



## EXECUTIVE DIGEST

# The counter-conventional mindsets of entrepreneurs

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**Abstract** These days, it seems, nearly everyone aspires to be an entrepreneur. But many entrepreneurs think and act differently than the way in which most other businesspeople do and the way much of today's business education encourages them to think and act. My in-depth examination of dozens of entrepreneurs I've come to know well over the past 2 decades tells me that their unconventional—or, dare I say, counter-conventional—mindsets and behaviors are marked by six common patterns: (1) 'Yes, we can;' (2) beg, borrow, or steal; (3) think narrow, not broad; (4) problem-first, not product-first logic; (5) 'No' is something waiting to be turned into 'Yes'; and (6) ask for the cash and ride the float. Thankfully, we now know that entrepreneurs are made, not born. These six patterns of entrepreneurial thought and action are eminently learnable. If you want to someday be an entrepreneur, or if you want the people in your company to become more entrepreneurial, then developing—or encouraging and incentivizing your people to develop—such a mindset might constitute a suitable first step toward preparing you to follow a more entrepreneurial path or to foster a more entrepreneurial culture in your company.

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## 1. Think differently, act differently

These days, it seems, almost everyone fancies being an entrepreneur; if not today, sometime in the not-too-distant future. If you aspire to join their ranks, or if you wish your coworkers or employees could become more entrepreneurial, you might want to give some thought to the surprising and not simply unconventional—but somewhat *counter-conventional*—ways in which entrepreneurial minds

typically work. More often than not, I find, they exhibit six ways of thinking and acting that lie at the very heart of their entrepreneurial endeavors.

### 1.1. 'Yes, we can'

Sao Paulo's Arnold Correia had a dilemma (Ananias, Forde, & Mullins, 2013a). His small company had been producing events—sales conferences, motivational events, campaign launches, and more—for some of Brazil's fastest growing companies during Brazil's economic renaissance in the mid-1990s. At an event for Walmart, the company that had been hired alongside Correia's company to produce a video of the event failed to show up, so Correia

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was asked if he could do it. “Sure, we can,” was his reply, though he had neither shot nor edited a video in his life. Correia frantically began calling his friends to find someone who could record the video. “Forty minutes later,” he recalled, “I found someone who could help, but in the strangest place. I had to pick him up at the cemetery, as it was the Day of the Dead, a Christian holiday in Brazil, which commemorates the faithful departed” (Ananias, Forde, & Mullins, 2013a, p. 3). Video production soon became a key element in Correia’s core offering.

In 2004, following a visit to the U.S., Correia spotted an opportunity to produce and distribute training and other video content for his increasingly far-flung, multilocation retail clients. Doing so, however, meant not just producing video content, something his 10-person team had learned how to do by this time. It would require mastering satellite distribution of video content, sending staff to install video equipment all over Brazil, and making a considerable investment. Correia’s staff wondered whether he had hit his head on something during his trip to the U.S. and posed all kinds of reasons why a move into corporate TV was simply too risky. Once again, Correia’s view was simple: ‘Yes, we can.’ And, they did.

Several years later, following the global financial crisis that very nearly put his company under, in 2009 Correia realized that being a cost to his customers wasn’t good enough. He recalled, “I want to be part of the revenue for my customers” (Ananias, Forde, & Mullins, 2013b, p. 3). The way to do so, Correia decided, was to produce and distribute customer-oriented content to be broadcast to his retailers’ selling areas, which, when interspersed with ads, would generate advertising revenue that could be shared with his retail store clients. ‘Yes, we can’ produce copious amounts of suitable content. ‘Yes, we can’ learn to sell in-store advertising to advertising and media agencies, something his company had never done before. ‘Yes, we can’ license additional content to fill the schedules. Correia’s business was completely reinvented yet again. Today, his business—ATMO Digital Media—is one of Brazil’s largest digital out-of-home media companies with some 18,000 screens in more than 1,000 points of sale, like retail stores, and points of wait, like doctor’s offices and fitness centers.

To say, ‘Yes, we can,’ when you’ve never done something before isn’t just unconventional thinking. It runs counter to conventional managerial wisdom, which holds that one should stick with what one knows (Moore, 2005) and only pursue opportunities for which the necessary competencies (Prahalad & Hamel, 1990) are in hand. Not so for entrepreneurs like Arnold Correia. First they say, ‘Yes, we can.’ Then they figure out how.

## 1.2. Beg, borrow, or steal

In 2009, Toronto’s Mimi Naghizada was planning her wedding (Hallen & Mullins, 2016). In preparation for the event, she started thinking about how she wanted to style her hair. She decided that she wanted to use hair extensions—something becoming increasingly popular with both celebrities and her friends. However, after going to the local mall with her sister Leyla, she came home quite frustrated. While she found hair extensions, she was not able to find what she was looking for. The amount included in any one package was not quite right; one \$150 package was not going to be enough, but she didn’t really need the full second pack. The color selection was also really limited, and the quality was not what she had expected. She then went online to see if there was anything better she could order. There wasn’t.

Her fiancé, Alex Ikonn (personal communication, March 15, 2016), had been looking for an opportunity to start his own business. He wondered if this was an opportunity they should pursue. Ikonn had already gained some digital marketing and social media experience working in a startup, so starting an online business seemed the right way to go. “But what about resources?” he asked. He logged onto Alibaba.com and found Chinese manufacturers who could supply hair extensions, and would do so in the package sizes and colors that Alex and Mimi thought the market wanted. He found a logistics provider who would receive, hold, and ship the goods to consumers. He found an e-commerce template with which he could build a rudimentary website that could display the hair extensions and process orders. And, thanks to the bank offers that seemed to arrive weekly in his mailbox, he even found most of the money he needed to pay for the first shipment from China via credit card offers of new accounts with 6 months free interest on cash advances.

“We’ve got six months to make this work,” he said to Mimi as he boldly ordered \$20,000 worth of hair extensions (Alex Ikonn, personal communication, March 15, 2016). Meanwhile, Mimi began building a following on YouTube with a series of videos addressing hair styling questions that women were searching for on Google.

Today, 6 years on, Mimi’s videos have been viewed by some 3 million loyal subscribers and their company, Luxy Hair, sells millions of dollars’ worth of hair extensions annually with a workforce of only four employees. In many companies, the unspoken assumption underlying any new product or new market initiative is that the requisite resources should be rare, valuable, and inimitable and owned and controlled, not borrowed (Grant, 2016). Though

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