

A VIEW FROM SUE UNERMAN

Churchill was right: you should never give in

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SUE UNERMAN, CHIEF TRANSFORMATION OFFICER 19 DEC 2018

“Never give in, never give in, never, never, never.” – Winston Churchill

I’ve always been inspired by persistence. When you fall down, you get back up again. Yet a fact-based argument in the much respected *Harvard Business Review* challenges this idea. Cass Business School’s Andre Spicer says that there’s in fact a “weak link between grit and performance” and that “people who tend to be tenacious are also those who get trapped into losing courses of action”. Spicer has a point. There’s a difference – a big difference – between not giving up and finding new approaches to problems (admirable) and not knowing when you haven’t got a chance of success but continuing to hit your head on a brick wall (dumb).

Churchill gave the speech quoted above in 1941, not to Britain as a whole, but to the boys at his old school. Not just boys who would be fighting for their country one day perhaps but

also those who would be building businesses in times of peace. It echoes his great speeches to the nation, of course, and also the spirit of entrepreneurship that is evident in small business and start-ups.

Whenever Justin Cross (from MediaCom's start-up for start-ups, Blink) introduces us to a tech start-up, there is a spirit of doggedness that comes across. The spirit of doing things differently and hoping to change the world.

There are a lot of start-ups. Nine in 10 people in the UK are considering starting a business of their own. There are 80 start-ups launching every hour. At a recent seminar of small and medium enterprises, "The state of the SME nation", a panel of small business owners talked about their reasons for setting up themselves. Hearing them talk about their jobs sounded like a description of living in Super Mario Land. Hazards kept cropping up out of the blue (one owner discussed her surprise in learning that she needed liability insurance of more than £5m to sell a few pictures at a market), while good luck and opportunities mushroomed unexpectedly. The general spirit was that so far everything had worked out – if not as planned, then certainly better than they'd feared. For every hazard, there were at least two beneficial mushrooms.

Similarly, at *Red's* Smart Women Week earlier this year, when I was interviewed by Cyan Turan for a "Grow your business" session, that same spirit of optimism and breathless excitement shone through.

Every business is subject to change. As Antonio Lucio, chief marketing officer at Facebook, recently said: "Change is inevitable; growth and success are not." Growth and success need a plan, a strategy and – in VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) times – resilience.

Wherever you work, in your own business or in a big corporation, we need this spirit of resilience to progress. The spirit that allows you to face challenges as if your livelihood depends on it.

As Jim Collins says in *How the Mighty Fall and Why Some Companies Never Give In*:
“Never give in. Be willing to change tactics, but never give up your core purpose. Be willing to kill failed business ideas... be willing to evolve into an entirely different portfolio of activities... but never give up on the idea of building a great company.”

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