



# Intrapreneurialism

*Fostering your entrepreneurial drive within an existing organization or community*

by Megan Karlin, Agriculture Future of America

**KNOWING THE SUCCESS** of a venture is entirely on one's shoulders pushes people to invest more of who they are into what they do. This is likely why many driven, creative individuals are drawn to the idea of entrepreneurship. Yet, starting a company isn't for everyone, and there are plenty of projects that are better accomplished by an established team. Is there a way to harness the creative energy and drive of personal ownership within the structure of an already-existing company?

## **BLOOMING WHERE PLANTED**

Intrapreneurialism is a word of increasing popularity. As the need for innovation in companies grows, so has the interest in harnessing the entrepreneurial mindset within existing companies and roles.

"Intrapreneurialism is a concept we've believed in at Agriculture Future of America for the last two decades," said Mark Stewart, AFA president and CEO. "While building transformational leaders in food and agriculture, we foster this intrapreneurial spirit. Our founders would call it, 'blooming where you are planted' or 'rising the tide.'"

At the heart of it, an intrapreneurial mindset acknowledges that you get out

of every position and situation what you put into it. Since 1996, AFA has seen many alumni take this concept to heart.

## **PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE**

Jake Worcester, CEO of the Kansas 4-H Foundation, was a student at the first AFA Leaders Conference, AFA's flagship leader development experience. Since then, he has continued his involvement with the organization in a variety of ways as a participant, a staff member, a speaker and now a facilitator for the capstone experience at Conference – Track 4 focused around lifelong learning.

"Early on, I saw folks from the industry engaged with AFA asking and encouraging young people to come to the table looking to create value, innovate and do things differently," he said.

Later as a member of the AFA staff, Worcester had a conversation with AFA founder Sandy Kemper that influenced his approach to intrapreneurialism further. When Worcester approached Kemper, who is an entrepreneur in his own right, about a situation he saw happening in rural America, Kemper suggested Worcester look for a solution himself.

"Sandy said, 'What do you think? Go prove it.' He told me to come back and

discuss how we could do something like that. Since then, that's how I approach those types of conversations with folks that I've looked up to," Worcester said. Today, Worcester always brings a possible theory backed by research when asking for feedback rather than asking for a solution.

Another AFA alum Emily Peters had that creative entrepreneurial spark, but didn't think about using it within a company until her involvement with AFA.

"Learning about intrapreneurialism at AFA helped me see I could take ownership for the benefit of the company and still utilize entrepreneurial skills," said Peters, agriculture sales lead for Union Pacific Railroad.

Peters has been with Union Pacific since graduating from The Ohio State University seven years ago. In that time, she has pursued and taken on a variety of intrapreneurial projects she wouldn't have been able to accomplish otherwise. These ventures have involved transport of food and fuel into Mexico.

"We were opening a brand-new market in a different country with a different culture. There were so many things we had to learn and understand," she said. "It was a benefit to do this

within Union Pacific because we had a great legal team, a great sales team in Mexico that knew the market and a great marketing team. It was a huge project.”

Peters believes in intrapreneurialism so strongly, she wanted to create a path for everyone at Union Pacific to suggest new business ideas. Similar to her exporting projects, Peters worked with a team to create a process for marketing and sales employees to anonymously suggest new business ideas and vote on their favorite ones. Top ideas are pitched to the company’s leadership.

“Not only is Union Pacific getting great ideas, other people are exercising their entrepreneurial skill sets in an intrapreneurial way. We have received feedback from people that they feel more confident and appreciate the exposure to executive leadership and real-time feedback,” she said.

## STAYING MOTIVATED

For Worcester, intrapreneurialism is all about mindset. Whether working for a large or small organization, he believes you can pursue intrapreneurialism by looking for ways to add more value. In fact, he likes to look at each day in his job as a one-day contract.

“At the end of the day ask yourself, ‘did I do enough today to get hired again tomorrow?’ Hopefully more days than not you say yes,” he said. “If you start looking at your job as something that someone owes you, it can be bad for you psyche. Instead if we look at it as, ‘I have a lot to offer, but this organization has something I need as well. For this relationship to work, I have to add value to the organization.’”

The ability to accept your ideas might fail is another mindset important to intrapreneurialism, Peters says.

“Be prepared and do your research, but don’t be too hard on yourself if an

idea doesn’t work,” she said. “You should be comfortable with failure. If you’re never failing, you’re probably not taking enough risks.”

Sometimes an idea you suggest might not have the opportunity to fail because it’s dismissed early in the process. When this happens, Worcester suggests taking a step back and trying to understand why the idea wasn’t considered.

“Recognize when an idea is dismissed, the person dismissing it has information or a perspective you don’t have. If you knew what it was, you might better understand even if you don’t completely agree. Ask them to help you understand what it is about this idea that they don’t think will work. Of course, the other piece of that is some level of humility. Every once in a while, I come up with a really bad idea and someone should say, ‘No,’” he said laughing.

## FINDING INSPIRATION

When you are in the same environment for a while, it can be easy to slip into your to-do list and not pursue innovation. To avoid this, Peters suggests scheduling time to think creatively.

“There are always tasks and things to be done,” she said. “It’s important to plan some strategic thinking time and to take action on it. Put it on your calendar and turn off any distractions.”

Worcester says he finds inspiration when he is actively pursuing learning whether through his own curiosity or pursuing formal personal and professional development opportunities.

“Any time you turn your learning muscles on, you generate ideas that may not be related to the thing that you’re working on but come because you’re working your brain in a different manner.”

Both Peters and Worcester agree that intrapreneurial effort will be attractive to companies that want to innovate. **AG**

# Questions to Ask in an Interview

If you’re looking forward to exercising your intrapreneurial skill sets in a new job, it’s good to investigate how intrapreneurialism is viewed and rewarded within potential companies. Here are a few questions to consider asking when you interview:

- What is the role of everyone on the team when it comes to finding new solutions?
- What happens when the team hits a road block?
- What’s the most interesting problem that you didn’t expect that you’ve solved recently?

“Asking questions like these will get you a better picture of what the real perspective is than asking, ‘Do you encourage innovation?’ It’s easy to say they do, but you want to know what it looks like when you’re actually in it.” – Jake Worcester, Kansas 4-H Foundation

- What are the career path opportunities within this company?

“As an entrepreneur, you become better the more experiences you have. The same thing is true of intrapreneurialism. The more roles you try will develop your intrapreneurial skills.” – Emily Peters, Union Pacific Railroad

Ask questions of both team leaders and those who will be your peers. Don’t just take one person’s word for it.