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Teaching companies how to be entrepreneurial: cultural change at all levels

Laurence Murray Gillin, Rebecca Gagliardi, Laura Hougaz, David Knowles and Michael Langhammer

Research on entrepreneurship usually concentrates on start-ups and smaller firms, not on how an entrepreneurship mindset fosters innovation as corporate entrepreneurship (CE). Classical case examples, including HP, Microsoft, Intel, Amazon, Google and Facebook, have emphasised the “garage” aspect of the start-up with less focus on the importance of an entrepreneurial mindset driving the culture of corporate strategy to achieve effective innovation. The question remains as to which staff development processes within larger corporate entities and partnerships deliver bottom-line value through innovation.

Recent scholarly studies identify which individuals and organisations are more entrepreneurial and therefore more likely to engage in action (Shepherd *et al.*, 2010). To analyse such motivation, Shepherd *et al.* (2010) coined the term “entrepreneurialism” which refers to how entrepreneurial either an individual’s mindset or an organization’s culture is. The higher the entrepreneurialness, the more entrepreneurial the mindset and culture in decision making.

To explain how and why a corporation or partnership develops, a recognised entrepreneurial mindset over time, we investigate Pitcher Partners Melbourne, a corporate style financial and consulting advisory partnership. Since 1991, Pitcher Partners Melbourne has grown to become the leader in the middle market and the fifth largest Melbourne-based accounting firm with 45 partners and more than 600 professional and support staff across two locations in Melbourne. Pitcher Partners is a national association of independent firms. The association is represented by Pitcher Partners Melbourne, Pitcher Partners Sydney, Pitcher Partners Perth, Pitcher Partners Adelaide, Pitcher Partners Brisbane and Pitcher Partners Newcastle and is also an independent member of Baker Tilly International.

The case study, extending over seven years, assesses the changes in staff behaviour and culture from introducing in-house entrepreneurship education in 2011. The outcomes demonstrating effective innovation, firm growth and a strong financial performance.

Entrepreneurial mindset

Entrepreneurial mindset is a way of thinking about opportunities that surfaces in the firm’s external and internal environment and the commitments, decisions and actions necessary to pursue them, especially under conditions of uncertainty that commonly accompany rapid and significant environmental changes. According to Ireland *et al.* (2003), simultaneous opportunity-seeking and advantage-seeking behaviours result in superior firm performance and define strategic entrepreneurship. When adopting an entrepreneurial mindset, organisational actors increase their ability to sense opportunities and mobilise the resources

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“The case study, extending over seven years, assesses the changes in staff behaviour and culture from introducing in-house entrepreneurship education in 2011.”

and knowledge required to exploit them. Significantly, an entrepreneurial mindset, culture and leadership and the strategic management of resources and applying creativity to develop innovations are important dimensions of strategic entrepreneurship (Ireland *et al.*, 2003, p. 971).

This case study examines the distinctive contribution of in-house entrepreneurship education to cultivating an entrepreneurial mindset throughout the firm and the creation of wealth through effective innovation. This follows the Shepherd *et al.* (2010) concept that interdependencies exist between the manager’s mindset and the staff/organisation culture such that “entrepreneurial culture and entrepreneurial mindset are inextricably interwoven.” Haidt (2013), in considering the concept of cognition and decision making, finds that emotions, gut feel, intuition and reasoning form a continuum of information processing. “Contrasting emotion with cognition is therefore pointless”. We aim to evaluate within Pitcher Partners the proposition that effective wealth is created when the firm “combines effective opportunity-seeking behaviour (entrepreneurship) with effective advantage-seeking behaviour (strategic management)” (Ireland *et al.*, 2003).

Strategic implications

Entrepreneurial behaviour is increasingly important for all firms, regardless of size, age or industry sector. Of the various dimensions of firm-level entrepreneurial orientation, it is argued that culture, broadly defined, is the single common theme underlying all forms of CE. However, the presence of an innovation culture *per se* is insufficient to label a firm entrepreneurial. Innovation of itself is only delivered when the customer or recipient of the innovative product, process or service actually transfers value or dollars for the benefit. It is the entrepreneurial mindset of seeing and creating the opportunity and managing the means to deliver the product, process or service at the point where it is needed and valued that constitutes entrepreneurial action and strategic value to the firm. The case shows this mindset in action by using innovation and education as mechanisms to redefine or rejuvenate the firm, its positions within markets and industries and the competitive arenas where they compete.

Pitcher Partners, as a leading firm providing financial and corporate advisory services, faces ongoing change and business disruptions, including compliance conformity, technology changes, speed of regulatory change, and an aging population. These threats may compromise the success and long-term survival of this 26-year-old firm. Pitcher Partners, in seeking to find an appropriate strategy, must identify ways to continue to be successful, learn quickly, be ahead of the game and see change coming rather than reacting to change when it is too late and survival becomes the driver of actions. Pitcher Partners continues to institutionalise innovation and use it to stay ahead of the game.

Significantly, the senior leadership group within the partnership demonstrates a passionate and committed approach to introduce in-house entrepreneurial education for all staff as a strategic “tool” to meet future development and competition. The partner leadership reviewed the availability of education from Australian universities, many of which offer major advice and courses in entrepreneurship and innovation. This number has increased steadily since the first Australian post-graduate program began in 1986 at Swinburne University of Technology (McMullan and Gillin, 1998). Today, there are over 16 programs across

Australia, with numerous courses at the undergraduate degree level. Based on the experience of world-wide education programs of all delivery formats and, given the widely accepted notion that entrepreneurial behaviour is the key to innovation, productivity and effective competition (Plaschka and Welsch, 1990), the question of whether entrepreneurship can be taught is obsolete (Neck *et al.*, 2014). Ronstadt (1987) posed the more relevant question regarding entrepreneurial education: “What should be taught and how should it be taught?”

Assessing firm entrepreneurial health

“Innovation does not surface in an organisational vacuum. Indeed, employees throughout a firm who are engaging in entrepreneurial behaviour are the foundation for organizational innovation” (Ireland *et al.*, 2006a). The quality of leadership displayed by top management plays a critical role in driving entrepreneurial behaviour and an entrepreneurial culture that supports the development of innovations (Kipp, 2001).

Thus, the notion of “entrepreneurial health” is at the heart of organisational entrepreneurship, and is based around the importance of culture in understanding the phenomena. In this case, Pitcher Partners established a solid set of values to underpin their unique culture for the firm – specialising in servicing the middle market. They encouraged a culture based on caring for clients and earning their trust, a strong advisory involvement with clients and care for its people on an individual basis. This passion continues today:

We have four pillars to our mission statement, in place since the beginning of the firm in 1991. People are most important in our firm. Investment in our staff has been huge. (Chair-Pitcher Partners Association)

Many of the businesses we service that operate in the “middle market” are entrepreneurial in nature. We need to make sure that we remain relevant to our clients. We encourage staff to think differently about the work they are doing, how they are doing it. (Managing Partner)

To assess the framework of “entrepreneurial health”, the partners agreed to participate in an audit of the firm’s culture and practice. Evaluation of this framework and the resultant culture and entrepreneurial behaviour is provided by application of the Ireland *et al.* (2006b) “Entrepreneurial Health Audit” of management and staff behaviour. The reliability of such measures has been validated within service organisations (Davis, 2006; Hazelton *et al.*, 2013).

The “Entrepreneurial Health Audit” evaluates the firm’s business environment by asking 78 Likert-style questions, grouped into five sections, based on the five organisational factors identified by Hornsby *et al.* (2002) as essential to stimulating and enhancing CE (Ireland *et al.*, 2006b):

1. *Management support* – willingness of managers/partners to facilitate and promote entrepreneurial behaviour;
2. *Work discretions/autonomy* – management willingness to tolerate failure;

“Thus, the notion of ‘entrepreneurial health’ is at the heart of organisational entrepreneurship, and is based around the importance of culture in understanding the phenomena.”

3. *Reinforcement* – developing and using systems reinforcing entrepreneurial behaviour;
4. *Time availability* – ensuring that individuals and groups have the time needed to pursue innovations; and
5. *Organisational boundaries* – awareness of divisional transparency.

The audit evaluates the firm's entrepreneurial health at a single point in time. Each of the five sections is scaled using an index and a number between 1 and 5. High scores (4 or 5) suggest the environment supports entrepreneurship. Low scores (1 or 2) suggest the environment does not support entrepreneurship and a score of 3 suggests the environment may support entrepreneurship. The score also indicates the "degree to which its employees are prepared to engage in entrepreneurial behaviour as exercised through innovative, risk-taking and proactive actions" (Ireland *et al.*, 2006b, p. 30). The instrument provides an indication of a firm's likelihood of being able to successfully use a CE strategy by identifying parts of the firm's structure, control systems, human resource management systems, and culture that inhibit and parts that facilitate entrepreneurial behaviour as the foundation for successfully implementing an entrepreneurial mindset (Ireland *et al.*, 2006b).

Audit results

Of the 93 pitcher partners staff (15.5 per cent of 600 staff) surveyed, representing the various divisions and levels within the firm (Table I), 81 completed full responses for use in the analysis (87 per cent response rate).

A selection of key findings presented below illustrates the state of CE within pitcher partners at the time of audit. The "health" score for each organisation factor associated with inhibiting/fostering entrepreneurial behaviour is presented in Figure 1. The overall firm average "health" score is 3.04, indicating an environment that may support entrepreneurial behaviour in developing a company entrepreneurship strategy.

Table I Discussion of organisational factors for the firm

<i>Organisational factors</i>	<i>Scale score (out of 5)</i>	<i>Factor discussions</i>
Management support	3.12	Senior management is perceived to facilitate and promote some entrepreneurial behaviour. Specific results were mixed between disagree, not sure and agree, suggesting that the environment promotes entrepreneurial behaviour in some instances and discourages it in others
Work discretions and autonomy	3.62	The highest score of the five factors, indicating the environment tolerates failure, allows freedom from excessive oversight and delegates authority and responsibility to middle-and-lower level managers more so than discouraging it
Reinforcement	3.44	The second highest score of the five factors indicates systems reinforce entrepreneurial behaviour more than punishment. Results indicate that the systems support entrepreneurial behaviour sometimes, encourages pursuit of challenging work, highlights significant achievements. Rewards are not linked to innovative behaviour
Time availability	2.43	The lowest score of the five factors falls in the inhibiting entrepreneurial behaviour range. Results suggest that participants do not have the time needed to pursue innovations and their jobs are structured so that they can meet short term organisational goals
Organisational boundaries	2.59	The second lowest score suggests that organisational boundaries are unknown and inhibit entrepreneurial behaviour. Participants appear to be unsure of what the firm expects from organisational work and development of instruments that evaluate, select and use innovations

Figure 1 Average firm scores per organisation factor



Table I provides a summary of staff propensity to support entrepreneurship in terms of each organisation factor. The discussion indicates staff perception of “time availability” and transparency to “organisation boundaries” is actually inhibiting entrepreneurial behaviour.

“Health” score measures by division affiliation, and at management levels in the firm, indicate a “fostering score” for entrepreneurial behaviour in the factor areas of management support, work discretion and recognition/rewards. Similar to the firm level results, division affiliation and management level scores indicate an “inhibiting score” to facilitating entrepreneurial behaviour in terms of time availability for staff to be opportunity-focused and to encourage cross division boundary activity to affect innovation. Significantly, the partners are very committed to embedding an entrepreneurial behaviour and an attitude of innovation throughout the firm.

Selecting entrepreneurial education intervention

Following much research and discussion amongst the partners, and following presentations from academics and consultants, the partnership agreed that an in-house, university delivered and post-graduate entrepreneurship education degree option could be effective in developing the desired entrepreneurial mindset amongst staff and result in effective innovation and added value to clients. The fact that the firm’s advising capabilities are primarily directed to the “middle market” rather than start-ups is a major factor in choosing the in-house option. To support the education-based development of an entrepreneurial culture, the firm established an institute for entrepreneurship and innovation.

One partner noted:

We’ve always been an entrepreneurial firm with a strong entrepreneurial legacy from the founding partners. The institute will reinforce that behaviour; it’s the next natural step. (Partner in Charge/Executive Director – Business Advisory and Assurance)

This decision was based on the results of the entrepreneur health audit suggesting that participants do not have the time needed to pursue innovations and their jobs are structured so that they can meet short-term organisational goals. The partners also wanted to create cross-divisional and cross-level activity by involving staff in shared teaching classes tailored to meet the needs of the firm.

In considering the type of education to be delivered in-house, the partners agreed that the focus would not be on general management skills but on developing creative skills and

“This new way of thinking about opportunities is now an established entrepreneurial strategy that involves the firm’s external environment.”

practices that identify opportunities, assess potential and, where appropriate, resource the developments to effectively deliver innovations needed in the market place.

The partnership agreed that the most effective strategy in developing an entrepreneurial culture in-house, would require establishing customised courses within the firm rather than sending individual staff members to take university courses. The in-house focus means significant firm investment in delivering a university program tailored to meet in-house needs and create a team culture and inter-divisional initiatives. The firm’s commitment over six years has resulted in 105 staff completing at least one qualification level in entrepreneurship at the graduate certificate, graduate diploma and master’s degree. In total, 11 staff graduated with the Master of Applied Innovation and Entrepreneurship in 2015 with more to follow in 2017.

In reviewing a number of Australian university postgraduate programs focussing on entrepreneurship, the partnership developed the following specifications:

- deliver dedicated courses in entrepreneurship with AACSB accreditation;
- offer a nested group of post graduate award programs at graduate Certificate, Graduate Diploma and Masters level;
- provide quality academic learning through experienced professors and adjunct professors (pracademics) committed to “advancing entrepreneurship as a method composed of a portfolio of practices” (Neck *et al.*, 2014);
- design a curriculum based on the integration of Master’s level academic materials and applied experiential learning, entrepreneurial theory, practice and experience;
- teach from in-house and external case studies in the Harvard style, case research, readings from research journals and books, together with an entrepreneurial research project;
- use the block teaching mode to meet staff availability;
- direct students to search for opportunities to evaluate early in the first term;
- seek application of learnings to in-house business practice and or with family business clients;
- teach innovation as the “tool” of the entrepreneur where innovation is defined as “the process that endows a recognized opportunity with the capacity to add value to an already existent invention, product, process or service and at a price a customer will pay”; and
- develop an international dimension to entrepreneurship.

The chosen provider was the Entrepreneurship, Commercialisation and Innovation Centre at the University of Adelaide.

Measuring change in staff behaviour

When adopting an entrepreneurial mindset, employees increase their ability to sense opportunities and mobilise the resources and knowledge required to exploit them. Can this be measured?

The Cognitive Style Index (CSI), a measure designed specifically for use with managerial and professional groups, provides a psychometrically sound instrument suitable for application in large-scale organisational studies. The instrument is a 38-item self-report questionnaire (Allinson and Hayes, 1996). Each item has “true”, “uncertain” and “false” response options, and scores of 2, 1 or 0 are assigned to each response with the direction of scoring depending on the polarity of the item. The nearer the total score to the maximum of 76, the more “analytical” the respondent, and the nearer to the minimum of zero, the more “intuitive” the respondent. Importantly this identifies intuition propensity as a dimension in assessing the development of entrepreneurial mindset and culture inside Pitcher Partners.

Using the CSI measure, the mean change in staff decision-style as measured for successive cohorts entering the program over a seven-year period is shown in Figure 2. The extreme of individual maximum and minimum scores, within each cohort, is also provided.

Entrepreneurial mindset

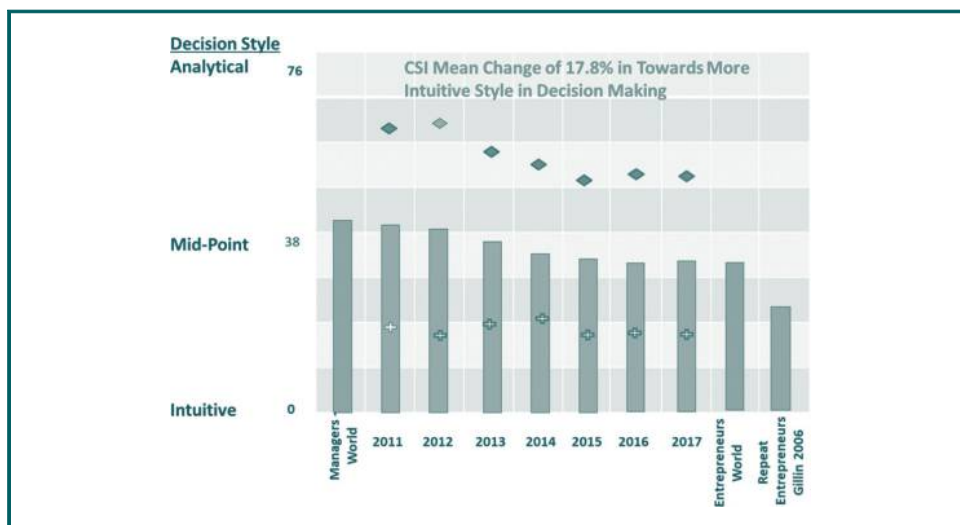
In the first two years of the program (2011-2012) little change in decision style is noted. Indeed, the scores were close to the world mean for managers (on the analytical side of the mid-point) as determined from international testing. However, over subsequent years to 2016 the decision score index moved lower and towards a more intuitive style, reaching a mean score close to the world mean for entrepreneurs. This change from 2010 to 2016 is 17.8 per cent, a significant change. It is noted that the extreme “analytical” outlier follows a similar move towards “intuitive”. In 2016, senior managers acknowledged the valuable contribution to entrepreneurial mindset formation that the Institute and its entrepreneurial education programs made to the firm and their employees:

A lot of the innovation that is happening internally in the firm comes from projects that were developed during the course. You can see the difference in the people who have done the course. (Partner in Charge/Executive Director – Business Advisory and Assurance)

Effective innovation

Example 1 of effective innovation resulting from the entrepreneurial education program is the recognition that Melbourne’s South East region is home to Australia’s largest and most

Figure 2 Cognitive style index, at commencement of each teaching cohort at pitcher partners



dynamic manufacturing hub, with a growing population of 1.4 million people. Yet, the firm had a city centric view of its resources. The trigger to assessing alternative opportunities in the location arose during an assignment in the “opportunity assessment” course of study for the graduate certificate:

The establishment of our Dandenong office -that's a radical project for our firm to undertake, an incredibly entrepreneurial decision that was taken . . . I owe this project completely to the Institute and the course that I studied. It gave me the time to devote to the development of the project.
(Partner/Executive Director – Business Advisory and Assurance)

Example 2 concerned recognition of an opportunity to offset the costly, confused process and misalignment between international students, agents and providers in obtaining quality, factual and facilitating information when seeking access into Australian tertiary education centres:

The opportunity is to disrupt the education agent sector for international students by providing an online platform that connects international students with providers. As a result of this in-class assessment the ensuring offering has gained international venture capital and is a spin-out company of the Institute. (See <https://outcome.life/>)

Strategic outcome

Based on the demonstrated and effective change in staff culture and behaviour, leading to more effective client trust, opportunities for discussions and improved firm growth, the partnership has instituted the next phase of the strategic investment in in-house entrepreneurship education and related business opportunities. Disruption is occurring across all dimensions of business, both nationally and internationally. In 2017, the partnership established an international institute of entrepreneurship to create a platform for professional service firms, local and state government agencies and not-for-profits to become learning organisations capable of responding to disruption in the economy (national and international), society and the market place. The international institute offers a range of initiatives for business executives to government officials to develop innovative and entrepreneurial mindsets. It acts as a centre of excellence for middle market thought leadership, communicating the skills and techniques behind innovative and entrepreneurial thought and action, and imparting expertise that enables managers and entrepreneurs to make crucial decisions to compete successfully.

The international institute, in partnership with Swinburne University of Technology, offers graduate programs through the Australian Graduate School of Entrepreneurship, including qualifications in Entrepreneurship and Innovation.

Conclusions

Measuring entrepreneurial health in Pitcher Partners has identified areas of effective and ineffective practice to achieve an entrepreneurial culture and effective innovation. Management has a passionate commitment to developing an entrepreneurial mindset within the firm. This new way of thinking about opportunities is now an established entrepreneurial strategy that involves the firm's external environment and the commitments, decisions and actions necessary to pursue them, especially under conditions of uncertainty that commonly accompany rapid and significant environmental changes.

This six-year commitment to entrepreneurship in-house education, the commitment by participating staff and continued financial investment by the firm have resulted in significant change in the firm culture. The development of dynamic staff: with an opportunity-focus; a positive increase in propensity for intuitive thinking and decision making; correlate strongly with the increase in innovation culture and improvement in firm competitiveness and profitability.

Keywords:
Culture,
Decision making style,
Entrepreneurial-education,
Entrepreneurial-mindset,
Health-audit,
In-house education

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Further reading

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