precision and commitment but to be an entrepreneur you also need additional management skills. Good management skills and strong team building abilities are often perceived as essential attributes for successful entrepreneurs. According to economist Joseph Alois Schumpeter (1883-1950), entrepreneurs are not necessarily motivated by profit but regard it as a standard for measuring achievement or success. They value self-reliance, distinction through excellence, are highly optimistic and favour challenges of medium risk.

In the book by Ashutosh Garg 'The buck stops here: my journey from manager to entrepreneur', he clearly states about things one unlearns to become an entrepreneur –forgetting the comfort of office, living with no infrastructure, no timings, no fixed routine to begin with. Becoming an entrepreneur is both the simplest and the most complex task depending on how self-motivated and self-disciplined one is.

Rashmi Bansal, in her book 'Stay Hungry Stay Foolish' that features the story of 25 MBAs from IIM, Ahmadabad who left lucrative jobs to follow their heart and had the confidence to succeed, has identified few categories of entrepreneurs:

Believers: People who knew entrepreneurship was the chosen path. They took the plunge immediately after studies or after working barely for a couple of years and they persevered till they made it big. Sanjiv Bhikchandani, promoter of Naukri.com is one such example.

The opportunists: These entrepreneurs did not plan to take this path but when opportunity knocked they seized it. Deep Kalra of Makemytrip.com fits in this category.

The Alternate Vision: These are individuals who are using entrepreneurship to create social impact or

as a platform that allows them creative expression.

To be a successful entrepreneur, I feel all the three elements should be there in the innovator. He should have the ability to see the invisible. Typical characteristics of an entrepreneur are: intelligence, alertness, energy and determination.

3. Learn to embrace your "gut feeling"

We're told to be evidence-based practitioners and to base all of our decisions on the best studies and meta-analyses available. This is a great 'scientific' mindset to have in clinical practice, and having that perspective is definitely helpful in planning a strategy for your patients and hospital, but we also need to learn to trust our gut feeling or instinct again. Sometimes, the evidence just isn't there, especially when you're doing a startup and you're doing something that hasn't been done before. If you spend all your time researching or waiting for the research to become available, someone will beat you to it. It was of course my gut feeling that there was a need of super speciality centers and centers of surgical excellence in our state and that is what inspired my idea of setting up the Swagat endolaparoscopic surgical institute (the first minimal access surgical center of eastern India) and Swagat super speciality institute in Guwahati.

I fully believe that social composition can influence entrepreneurialism in peers by demonstrating the possibility for success, stimulating a "If he can do it, why can't I?" attitude. That's what I felt and all my contemporaries must have felt when I did my first laparoscopic surgery after seeing a senior professor doing it in Mumbai, or when I did the first ERCP, the first endoscopic thyroid surgery and the first endoscopic fistula surgery and introduced these in our state and in the north eastern region.

The truth is it takes a lot of courage to embark on any new venture or new procedure and more so when you are established and you have a secure job and also in a society which is increasingly hostile to the medical fraternity. Granted, there is some amount of luck involved. However we should know that if we don't make smart choices, no good fortune will ever come of us.

The questions that hounded me and that would also make any budding doctor-turned-entrepreneur have sleepless nights were - 'Are the choices I'm making today –right now –changing the outcome for better or worse? Do I have enough funds to sustain myself at least till the time I establish myself? What if my concept and idea fails?' The truth is, the right

decisions are never the easy ones. But the hardest part is making those first right choices. After a while, that sort of decision-making becomes part of you. And that's when you know you're on the right path and the stage comes when it becomes much easier to make hard choices.

4. The three ways to success- find the things you can do better than others

I firmly believe that there are three ways to success. The first and foremost is to find that one thing you are passionate about and also the realization that you can do it better than anyone else. This is one way to become an entrepreneur.

The second way to success is the benefit of being the "First". If you wish to be successful once again you have to think differently and come up with an idea or a new concept. This has the advantage of ensuring that even though you may not remain the best, you would always remain the "First".

The third tip is of course is to think differently, something that's not always easy.

Innovative entrepreneurs may be more likely to experience what psychologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls flow. Flow occurs when an individual forgets about the outside world given a powerful insight. Csikszentmihalyi suggested that breakthrough innovations occur at the hands of individuals in that state.

Imagine that you are skiing down a slope and your full attention is focused on the movements of your body, the position of the skis, the air whistling past your face, and the snow-shrouded trees running by. There is no room in your awareness for conflicts or contradictions; you know that a distracting thought or emotion might get you buried face down in the snow. The run is so perfect that you want it to last forever. We all are capable of reaching that state of effortless concentration and enjoyment called "flow."

Other research has concluded that a strong internal motivation is a vital ingredient for breakthrough innovation. There are various ways these instincts may come in your way and many a times it may be someone not related to your discipline may trigger that new innovative instinct. One must remember that candle makers never invented the light bulb-we must learn from insight and also from people outside of our field.

5. From surgeon to surgeon entrepreneur?

I was a young doctor that had worked in the system. I had gone to medical college but found many

a times the existing health delivery system a bit frustrating. Being in Government run hospitals, every day we get used to this feeling when we need to refer patients with trivial problems to other centers, mostly corporate for so-called 'advanced treatment' and many a times such a patient ends up being treated by a physician or surgeon of much lower knowledge and experience than us.

I felt that I could prove a point that a young doctor with practically no fame or recognition, no funding could do what people thought would be impossible.

It was way back in 1991 when I was attending the International College of surgeons' conference at Goa that I heard and saw Dr Thehemton Udwadia of Mumbai presenting his video of his first case of laparoscopic cholecystectomy. I decided to follow him to the Operation Theatre to practically be with him while he was demonstrating diagnostic laparoscopy. I found it very fascinating. Thereafter, there was no looking back and very soon in 1992; I was doing diagnostic laparoscopies in the department of gynaecology at Gauhati medical college. Of course, therapeutic endoscopy had to wait for some more time and it was only possible in 1996-97 when a gastroenterologist friend of mine sold me the new complete endoscopy system that he had purchased from USA. I must say that it was like he had gifted me ERCP as I was so thrilled that I started diagnostic duodenoscopies and ampullary cannulation at my residential clinic.

My surgeon colleagues would agree with me that presently more surgeons are doing therapeutic endoscopy compared to gastroenterologists in this part of the country.

6. Don't try to be perfect

We don't have enough time to be perfect, and there's a law of diminishing returns type effect whereby 80% of the benefits from any given action come from just 20% of the effort. Your innovative idea and plan, for example –will require a lot of time and effort, but it'll never be perfect no matter how hard we try. Equally, we could spend years trying to build 'the perfect product' or refine and modify a particularly complex surgical procedure, but what you want to do is to come up with an idea and solution that is robust and offers value to your patients and mankind. They'll tell you how to improve it once it's released. If you try to build the perfect product or come up with an innovative but absolutely foolproof surgical technique, you may never release it or popularize it, and again

someone may beat you to it.

"You can achieve anything you want in your life if you have the courage to dream it, the Intelligence to make a realistic plan, and the will to see it to the end" - Sidney A Friedman

7. Doctor entrepreneurs –the new generation.

The generation of medics and junior doctors coming through the system now are the digital natives –they've grown up with computers and the internet and with the general expectation that they can access any piece of information, anywhere and at any time. It has changed our reality, and I think to a lot of people healthcare seems to be at least a few years behind compared to other technological revolutions—so there's a natural push for younger medics to bring the hospital environment 'up to speed' with the progress they see in other areas of their life.

I am sure the new age doctors are going to make maximum use of technology and come up with lot many enterprising ideas. Although telesurgery, foetal surgery and robotic surgery are gradually becoming routine procedures, soon someone would come with an new concept of pre-programming his own surgery on the robot and the surgeon would be able to operate on himself.

I can see many new doctor entrepreneurs in the making.

"We are all born with a divine fire in us. Our effort should be to give wings to this fire and fill the world with the glow of its kindness" - A.P.J Abdul Kalam.

8. Family support

The importance of family values for entrepreneurship is not that obvious at the first sight. However, empirical evidence from many studies uncover that a majority of entrepreneurs would not have started up their business without the backing and support of their family. At the time of initiating business when most of the start-up face problems and crisis, the family support becomes the most crucial factor for success.

9. The need

India needs entrepreneurs for two reasons-one is to capitalize on new opportunities and second is to create wealth and new jobs. In the next ten years, 110-130 million Indian citizens will be searching for jobs and this will include 80-100 million looking for their first jobs. This does not include disguised unemployment

of over 50% among the 230 million employed in the rural areas. The point here is that there is a strong need for entrepreneurs and start-ups. There are huge gaps and demand to be fulfilled which crop up regularly. Often one particular offering gives rise to ten other gaps to be met. For example, the telecom industry gave rise to mobile phones which led to need for mobile apps, content, security software, data storage and technology to share mobile content over internet etc. There isn't lack of ideas or entrepreneurial zeal in individuals but the challenge remains in making them marketable and execute with precision. The present generation is better educated and more eager to start on their own rather than join public sector. The rapid rise in specialists from premier institutes favouring starting up their own ventures poses a promising future for entrepreneurship in India.

Entrepreneurship is required to transform innovations into new products or services. In other words, the more individuals are willing to become entrepreneurs, the more ideas and innovations will become reality. The benefits for society from this are obvious. New enterprises make up for enterprise deaths and particularly innovative ones add to the potential growth of economy. In a short span of nearly two decades the surgical community of the world has seen the introduction of many new enterprising ideas and concepts, that included endoscopic spine, endoscopic cardiac surgery, endoscopic sinus, endoscopic pituitary surgery and ureterorenoscopy, and many other similar procedures, almost all of which were the outcome of the introduction of the innovative idea and concept of laparoscopic surgery for gall stones.

Entrepreneurial firms are re-shaping the business eco-system, creating an environment where they play a major role in introducing innovations, commercializing new technologies, creating new jobs, opening new markets and creating value by combining resources in exciting new ways. Entrepreneurs are reveling in their roles as world leaders, role-models and heroes.

10. Doctor preneurs

There is a new community of medics called Doctor Preneurs. It is a Global community for doctors, medical students and other professionals interested in improving health through innovation and entrepreneurship. Their motto is 'think creatively, act courageously and transform health care'. As an example, we can cite the use of mesh for hernia repair, something introduced to us several decades back and still being used widely by the surgical fraternity. How

many of us have thought about it and about replacing it with something different or something new. We would need a strong surgical entrepreneur to come with an innovative idea of replacing this with something new and something better.

"My message....is to have courage to think differently. Courage to invent, to travel the unexplored path, courage to discover the impossible and to conquer problems and succeed"
- A.P.J. Abdul Kalam.

11. How can the Entrepreneurs achieve balance?

Aaron Blackledge of Care Practice feels that entrepreneurs balance their neurochemistry by constantly doing something stimulating or innovative at all times. Boredom is like a torture for these entrepreneurs. The most important thing for them: They're meant to be physically active. Every one of these tech entrepreneurs should be encouraged to find intense activity that's both creative and social. Unfortunately some of them get off track lose some of the creativity and they run themselves into the ground. They're running three hours a day and working 12 hours, and they're just killing themselves. But if they're physically active in a creative social process they actually can achieve balance.

Hyperactive they are, even after work they go home and think about work all night long. These people can't stop working, and most of these people hardly read instruction manuals. Their brain likes to anticipate and it makes them feel better to figure things out.

12. Why doctors should be entrepreneurs

I fully agree with Arlen Meyers (www.sopenet.org.) about what the society feels about doctors. Conventional wisdom has it that "doctors are lousy business people", and they should just take care of patients and leave the business stuff to someone else. In my opinion, these beliefs are no longer sustainable if doctors are to thrive in the new Indian healthcare environment. I know that doctors have the potential to make great entrepreneurs. Admittedly, only a small percentage of the actively practicing physicians in the country have an entrepreneurial mindset and even fewer are innovators. However, it only takes a few innovators to disrupt the system and add substantial value.

I feel doctors can make good entrepreneurs because of the qualities they develop after studying medicine for five years and spending an additional four

years in internship and residency and several years of clinical practice.

Everyday a clinician has to make a clinical judgment on the basis of his knowledge and experience. The process is the same for business. Learning from mistakes is called experience. Learning from experience is called clinical judgment. It's the same with entrepreneurship. Very few entrepreneurs have *not* had their share of mistakes of failed startups. The successful ones learn from these mistakes, and sometimes even from other's mistakes and develop the habit of making judgement in the course of their clinical and entrepreneurial practice.

Entrepreneurship is also about research and experimenting, something we do very well every day, day in and day out, with our patients. We are used to dealing with uncertainty. Like business people, many a times we make decisions with incomplete information. Sometimes we have to do things based on their gut. In fact, we do so more than we would like to admit. Only about 25-35% of medical decisions are based on scientific evidence.

We also know how to question, observe, connect and associate: core entrepreneurial skills. In *'The Innovators DNA'*, Christensen *et al.* noted the core skills of innovators are: questioning, associating, connecting, experimenting and observing. We have all these qualities.

Many a times we have to assess risk and make spot decisions. Medical decision is based on risks versus benefits. Most of the surgical decisions are based on the risks involved in doing a procedure and the benefit to the patient. Often in a private setup, the surgeon has also to take a quick decision as to the benefit of any such or any new procedure to the institution.

Doctors can also fulfill core entrepreneurial roles. They can be techno pruners, market perceivers, managers, and/or investors.

The greatest experience for a doctor, particularly a surgeon and intensivist is the courage to know when something won't work or should be ended. We deal with such circumstances on a routine basis when dealing with patient treatment. Most of us vividly remember the unpleasant situations we would have faced in our surgical career and are well experienced to tackle such incidents. With a vast experience of dealing with such success and failures we gradually develop the mindset of a good entrepreneur who has seen success, failures and many a times has taken quick on-the-spot decisions with limited resources to

tackle a situation.

With shrinking reimbursements, expanding regulations and increasingly complex coding and billing procedures, the non-business-savvy medical practice stands a much smaller chance of success than just a few years ago. And it's only going to get worse. Perhaps we'll be seeing 'MBA's written on more and more doctors' coats soon.

"No one wants to die. Even people who want to go to heaven don't want to die to get there. And yet death is the destination we all share. Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma—which is living with the results of other people's thinking. Don't

let the noise of others' opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary" - Steve Jobs

Finally I would like to mention here that any physician or surgeon who is looking for a change must not forget the skills that made him a good doctor - the skills of effective interviewing, rapid decision making, pattern recognition – skills that are also essential to any successful entrepreneur.

I conclude here with a quote by Peter Drucker, "The best way to predict the future is to create it yourself."

