



Principles of Entrepreneurism from Martin Luther King, Jr.



This article examines Dr. King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail", and shows how the principles he exhorts can be used to develop and sustain entrepreneurship. Like King's strategies for desegregation in Birmingham and elsewhere, successful entrepreneurship also begins with a plan. Foremost and most important should be:

- "Opening the D.O.O.R.S to Success"
- Focus yourself by "Planning in Seclusion"
- Always "Build With Your Altitude in Mind."

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Dr. King's greatest contributions come from his work as an orator, a civil rights activist, and his continued positive impact on society forty years after his death. However, generally speaking, his influence on humankind and our culture is much further reaching than at first glance.

He is most remembered for his "I Have A Dream" speech, but it is his lesser-known "Letter From A Birmingham Jail" that serves as a genuine manual on how to fire up your entrepreneurial spirit. It is from here that you can gain some key insights on how to be a

successful entrepreneur. He brings a new level of understanding to starting a business correctly or moving an existing business to the next level as he explores and discusses strategies on implementation and effectiveness.



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I Opening the D.O.O.R.S. to Success[©]

Dr. King, in his Letter, outlined the five planning phases necessary to open any door and turn an idea into reality.

DREAMS OPPORTUNITIES OBSTACLES RESOURCES STEPS



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Dreams

Birmingham, Alabama authorities arrested Martin Luther King for ignoring an injunction against leading protests. While in jail he started to write a letter to the black community to explain his role as a civil rights leader and to the leaders of the white clergy that criticized his activities.

Dr. King started his plan with the first critical step. He provided a description of the problem (segregation laws and discrimination) and why his approach was best (non-violent demonstrations). The Letter stated when you should begin seeing results (immediately). Giving dates to your dream is imperative. Rev. King expressed the urgency, stating, *“We have waited 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights . . . We’ve taken about all we can . . . The status quo cannot continue.”*

Like King, you must write down your dream. Studies have shown written goals have a greater chance of being realized than non-written goals. Three questions must be answered: What are the problems, the cause, and/or the unmet needs you are trying to solve? Why is your product (goods and/or services) best, better or different than the competition (direct, in-direct or substitutes)? When (specific date) are you going to realize the results (revenue and profit)?

The Letter clearly gave the readers a narrative picture of the sunlight behind the door, one that others could see and agree to join by helping to open the door. Your plan must do the same if you have any intention of creating a working business.

Opportunities

Next, outline the reasons your dream is reachable. Below are some of the reasons King believed that his dream was possible.

- The 14th Amendment, the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, and the Bi-

ble gave King a legal and moral right to stand against discrimination.

- Recently and not far away, the black community embraced action in Montgomery, Alabama with a non-violent boycott (over a year) that resulted in victory when some of the City’s segregation laws were ended.
- Birmingham’s black community and liberal white community had shown a strong desire to use non-violence to end one of the nation’s most segregated communities.
- King believed he had the experience and responsibility to help Birmingham’s black community as he did in Montgomery. King explained “. . . *just as Apostle Paul . . . carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco-Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town.*”

Where are your opportunities? List the reasons that the industry, target market, your product’s strengths, your competitor’s weaknesses, and/or your personal experiences make your dream possible. Explain that it is a door that can be opened, not a wall that is keeping you from your dream.

Obstacles

After listing opportunities, the next phase is explaining what obstacles must be overcome. A summary of those in the Letter are:

- Discrimination was legal in state and local laws, accepted by the establishment.
- The white community demonstrated in the past they would respond with violence (arrests, beatings, bombings) to anyone who challenged their segregated way of life. King wrote “. . . *freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor . . .*”
- Change is not comfortable for anyone. The black community needed to make changes for a non-violent approach. The white liberals, he felt, “. . . *would be among our greatest allies. Instead some have been outright opponents . . . all too many others remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained glass windows.*”
- King, living in Montgomery and originally from Atlanta, was viewed as an outsider by the Birmingham residents who felt he had no right to be involved in their community.

What are your obstacles? Be honest about the reasons why you are facing a closed, locked door. King did not sugar coat the facts about the challenges. You should not either; it will only hurt you in the end.

Resources

Martin Luther King, Jr. used several resources. Some of those were:

- King communicated that he and his followers were in God's will and thought faith change would come "*... comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be co-workers with God...*"
- Federal government would step in if violence by whites in retaliation became prevalent and widespread (the age of TV brought national and international attention to discrimination that embarrassed the federal government).
- Mahatma Gandhi was King's mentor. Gandhi successfully fought British oppression with passive resistance.
- Pulpits of African American churches in the community were used to communicate the need to protest for change and served as training grounds.

There are basically six resources available in any business: human, natural, capital (plant, property, & equipment), financial, information, and your time. Whose resources are you going to use as keys to unlock the door?

Steps

After the public dissemination of the Letter, King and his followers began their boycotts, marches, public forums, and other methods to create tension. The Letter clearly laid out the steps of how passive resistance works.

How are you going to take the steps necessary to open the doors by building on your opportunities, addressing your obstacles and utilizing your resources to reach your dream?

The best analogy to describe the "Step" phase of planning is the use of a navigation system when traveling. You must enter in your ending point (your dream) and your starting point (the opportunities and obstacles). The navigation system, as a series of several resources (human, capital, financial, information, and time) presents you with step-by-step direction. Of course, a navigation system does not give the steps in alphabetical order or random order. That would be useless. Steps need to be in priority order.

Many people go on a trip without planning—just get in the car and start driving. "I'm not lost," says the non-planning traveler, "I just made a few wrong turns and do not know where I am right now." How many wrong turns can you afford to make with your business? Martin Luther King, Jr. knew that the civil rights movement

could not afford to make many wrong turns and become lost. He developed a plan. Entrepreneurism is more than just a good idea. True entrepreneurs convert needed innovations into reality.

II Planning in Seclusion

The second major principle on entrepreneurship from Martin Luther King is he did not write his plan in the busy-ness of the day. As the title of the Letter suggests, King wrote it while in a Birmingham jail. Local police arrested King for ignoring an injunction against leading protests. He was placed in solitary confinement for days.

At the time, King's imprisonment was an unfortunate circumstance. Looking back today, it was fortunate.

Would this document have been written if King was not forced to be alone for days? Could it have been done around his busy day of speeches, meetings, and protests? We will never know. The Letter had such a significant impact on the civil rights movement, it is hard to imagine what would have happened without King's plan.

"Some people hope, others plan; failing to plan is planning to fail." Are you truly dedicating the necessary time and focusing on your business's future?

We are not suggesting that a successful entrepreneurial plan has never been written around someone's busy schedule. But we are suggesting that a plan cannot be an afterthought. It is so critical to success that one must dedicate the time to review, reflect and rejuvenate from the outside looking in at the business.

Each year, set 3 to 4 days aside for the purpose of transforming your business. Hold a retreat. Spend time on the following:

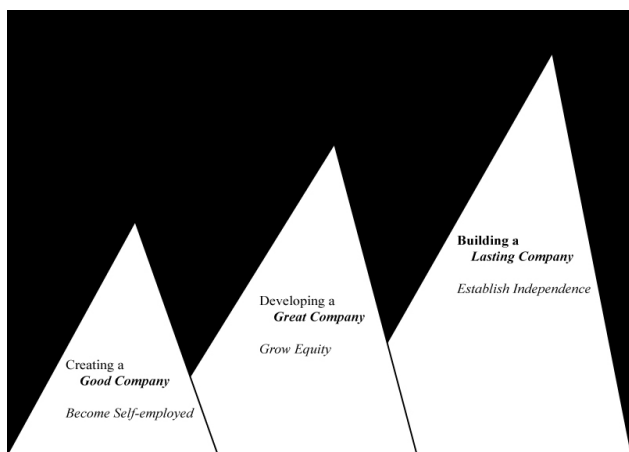
- Read a book or attend a seminar for new insight.
- Perform at least one enjoyable, relaxing exercise to separate your mind from the day-to-day activities of the business.
- Check your business directions against your personal goals. Do they match?
- Decide if your new steps (strategy) are aligned with your systems (policies & procedures), structure (who is assigned to tasks), skills, culture (norms, values & beliefs), and budget. Your business is like your car; it will be consistently out of alignment and must be corrected, or it will deteriorate.
- Review your plan, going through the five planning phases: affirming your Dream, understanding your Obstacles & Opportunities, identifying Resources, and outlining Steps (existing, new or different).

III Building With Your Altitude in Mind

When Dr. King wrote his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” its purpose was not just a plan to open the Doors for Birmingham’s black community. He wrote the document to last beyond Birmingham, beyond ending southern segregation, beyond the civil rights movement. The words were written to present a manual for passive resistance for any cause. The Letter has value, as we have demonstrated, for many purposes.

This did not happen by accident. King, in our opinion, had this long range intention in mind. He wanted the Letter to last past the immediate need of Birmingham. Yes, King took it one step at a time, but as he wrote he was looking at its highest usage.

Every small business has three potential altitudes. The first peak is creating a “Good Company”; the owner is attempting to become “self-employed.” The business provides enough money to meet immediate financial obligations. Owner draw from the business equals the amount received from a job working the same hours.



The second peak is developing a “Great Company,” in which the owner is able to be away from day-to-day functions of the business and its compensation is greater than their time in the business.

Peak three is building a “Lasting Company,” being absolutely free. All business functions can be duplicated without the entrepreneur’s direct involvement. The business can last for another generation or for another owner.

Have you selected your altitude and are you building

with that altitude in mind? If you desire to become a true entrepreneur, and obtain the true prize of freedom, it requires working on the business, not in the business. You need to write a plan as King wrote the Letter that goes beyond what you have today. You must build your business as if you were to franchise it. Have systems in place for each significant process. If you build it as if you were going to franchise it, you will truly have a business that can operate on its own and you can become a true entrepreneur. Dr. King wrote the Letter as if to franchise his beliefs of passive resistance.

A common myth is that ALL small business owners are entrepreneurs. True entrepreneurs undertake a cause that inspires dreaming, have the faith to ask “what if” and “if when” and possess the courage to act. Entrepreneurism is the energy within those who change our society.

Many small business owners stopped being entrepreneurs, losing the spirit that inspired them to start a business. The entrepreneurial spirit became overtaken by laboring in the day-to-day ownership duties, focusing on the here and now.

The second myth is that ONLY current and aspiring small business owners CAN be entrepreneurs. It is true that many changes in our society such as product and service inventions came from entrepreneurial small business owners, but not all. A third myth is that people are born to be entrepreneurs, that it is something that you cannot learn. This is also not true.

An excellent resource to reach independence and be free from being owned by your business is the book “The E-Myth Revisited: Why Most Small Businesses Don’t Work and What to Do About It.” This article was written with the author’s truths throughout.

Entrepreneurism can and must be learned. Many people become entrepreneurs because they watched those around them show the energy within that resulted in change. Dr. King had a mentor, Gandhi, and you need one too—living, deceased, real, and/or fictitious. Classic literature, as demonstrated in this article, as well as films, are instilled with human spirit—action, reactions, and interaction—the fundamentals of entrepreneurship. Classics may not answer all of your question, but will enable you to ask better questions.

Bernette Henry is a retired professor of English, teaching at colleges in both New York and Maryland. She used the *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* in several classes. Under the leadership of one of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s deputies, she became active with the civil rights movement in the New York City area.

Russell C. Teter III serves as the Director of the Northern Maryland Small Business Development Center (SBDC), serving 1,000 existing and aspiring small business owners per year. While attending Hartwick College, his professors supplemented traditional text with classic literature and films as business case studies. In 2006, he was honored by Maryland’s Governor and Lt. Governor with a Proclamation & State Capital flow flag for co-founding the Minority Business Assistance Program for Maryland, which “encourages minority entrepreneurs to be stronger leaders and advocates.”