

Effective Entrepreneur Enabling – Increasing the Effectiveness of Advising, Coaching and Mentoring Support

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ABSTRACT

This paper has been written as a commentary, debate and dialogue about critical issues in entrepreneur enabling. The general issues discussed, which draw upon case-based research from around the world, are clearly relevant for a wide audience. However the specific comments on certain business support programmes in the UK, and upon current UK priorities for targeted support, are country specific. There are two main reasons for writing this paper – first to capture certain conclusions from on-going research into entrepreneur enabling, and second to explore some of the implications of current UK government policy on business support and growth.

INTRODUCTION – THE ENABLING BIG PICTURE

Entrepreneurs – we know one when we see one. But can we identify those with the real potential before they set out and thus make our support mechanisms more effective? The answer is 'Yes'.

There are people who argue that anyone can be an entrepreneur. However if we accept that 'entrepreneurs are people who habitually create and innovate to build something of recognised value around perceived opportunities' (Bolton and Thompson, 2000, 2002 & 2004) then we must conclude that many enterprising people – who might build very successful micro and small, limited-growth, businesses are not true entrepreneurs. Such enterprising people may not be entrepreneurs, but they are valuable in their own ways; a thriving economy needs both. Significantly, the support and the enabling they need varies – which in turn demands we try and identify those with true entrepreneurial potential so we can provide them with the most appropriate package.

This argument can be taken to another level of complexity, of course. We might argue that each and every one of us should seek to be creative, innovative and enterprising in everything we do, regardless of our position in an organisation or the sector in which we work. This has an impact on the enterprise agenda in schools and universities as well as creating a need to encourage and reward intrapreneurial behaviour in larger organisations. These also need enabling in specific and appropriate ways – but they are beyond the direct scope of this particular paper.

Business advisers, business mentors, business coaches and business incubator staff – we all know that some are truly effective enablers whilst others fail to connect with those they seek to advise and help. Can we identify those people with enabling capacity? Again the answer is 'Yes'. Here we are using the term 'entrepreneur enabler' as an umbrella term to embrace a number of advisory and support roles, which we define and delineate later in this paper.

Again, there are people who would argue that anyone with a business degree or some business experience could help the would-be entrepreneur. Retired managers must make ideal business advisers because they have spent their life in the world of business. There will be examples where this argument does hold – and many other instances where it simply doesn't. We believe that qualifications and experience are valuable assets to have, but equally important, and maybe even more important, is an ability to understand the enabling process 'big picture' and to appreciate what the client needs and how this can best be provided. In turn this demands a need for empathy and trust between the enabler and the person being supported.

When we look at the growth of entrepreneurial communities, such as Silicon Valley in the US and Cambridge in the UK, we can see the significance of both venture capital and networks. Experienced entrepreneurs start new businesses both habitually and serially; they also act as investors in other start-ups. In this way they coach and mentor others. Venture capitalists often appoint mentors they believe to be suitable to support new entrepreneurs – and to help protect their investment. These may not be formalised enabling initiatives, but they are very significant.

Whilst some private sector and public sector attempts to stimulate entrepreneurial initiatives – business incubators and others - are outstandingly successful, others deliver disappointing results. On occasions some people in positions where they are allegedly helping entrepreneurs actually frustrate them because they cannot connect with them and appreciate their real needs. There is no shortage of both anecdotal and research evidence of poor connections between 'advisers' and entrepreneurs. At the same time, other initiatives have delivered the desired outcomes.

There will be many reasons for this, and they will vary on a case-by-case basis. However our case-based research, relying extensively on formal and informal interviews with both

entrepreneurs and enablers, has reinforced how important it is to see business support and business incubation as processes and not simply an activity, a programme or a building.

Formalised business support in the UK

The responsibility for delivering business support in the UK has been devolved to the relevant Development Agencies by the government. The Small Business Service has an important policy-making role, but it does not deliver services. In the main this implementation ultimately lies with Business Links and Enterprise Agencies. The most visible support role is that of the Business Adviser. We explore this in more detail later in the paper, but fundamentally advisers are key sources of information and contacts. Advisers are not coaches and they are not mentors. Some will help entrepreneurs and small business owners to identify their real needs and then introduce them to others who might help them – but at this point any free service often disappears and support is brokered to a private sector provider. Businesses identified as having ‘high growth potential’ could receive additional support to those perceived to be lifestyle or micro in scope and ambition.

When we get anecdotal reports of client dissatisfaction from the business advice they receive in this way, there can be a number of explanations. It is possible that the frequently reached conclusion that the adviser is not very good at his/her job is correct. It is also possible the client both needs and expects a quite different service, perhaps one based on genuine mentoring and is disappointed when this is not available. To deal with this issue the UK Enterprise Agencies have supported the development of volunteer mentor programmes in various regions – including some very successful ones – but the pump-prime funding for this has ended. A programme of coaching – fundamentally performance coaching as distinct from personal or life coaching – for identified high-growth businesses is currently being developed and rolled out, again via the UK Development Agencies. And underpinning all of these initiatives, Business Links and Enterprise Agencies offer (generally free) training programmes covering the fundamentals of starting up for anyone who expresses an interest.

The underlying ethos of this public sector support is that it is free to the client and this can sometimes affect client expectations. In other words, if it is free it can't be worth very much! But of course, the opposite can also hold true. Some clients who are paying for professional advice or consultancy expect ‘guaranteed answers’ because, after all, that's what they are paying for. There is another danger here too – the client pays for support and abdicates both ownership and responsibility to the provider. Really this should never happen – the ownership of the problem and the resolution always lie with the entrepreneur.

Business incubation

Business incubation offers a supportive and sometimes nurturing environment for new and young businesses. UKBI (UK Business Incubation), which has published guidelines on good practice, has shown there are some 280 ‘declared incubation environments’ in the UK, equating to one for every 19000 SMEs, which is close to the European average. Only a small minority are financially sustainable without any form of public subsidy, often European money. Incubators vary, particularly in the enabling support they offer.

Although managing real estate is a key element in a business incubator manager's job it can sometimes become a distraction from the ultimate purpose, which is helping *new* and young businesses survive and grow in the early stages of their lives. Incubator managers can play a critical role in the enabling process, both working directly with their tenant businesses and selecting others to provide the necessary support. Amongst others, these will include professionals (accountants and lawyers), business advisers and successful entrepreneurs who ‘want to put something back’ by helping others, often voluntarily.

The support that the incubation team provides can never be a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, and the ability to customise that support around a generic core is critical. Some enablers are very flexible and can change their approach as circumstances dictate; others are less flexible, ideal in certain circumstances but less relevant in others.

The enabling challenge

With both formal business support initiatives and business incubators we are faced with two key challenges:

- How to help enablers appreciate and understand their most natural style, and also to appreciate which style is most appropriate for the entrepreneur and the situation
- How to engineer an effective match between entrepreneur and enabler. This effective match implies congruency between the entrepreneur's needs and preferred learning style and the enabler's preferred support style.

Underpinning this is a very simple belief that if you raise awareness you raise the metaphorical bar.

The conclusions from our research are that:

- It is important to exercise some appropriate selection when encouraging people to set off on the start-up or self-employment route, when looking for candidates for dedicated programmes and when recruiting tenants for incubators – in part so that would-be entrepreneurs can be counselled effectively, but also to identify where they most need help and how that can be best provided
- Entrepreneur enablers also need recruiting carefully. We believe that effective enablers have certain distinguishing characteristics and that, in part, they are entrepreneurs themselves
- It is important to acknowledge that enabling is not a one-size-fits-all activity. It embraces 'talent spotting', advising, counselling, training, mentoring and coaching. Some enablers are more comfortable with and more inclined towards certain of these roles and less comfortable with others. The most effective enablers are those who can think 'outside the box' and who are willing to act outside their direct remit when it is appropriate to do so. In addition different incubatees have different needs – and these needs change over time
- The stage of the development of the business, the industry in question, the background of the entrepreneur and his/her motives for the future of the business are all relevant variables for creating a suitable enabler-entrepreneur partnership – as is the background and natural style of the enabler himself/herself.

What enabling involves

The key starting point is an appreciation that new business start-up, development and growth involves three inter-twined strands. All three matter, but how they are best dealt with varies. The strands are:

1. The basic idea into a successful product or service. This is where technical expertise is sometimes valuable and where an ability to implant the customer perspective is critical. Ideas are not necessarily opportunities. What seems a good idea might not find favour amongst potential customers.

2. The proverbial spare bedroom into an organisation. At one level this concerns basic operating and financial systems; at another level it involves building a suitable team of people, directing and leading them. It is important not to overlook that some people start businesses because they are frustrated with organisational life; if their business is successful they will have to build their own organisation. These issues are particularly important for businesses and entrepreneurs concerned with growth.
3. The entrepreneur-in-waiting into a 'competent practitioner'. For people who are genuinely entrepreneurs in waiting, this implies helping them make the most of their talents and managing their temperament. For people who do not possess the natural characteristics of an entrepreneur, the development process is more complex and involves an element of serious counselling.

It is all-too-easy to focus attention on the first of these three, the product, and ignore or at least underestimate the significance of the others, especially the would-be entrepreneur himself/herself.

THE ENABLER'S CONTRIBUTION

Academics and academic researchers can sometimes be accused of navel-gazing at a level of detail that is far removed from reality, such that they have no impact on real managers, just fellow researchers. Some aspects of the work in how entrepreneurs learn fit this contention, and yet this is a critically important issue for both the entrepreneur and those involved in enabling. It is important for those involved in supporting would-be entrepreneurs to reflect upon their needs and how these needs can best be met. In other words, to think seriously about the enabling process.

More specifically this means enablers need to:

- Know their own enabling strengths and weaknesses
- Understand what style comes naturally to them, and what would be a struggle
- Appreciate how *individual* entrepreneurs network, think and learn – for they are not all the same
- Diagnose **what** the entrepreneur in question needs, **why** they need it, **who** can best provide it – if not them – and **how** it can best be provided to suit the learning style of the entrepreneur – then
- Engage and seek to influence in the most appropriate way.

Sometimes enablers should conclude they are not the right person for a particular situation and withdraw – in the process perhaps attempting to introduce the entrepreneur to someone who can be more effective. But this will never be easy if people are being paid or when outputs are important measures.

THE ENABLING ROLES OUTLINED

From our research (see, for example, Thompson, 2006) we have concluded that we need to examine the following roles and how they are perceived in the world of business support.

- **Talent spotting** – identifying those people with the potential to be successful entrepreneurs. Arguably this role is often ignored, in part through a desire and willingness to offer help to anyone who seeks it. But when we do ignore this we may not be helping a person in the long term because we may fail to target support to those areas where it is most needed.
- **Counselling** – working with people to help them appreciate their potential –beginning with identification - and counselling on whether they should, or should not, pursue the

route of the entrepreneur, for which they may not be ready. Here there is an element of 'making sense of the past' and appreciating readiness through reflection and captured learning. Sometimes where output targets really matter, there can be real pressure to encourage people, albeit in a qualified way, when perhaps they should be discouraged.

- **Advising** – At a general level, helping a person become more aware about what's 'out there' in terms of help, advice, grants, loans etc – and what they need to do to obtain it. At this level it is a role often provided by public sector business advisers who have detailed specialist knowledge of grants and schemes. At another level it involves professional advice available from experts, such as accountants and intellectual property lawyers. In some respects these professional advisers are acting as **consultants** (often paid, but sometimes providing it pro bono) because their commitment is not on going. Business Advisers, then, help people develop their ideas into products and businesses. They do this by providing information and access to information and to other forms of expert help.
- **Training (and teaching)** – imparting knowledge, both general and specific and often to groups rather than on a one-to-one basis.
- **Performance Coaching** - working *with* a person *inside* the business to get things done and improve performance – using a directive (show and tell) approach. Performance Coaches improve competencies in key business functions. Ideally it will take the perspective that coaching '*transfers* knowledge, know-how and experience to the businesses rather than doing it for them. [terminology from The European Mentoring and Coaching Council].
- **Mentoring** – again working *with* a person *inside* the business to get things done and improve performance – but using a non-directive approach. Business Mentors need to believe in the people that they are supporting and helping, and take actions to help them be the very best they can at what they do in the context of the business. To accomplish this they might:
 1. Help people develop their entrepreneurial potential and capabilities
 2. Help re-draw and re-shape the 'bigger picture'
 3. Add value to the would-be entrepreneur's original idea
 4. Help people grow in confidence as their business develops
 5. Stimulate thinking and provide reality checks
 6. Offer a sympathetic and listening ear when people need to talk something through
 7. Prepare entrepreneurs for their organisational leadership role.
- **Personal (or Life) Coaching** – working *with* a person *on* the business, helping them develop themselves and improve their personal performance. Life Coaches help people clarify where they personally want to take their business, decide whether they want to sell out and move on, or stay as it grows. They also help people set objectives for both themselves and their business and establish processes for tracking their progress and achievements.

Advisers, performance coaches and trainers typically impart information, knowledge and techniques. Advisers and trainers may not be true 'enablers' if they are only versed in techniques.

Mentors and personal coaches meanwhile impart wisdom. They help people develop their talents and manage their temperament. They also help them to set their personal and business visions, to 'grow as people' and 'accommodate the knocks'.

The coaching and mentoring roles are critical because there is never 'one best way' of doing anything in business. Nor does it follow that copying what another entrepreneur or another business has done will work just as well in different circumstances. Entrepreneurs can buy and read 'how to' management books; they can also read entrepreneur biographies. And arguably

they should do this. But rather than following in the footsteps of others, they should reflect and try to tease out the relevance of the messages for their particular circumstances. It is here that 'wise counsel' – possibly someone who might have reached different conclusions from reading the same books! – can be very useful for listening, provoking and generally debating ideas.

What does matter, though, is to know and recognise when and where we are working on the needs of the business – albeit *through* the entrepreneur - and when and where we are focusing on the person, the entrepreneur, himself. We should never forget, though, that effective enablers work on or with the entrepreneur, who, in turns, runs the business. Responsibility and ownership of the decisions should never pass from the entrepreneur to the enabler.

	DEVELOPING THE BUSINESS IDEA	DEVELOPING THE ENTREPRENEUR
<i>EMPHASIS OF THE ENABLING RELATIONSHIP IS ON THE BUSINESS</i>	<i>ADVISING</i>	<i>MENTORING</i>
<i>EMPHASIS OF THE ENABLING RELATIONSHIP IS ON THE PERSON</i>	<i>PERFORMANCE COACHING</i>	<i>PERSONAL/ LIFE COACHING</i>

There is another important distinction to make, and that is between the directive and non-directive styles. Typically mentors and life coaches would be expected to adopt a non-directive style and to question and listen extensively. Advisers, trainers and performance coaches will typically be more directive. Different enablers can therefore feel more or less comfortable in different roles in part because of their natural inclination to listen and respond or to tell.

IDENTIFYING ENTREPRENEURS AND ENABLERS

Bolton and Thompson (op cit) argue that business techniques matter for the entrepreneur, but they do not define the entrepreneur. Instead, we need to look at the existence and relative strength of certain natural characteristics or character themes. They identified some 30 of these which they 'package' as six clusters under their FACETS acronym. These six characteristics are:

- Focus** Time, Target and Action are the three component characteristics
- Advantage** Vision (for selecting the winning opportunity), benefit orientation (for identifying where and how value can be created and added), performance orientation (for monitoring and control) and resourcing
- Creativity** Encompassing ideas generation, opportunity generation (prior to selecting the right one) and solutions (linked to problem solving)
These are all talents
- Ego** Our Inner Ego (best known only to ourselves) comprises our motivation, dedication and self-assurance. Our more visible Outer Ego is responsibility, accountability and courage (the way we deal with setbacks)

Ego is temperament.

Together these are the FACE of the individual entrepreneur. Team is required to bring a multiplier effect and leverage them.

Team Person selection, working through a team, using experts (as and when appropriate) and networking. Of course, the use of experts is directly related to the ability to know when a mentor or coach could be valuable and who it makes sense to work with.

Social Beliefs, values, mission and service to others.

Social will affect the direction of the activity and inherent values and behaviours – it is the only characteristic that itself affects the ego.

They can be readily related to, and seen as the underpinning drivers of the behaviours that are typically associated with entrepreneurs. For example, we will often hear it said or see it written that entrepreneurs provide vision/direction (*which relies on creativity and advantage*); passion (*driven by ego and focus*) and they make things happen (*advantage and focus*).

Entrepreneurs do not always 'go it alone' of course. Where there is a core team of people developing and running a business, then it is important that between them they possess the characteristics, and that they are able to complement each other rather than clash. Entrepreneur teams, then, are not selected purely for their functional contributions (marketing, operations, finance etc) but also for their entrepreneur characteristics.

Bolton and Thompson concluded that in general the most effective enablers possess at least some of these FACETS characteristics in line with the entrepreneur they are seeking to help. Where there are characteristic weaknesses, these will typically be related to advantage and/or ego. The implication is the person has simply never been able to spot a winning opportunity for himself (herself) or is motivated by a desire to help others. Here a seventh characteristic, **Enabler**, comes into the equation and impacts on the ego. People strong in this enabler characteristic are committed to helping others, and, significantly, they gain real satisfaction from seeing others succeed.

The argument is that where the enabler is able to think and behave like an entrepreneur, it is easier to build empathy, trust and respect. Entrepreneurs often get frustrated with people who come along and say words to the effect 'I am going to show you how to do it' when there is no evidence that the person saying this has ever actually done anything similar themselves, and taken responsibility for it.

Of course, it is also necessary for the enabler to have reflected upon his (her) own experiences and to have been able to make sense of the lessons – and these might be lessons from either success or failure.

A number of themes help us appreciate the most natural style or styles of enablers. These include:

- Whether a person prefers to work with groups or one-to-one
- The extent to which they genuinely enjoy seeing others succeed – some will be offering enabling services as *their* own business, and be more concerned with their own revenues and profits than those of the entrepreneurs
- Whether they are genuinely good at listening and asking probing questions

- Whether by nature they are directive or non-directive in their approach
- Whether they have a predisposition to particular approaches and systems or will encourage entrepreneurs to work out what will work for them
- Whether fundamentally they are offering knowledge, wisdom or techniques.

In selecting people – either would-be entrepreneurs or as enablers to support them – these themes can be utilised in various ways. Whilst Bolton and Thompson have developed a diagnostic Indicator, the characteristics can also be sought more informally by observation and interview – as long as the interviewer is clear what he or she is looking for and how it might be manifest.

MATCHING ENTREPRENEURS AND ENABLERS

To secure an effective match a Business Incubator Manager – or whoever is seeking to match people – must factor in a number of things:

- The FACETS characteristics of both the entrepreneur and the enabler
- The most natural style of the enabler
- Whether the enabler is flexible and can adjust between styles
- The needs of the *business* – based on its type and stage of development
- The needs of the *entrepreneur* – in particular the person's preferred learning style
- The circumstances – whether this is a group or one-to-one situation
- Whether an individual or several enablers are involved
- Whether the involvement is short-term or on-going
- Whether the enabler is paid or a volunteer, which can affect their willingness to hand over to others if they feel they are the wrong person to be involved.

ENTREPRENEUR ENABLING AND CURRENT POLICY PRIORITIES

At any one time governments will have policy priorities, and the work we are reporting here can have a relevance for a number of current business support priorities. Some of these have already been embraced; others would need further work. This section of the paper, therefore, is reflective on where we are.

Female entrepreneurship

The work on FACETS is not gender specific in any way and it is therefore relevant. The database of people who have completed the on-line Indicator is being analysed during 2006/7 and it will be interesting to see whether there are any significant differences in the characteristic profiles of male and female entrepreneurs.

Research suggests there are management style differences between men and women. One might question whether female entrepreneurs respond better to certain enabling styles, and whether female enablers are more likely to be naturally comfortable with certain enabling styles. But this is not work we have so far tackled.

Ethnic minority entrepreneurship

Very similar comments to the previous section apply here.

Social entrepreneurship

FACETS contains the Social character theme, which itself is split into four levels: beliefs; values; mission; service to others. When business entrepreneurs possess strong and relevant beliefs and values, this can affect a number of aspects of their business and the way they run it. One can find well-run businesses or social enterprises in the hands of a strong and successful entrepreneur, someone who is strong in the other FACETS characteristics, but these may well be businesses which proclaim particular and distinctive values. Those people we would describe as true social entrepreneurs, committed to a cause, will demonstrate the additional social characteristics.

These are important themes if we accept that social enterprises still need to be business-like and run on robust lines. There will be occasions where an individual has a high Social characteristic which supports and influences a strong Ego, but these temperament characteristics are both higher than the Creativity-Advantage-Focus talent characteristics. In such a case we may have someone with real enthusiasm and commitment but who is not a natural entrepreneur.

The other question to consider, of course, is the extent to which an enabler should be sympathetic to the social agenda or the cause in question if he/she is to build a relationship of trust and empathy.

Third age entrepreneurship

We already know that some people opt for the self-employment option in middle age when their financial commitments have lessened and when for them the perceived risks are different and reduced. It seems therefore appropriate to encourage more people to think seriously about this option, but to consider all the risks carefully. They could have a 'lifetime's' business experience and may be able to deal more readily with setbacks and even failure, but equally they may never have experienced the world of micro and small businesses. One might speculate that for many potential third age entrepreneurs business counselling, mentoring and personal coaching will be critically important, and more important than advising and performance coaching – but this will clearly not always be the case.

They may also be far less tolerant of people in whom they have little trust. One could easily see a situation where two people who have both taken early retirement from the same organisation meet face-to-face. One is now seriously contemplating starting a business; the other turns up as his Business Adviser.

Location issues

There are many places where people can start a new business, from their home to rented workspace, from a supportive business incubator to customised residential workspace. The need for the most appropriate enabling never changes, but the specific needs will. Where people are working in close proximity to like-minded people, this can really help when there are opportunities to meet, share and network. Working from home can be very isolated and different networking opportunities need to be created and exploited. There are opportunities for on-line mentoring here, but this will work better for some than others. There is, of course, evidence that appropriate enabler support in a business incubator environment increases the business survival rate.

These comments merely reinforce that location is another critical variable in considering and trying to provide the most appropriate enabling package.

Business growth issues

Businesses with real growth potential are naturally an important priority for the government. Why do some businesses and entrepreneurs with genuine growth potential seem to stagnate

once they reach a certain size? Sometimes this will be the result of the entrepreneur in question making a deliberate decision not to grow because of the potential threat to the business-leisure lifestyle he/she has created. But sometimes it will be because the entrepreneur has become too embroiled in operations and day-to-day problems such that there is no space and time to strategise and map out a growth route forward. In both cases personal coaches can help people take a long hard look at the situation, but in the latter case both a mentor and a performance coach can make important contributions. It is recognised that there are opportunities in China and India and exploiting these needs expert help – something a performance coach can best provide, for example. That said, there will always be a danger in a paid performance coach/consultant creating a strategy for the business that the entrepreneur never truly buys in to and therefore doesn't implement.

To conclude this section, a quick assessment of these six priorities reinforces that in entrepreneur enabling there is no one-size-fits-all solution.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The extent to which policy makers, business incubator managers and others will take these issues seriously is dependent upon a number of factors, some of which are under their control, and some which are harder for them to influence.

Do they want to genuinely select clients for their incubators and/or specific support programmes? Where demand for places exceeds supply, then clearly this is a serious option. If they are struggling to fill their places and they have a rent income or output target to meet, they are likely to be far less selective!

Do they accept the argument that incubation and support is more about process than it is about place and programmes? Although many do accept this perspective, others remain locked into an economic business model for their incubators.

Are they in a position to provide a comprehensive enabling and support programme, or are their resources limited? In one situation, enablers can be deployed where and when they can be most effective. In another situation, the key is to persuade enablers of the need to be flexible and responsive and make sure they are putting the client's real needs to the forefront rather than being especially directive.

Are they willing to remove an enabler who is failing to convince his (her) client and replace with another?

If these issues are taken seriously then, over time, we have a real opportunity to 'raise awareness and thus raise the bar' and thereby improve the effectiveness of the various support programmes and initiatives. That said, for some already effective enablers, these issues are second nature. They have thought about them and dealt with them. Others have further to go!

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Most of the research for this paper has been case-based and observational, but the following earlier works by one of the authors have been cited:

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