
What Entrepreneurs Can Learn from Authors



By Venugopal Gupta , Founder, The Business Parables (INSEAD MBA '06J)

Authors, like entrepreneurs, agonise about making their work a big success. But “best-seller obsession” can take them down the wrong path.

For a long time, I had wanted to take a writing sabbatical. Then, in 2011, I took the plunge. While my book is still undergoing editing, the journey has already given me important insights into shaping new initiatives. Having worked all my professional life in start-up situations, I realise that every innovation is, quite simply, a story waiting to be told. To get that story right, entrepreneurs can take a page out of the writer’s playbook.

When I started writing my book, I would spend hours idly looking outside the window of my apartment towards the playground below. I didn’t know where to start. I had “writer’s block”.

As days piled up, the euphoria of my sabbatical was turning into anxiety.

Then, one night, unable to sleep, maybe because my mind was so full, I threw caution to the wind and just wrote whatever came to my mind. There

was no stopping me. I realised, I must have breached a really big barrage because now the story just gushed out. I think that barrage was me. When I got out of the way, the story flowed unfettered.

The more I wrote, the more it cleared the way and the more it cleared the way, the more I wanted to write. I would write until late at night and early in the morning. According to my wife, my bearded, haggard form revealed a feverish passion that she hadn't seen since college.

As the book neared completion, however, the anxiety returned.

'Is anything wrong?' my wife asked after a few days had passed and the situation hadn't improved.

'I guess, I am just anxious for this book to be a bestseller,' I said.

She smiled.

'Can't the book be the reward itself?' she suggested.

'It can, but...'

'Tell me something. How many pages is your book?' she asked, trying a different approach.

'About 300 pages, why?' I enquired.

'...and how many pages to the end once the friends reach the destination?'

'About 15.'

'So, 285 pages for the road-trip and 15 for the destination.'

'Yes. So?'

'Can't you see, it is the journey that really matters?' she asked.

Overcoming writer's block

Working on an idea can be overwhelming. There are no rules, no redlines, no boundaries. Just infinite choices paralysing us much like Buridan's ass. To first-time authors, experienced writers prescribe a simple remedy for overcoming writers block: writing.

The fog does clear but only if we move forward. Like the game of twenty questions in reverse, moving forward forces us to make ‘real’ choices that help us recognise our goals with increasing clarity.

That is because the road to innovation is not a straight arrow. It is a maze of narrow winding alleys. Chances are, they may lead you to an unexpected destination but it could be a vastly better one.

As one of the most prolific innovators of our times, Steve Jobs, points out, “you can't connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backward.”

The lesson is simple: don't worry about connecting the dots even before you start. As Henry Ford said, “Life is not a battle that you will lose with one wrong step.” Life is an opportunity.

Avoid Bestseller Obsession

“If you keep fussing about how the book is going to come out, you will never find your voice,” publishing editors frequently advise first-time authors.

Similarly, entrepreneurs could be so obsessed with creating a bestselling product that they might impair their only chance of success: their original and unprecedented perspective.

To find that unique voice, that unique perspective and even to find ourselves, we must first strive to get lost, in a meaningful purpose. We must get out of the way and allow our idea to evolve unfettered by our dogmas and expectations.

There is a huge difference between thinking about aims and thinking about consequences. The latter is called worry, because it is outside our sphere of control.

As long as our efforts are oriented to meaningful aims (a product that serves people in new ways), we feel fulfilled. It is only when they become anchored to consequences (money, fame etc.) that we feel pulled in different directions, we feel anxious and stressed.

“Writers block” and “best seller obsession” not only impair our ability to innovate, they make our journey a burden we must endure rather than an adventure we can enjoy.

If we are prepared to go all the way, we might find ourselves at a destination that makes even more sense. Miracles do happen, but only if we make a start and don't get caught up with the happy ending.

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