The Figures You Need in Your Entrepreneurial Support System

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If you’re like most entrepreneurs, you like to build. Tinker. Experiment. Grow. Shifting the direction of your company and trying new things comes naturally.

It’s human nature to want to run your ideas by others. But who truly understands? Being overly creative or experimental with your business can feel isolating and even stressful without the right support system.

Sometimes it feels like sharing ideas with other professionals could entice competition for your ideas. Brainstorming ideas with your staff can create company confusion or undermine your leadership because you may not sound confident in your direction. And as well-intentioned as your family or spouse may be – sometimes they just can’t help you with the nuanced details.

But being an entrepreneur doesn’t mean that you need to be alone.

It’s important to have a network of people – some in the business, some on the outside – that will challenge you as much as relate to you. Honesty is what you are seeking, and if you pick the right support system, that’s what you’ll get.

Consider the following pros and cons of what you might expect from these groups within your network.

Friends and family

The upside of confiding with your friends and family is that you receive (the too often under-appreciated) emotional support for your entrepreneurial journey. These are the people closest to you who love you despite your faults.

Sharing with friends and family ideally means that you can share openly and with less fear of rejection or failure. This creates a positive environment for you to practice, brainstorm your approach to new ideas, and weigh the pros and cons of your thought patterns.

On the flipside, your friends and family may lack objectivity. While they do care a great deal about you, they don't always have the most relevant advice to your challenges. They haven't been there and done that, in most cases. They're ready to cheer you on – but may not have a clue how to help you otherwise.

For situations where business-specific advice is most important, it's best to turn to a mentor.

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Mentors

These are the people in your network who have been there and done that. Mentors can also be friends or family members, former bosses, professors or industry experts that you reached out to on your own.

What defines a great mentor is someone who has experienced the ebbs and flows of your industry or has built an empire (or tanked a business in the past). They can be more objective about solutions to your challenges while sharing their own experiences from the frontlines. The most connected mentors will want to see you do well and may even find joy while

helping you succeed.

When reaching out to your mentors, be sure to make sure that you aren't overusing them or exhausting their willingness to help. A mentor's time is valuable and often has its limits, unlike with your friends and family. Make sure to be organized and intentional when you speak with them.

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Clients or customers

In a perfect world, turning to your customers for support is the best bet. Your customers have already voted for you financially – meaning, they've believed in you enough to have bought your services or products. They may have even referred you to others and brought you more business.

If you have a great relationship with your customers, they will share their own needs and wants – and their feedback can help you improve your business or validate new ideas that you have.

Your customers often know more people like themselves, and confiding in them could open more potential business for you, especially if they have had a say in how you do business. You could confide in your customers and build advocates at the same time.

In many ways, customers also know your product inside and out, and the real-world implications of any changes you may make. As the most "plugged in" of your support system, they will also have the most unvarnished opinions, especially if they've seen the impact of the service or product themselves.

On the flip side, you should beware of taking in too much advice from customers. Sometimes they ask too much and offer ideas that actually aren't making your business better for anyone but themselves. If you experiment too much, it can

dilute what made your business appealing in the first place and could result in diminishing returns.

How to approach building your support system

In your early days as an entrepreneur, you'll likely start with friends and family as you get more comfortable with sharing your business. Concurrently, you should begin to reach out to other business owners either through your local community, on LinkedIn or by contacting some of the Entrepreneur contributors on this site to build your mentors.

Consider that your mentors will likely change as your business grows. Someone who helped you at the start may not be as helpful as your business grows, so make sure that finding mentors is not a static process.

In time, you will have customers to contact for feedback and support. Similar to mentors, keep in mind that you shouldn't pick the same group of customers to confide in over and over. You need to be diverse and speak with many different types of customers at various stages to avoid stale information that can stagnate your growth.

Finally, remember this: Don't be afraid. Sure, you're a little crazy for being an entrepreneur. It's not easy. You're taking risks to live a more fulfilling life. That takes courage.

It can certainly be an isolating experience as an entrepreneur, with feelings of being misunderstood or alienated as par for the course. That does not have to be the case, though. Taking risks and disrupting the status quo is something everyone should do in business — just make sure you have others to turn to along the way.

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