

## 10 gifts from 10 years as an entrepreneur



This week I celebrated the 10-year milestone of my business. As any entrepreneur will tell you, that day inspires a mix of immense gratitude for good fortune and pride at your perseverance and hard work. I took a moment to think back on the day I first stepped into the entrepreneurial world and reflect on all the lessons learned along the way – some accidentally and others through difficult

moments. Today, as a gift to every aspiring entrepreneur thinking of going out on their own, I'd like to share the 10 most valuable things I have learned in business.

## **10 Valuable Lessons for Entrepreneurs**

### **1. Be true to yourself**

When I inherited my business, I had only one year's experience and was nestled in a safe consulting position. It catapulted me into the reality of running a business, and the first lesson presented itself very quickly.

In the first month I had to present my credentials to the senior leadership of one of our clients. I will never forget how anxious I was and how the first question completely threw me: "How many clients have you been able to retain and how many new ones have you acquired?"

I barely had time to think and I honestly do not recall my exact answer, but that question kickstarted my journey to authenticity. My integrity did not allow me to present anything else but my reality at the time. The courage to be human paid off hugely, and this client is still by my side after 10 years.

Learn from feedback and seek every opportunity to fine-tune your offering. But do not let others' input derail you from your vision. Stay true to your voice – this is the backbone of small business.

No matter how senior or intimidating people are, they are still human and sense if you are being truthful and sincere.

### **2. Be prepared to fight**

Corporates are not the bricks and mortar, you see – they are made up of people. All too often, people hide behind a culture that allows behaviour that is far removed from humanity.

In the first week of taking over the business, a major client took their business to another supplier, despite a signed project agreement. They did not know if I would be able to deliver the work and did not ask either.

I took them on for breach of contract, and the matter was settled.

Toughen up when the going gets tough.

### **3. Believe you are making a difference**



I often find myself thinking about my purpose in business and in life. How am I making a difference?

I am reminded now of something one of my top interviewers told me a while back. She had started to use the techniques we taught her (especially active listening and empathy) with her son and husband. This made me enormously grateful – we are changing the way people engage with each other.

More recently, our research psychology intern emotionally told us how much she appreciated the exposure and the opportunity we gave her. It was so rewarding and unexpected to see her exponential transformation in confidence.

My business model provides a source of income to competent people who may not be able to take on permanent positions in the formal workspace due to their personal circumstances. Our team includes students completing their master's degrees, stay-at-home-moms, single moms, mature workers and disabled people. This modern, flexible business model means they can work from the comfort of their homes (or from anywhere), at their own pace. No traffic and no compromises when children get sick. They can study *and* work with well-earned qualifications and skills, expand their work experience, and make a difference.

People's sense of self-worth and value are hugely enhanced by the ability to contribute and do meaningful work. You can make a difference and contribute despite challenging personal circumstances.

#### **4. Be consistent and reliable**

During the first few days of every month for ten years now, we prepare our clients' CX month-end reports. We commit strong mental resources and deliver a quality product on time, every time. This consistency builds trust and confidence in clients. Even my family and friends know that I book out those days to produce these reports, no matter where I am in the world, be it Cancun or Italy. I believe this has been the key to my 10-year tenure as a small business owner.

Lead by example, keep the focus on the value you bring and inspire your team to embrace their role in the collective result.

Your last work is the best showcase of your ability to deliver.

#### **5. Reinvent yourself**

I have learned that you can and *have* to reinvent yourself, time and time again. Not only does the



social and business context fluctuate; needs and challenges change too.

Ten years ago we designed a [customer experience management programme](#) that was undoubtedly ahead of its time. The realization of what customer experience can do for brand differentiation, has now hit the South African business shores in full force, and [CX professionals](#) were taking up this challenge with gusto. Yet most were focused on the numbers, while our programme tracked the experience of customers through conversation and stories. We were lone soldiers at the time.

Although we still passionately advocate the value of customers' stories for consumer behaviour insights, we are always seeking the next horizon. This lesson is also a personal challenge: push boundaries to disrupt and to bring change.

Passionately do what you believe in and the rest will follow.

## **6. Never stop learning**

One of the most daunting aspects of being an entrepreneur is the constantly changing playing fields and the knowledge you need to survive. Over the past 10 years I have had to adapt and master an astoundingly long list of new tools: for business efficiency, online accounting, collaboration, project management, time management, editing, social media, marketing, presentation, proposal writing, research methodologies, analytics and facilitation.

Although I sometimes feel like the jack of all trades and master of none, I know that the very nature of the entrepreneurial space underpins the need to evolve and learn; this agility is your key to survival.

Try out new tools and approaches to make your business more agile and efficient.

## **7. Celebrate your success**

There is really no one to pat you on the back when you are an entrepreneur. There is no boss, and very few clients, who can give you the encouragement and positive feedback to keep going. Where do you get bucket loads of resilience then? By celebrating the smallest of victories.

In my experience, most clients feel that employees' and suppliers' payment is the reward, which is also evident in how they treat their staff. However, I will never forget a client calling me after a team workshop, to simply thank me for our efforts and contribution to their business. I was moved to tears as these moments are rare. I felt truly valued and, guess what, I would do anything to return their appreciation and faith in my business.

Another time I asked a client if he would write a testimonial of our work, and was deeply touched by the letter – I never realized how much they valued us.

Reflect on your service delivery often and recognize when you and your team have done great work. Celebrate the smallest successes by consciously noticing any change. And when a client acknowledges your contribution, share this to inspire your team.

Ask for a testimonial – their view on your contributions may surprise you.

## **8. Manage expectations and set healthy boundaries**

I soon learned that, just as in corporate, you can quickly be swallowed up by your clients' demands. Your illusion that you are your own boss will come crashing down: you still work for a boss, they are just now called clients.

I know other entrepreneurs whose clients call them after hours and expect them to immediately act. My advice is to set reasonable time frames and to not overcommit. When you spot a challenge with your delivery, speak up and re-negotiate. In most cases, one day will make a huge difference in your life, but not in your clients' business. You can guide these conversations better when you understand what drives certain deadlines for the clients.

If you don't, you will end up resenting the client, deliver poor work, or be disappointed in yourself when you push yourself purely for the sake of a deadline. Have the courage to set boundaries and manage client expectations. Sometimes it means that you have to choose your or your family's happiness over your clients.

If you do not value your own time, your clients will not either. Do the best you can in the time you have.

## **9. Connect with other entrepreneurs**

When I just started out on my own, I had a standing Friday lunch date with a friend who had also started her own consultancy. We shared our frustrations and our successes. We spoke about how best to approach clients and design our administrative processes. We shared contacts and supported each other emotionally. It was one of the most meaningful contact sessions I had each week. In the following years, I have often connected with other entrepreneurs who face similar challenges. It helps to contextualise the roads less travelled with pit stops to recharge, refuel and grow.

Reach out to others who understand the challenges of trying to make it on your own. Invest

the time in connecting with people who can inspire and support you, and reciprocate.

## **10. Positive cashflow is king**

Without a positive cashflow, business becomes a never-ending source of stress, regardless of turnover. I have been extremely blessed with no bad debt and a positive cashflow in ten years, and I contribute this to solid relationships with clients, having the courage to ask, and good governance. Irrespective of the size of the business, good financial practices are essential.

My goal has never been about money, but to play a significant role in the economy, to be a responsible employer and enable our entire team to contribute and sustain our personal dreams.

I do what I do because I want to make a meaningful difference, but I am worthy of being rewarded with fair compensation.

*Today, armed with a suitcase of lessons, I venture out onto the next 10 years. I thank all the clients who have trusted us, a supportive and committed team, and of course, friends and family, whom without, no entrepreneur will survive.*