

Been There... Done That... Here's How

Brent Bowers

Terry Corbell, a management consultant, does not work for start-ups. "People who are starting businesses aren't good at what they do yet," he says.

But Mr. Corbell, founder of CMS Associates LLC in Federal Way, Wash., and author of a column called "The Biz Coach" that appears on the Web sites of an all-news radio and television station in Seattle, is happy to advise people whether they should become entrepreneurs and, if they do, what the basic rules are for success.

Mr. Corbell offers a series of questions for anyone considering that path, including these:

Are you worried about whether you have what it takes?

"Often, anxiety is a positive indicator," Mr. Corbell said. "Arrogant people make poor entrepreneurs. Fear can be a great motivator."

Are you brimming over with self-confidence?

It might sound paradoxical, but you have to believe you're going to wow the world with your product, even as you wrestle with your doubts.

In your 9-to-5 job, do you ruffle feathers?

"I was a broadcast journalist until 1987," Mr. Corbell said. "I was a self-appointed efficiency expert. I'd make suggestions to bosses who didn't want to hear it." At a television station in Salt Lake City, he came up with a 13-page list of ideas, like running movie reviews in the afternoon drive time instead of at 10 a.m. "My boss told me to mind my own business," he said. But the station ultimately adopted many of his ideas, he said, and ratings shot up.

Do you hate reporting to somebody else?

After being laid off for the 12th time, Mr. Corbell said he was seized by a desire to be his own boss. He took an aptitude test, and the professor who analyzed it told him, "You have to work for yourself." Now that he does, he said, he could never return to the corporate cocoon.

Are you a sharp negotiator? Mr. Corbell, now 59 years old, recalled how he acquired a print advertising firm in 1992 — it was in return for agreeing to pay the owner 10 percent of net profit every month for two years.

Would you be willing to sell fireplace inserts door-to-door in Houston? Every successful entrepreneur has to be a good salesman, period, he said.

Can you switch gears on a moment's notice? The company Mr. Corbell bought was called Marketing Services Northwest, or MSN. One client was an office furniture company that was so poorly run, clerks were giving discounts without authorization, he said. Mr. Corbell shifted into the role of sales manager, showing the owner how to organize meetings and bolster employee morale.

"I turned the company around," he said. He duplicated that success with another customer, a distributor of printed T-shirts. "I had somehow transformed a print advertising company into a management consulting firm," he said.

Do you know when to fold 'em? Mr. Corbell was the proud owner of MSN when an upstart company called Microsoft started a Web site by the same name. Realizing a court challenge would eat up too much time and money, he rechristened his firm CMS Associates.

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If you decide to start your own business, here are some rules that Mr. Corbell says will increase your chances of success.

First, act more like an entrepreneur at your current job. Be a maverick. Put in longer hours, give yourself a crash course on your company's operations and strategic goals and, most important, locate a problem outside your realm of expertise and solve it. "Your boss will notice," Mr. Corbell said. If you lack sales experience, ask for a transfer to the marketing department.

Find a mentor. "I have had three mentors over the years, including a Ph.D. in nuclear physics and the C.E.O. of a publishing company," he said. "This nuclear physics guy taught me that there are no big deals. I got laid off once and was in deep distress. He said, 'It's called life.' I said I didn't need him to laugh at me, I wanted pearls of wisdom. He said, 'You're getting them.' I have never since let setbacks get me down."

Team up with a partner. He or she should be someone you have known for at least two years and who is, in this order of importance, ethical, kind, careful in appearance, hard working and smart.

Exceed expectations. The Corbell principle is to give your customers 10 percent more than you agreed to. "It does wonders," he said. He once paid a public relations specialist to arrange interviews for a client who was a chief executive.

Never be defensive. "If you do make a mistake, be the first to admit it," he said.

Study successful entrepreneurs. Mr. Corbell loves to read news profiles of high achievers. In "Confessions of an S.O.B.," he says, he learned that Al Neuharth, founder of USA Today, always sent out handwritten thank you notes. When his son promised to send a thank you e-mail to a business group in Los Angeles, "I said: No! Go to a stationery store and buy some elegant looking thank you notes, and write a letter." (His son complied.)

Get in people's faces. After repeated phone calls and e-mail messages went unanswered, Mr. Corbell strode into the offices of an organization he wanted to work for and pitched his services. He got the job. Later, he overheard the top executive tell somebody on the phone, "This guy Corbell will fall on his sword for you." ("And I don't even have a sword," he said.)

Fake it until you make it. Entrepreneurs take risks, and they often fail. "It's better to be decisive and wrong than right but dithering," he said. "Do your due diligence, move ahead and act as if everything is going to be O.K."

Give yourself a crash course in sensitivity training. When he was still a broadcast journalist, Mr. Corbell found out that a former boss had told his current employer that he was "a bit of a Hitler." He was devastated, and with the help of a mentor, forced himself to do more listening and less talking. His newfound empathy for other people made him a better negotiator and salesman, he says.

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If you have read this far, it means you are persistent, another core trait of the entrepreneur. Your reward: Send me an e-mail about a conundrum that you are facing, and in a future column, I'll give you Mr. Corbell's advice on how to solve it.

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