

**What Every Successful Entrepreneur Knows, But Won't Tell You**

“Kevin Johnson is definitely playing a pivotal role in contributing to our entrepreneurship age.” —Vivian Giang, *Business Insider*

# THE ENTREPRENEUR MIND

**100 Essential Beliefs, Characteristics, and Habits  
of Elite Entrepreneurs**

**KEVIN D. JOHNSON**

**Founder and CEO of Johnson Media Inc.**

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Kevin D. Johnson

**JOHNSON MEDIA INC.**

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## Foreword

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The secret of success in life is for a man to be ready for his  
opportunity when it comes.

—Benjamin Disraeli, prime minister, United Kingdom (1868, 1874-1880)

**W**hile finishing this book, Johnson Media Inc., the small company that I started as a college sophomore in 2000, beat two other companies in a bid for a \$40 million project. The project, which spans three years, is the largest account that my company has ever won. Johnson Media Inc. will now be one of the most prominent companies in the marketing industry.

In late July 2012 I received an e-mail and phone call from the vice president of a national organization who was impressed with my company's work in the financial services industry. The vice president asked us to submit a proposal for the organization's major project. I agreed without hesitation.

Although I was on vacation visiting my family in Chicago, I went right to work, summoning my team to focus all efforts on winning this project. Also, I immediately reached out to two men-

tors whose companies have made millions to get their support and guidance. My team and I finished our winning proposal weeks before the deadline, giving the client the impression that we were all business and that we made their project top priority. It paid off.

I mention this major accomplishment because it is a testament to the effectiveness of the principles discussed in this book. In *The Entrepreneur Mind* I detail how elite entrepreneurs respond quickly, put their business first, consult with mentors often, hire the best team, create an environment of stressful urgency, use time wisely, and so on. The one hundred lessons in this book are precisely the basic principles that I have used to build a multimillion-dollar company at a young age.

This is not just another book on entrepreneurship that focuses on high-level theory or popular thought, but a pragmatic approach that will get you results. In your hands, you have a real playbook to help you accomplish your entrepreneurial dream, whether being able to determine your own destiny or winning a multimillion-dollar account. If you learn from my experiences and the lessons of high-performing entrepreneurs, then you are on the path to success. If you adopt these principles and believe in them wholeheartedly, then success awaits you.



# Introduction

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**T**o be an entrepreneur is to think differently. While most people seek refuge, entrepreneurs take risks. They don't want a job; they want to create jobs. Their goal isn't to think outside the box as much as it is to own the box. Entrepreneurs don't follow the market; they define the market. This bold and seemingly backward way of thinking I refer to as the Entrepreneur Mind.

How does one develop the Entrepreneur Mind? Debate about this question never ends. Everyone from scholars to entrepreneurs themselves wonder if consciously developing such a mind-set is even possible. Some people believe that entrepreneurs are born, that certain individuals are ordained to be entrepreneurs, gifted at birth with the right mix of characteristics and circumstances. Others believe that entrepreneurs can be developed through a combination of coaching, education, and experience.

The idea that entrepreneurs are born, not made, is ridiculous. Contrary to what many erroneously believe, entrepreneurship *can* be taught and learned. The fact that over six hundred thousand college students were enrolled in some type of entrepreneurship curriculum in 2011, up from less than 1 percent of that amount a decade before, is a testament to the growing belief that entrepreneurship has a respectable place in academia. In many ways, entrepreneurship is like any other major discipline that requires intense study and practical experience.

Although I didn't have the benefit of studying entrepreneurship in a formal classroom setting, I did learn by reading books, many of which I still have in my library and use as references. Trips to the bookstore were a natural first step once I decided to go into business. With teeming excitement and eagerness I bought and read *High-Tech Start Up: The Complete Handbook for Creating Successful New High-Tech Companies* by John L. Nesheim. One of my favorite books was *Netscape Time: The Making of the Billion-Dollar Start-Up That Took on Microsoft* by Jim Clark. Books like these formed the foundation of my education in entrepreneurship. Without them, I would have probably given up from the frustration of trying to figure out everything on my own and to motivate myself.

This book is an attempt to add a fresh and practical perspective to the wealth of knowledge available about how to be an entrepreneur. As I developed as a young entrepreneur and experienced different situations, I realized that few books offered the kind of succinct advice that I now give to my mentees. By telling my personal stories and relating those of other successful entrepreneurs, I set out to write a book that focuses on one hundred core lessons that teach entrepreneurs what they may not find in a textbook, magazine, or online. These lessons range from how to think big to why you should use multiple banks, and even include whom you should choose as a spouse.

Furthermore, my goal in writing this book is to help young entrepreneurs avoid the mistakes I made. Mistakes during the early days of a business can be devastating. A bad decision such as spending too much money or choosing a bad business partner can lead to an entrepreneur having to shut down operations completely. After making some of my biggest mistakes, I would often think, *I wish there were a book out there that would have warned me about this*. Now that book exists, and I can help people who may have that same wish.

This book is divided into seven parts: Strategy, Education, People, Finance, Marketing and Sales, Leadership, and Motivation. Each part contains relevant nuggets of wisdom that you can read separately or sequentially. Feel free to jump around based on your interests or read the book from beginning to end.

Whether you are thinking of starting a business, celebrating your first year in business, or approaching ten years in business, you'll find tremendous value in reading this book. Simply put, it will help you to develop the Entrepreneur Mind.

# Strategy

Strategy is a style of thinking, a conscious and deliberate process, an intensive implementation system, the science of ensuring future success.

—Pete Johnson, British businessman

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**A**ll entrepreneurs must ask themselves three vital questions that concern their business strategy: *Where are we now? Where do we want to be? How do we get there?* If you don't know the answers to these questions, you don't have a strategy for success. Instead, you have an aimless, business pursuit and a likely failure on your hands.

Businesses with a clear and a solid strategy are prepared to win. Companies with inferior products often beat companies with superior products because, while the big dogs rest on their laurels, the underdogs are implementing and executing a better strategy. In addition, they may have better partners, employ sharper lawyers, or automate more processes. A company's strategy and tactics can help it surmount what seem like impassible obstacles.

In this chapter, you learn about strategies and tactics to improve your business, ranging from testing a new market to devising an exit plan. Mastery of these important concepts will put your business ahead of the rest.

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## 1) Think Big

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It must be borne in mind that the tragedy in life doesn't lie in not reaching your goal. The tragedy lies in having no goal to reach. . . . It is not a disgrace not to reach the stars, but it is a disgrace to have no stars to reach for. Not failure, but low aim is sin.  
—Benjamin E. Mays, minister, educator, scholar, social activist

### *The Two Types of Failure in Business*

A business can fail in two ways: not surviving beyond its start and not reaching its full potential. While shutdowns receive the most attention, failure to reach full potential is much more catastrophic.

On the one hand, measuring and understanding why so many businesses fail in the traditional sense is relatively easy. We have the data. Organizations ranging from the Kauffman Foundation to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce have analyzed years of statistics, giving us a solid idea of why about 75 percent of businesses do not survive fifteen years or more. Some of the reasons for failure include undercapitalization, overexpansion, poor planning, and a declining market.

On the other hand, measuring and understanding why a business fails to maximize its potential is quite difficult. Studies and statistics aren't readily available. Also, the default measuring stick for success in business is often the very existence of the business itself. I am guilty of perpetuating this low expectation, frequently congratulating business owners for having survived their first five years. While this accomplishment is honorable, it's more impressive to have a *profitable and a high-growth business* after five years. Instead of flattering business owners who have reached a certain number of years, the goal should be to challenge and to help solid businesses ascend to the next level—to think big.

## *“Thinking Big” Defined*

The phrase “Think big” is ubiquitous, whether it’s from an ESPN commentator or Donald Trump. Likewise, a popular T-shirt carries the phrase, “Go big or go home!” Apparently, we have an epidemic of small thinkers, and we must be cured of this contagious inability to think big. Despite its popularity and ascendancy to pop culture status, the saying has no clear meaning, especially as it relates to business.

In business, “thinking big” simply means pursuing ideas that maximize the scope of your potential. Likewise, it can mean pursuing ideas that have maximum impact in the world. Despite its simple definition, thinking big is difficult to do for many reasons, but if you are aware of the obstacles you can avoid them altogether.

1. *One of the main obstacles to thinking big is the inability to outgrow your environment.* I am a mentor to several young entrepreneurs, and one of the common disappointments I have about my mentees is their inability to create businesses that go beyond the confines of their reality or environment. In other words, their environment restricts their thinking to the point that their business suffers limited growth or even death.

To counter this effect I provide examples of entrepreneurs who have gone outside their environment to succeed. For example, many college students wish to start a business that targets only college students on their own campus. Instead, I encourage them to expand their markets by applying their product or service to additional segments. Students, for instance, could sell their product or service to colleges across the nation or the world. If the idea has broad appeal, it could be even larger. Also, I share with my college mentees how Facebook, originally for college students only, was founded on an ideology that appeals to people all around the world. It was just a matter of time before Facebook’s cofounder Mark Zuckerberg expanded his company’s target from college students to everyone on the planet.

2. *Many entrepreneurs lack the motivation to pursue big ideas.* I find this mentality prevalent among entrepreneurs who have had some level of monetary success in business that diminishes their willingness to pursue bigger ideas. These entrepreneurs strive to maintain their comfort or have become accustomed to going for low-hanging fruit. As business author Michael Gerber says, “Comfort makes cowards of us all.” Moreover, these entrepreneurs could simply be overwhelmed with running their own business and don’t have the bandwidth to do anything else.

For overcoming lack of motivation, entrepreneurs should find an individual or team to hold them accountable for pursuing their big idea, step by step. I know that staying motivated can be difficult. However, having people hold me accountable for my goals has really worked. Moreover, if you have several businesses like I do, you have to delegate tasks to others and carve out priority time to develop your idea. Otherwise, you make little progress.

3. *Several entrepreneurs lack the self-confidence to think big.* They don’t see themselves running a large organization, or they are frozen by the immensity of their idea. They may ask themselves, *Where do I start? How will I build a team capable of pulling this off? Where will I get the start-up capital for such a huge idea?*

To boost your self-confidence, devise and take small steps that start you working on your idea. For example, do some basic research about your idea or write down your ideas. If you are like most people, these small wins will add up to increase your confidence and to propel you forward.

4. *Entrepreneurs often lack the diversity and expertise of influencers required to think and eventually to execute in a big way.* I am a fan of the television show *Shark Tank* in which entrepreneurs pitch their business idea to a panel of investors, or sharks, who then decide whether to place an investment with the presenting company. Entrepreneurs who appear on the show seek investment capital as much as the valuable experience of the sharks. In one episode, a shark suggested that an entrepreneur license his product

instead of selling it to individual retailers, an arduous process. The entrepreneur had not thought about licensing his product, a strategy that would yield him profits faster and minimize risk. In this case like so many others, the founder needed the experience and influence of seasoned entrepreneurs to maximize the potential of a business idea.

To jump this hurdle, you must establish a diverse network of individuals who think big and understand what it takes to arrive at that level. Likewise, they can help you to vet and improve your idea. Reid Hoffman, founder of LinkedIn, recently told a group of aspiring entrepreneurs in Cambridge, England, “Talk to as many people as you can. What you want are the people who will tell you what’s wrong with your idea. They are the ones you can learn from.”

### *My First Big Idea*

Like many of my college mentees today, I was unable to think big during my early start-up days, because I was limited by my environment. Also, my network at the time didn’t include older entrepreneurs who could help me translate the value of my college website to a larger, more profitable audience. By the time I realized the great potential of my idea, it was too late. Well-funded and talented competitors seized the larger market aggressively while I focused on increasing my success in my small-college microcosm. Had circumstances been different, I could have been a formidable competitor to companies like CollegeClub.com, or even Facebook itself.

Despite the missed opportunity of becoming a national or even global college web portal, all was not lost. Eager to move on from serving the college market and making my mark in a bigger area, I stumbled upon an opportunity that would forever change how I pursue business ideas. I decided to focus on commercializing an internal tool that I created to help my staff update web pages with-



out having to know computer programming languages. OmniPublisher, one of the first online content management systems—similar to an early WordPress—was my first product with global appeal. From that point I began to think big and never returned to thinking small.

We sold OmniPublisher to local community newspapers and other publishers to simplify making frequent updates to their websites and to automate archiving with a portable database. OmniPublisher also helped users with small budgets to obtain enterprise-like software that normally would cost them much more to build or to purchase from an established vendor. My company had regional success with the project and eventually sold OmniPublisher to a small publishing company. During an early consolidation period, companies with software similar to my company's were acquired for millions of dollars. My dream of selling to a large media conglomerate at a higher valuation didn't come through, but I sleep well at night knowing that I dreamed big and went for it.

### *Where Thinking Big Helps the Most*

I contend that the aggregate loss of value by businesses that fail to reach their potential is much greater than the value lost by businesses that cease to exist. Some compelling statistics support this position, as reported in a recent Technology Association of Georgia (TAG) proposal:

According to the YourEconomy.org website (created by the Edward Lowe Foundation from Dun and Bradstreet data), from 2000–2007, most new job creations in the United States were provided by Stage I (1–9 employees) companies (approximately 5.7 million). However, over this period of time, new jobs by Stage I companies were created at a rate of 1.5 per new company, whereas Stage II (10–99 employees) companies created new jobs at a rate of 26 per new company. The website further indi-

cates that since 2000, Stage IV (500 or more employees) companies have yet to create one new net job. Instead, they have lost approximately 2.5 million jobs.

For this reason, economists, entrepreneurs, and others interested in economic development should not necessarily emphasize fostering start-up growth. Instead, they must emphasize helping established businesses and leaders transform their operations from medium to large. In other words, increasing the number of new start-ups is less important than ensuring the full maturation of established companies that have tremendous and sustainable growth potential.

How do we move medium-sized businesses to become big enterprises? Many economic developers are asking themselves that question today and are working diligently to answer it. One approach, economic gardening, is addressing the challenge and seeing great results, especially in Florida. As defined by the Kauffman Foundation, *economic gardening* is an economic development model that embraces the fundamental idea that entrepreneurs drive economies. The model seeks to create jobs by supporting existing companies in a community. Economic gardening also develops an entrepreneur's mental ability to think big and provides resources to make it happen.

Making the jump from thinking small to thinking big can be extremely difficult, but it is worth it. In fact, all of the greatest achievements of humanity started with a daring, big idea. Imagine where we'd be if the inspiring words of the great Benjamin E. Mays that encourage us to think big hadn't inspired a young student at Morehouse College who dreamed of living in a different world than the one in which he found himself. Martin Luther King Jr., one of the most known icons in the world today, could have settled for being just a preacher in his hometown of Atlanta, Georgia. He never would have set out to accomplish his dream, a vision that changed our world forever. People with the ability and the audacity to think big carve the path to greatness.

## 2) Create New Markets

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If I had asked people what they wanted, they would have  
said faster horses.

—Henry Ford, founder, Ford Motor Company

The two kinds of entrepreneurs are those who create markets and those who do not. On the one hand, the entrepreneur who creates markets is considered a revolutionary. On the other hand, the entrepreneur who competes in well-established markets is considered ordinary. Both approaches can lead to success in business, but research indicates that the creative entrepreneur has a better strategic position.

*Blue Ocean Strategy*, a best-selling business book, makes a cogent argument that creating new markets known as “blue oceans” is better than competing in overcrowded industries known as “red oceans.” The authors, W. Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne, studied 150 strategic moves spanning more than one hundred years and 30 industries for their book. They also looked at 108 companies that launched new businesses to quantify the impact on revenue growth and profits of creating blue oceans. Kim and Mauborgne’s findings are remarkable:

We found that 86 percent of the launches were line extensions, that is, incremental improvements within the red ocean of existing market space. Yet they accounted for only 62 percent of total revenues and a mere 39 percent of total profits. The remaining 14 percent of the launches were aimed at creating blue oceans. They generated 38 percent of total revenues and 61 percent of total profits.

According to these data, it pays to create blue oceans. The book gives solid examples of successful companies that created new markets, including Yellow Tail, Cirque du Soleil, Ralph Lauren, and Lexus. It also provides a step-by-step process for executing

blue ocean strategy. I highly recommend that you buy a copy of the book.

As a mentor to young entrepreneurs, I encourage my mentees to seek new markets rather than to go into well-established ones. The potential for attaining greatness is in creating new markets. My first start-up was a blue ocean, or a blue pond considering the size of my market. In my microcosm of a college campus, I created a web portal that enabled students to interact in ways like never before. As a result, advertisers flocked to take advantage of my platform. Moreover, I encourage my mentees to study some of our greatest and wealthiest entrepreneurs to learn how they were able to identify and to dominate new markets.

Going down the list of *Forbes* magazine's wealthiest four hundred Americans, you read the names of many entrepreneurs who have created and led in markets that before were nonexistent. Michael Bloomberg, for example, started his company after being fired from an investment bank in 1981 and was a pioneer in providing high-quality financial data to Wall Street banks and traders. Before Bloomberg L.P., no company provided this valuable data quickly and in several different formats. Likewise, Jeff Bezos's Amazon.com revolutionized the way consumers buy books and other products. The list continues with names like Michael Dell, Phil Knight (cofounder of Nike), George Lucas, and more.

Which kind of entrepreneur are you? If you have a blue ocean, you are on your way to tremendous success. However, if you are competing in a red ocean, it's time to adopt strategies to spawn innovation, leading your company to significant profits and to a sustainable competitive advantage.

### 3) Work on Your Business, Not in Your Business

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If your business depends on you, you don't own a business—you have a job.

—Michael Gerber, author, *The E-Myth*

It was one of the greatest feelings of accomplishment and satisfaction I have ever had. After a long and difficult process of searching for the right people, every essential role in my publishing business was filled. No longer did I have to sell ads, do layout, edit articles, or distribute my magazine. My staff of almost twenty people took care of everything from determining a new issue's concept to delivering it to readers. I didn't even have to look at the final printed magazine if I didn't want to. I could now focus on how to grow the magazine from a regional publication to a national one.

Until an entrepreneur's company runs without the founder, that person is just self-employed, the lowest rung in the hierarchy of entrepreneurs. The unfortunate reality for millions of entrepreneurs is that their business depends on them way too much. You know the type, and perhaps that type describes you. They are often overwhelmed with their business, doing everything from their own taxes to taking out the trash. They work nonstop not because they want to but because they have to. They may act as though they have a team that takes care of everything, but they don't. It's all just a façade. The harsh reality is that if they were hit by a bus and died, their business would die, too.

Just because you *have* the ability to assume a crucial role in your business doesn't mean you *should*. In a recent conversation I had, a fellow entrepreneur boasted about his entrepreneurial frugality as if it were an admirable quality. Normally it is, but he took it too far. He enthusiastically bragged, "Why should I pay someone for something I can do myself?" That's usually code for "I don't have money to pay someone else to do the work." If you don't have the revenues to hire a team and to replace yourself, your

business isn't profitable, and perhaps you should consider a different approach or a different business altogether. Doing everything in your business yourself leads to a quick burnout, and the activity prevents you from executing your role as an entrepreneur: working on your business, not in it.

Before you even start your business, focus on planning how to get rid of yourself, especially if the business is service-oriented and you are the one serving. This outlook is absolutely imperative because once the business gets going, you won't have time to dedicate to planning when work piles up. You naturally will give priority to serving clients and generating revenue rather than planning your replacement.

Finding quality people to fill all-important roles puts you in the frame of mind of running a business. In this mode, you are really an entrepreneur, and that's what it is all about. Once you have successfully eliminated the dependency of your business on you—and the process won't be quick and easy—you can focus on growing your business or even moving on to your next venture.

I have seen it happen time after time: Entrepreneurs start a company, hoping to be free from the tyranny and demands of a regular job, and before long they are weary from having to do everything for their business. In fact, many are miserable. Either they failed to extricate themselves before it became really difficult to do so, or they just can't seem to let go and get away. If you desire to pass the primary level of self-employment and reach the upper echelons of entrepreneurship, learn to delegate quickly. Otherwise, your chances of growth are limited significantly. If you want guaranteed, limited growth, you might as well get a job.

## 4) All Risk Isn't Risky

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Risk comes from not knowing what you are doing.

—Warren Buffett, businessman, investor, philanthropist

Among the several definitions of an “entrepreneur,” some are pretty good while others are downright terrible. Regardless, a common word among them seems to be “risk,” which is what truly defines an entrepreneur. The following simple definition by *Merriam-Webster* is one of the best: “An entrepreneur is one who organizes, manages, and assumes the risks of a business or enterprise.”

The focus then becomes understanding risk and how it factors into being an entrepreneur. “Risk,” as defined by the same dictionary, is the “possibility of loss.” What’s most interesting about this definition—and contrary to popular belief—is that it doesn’t impart a negative value judgment; the definition merely declares the possibility of loss. In other words, an event can have a 1 percent or a 99 percent probability of loss. Our response to and interpretation of those two levels of risk make all the difference.

Entrepreneurs have a higher tolerance for risk than the average person when it comes to starting and running a business. According to the Kauffman Foundation, less than 80 percent of businesses last after their fifth year of existence. Moreover, according to Saratoga Venture Finance, less than 1 percent of businesses ever go public. Despite these daunting odds, entrepreneurs are not deterred from pursuing their goals.

This higher tolerance of risk among entrepreneurs, though, doesn’t tell the whole story. Entrepreneurs surely take on high probabilities of failure, but they don’t necessarily like to gamble. Instead, they take calculated risks, stacking the deck in their favor. They find ways to minimize or to spread the risk of their endeavor to increase the odds of their success or minimize the odds of loss. Entrepreneurs have the confidence in themselves to avoid and to overcome obstacles that could cause great loss, whether through

expert knowledge, solid relationships, or even personal wealth.

For example, the media tend to emphasize the Cinderella stories of CEOs who have achieved great success despite unfavorable odds. However, a closer look at these stories often reveals that the CEOs took calculated risks and had solid backup plans. In his book *The Reluctant Entrepreneur*, Michael Masterson describes how Bill Gates is frequently perceived as a college dropout who took a huge risk to start Microsoft. Masterson criticizes this perspective and paints a very practical picture of Gates, one that portrays him as a methodical, brilliant youngster who always planned to return to school if his business venture didn't work out. Perhaps Gates's decision to leave Harvard would have been riskier and thus worthy of the media spin if he weren't so smart and didn't have the great financial resources that his well-heeled parents gave him.

In short, all risk isn't risky, and entrepreneurs know this rule. Put another way, the reality of becoming an entrepreneur isn't so much about the high probability or risk of failure as much as your ability to beat the odds. Ironically, the entire world has learned this lesson from the Great Recession. The opposite of this rule is just as valid. What people thought was safe is no longer as safe as they thought. College won't guarantee you a high-paying job in the field you studied once you graduate. A corporate job doesn't mean you won't get fired. Enrolling in your company's 401(k) plan doesn't mean that you will have more money in the bank than when you started the plan. If the world continues on a path of economic decline, pursuing your entrepreneurial dreams will be less risky than getting a job. And that's not such a bad thing.



## 5) Don't Waste Time

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Procrastination is opportunity's natural assassin.

—Victor Kiam, entrepreneur; former owner, New England Patriots

I had lunch recently with one of my mentees who just graduated from college. Now that school is occupying less of his time, he wanted to meet and get some guidance about what to do next. He and a couple of his friends from college started a company over a year ago that finally seemed to be gaining some traction.

Although he has great potential, my mentee disappointed me with his lack of effort and sense of urgency. During our meeting, he asked me mostly the same questions he asked during our last meeting eleven months ago. He took thorough notes from that meeting, but had made no progress toward following any of the crucial steps I suggested to propel his business forward. In fact, he had done absolutely nothing of major significance. He offered no valid excuses for his lack of progress, putting his head down and repeating, “Yeah. I have to get moving.” Frustrated, I simply gave him the same information from before and admonished him to follow immediately the advice I gave him. I am afraid that my words went in one ear and out the other.

After our two-hour meeting, I began to think about what his poor follow-through and hesitation meant. To better understand, I recalled how I felt about pursuing my entrepreneurial endeavors while in college and shortly after graduating. My sense of urgency to create a profitable business was almost an obsession. Some people would say it was indeed an obsession, as I was always running home to code and to add a feature to my website. I didn't have time for anything else except for doing the necessary tasks to move my business forward. School, a demanding girlfriend, and the desire to hang out with my friends were no obstacle for me. I made it happen regardless of the circumstances. I certainly wasn't going to wait around and do nothing. Even as I worked hard on growing my

company, I felt like time was slipping away, like a competitor was just waiting for me to make a mistake.

The best entrepreneurs create environments of stressful urgency. Entrepreneurs know that start-ups rarely get anything done in a relaxed, take-your-time environment. For example, Steve Jobs, the cofounder of Apple, was notorious for pushing his team beyond its limits by setting seemingly unrealistic timelines. As a result, his company created products quicker than they had ever imagined was possible and thus gained a huge competitive advantage over rival companies like IBM.

Doctors and psychologists believe that stress caused by time constraints or urgency has an upside. In fact, they argue that we all need stress in our lives to perform certain tasks at a high level, ranging from avoiding a car accident to finishing a report for work. A recent MSNBC.com article explored the benefits of stress: “When the brain perceives physical or psychological stress, it starts pumping the chemicals cortisol, epinephrine (adrenaline) and norepinephrine into the body. Instantly, the heart beats faster, blood pressure increases, senses sharpen, a rise in blood glucose invigorates us and we’re ready to rock.” The article also quoted Janet DiPietro, a developmental psychologist at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health: “When you have a deadline, when you have to perform, you want some stress to help you do your best.”

If you lack the sense of urgency to grow your business, evaluate why you want to be in business. Perhaps you are not passionate about the business idea. Maybe your subconscious tells you that the idea isn’t worth pursuing. Maybe the idea isn’t yours and you feel no allegiance to it, or maybe you lack the self-discipline to be an entrepreneur. Whatever the reason, your lack of enthusiasm is not a good sign.

Before our meeting ended, my mentee gave me a clue as to why he called the meeting even if it seemed he hadn’t been making progress. He revealed that he had to make money to support him-

self soon and that he had been offered a decent job that he doesn't necessarily want to take. I had a much better understanding of his circumstance and his sudden sense of urgency. It was telling. I concluded the meeting by reiterating that he should be working harder than ever to grow his company because time is running out. However, experience and entrepreneurial intuition tell me that he will end up getting a job working for someone else. He wasted too much valuable time.

## **6) Build a Company That Is Systems-Dependent, Not People-Dependent**

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Systems are the essential building blocks of every successful business.  
—Ron Carroll, entrepreneur, business coach

As a computer science major in college matriculating with some of the brightest students from around the world, I quickly learned that my computer programming skills were not the most economical. I could get the job done, but not in the most efficient way. I would take one hundred lines of computer programming code to do something that my peers could do in ten. Such efficiency translates into faster programs and smaller-sized files. I eventually improved my programming skills because success in technologically related fields relies largely on the ability to implement efficient systems and methodologies.

The pioneer in creating systems that increase work efficiency was Henry Ford, founder of the Ford Motor Company. Ford created an assembly-line system that enabled him to mass-produce the Model T car. Before his introduction of the assembly line in 1913, a small team of specialists made cars, and the process was lengthy. Ford's methods, though, reduced the time from more than twelve hours to two hours and thirty minutes. His innovation put the car in the economic reach of an average family and improved productivi-

ty rates across many industries.

Not only did Ford's system boost productivity, but it also cut the need for the jack-of-all-trades. Instead, workers on the assembly line could be specialized, which also made them easier to replace. Before the assembly line, if an employee who built most of a car was out sick, productivity would slow down and the arduous process of building a car by hand would be much more difficult to continue.

I didn't understand the importance of building and implementing systems in business until my company had become too dependent on people. For instance, when I started my first popular website in college, I learned that a growing business that relied totally on me wasn't sustainable. I would eventually burn out and be unable to serve the growing number of users. And if, for some reason, I couldn't run the business, it wasn't clear who would do what to keep it going. I had to make a change. Consequently, I created a content management tool to expedite web updates and give me more time, but even that wasn't enough after a while. I was growing too fast and needed to bring on other people. The need for a clear system and way of doing things was obvious.

As a result of these growing pains, I learned to do two things when I begin a business venture: First, clearly separate and describe the roles in the business in written form. Second, use technology to map out and build systems that simplify and automate important tasks.

Even if you are a one-person show, take the time to delineate the roles and expectations that people in your business will play. Write a job description for crucial positions like CEO, CFO, vice president of sales, vice president of operations, and so on. You may be doing one, two, or all of these roles at the start, but this activity forces you to conceptualize how each role, not an individual person, relates to your business. As alluded to earlier, people come and go, but the functions needed to keep your business going do not.

Moreover, using technology, create process maps to visualize how you will execute different tasks. This step helps you determine where your processes can be improved and see where technology can make your processes more efficient. For example, my company uses several tools to help automate social media campaigns. Powerful tools like HootSuite enable users to manage several social media accounts through one interface, and its functionality automates messages. One person can do the work of tens or hundreds of people. This technology has made my company more efficient, saving valuable time and increasing revenues.

Being a start-up doesn't mean you have to operate haphazardly and without systems. While some degree of organizational chaos is unavoidable, you should still create, think through, and continually optimize your systems so that you are less dependent on people. Taking this step up front puts you further along the path to reaching your goals and allows you to know you're in the mode of building a company.

## 7) Ask for Help

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Tell everyone what you want to do and someone will want to help you do it.

—W. Clement Stone, businessman, philanthropist

When I arrived at Morehouse College, where I would spend four crucial years of my life, I had a huge chip on my shoulder. About a year before my arrival, Morehouse offered and I had accepted a full academic scholarship to study computer science. My scholarship was funded by NASA and was intended to groom outstanding math and science majors to work in the space program upon graduation. That summer before classes officially began in August, I took part in a mandatory, six-week orientation program for the thirty or so NASA scholars at Morehouse. We were the elite students, and we knew it. Along with high SAT scores and GPAs, we

had extremely high opinions of ourselves. These opinions would change quickly.

What we thought would be an easy summer filled with new-found independence and fun became a summer of torture. During the program, we took college courses, including advanced calculus and advanced computer programming. Our calculus class was taught by a stern alumnus who was the stereotypical difficult professor. There was never a right answer. Even when a student offered a correct answer in class, the professor would ask us, “Is this answer correct?” Going to class was like having your fingernails pulled out one by one. Our computer science professor was equally intimidating. He had a different approach, though. He was a soft-spoken, jovial guy, but he would laugh at you and make fun of you if you gave a wrong answer. And he would often digress, talking about life in general. The worst thing about the summer classes was our grades. For example, in our calculus class, the best grade on the first quiz was a 55, I think. My grade was closer to my age. It wouldn’t get much better. The material, pace, and pressure were too hard. The NASA Project Space Program knew exactly what it was doing. It broke us down and it humbled us.

As a result, we were all scared to death of college and studied harder than ever to prepare for the first day of real classes in August. Students who had never struggled academically were on the verge of a breakdown at the NASA program. There was mass panic, but everyone tried to play it cool. Some of us formed study groups and curtailed our social activities. Many of us questioned our ability and fortitude to survive and to make it through college. Some bailed before the six-week program was over.

This period was especially difficult for me. Through high school I rarely had to ask for help in my courses. If something gave me trouble, I would figure it out. Now I had to ask for help—and from peers—something I wasn’t comfortable doing at all. I thought that this was a sign of weakness, and my reluctance to ask for help caused me to pay a high academic price.

I learned my lesson as a student thanks to NASA, and I vowed not to make the same mistake when I became a CEO in business. In fact, seconds after I came up with my first business idea as a sophomore, I asked for help. I contacted my good friend and fellow NASA scholar, Chris, to hear what he thought about my company's new name and domain name. Also, before I started another college business, I invited about five entrepreneurs to an evening meeting to discuss my business idea and to get their feedback and help. I made it a habit to ask for help from day one. Many of these same people continue to give me their guidance today, more than ten years later. The help I have asked for and received has been invaluable to my company's growth and my personal development. Before long, asking for help became natural. I just had to get rid of my ego.

When you start your business, lose the ego immediately. It's the main reason that entrepreneurs don't seek help. An overinflated ego even prevents those who ask for help from receiving it. Rarely do people want to help those who act as though they don't need it. And there's a difference between being confident and having an ego that's too big for your own good. Confidence attracts people; ego repels them.

One of the quickest ways to lead a life of mediocrity or utter failure is to think that you can accomplish a major task all by yourself. The self-made man or woman is a myth. Even the greatest business minds of our time had to ask for help. One of my favorite examples is that of Mark Zuckerberg, who asked his parents to help finance his young company, Thefacebook. His parents gave him \$85,000 in the summer of 2004 to help buy servers for his growing business. This money, according to a lawsuit, was intended for his college tuition. It doesn't hurt to ask, right? Whether it's your oversized ego or your tendency to be introverted that's stopping you, go beyond your comfort zone and ask for help. Your business depends on it.

# Praise for The Entrepreneur Mind

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“If you want to start a business or improve the business you have, this is a fantastic resource. Kevin has managed to condense many of the crucial lessons that too many entrepreneurs learn the hard way. Read this book, and you’ll be far ahead in the business game.”

—**Andrew Dietz**, founder and president, Creative Growth Group

“Kevin stitches together actual life scenarios and outcomes that every entrepreneur needs to understand. This book doesn’t live in the clouds like some others do. Real life for real business builders... read it!”

—**Devon Wijesinghe**, serial entrepreneur; chairman, Insightpool; director, Atlanta Technology Angels

“Kevin has just given us the next best *how-to* handbook on starting, building, and sustaining your own business. It is written with such clarity and with commonsense lessons that truly hit the mark, turning complex concepts into simple applications.”

—**Kent Matlock**, CEO, Matlock Advertising and Public Relations

“Kevin has done a remarkable job synthesizing the key points about successful entrepreneurship. In valuable detail, he discusses his own enlightening experiences and those of well-known entrepreneurs to help readers get it right the first time. This book is an important resource for current and aspiring entrepreneurs.”

—**Eric Overby, Ph.D.**, assistant professor, Scheller College of Business, Georgia Institute of Technology



“*The Entrepreneur Mind* provides an easy-to-understand blueprint for success. It can be used by anyone wanting to make their dream a reality or aiming to take their business to the next level. In this book, Kevin gives key step-by-step principles for building a strong business foundation from idea to execution, and it is truly a must read for everyone ready to step out on faith to start their own enterprise.”

—**Samuel T. Jackson**, founder, chairman, and CEO, Economic Empowerment Initiative Inc., and member, U.S. President’s Advisory Council on Financial Capability

“Kevin has built a roadmap to success that every entrepreneur needs to read before starting their journey. This book provides a no-nonsense approach to overcoming the roadblocks and detours that are inevitable in entrepreneurship.”

—**Chau Nguyen**, founder and CEO, Campus Special

“In this commendable work, Kevin has emboldened a movement very dear to my heart: making entrepreneurship accessible and a viable option for millions of young people around the world.”

—**Scott Gerber**, founder, Young Entrepreneur Council; author, *Never Get a “Real” Job*

“An amazing book that reveals the sometimes elusive insights that entrepreneurs need for success, *The Entrepreneur Mind* gets two thumbs up.”

—**David Meredith**, president, ePals International

“In our current time, it’s essential to share any type of business knowledge that we attain, and Kevin Johnson is definitely playing a pivotal role in contributing to our entrepreneurship age.”

—**Vivian Giang**, reporter, *Business Insider*

“*The Entrepreneur Mind* is a very important contribution to the entrepreneurship literature. One of the critical takeaways deals with relationships, relationships, relationships! To be truly successful as an entrepreneur you must always exceed expectations in all of your diverse relationships!”

—**James I. Herbert, Ph.D.**, professor of Management and Entrepreneurship, Michael J. Coles College of Business, Kennesaw State University

“Wow! Within minutes of reading this book, the business strategies and secrets that Kevin shared more than paid for the price. I highly recommend this book to entrepreneurial newbies, seasoned pros, and everybody in between. Buy it, use it, and watch your business grow!”

—**Shaun King**, founder, HopeMob

“Kevin’s book is thought-provoking and insightful. Readers will be challenged on their own beliefs and characteristics regarding entrepreneurship. It is full of rich ideas on how to develop an entrepreneurial mindset and how to build a business the right way, avoiding the issues that have caused others to stumble.”

—**Christopher Hanks**, director of Entrepreneurship Program, University of Georgia

“What I absolutely love about this book is the embedded story within about an entrepreneur who sought mentorship, and in turn became a mentor to others. This is an inspiring work from someone I have come to know over the last several years as a continual learner; now Kevin is a teacher whose insights focus on one of my all-time favorite subjects: how to be street-wise. This book isn’t just for entrepreneurs, though; it is for thinkers, doers, and winners.”

—**Robert Lahm, Ph.D.**, associate professor of Entrepreneurship, Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation, Western Carolina University

“Kevin Johnson has written a phenomenal book that will inspire readers to become high-achieving entrepreneurs. Cleverly interweaving the lessons from his rich experience with those of business moguls who we all admire, Kevin exemplifies and articulates the great opportunity, fulfillment, and value that pursuing entrepreneurship brings. Well done.”

—**Andrew Young**, former mayor of Atlanta, U.S. congressman, and U.S. ambassador to the United Nations

“This book sharpens and focuses the mind of true entrepreneurs! It is an absolute must read for entrepreneurs who are serious about success.”

—**Dexter Caffey**, investor, entrepreneur

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