

## **INTRAPRENEURING, AGAIN? HOPEFULLY A FLEETING NOTION**

BY

TIMOTHY GRAYSON

Like long forgotten songs on a K-Tel compilation, Intrapreneurship, the notion that employees of large organizations can hustle and scramble like entrepreneurs to create innovation and radical growth, is back! Of course, its day in the 1980s sun was a failure. But *today's* promise is the success of Silicon Valley's disrupting wunderkind.

Should intrapreneurship actually catch on, again... it will fail. Again. Smart executives of targeted enterprises and government departments ought to remember why it failed before and take a pass this time. The flawed assumption is that entrepreneurs thrive in any environment. Except, everything that makes entrepreneurship admirable is suffocated in the low oxygen atmosphere of the large organization.

The entrepreneurship allure is palpable: a dream of agility, disruption, and outsized growth leading to dominion over new and even undiscovered frontiers. With unicorns on every horizon, it's hard to ignore. But for large organizations, it's a mirage that will squander resources and frustrate everyone.

The larger the organization, the more its strength weighs upon it. It can no more be an entrepreneurial entity than the growth business is a colossus bestriding the world. The pitch to turn an eighteen wheeler into a Tesla is ridiculous and counter-productive.

Large organizations need not ogle enviously at the upstart entrepreneurial organizations rapid, often false growth that captures market and media attention. Appreciate your own qualities. Large organizations are mostly slow and steady. They have to be. Oscillating around opportunistic pivots would rend the behemoth from seam to seam. A material mistake by a small business constantly changing anyway is bad but recoverable. A material mistake for a large organization could prove mortal (without government intervention). Demands of governance and responsibility befitting its stature command the organization to be circumspect. One role of large organization is to stabilize tempestuous seas.

Sounds banal compared to the romantic entrepreneur. But, this gummy stateliness belies vast virtue. Large organizations have the power to change markets and industries. That they may choose not to because they're comfortable has nothing to do with intrapreneuring. The taxi industry did not have to actively ignore its suzerain being upended while focusing on rigging regulation. Moreover, a start-up did not succeed in digitizing music nor create the consumer smart phone industry. Apple did. Ultimately, large organizations control innovation and disruptive change.

Your favourite innovation guru will have written that when industries heave with revolution, some venture-backed entrepreneur has used a technology or method to disrupt a cozy environment. But even where that is the case, it's *because the large incumbents were sleeping*. As often as not, industries are turned inside out because competitive, large organizations acquire or introduce changes to the competitive environment and evolve the marketplace. In effect, they reinvent themselves and their worlds.

This has little to do with being entrepreneurial. It has everything to do with being observant, smart, and courageous. These mark the entrepreneurial character but are not

exclusive to it. Most organizations require innovation of some sort, not all need the peculiar and destabilizing qualities of the entrepreneur.

This intrapreneurship fad is but a means to a desirable end: innovation, which in turn leads to growth (and maybe reinvention). A large organization does not have to weaken its chances pretending to be something it is not and cannot be. Of course, large organizations should do things to remain vital and purposeful. But they should play to strengths.

Large organizations should get and be strong at anticipating changes to their world as has Royal Dutch Shell. They should strive to innovate. That will necessarily keep them apprised of near and distant (technology) innovations around them. Large organizations have the resources to do something better than *be* entrepreneurs: they can *buy* entrepreneurs—at the right time.

Large organizations have been known to get fat and lazy, ferreting out challengers, buying them, and burying their technologies to maintain control of their worlds. The world no longer allows that. Enterprises need to tuck: don't buy the start-up or growth company to shelve it; buy it to grow it and, maybe later, internalize it. I say *maybe* because the choice could be to shape the smaller organization to benefit from and provide benefits to the large organization. This is a different skill, but one a large organization could more probably create.

Many enterprise organizations would be better off creating a farm system of minor investments and expertise at observing real entrepreneurial action. Supporting and keeping them alive, all the while creating the internal conditions to ingest entrepreneurial output and do what enterprise organizations do best: serve scale.

Large organizations have to be stable, not ossified. An aircraft carrier is no PT boat. It is built for stability *in even the roughest waters*. To be the indispensable centre of many critical operations, the largest of naval vessels must be stable. Necessarily, it doesn't move nimbly. It would be absurd to expect it to operate like a frigate. But even with the responsibility to provide a dependable platform, the aircraft carrier and its personnel are always prepared and vigilant for stormy seas or competitive attack from the sky or under the waves—from other navies or even pirate flotillas.

Think about that. Maybe the idea of a carrier group fleet would serve large organizations well in structuring themselves to do battle in their own corporate oceans.

XXX

*Timothy Grayson is a transformation consultant and writer who lives near Ottawa, Canada. Find him at [institute-x.org](http://institute-x.org)*

©2016, Timothy Grayson