
Patrick Turner: Entrepreneurs' Mentor



By Philip Anderson and Timothy Bovard , INSEAD, and Michael Ullmann, INSEAD Entrepreneurship Centre Advisory Board

Patrick Turner, an inspiration to thousands of budding entrepreneurs, with an inimitable teaching style blending theatricality with hard-nosed business sense, died on September 12th, aged 66.

There is no better example of the way Patrick brought entrepreneurship to life than “Your First 100 Days,” an MBA elective that became the school’s most popular class shortly after its 2004 debut. “YFCD” (Patrick’s favoured abbreviation – his classical education steering his preference for the Roman numeral) was closer to boot camp than business school, tossing students headlong into the chaos of onboarding a new acquisition, worst-case scenarios very much included.

Acquiring an existing business rather than launching a new venture was a mode of entrepreneurship Patrick helped to popularise at INSEAD through the course “Realising Entrepreneurial Potential.” “Not many people realise that individuals can buy companies,” Patrick once said. “We see it as a way of being an entrepreneur without starting up a company or having a great

idea.”

Patrick, working with colleague Timothy Bovard, devised “YFCD” as a follow-up to “REP.” The pair drew inspiration from the pressure cookers of American television at the time, *24* and *The Apprentice*.

Patrick’s sense of showmanship gave authenticity to “YFCD”’s countless simulated snafus. Instructed to keep their mobiles switched on day and night, students would be forced to respond to a sudden crisis or change in plans at 4 am. To test their equanimity to the utmost, Patrick would conspire to have actors portraying striking workers interrupt meetings between students and their “clients” (usually professional acquaintances of Patrick playing themselves). But as demanding as the course was for the budding entrepreneurs, it was even tougher on its teacher: Acting as chairman of the board for all the hypothetical companies, as well as many other fictional stakeholders, Patrick sent about 500 emails a day and slept four hours a night for the duration of “YFCD”’s first iteration.

He was known to say about the class, “It will teach you nothing, but you’ll learn a lot.” Students emerged from the course exhausted but exhilarated—it seemed to them like the perfect MBA capstone experience, calling on everything they had learned as general managers.

Patrick in the classroom

Patrick was a classroom maestro, which is rare enough; but his positive influence extended beyond his courses to help shape the development of entrepreneurship teaching at INSEAD. In his capacity as primary counsellor for INSEAD’s Rudolf and Valeria Maag International Centre for Entrepreneurship, he guided several thousand students and alumni and helped spawn many ventures.

Patrick’s background as an INSEAD alum (MBA ’78) and a former entrepreneur gave him a unique rapport and degree of credibility with the community. Between receiving his MBA and joining the INSEAD faculty in 1999, among Patrick’s many international business adventures were two entrepreneurial stints in Spain. These experiences, along with those of his colleagues and his far-flung network of contacts, became the raw material for the vast creative endeavour that was entrepreneurship education according to Patrick Turner.

Patrick's Principles of Entrepreneurship

For Patrick, teaching entrepreneurship was less about sharpening traditional business skills than about cultivating calm in the face of risk and uncertainty. In his book *Entrepreneurship—Mastering Business in Asia* (co-authored with Chris Boulton), Patrick wrote, “[Entrepreneurship education] can positively influence an individual’s perception of the risks entailed in becoming an entrepreneur so that he realizes that the risks he perceived can be managed in such a way as to radically reduce them.”

The importance of facing danger with a stiff upper lip was reflected in his three overarching principles of entrepreneurship: 1) Beware Murphy’s Law. 2) The only certainty in any business plan is that it will be wrong. The only question is in what area and by how much. 3) Never, ever run out of cash.

As the first full-time entrepreneurship professor on INSEAD’s Asia campus, Patrick always fought the cliché that Asian cultures are inherently less “entrepreneurial” than the West. For him, entrepreneurship was defined not by cultural origin but by tenacity and the desire to build something one could be proud of. “When you give out your business card, are you more proud of your name or the company logo?” he would ask his students and mentees. “This will define whether you are an entrepreneur.”

An Irreplaceable Educator

Because Patrick was instrumental in building up so many aspects of entrepreneurship at the school, it is fair to say that he has directly or indirectly touched the great majority of students and alumni who have sought help from the Entrepreneurship and Family Enterprise area these past dozen years. At Patrick’s funeral service in Singapore, we saw proof of just how meaningful his impact was, when a former student stood in front of Patrick’s casket crying uncontrollably.

Thankfully, Patrick, like an exceptional entrepreneur, built his contributions to last. “YFCD” survives as one of Patrick’s legacies because he carefully trained others to teach it, generously sharing the lessons of the hundreds of hours he invested in building it. He is irreplaceable, but the things he left behind are so well constructed that his colleagues and friends will be able to preserve and expand his legacy, upholding the spirit of entrepreneurialism he embodied for us all.

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