An entrepreneur, innovator, scientist, educator and philanthropist.

A TRUE PIONEER

This is the second part of the interview with Dr. Wilson, an American entrepreneur and philanthropist.

In this installment, we discuss his entrepreneurship experience, thoughts on philanthropy, effective communication and globalization.

PART 2

Looking at your philanthropic work, you seem to get a lot of satisfaction from being involved in making education available to as many people as possible. You have established an entrepreneurship center at UMass Lowell; you give freely your time to educational projects. Why is philanthropy important to you?

Philanthropy is important to me because I recognize that I have been an incredibly lucky person and have benefited from help that makes me want to give that same, or better, opportunity to others. I think most people find that when they are able to help someone else, that it provided a very strong feeling of satisfaction and involvement. I want people who have lived long enough to see students that I have taught, or people that I have helped, who have gone on to make tremendous contributions to the world, that I hope that they can find the same satisfaction in their lives that I found in mine. This means that satisfaction can be passed from generation to generation. Living in this way makes for a joyful life.

Let’s talk about your company and IT entrepreneurship. You’re the founder of an IT company. How do you prepare your students for mistakes or failures? The truth is simple - you cannot become an entrepreneur if you cannot bear the pain of mistakes - can it be taught?

We do try to teach students about failure and how to overcome it. We try to teach them that every mistake and failure, however painful, is an opportunity to learn and become better. But you’re quite right to say that it’s “easy” to lecture about it. The best way to learn is of course to actually go out and go through that failure and have a mentor that helps you face the challenge. I have tried to mentor people through failures and help them understand that when you’re in the depth of pain of getting punched not only interesting but also something that, even back then, I believed would later become an important way of learning.

Eventually, you sold your company. You were its founder, CEO and chairman. Was it difficult to move on - more generally, how do you know when to let go? Knowing when to stop is one of the most important and difficult tasks in anyone’s life. I have seen too many people who have hung on to a role for far longer than they should have. That hurts themselves as well as others. It is important to refresh oneself regularly and for those around you to experience fresh leadership. I decided that I would try to make a major change in my work every 7 to 10 years. I have held to that principle for my entire career. You need to make a reasonable commitment to anything or anyone you participate in, but after 7-10 years, you should have accomplished your goals, or you probably never will. In either case, it is important to let new leadership take the organization in new directions.

Now that I have done this six times in my career, I will say that sometimes it is hard to let go, but I have never regretted doing so. I have always found new and meaningful projects to work on next.

As a business professor and a successful entrepreneur, how do you prepare your students for mistakes or failures? The truth is simple - you cannot become an entrepreneur if you cannot bear the pain of mistakes - can it be taught?

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Clearly, it is also about persistence as an overall attitude.

To be an entrepreneur you certainly have to be persistent. You try to solve a problem, you get beaten down, then you come back, you try again, differently. And if it still doesn’t work, you repeat the process. I call it the “PC”-persistence and persistence, trying again and again. Oftentimes, entrepreneurs are seen as impatient. In fact, many entrepreneurs had had a career in a larger company where they became a squeaky wheel, even annoying. They didn’t like the way things were done and they saw there was a better way. They wanted to implement their ideas, but to bring about change can be incredibly difficult in a large, traditional company. So many of them become entrepreneurs. If you cannot implement your ideas within the company, then they leave and start their own company.

In your career, you have had to deal with all sorts of people. At one point, you had to work with both Ted Kennedy, an iconic democrat, and Mitt Romney, who was a Republican governor. What does it take to be an entrepreneur?

There are different approaches to communication. There’s the manipulative approach where somebody tries to talk to people and say what they want to hear. Then there’s the communicative goal where you listen and try to understand the other. You don’t have to agree with other people’s points of view but you learn a lot when you listen to them. Indeed, I have had the great opportunity to listen and talk to quite a few American presidents. I even met our latest president (Donald Trump) who will say is very interesting to speak to. I’ve never had a problem communicating with other people, whatever their beliefs are, because when I meet them I want to learn about them. I want to see what makes them tick, what they’re interested in and don’t have to feel I am advancing my point of view; I might, depending on what we’re talking about, but that’s not the goal of communication. Learning is the point of communication.

You have traveled extensively; you are enthusiastic about globalization - can you discuss its importance and impact?

I traveled in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union before the Iron Curtain came down. I watched these countries cope with a very different economic system; I watched Russia go through many changes. I watched communist Europe become free. I also spent a lot of time in China where they’ve undertaken a very different path. You learn a lot through travel and actively engaging in international projects and encourage my students to get international experiences, to immerse in different cultures, to learn from other cultures completely. The world is very different - much more free and it’s a much better world. I watched the excitement of all the communist countries; the Iron Curtain went down; I observed their aspirations and optimism. But also a degree of disappointment - they succeeded in building a pretty healthy economic system but it takes a lot of time for the economy to fully develop, to make sure everybody has a chance to participate in it.

Some of that has been done very successfully and some still needs to be done. And that’s true also in the US and elsewhere. That’s another reason why globalization is so beneficial. We can all work on making sure that everybody has a chance to participate in a healthy economy.

What do you say to those who claim that globalization brings in a degree of homogenization which is counterproductive?

This criticism is a bit tricky to address because in fact globalization does mean that cultures are exposed to each other and adapt ideas from each other. I am not of the view that that is good and how much is bad? We certainly are countries that try to preserve their identity and almost regulate it. Does that work? If we consider history and go back to the trade between Europe and Asia during the Silk Road era, we realize how cultures have influ-