

# Sustainable Entrepreneurship

by Oscar Motomura\*

## The entrepreneur

Whenever anyone talks about entrepreneurship, the image that appears in most people's minds is that of people starting their own businesses. Although that image is compatible in part with the concept of sustainable entrepreneurship, I prefer to work with a different meaning. To me, entrepreneurship is nothing more than the power to make things happen. According to this concept, an entrepreneur is anyone capable of generating results in any area of human activity.

- According to this definition, many housewives are entrepreneurs: in the face of great challenges and many difficulties, they make everything work and help the family to evolve. There are, however, housewives who are incapable of making things happen, with obviously bad results.
- There are employees who are entrepreneurs, and others who are not. There are even bosses and executives who are entrepreneurs, and others who are not. This is as true in companies as it is in governments, and even in non-governmental organizations.
- There are cities that are entrepreneurial, and others that are not.
- There are children and young people who make things happen in their studies and even in the sports they play and in their games, and there are others that do not.
- There are elderly people who make things happen until their dying day and others who do not.

It is interesting to contrast the figure of the entrepreneur with his opposite, a figure who is very common in our society: that individual who has a lot to say, offers criticism, and may even have good ideas, but who does not go any further. These people do not even seem concerned with the effective implementation of the ideas they have or with finding real solutions. Even when they are concerned, they seem to think that making things happen is a detail for other people to handle, as if it were “not their department.”

On the other hand, there are entrepreneurs who make things happen, at great trouble to themselves, but without thinking. They do not stop to think whether there are more essential things to do, things that may be more useful to society and to future generations. They are people who, if they stopped to consider how everything works as a whole, would not do what they are doing. They would be contributing in some other way, perhaps a very different way.

Then there are entrepreneurs of great talent who not

only work in activities that are of little relevance, but are even harmful to society. They are the ones, for example, who use their talents in areas that are highly polluting, or that produce products that are harmful to people's health. At the far end of this spectrum are those who participate in legitimate business, but in a manner that is not ethical. They may even view crime as a highly lucrative form of “business.”

## Sustainability

Sustainability has as its base a way of living that is capable of guaranteeing a continuity of life for all. Sustainability implies solidarity, a strong sense of the collective, and the most elevated notion of ethics: the search for the common good.

Sustainability means, fundamentally, a way of living in its totality that makes possible the best conditions of life for everyone (without exception or any type of exclusion) at all times.

Sustainability means living a balanced life today, a healthy way of living in which no one lives at the expense of anyone else (situations in which, for example, some have an excess of food while others have none). For those who have nothing, life is not sustainable.

Sustainability also means a way of life lived by the whole of society that considers the needs of future generations.

On the one hand, a way of life that is not sustainable in the short term will only lead to deterioration in the long term (unless there is something strategic and very well-planned about it, that calls for sacrifices today in order to achieve benefits for everyone in the future—something that is very difficult to do, since those who have much today will be reluctant to surrender their advantages in order to share with others in the future.)

On the other hand, although the way of life may be balanced today (something that is obviously not the case), it may be a case of “borrowing against the future” to achieve this balance in the short term. And we would not have sustainability in the long run.

## What, then, does “sustainable entrepreneurship” mean?

To put it very simply, it means making things happen in a way that takes into consideration the short, medium, and long-term. From one point of view, the expression can be contrasted to the concept of “selfish entrepreneurship,” in which people seek advantages only for themselves and often at any cost. On the other hand, the expression

can also be contrasted to “unconscious entrepreneurship,” in which a non-sustainable way of life is produced—a destructive way of living that generates imbalances of all kinds.

At this point in our discussion, the key question emerges clearly: how can sustainable entrepreneurship help to develop Brazil? To what degree is this concept fundamental to the “strategic management” of our country and of the communities of which it is composed?

What we need most in our country is the energy to make things happen, but in a conscious manner. For this, we first need to transmute the wasted energy (in criticism/analysis/diagnostics, in process-related activities that bureaucratize everything around us, in efforts to circumvent the law and seek advantages for the few) and turn this into energy that moves us toward sustainability and the common good. In second place, we need to focus all of this energy on the “right” things.

### Where should we apply this entrepreneurial energy?

Simply ceasing to apply our energies to unethical and predatory activities would be a step in the right direction, but much more than this is needed. We must make sure that society’s entrepreneurial energy is very well applied for the common good. But how should those entrepreneurs who are willing to work both for themselves and for the common good proceed?

In essence, all of the entrepreneurial energy should be applied to meeting the needs of society. The best image here is that of everyone in society applying their energy to helping to meet the sum of all of the needs that exist in society itself. We have already seen that this energy is present in everyone, from the housewife to the laborer, to the employees and executives of companies, from governments to civil society.

To meet social needs? No, not only social needs, but rather needs in a broad sense, in the sense of all needs. Thus the expression “the needs of society.”

When we think about the sum of all of the needs of society (which are many), we immediately face an enormous paradox. It is the paradox of having, on the one hand, many needs, and on the other, unemployment (that is, people with nothing to do). The existence of this paradox is also a testament to ineffectiveness in management. Whose ineffectiveness? In part, that of governments, and in part, of business people who do not create companies geared to existing needs (and who even prefer to deal in the superfluous in highly-congested markets). Another part of this ineffectiveness belongs to those who are competent at making things happen but who decide not to use their abilities to meet the needs of society (believing that this is the responsibility of the government, of other businesses and institutions – in general, of “someone else”).

How, then, can this paradox be eliminated? Most fundamental to eliminating it is to create a mega-equation for

society as a whole:

*“How can we assure the existence of creative processes of highly integrative management (capable of involving all members of society, without exclusion of any kind) that function such that all of society’s needs are met in a highly effective manner, using the work of all of its members (that is, everyone helping to meet the existing needs, with the result of zero ‘unemployment’)?”*

To the degree that society as a whole, together, seeks to solve this equation in an innovative/creative manner, we will make huge leaps in all areas (social, economic, etc.).

The effective management of society, therefore, means the creation of a context in which everyone in society is contributing to guaranteeing that everyone else in society has his or her basic needs met, at all times, in a sustainable manner.

### How can this mega-equation be solved?

First, by daring to set this equation on the table so that society as a whole can use its creative capacity in the search for pragmatic, innovative solutions, in a natural, continuous, and sustained manner. This would bring focus to the process as a whole.

Second, elaborate—with the participation of society—a complete “map” of society’s needs (from the largest to the smallest).

Third, create a type of clearinghouse in which collectively (and creatively), an attempt is made to assign an adequate allocation of human energy to each set of needs. The premise here is that if this clearinghouse works right, we will not have anyone left inactive (zero unemployment, zero entrepreneurs/companies doing useless things, or things unrelated to the needs we want to meet). Society as a whole will be evolving in a healthy manner in all sectors and all areas, and so forth.

This is the central idea of a type of management—public and private—that is very different from what we see in societies in general.

In the next article, I will consider two other issues related to the essence of this new type of management in relation to the one that still prevails today and is very outdated: 1) the likely causes of the distortions in the system of management used today; 2) the new roles that the various institutions of society – government, the private sector, civil society – should play in this new type of participative democracy that we urgently need in our country.

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