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'Corporate misfit' entrepreneurs, with help, will save the day

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Last month, the Ann Arbor-based software services company Janeeva decided to shut down its software center in Bangalore, India, and create jobs in Ann Arbor. Serial entrepreneur Vinay Gupta attributes the decision to access to talent.

As we look around for saviors who could rescue the region from the post-Pfizer economic Katrina, it's pretty obvious to me it's not the government handouts, multiple public committees et al. that can make a measurable impact, but rather entrepreneurs that can reinstitute the morale and economic fiber of the city.

Ann Arbor, the once economically invulnerable city (which needs no state-sponsored "cool city" designation, thank you very much) is struggling. While town hall discussions abound, the tough problems are usually tackled by the entrepreneurs - the soldiers battling the economic crises. If you look around carefully, you might spot the entrepreneurial beast in multiple locations all over the city, exhibiting characteristics that set her or him apart from the "group think." They:

- are driven by independence, unwilling to submit to authority and take "no" for an answer;
- are motivated by achievement;
- demonstrate insights, resourcefulness and leadership in solving tough business problems; and
- are creative, opportunistic value creators.

Entrepreneurs are "corporate misfits," perpetually standing at a tangent to the world. As a bane of the large bureaucratic behemoths, the species does not survive amongst lemmings and follows the drum beat of Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken."

All of the above symptoms make an entrepreneur somewhat unpopular within the social fabric. Many times, we struggle to see the vision being laid out by an entrepreneur for a new product or service offering. Our myopic vision, ego or lack of market knowledge makes us instant critics. We are quick to think "that is a crazy idea and will never work - good luck." We shun these foot soldiers until, of course, they strike oil. After having made it, the once "crazy" entrepreneur finds invitations to speaking circuits, awards and other social badges of honor. In my opinion, it's too late - to stand alongside someone when their darkest hour is past is easy, almost shallow.

Entrepreneurs need help along the way to carry the bricks, not when the proverbial "Taj Mahal" has been built. Once the community comes together to build each others' business, it's an easy path to recovery.

Entrepreneurs need 1) customers; 2) capital; and 3) smart people. Of the three, the first is the most important, without which the other two may not follow.

Large institutions shun entrepreneurs/start-ups in their own way by avoiding products or services due to the fear of business mortality and inability of start-ups to support their needs. But if institutions flip this fear around and take some risk, the first customers could very well be the University of Michigan, the state of Michigan or large corporations in the region. Purchasers could set aside time to meet entrepreneurs once a month to listen to their ideas with an open mind, and explore how these could fit into their universe.

I'd go as far as to challenge these large institutions - ones with ample purchasing power and vested interest in growing the economy - to lead by example and set aside 3 to 5 percent of their annual purchasing budget to buy from local start-ups. This would do more to attract and grow the local economy compared to throwing grant dollars.

Ann Arbor's entrepreneurial heritage is strong: Vinay Gupta and Hal Davis (who together sold BlueGill Technologies in 2001 for \$250 million) are back at it again with Janeeva, creating jobs for smart people. Dwight Carlson, founder of Perceptron and Xycom, has now founded Coherix. Thomas Collet has formed a string of biotech start-ups - ProNai Therapeutics, Rubicon Genomics, Meditrina Pharmaceuticals - in the region.

First-time entrepreneurs like Michael Crowley (CEO of Incept Biosystems), Jennifer Baird (CEO of Accuri Cytometers) and Dawn White (CEO of Solidica) are soldiers of their own merit, building the anchor companies of tomorrow. Roger Newton (CEO of Esperion Therapeutics) could be back again with his next big idea.

Behind any knowledge cluster is a group of entrepreneurs, the ambassadors who attract smart people and capital to build the "next new thing." What if the new measure of economic development is not jobs but entrepreneurs created? What if, instead of criticizing or shunning entrepreneurs, each one of us decides to help them build their "Taj-Mahals" by referring customers, capital or smart people to these foot soldiers? After all, as the award-winning poet Gwendolyn Brooks wrote in her poem "Paul Robeson":

"we are each other's

harvest:

we are each other's

business:

we are each other's

magnitude and bond."

About the writer: Mahendra Ramsinghani, a Lodi Township resident, is senior vice president with Plymouth Venture Partners, a Ann Arbor-based venture capital firm that has invested in the startups of local entrepreneurs, including Vinay Gupta, Jennifer Baird and Michael Crowley. He has been recognized by the New Enterprise Forum for his "outstanding contribution to Michigan's entrepreneurial community." To contribute essays to Other Voices, contact Mary Morgan, opinion editor, at 734-994-6605 or mmorgan@annarbornews.com.

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