

## **How Entrepreneurs Can Combat Fear**

**by Bruce Hoag PhD**

On March 4, 1933, Franklin Delano Roosevelt stated in his inaugural address as President of the United States that the nation had “[n]othing to fear but fear itself.”

At that time, The Great Depression was at its worst.

Nearly 25% of the labor force in the United States was unemployed.

He called this fear “nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.”

In other words, people were too scared to do anything, and FDR knew that if they didn’t do something, then things would get a lot worse.

Napoleon Hill, famed author of *Think and Grow Rich*, recalled a time when FDR called together all the editors of the major newspapers and various other influential people and explained that they had to start “talking up” the economy. They had to start telling people that things were getting better. And this they did.

The improvements were slow. Unemployment in the US was 23.53% in 1932, and 15.82% in 1931. It was still almost 10% in 1941 when the US entered WWII.

During five years of the decade from 1930-1939, the Gross Domestic Product shrank. This was the fault of the Fed which raised interest rates and the Government which raised taxes just when the economy started to recover.

Then in 1939, World War II began. Sixty million people were killed as a result of that conflict and millions more injured.

And then to top it off, the US economy shrank again from 1945-1947. If ever there was a reason to be afraid, then it was during the years between 1929 and 1947.

It wasn’t until 1954, 25 years after the start of The Great Depression, that the Dow Jones Industrial Average reached the 1929 high.

## **What does this have to do with you?**

These few statistics should make a powerful impression on you.

They should make you realize that whatever fears you have about completing the tasks that are necessary to build a business, that they are meaningless by comparison.

That doesn't change the fact that you have them, however, and so what we need to do now is to understand why you have them, and what you can do about them.

## **What is fear?**

Fear is one of 34,000 emotions. That's right. You have 34K emotions. Fear is just one of them.

Fear is the rational or irrational emotion you experience when you feel threatened. The threat can be real or imagined.

And that means that sometimes, we should be afraid. In such circumstances, fear will do what it should. It will protect you from danger. If you listen to it, then it will cause you to change your direction so that you're not hurt in some way, whether that be physically, mentally, emotionally, or spiritually.

An army retreats when the battle becomes too fierce. They do so to preserve their lives.

An astute hiker will avoid bears, mountain lions, and rattlesnakes.

A savvy investor won't put money into risky business opportunities.

In each of these examples, there will be some degree of apprehension that causes those involved to avoid doing something that could have catastrophic consequences.

So what we can see is that fear is always a result. You feel it because of something.

You don't wake up one morning and decide to be afraid. You're confronted with something, and the outcome that you believe is most likely generates an emotion. If that outcome feels threatening, then you will experience varying degrees of anxiety.

## Where does fear come from?

According to Robert Plutchik, *fear* is an emotion that's sandwiched between *apprehension* and *terror*.

This may be an oversimplification. With another 33,997 emotions available, there are likely to be a few that we could include in this sequence. For our purposes, however, three is enough.

All we need to do is to see how this emotion develops.

What we discover is that it begins with *apprehension*. Apprehension is that hesitancy you feel when you put your toe in the water just before you jump into the swimming pool at the beginning of the summer. You're not quite sure how cold it will be, and so you literally "test the waters."

Having done so, you then have to make a decision. Some people will jump in regardless and then tell you how nice it is. Others will mimic a shiver, wrap their towel around them a little more tightly, and try to find a place in the sun to warm up.

Notice that while all this is going on that the water temperature hasn't changed.

You may decide to wait for the day to warm up a bit more before taking the plunge.

If every day, you go to the pool, put your toe in the water, and then decide to wait until the next day, then you're gradually conditioning your brain to believe that the temperature will never be right. After awhile, and it's different for everyone, you'll come to *fear* the temperature regardless of what it is. And postponed for long enough, you probably won't even bother to go the pool at all.

The same exact thing happens when you put off doing a task in your business. The task itself doesn't get easier or harder, but your reaction to it can make the difference between you accomplishing it and being terrorized by the prospect.

Apprehension unchecked becomes fear, and fear when it is allowed to develop fully becomes terror. These are feelings that you allow to occur. It's essential that you recognize that.

So the problem is perceptual rather than real, and that makes it irrational.

A rational fear is what occurs where the likelihood of you getting hurt is high. An irrational fear is one that occurs because you feel threatened by it, even if there's little or no chance that you will be harmed as a result.

### **Where does apprehension come from?**

Apprehension, the hesitancy that you feel, comes from your uncertainty of the result of taking some action.

If you've never ridden a bicycle or seen someone else do it, then you may experience some reluctance to just hop on two wheels and hope for the best. Without knowing that sufficient forward motion will be enough to keep you upright, you might be tempted to wait until you're sure.

Or you may get on the bike, and then fall off. Now you have to ask yourself if you want to risk falling off again. Can you be absolutely certain it won't happen? No. You can't. Even professionals and serious amateurs who "clip-in" to their pedals fall, and so if you're just starting out, then you have to weigh up the probability that you'll join them against the pleasure that you'll get from riding.

One thing you can be certain of, and that is that if you never ride a bike, there's no chance that you'll ever fall off of one.

The same thing is true in your business. If you never write an email, or a blog post, or create a product, then there's no chance that someone will reject it. But just as those who fail as cyclists because they refuse to get on a bike, you will fail in business if you decide not to complete the tasks that are necessary to have one.

So fear is apprehension that's been left unchecked. You've dwelled on it. You've thought long and hard about all that could go wrong. And in the process of doing so, the feelings have intensified, and your perceptions have become more distorted.

Terror is the next natural step. Once you've convinced yourself that whatever it is that you were thinking about doing is so terrible that you're afraid to do it, you'll then become

too frightened to even think about it. You'll blot it from your mind. You'll tell yourself that you don't have to do it, and that's when you'll turn on your creativity in order to justify to yourself why you shouldn't do it at all.

This will make you feel better and, because of that, you'll be convinced that you've done the right thing. This will reinforce your belief that you had good reason to be apprehensive in the first place.

## **Irrational fear**

Irrational fear comes from the perception that something real will cause harm when it won't.

Suppose your coach has told you to make a video. Just thinking about the technicalities of doing it makes you feel anxious. There are different degrees of anxiety. It might only be enough to make you set aside more time to learn how to do it, or it may be so strong that you decide that you're going to do something else instead. Neither of these things changes the fact that it's still a video. How you feel about it doesn't change the nature of what it is.

In his book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey talks about the Circles of Concern and Influence.

Most people live in the Circle of Concern. They look at all of their limitations, and then ask what they can do in that context.

Those who live in the Circle of Influence look instead at all the things they can do, and then ask what else they can do.

The thing is that those who are bound by thoughts of their limitations end up doing less and less because they see that they can't do as much, whereas those in the other group recognize that they can do much more than they had realized at first.

In both cases, the facts haven't changed. One group sees limitations; the other, opportunities. Those who focus on their limitations are the same ones who take their eyes off the ball and work on other things, even if those things don't get them closer to

their goals. Those who focus on what they can do are more likely to find ways to overcome the same hurdles that those who feel limited face.

## **Fear and entrepreneurs**

Entrepreneurs experience both rational and irrational fear.

Generally, you won't hear them label it as such unless things are going very badly.

They'll tell you of their concerns or their worries, but it's unlikely that they'll tell you that they're afraid, even if they are. That may be because of the disempowering effect that such an admission can have. That "deer in the headlights" fear can prevent you from doing anything, and doing nothing is a decision you make to maintain the status quo.

Business-as-usual and change are mutually exclusive.

The only way that entrepreneurs can succeed in their businesses is to change what they do constantly. Even after they find something that works, they have to keep refining it because customer expectations are always increasing.

And so if you want to be an entrepreneur, then you're going to have to get used to this.

If you've never been told this in the past, then this is something you need to have etched into your brain: You will have to change if you are to succeed. You will have to reinvent yourself and the work that you do in order to make it relevant to the needs of your customers. And if the thought of doing that is so scary that you don't even want to contemplate what that might look like, then having a business of your own isn't for you.

The good news is that while some people clearly have a predisposition towards entrepreneurial behavior, it is something that those who aren't born that way can develop. But you need to know up-front that this is what being an entrepreneur looks like.

The fear *never* goes away. You learn to do your work in spite of it.

## *Creative people*

All entrepreneurs are creative people in one sense or another. They create products, services, or both.

Sometimes the products are made up of physical things. This is where engineers come into their own. They have an innate ability to understand how things are put together.

Creativity, however, goes way beyond that. It includes those who develop ideas into methods and techniques. The product may be nothing more than words in a PDF. The information may be worth as much or more as a manufactured product that an engineer builds.

This group of creatives include actors, painters, writers, and musicians. All of them are artists in their own right.

One of the characteristics of this group is something called the *Impostor Syndrome*. Those who “suffer” from it - and there are varying degrees - believe that if someone scratched the surface, then they’d discover that that person was a phony; a fake; a charlatan; someone who wanted to be an artist, but who really wasn’t.

According to *Entrepreneur* magazine, this feeling is typical among creative people. Here are a few that they list: Serena Williams, professional tennis player who has won the second highest number of single’s titles; Howard Schultz, CEO of Starbuck’s; the late Nobel laureate Maya Angelou; Academy Award winning actress Natalie Portman who at her commencement speech at Harvard University said that she felt like she wasn’t good enough to be there; and two time Academy Award and four Golden Globe winner, Tom Hanks.

That’s a fairly illustrious crowd. If you feel like an impostor, then you’re in good company.

Although fear can stop you in your tracks, that same feeling can also enable you to deliver your best performance. That’s because when you’re pushing yourself outside of your comfort zone, you have to work harder than when you do what feels easy to you.

You see, it’s easy to become complacent when figuratively we can do whatever we do

with one hand tied behind our back or with our eyes shut. Concentration and focus always produces the best work, even if you're somewhat relaxed about it.

The performances of others, whether on stage, in books, or in any other creative activity will attest to the fact that our feelings are not to be trusted. They are nothing more than an indication of a *possible* threat; but that you feel apprehensive, fearful, or even terrorized in and of itself is a poor determinant of whether or not you'll actually experience harm.

And that's the key to dealing with fear as an entrepreneur.

Numerous sources all say the same thing. It's okay to feel the fear, but rather than using that as an excuse to do nothing, you must press on with the work at hand. In fact, it's likely that the thing you're most afraid to do is the very thing that you must do.

If what you're afraid to do won't harm yourself or anyone else, then it's probably the next thing you should do. You see, it's that feeling of uncertainty that holds you back. It's the not knowing for sure what the outcome will be that makes you hesitate. That's why those in personal development are so fond of asking you what you'd do if you knew you couldn't fail. If success was guaranteed, and you were happy with the changes that that made in your life, you would feel no anxiety at all. Instead it would feel perfectly natural.

### *Irrational goals*

Some people work at cross-purposes to themselves, however. They want success, but they want to keep doing everything the way they've always done it, and that includes avoiding the things that frighten them.

In a management book I co-wrote, I called organizations that had this attitude *traditional hybrids*. Whether it's a for-profit, a non-profit, or an individual, the same thing is true. You can't have it both ways. You can't follow Behavior-A and reasonably expect to get Behavior-B-results. That's an irrational expectation.

There's more to it than that, though. There are those who are willing to change to get success, but don't want the changes that the success will make to their lives.

For example, there are many who want the financial freedom to buy a better car or a bigger house. Thing is that when others know that you're wealthy, then they believe that you should give them some of it. Socialist governments believe this, too, and will do their best to take it away through taxes. That may mean getting an accountant who knows about tax laws that hadn't been relevant to you in the past if you happen to live in a country where you have that choice.

Acquaintances and even friends will take a greater interest in you. J Paul Getty talked about this in his book, *How to Be Rich*.

More expensive stuff means more expensive insurance.

If you succumb to the trappings of wealth, then you have to be prepared for the changes that will occur in your life because of it.

To expect anything else is to have irrational goals.

### **How you can combat fear**

So far, we've learned that fear is an emotion that's caused by your reaction to a real or an imagined threat. We've seen that it begins with a hesitation - an apprehension - that something might go wrong, and we've acknowledged that even irrational fears are common to entrepreneurs.

The next thing to do is to identify some tactics that you can use to combat fear.

If you have good reasons to be fearful, it's essential that you have tools to hand to help you cope with them. If, however, your anxiety is due to irrational concerns, then you especially need to know what to do so that you can get your work done.

Recognizing that you'll always feel a certain amount of fear, what can you do?

Here are several suggestions.

## 1. Preparation

When it comes to property, it's location, location, location. When it comes to combatting fear in business, it's preparation, preparation, preparation.

That's not a license, by the way, to spend your whole life preparing. P stands for preparation, not procrastination.

It also doesn't mean that you wing it, or "shoot from the hip."

A former actor once told me that people who can't remember their lines *don't know the material*, and the late Leonard Bernstein, who at the time was assistant to Serge Koussevitzky, was forced to leave a rehearsal early in his training because he didn't know the music.

If you're going to succeed in anything, then you have to prepare yourself for the work. Academics get PhDs because the skills that are learned to do that will be needed for a life in research.

Doctors go to medical school to get the training they need to treat their patients effectively.

Your particular niche may not require a degree, but you will need to know what you're doing, and you won't get that kind of knowledge accidentally. You may get it from the School of Hard Work, the School of Hard Knocks, or something more formal; but you'll get it or you won't have anything of value to give to anyone else.

## 2. Spontaneity

This isn't a contradiction of the first suggestion. You do have to plan and prepare, but you'll never be able to do it to the last detail.

It's that old saying: Life happens.

Nothing will stand still while you plan and prepare.

So you have to learn how to work and adapt quickly.

That leads nicely to the next one.

### 3. Recognize when it's good enough

Good enough doesn't mean perfect.

Perfect is impossible, and for a lot of reasons.

One is that you're not perfect, and so by definition you can't recognize or create something that is.

Another is that problem of the world changing. Even if it was possible to create something that was perfect, by tomorrow it would be imperfect. The circumstances would be different and so would be the people looking at your work.

If you've ever written a blog post or an article, then you know this to be true.

You write something that you think is brilliant, and then when you read it a month later, you see a typographical mistake, or a word left out, or a problem with the syntax.

Instead of striving for perfect, aim to make it fit for the purpose. Make it as good as it needs to be to get the job done. After all, that's what your clients want.

### 4. Make a clear distinction in your mind between what you do, and who you are.

This is absolutely vital to your mental health.

The fact that you experience fear doesn't mean that you're fearful. The fact that you've failed thus far to succeed at something doesn't make you a failure as a person.

Salespeople, for example, experience far more rejection than nearly everyone else. More people tell them "no" than "yes." But most salespeople also make a very good living, something that would be impossible if they decided they were failures on the basis of the number of people who tell them, "no."

## 5. Evaluate criticism correctly

Jon Acuff says in his best-selling book, *Start! Punch Fear in the Face*, that on one occasion he got a negative review. Despite all the other positive ones, not to mention the number of books sold, that one review really bothered him. It was only when he realized how ridiculous it was to let that happen that he was able to let it go.

Seth Godin doesn't read his reviews.

The struggle that creative people face is that they put so much of themselves into their work that they identify with it.

When a prospect rejects a product, the average salesperson recognizes that the product is unwanted.

What do artists say?

"How do you like my work?"

And everyone knows that artists are looking for approval, because such accolades reflect directly on the the person who created the work.

Imagine going to a music performance where the crowd listened in silence, and then when it was over simply got up and left. No applause. No shouting. No singing along. Nothing.

How do you think the musicians would feel?

It's easy for creative people to feel like failures when people don't buy their work or show their appreciation. And criticism, regardless of the source, can be particularly hard to bear. But just like fear, you must not allow yourself to dwell on it.

### **In conclusion**

For as long as you try to be more than average, you will experience some degree of anxiety.

It goes with the territory.

If you recognize that it has the power to enable your best work, then you'll embrace it and change lives.

On the other hand, if you cower in its presence, then you, like so many others, will fade into obscurity.

It's up to you.\*

\* If this has been helpful, and you'd like to go deep on other psychology topics for entrepreneurs, then visit my website **[Psych Hacks](#)**.