Entrepreneurs can learn from each other

Ali Madison
Economic Diversity

It's easy when we become close to a business concept to lose sight of what the plan should be, and when or when not to adhere strictly to it in the interest of achieving the optimal outcome. Scientists in research and development laboratories often discover things during their research that are different and even more exciting than originally intended. The same possibilities exist for entrepreneurs, if they're listening and open to the idea of embracing changes in their thinking.

One successful entrepreneur who got this right is Richard Tait, who cofounded the Cranium game company in 1998 after a successful career at Microsoft. And although he later sold the company to Hasbro, he kept many of the lessons he learned at the helm of his wildly successful venture. He currently makes the rounds speaking about several lessons in particular that can help other entrepreneurs poise themselves for greatness. Here are a few to think about.

Have a mission. Your employees must have a clear sense of why they're dedicating their life to the company's dream in order to help you make history.

Change the rules. Don't be afraid to do things differently than others do, or than you expected to do them when you started. In Tait's case, an extra 27,000 games on hand and a missed opportunity to attend a major industry sales event led to commiseration over coffee at Starbucks. There, he observed members of Cranium's target adopters all around him and realized taking the game to the players rather than to where games are sold, was an idea worth pursuing. Cranium became the first noncoffee product sold at Starbucks and the first game to be sold in Barnes & Noble stores.

Know what you are good at. And when you discover what that is, don't stop until you're the best in the world.

Make hiring priority No. 1. At Cranium, Tait's philosophy was to hire for smarts and rent experience. Make certain you only hire and retain employees who fit your culture.

Your customers are your sales force. Customers must come first and are even worth doing ridiculous things for. Tait cites an example at a recent Entrepreneur University event in Bellevue of a woman in Eastern Washington who was throwing her husband a birthday party, but couldn't find the game. Cranium sent a bike messenger to Boeing Field with the game, found a flight headed to Spokane to put the game onto, had a taxi meet the flight and delivered the game in time for the party. For seven years following, that woman sent Cranium a holiday card, and they knew she was out advocating for the product, helping create a culture of passion around it even.

These are fairly straightforward concepts to read through. But perhaps more subliminally, the messages are to take risks, and listen not only to your instincts and the environment around you, but also to others who have paved successful paths as entrepreneurs and chosen to share their wisdom.

Many seasoned entrepreneurs in our area actively engage in doing so, and many programs and events are accessible throughout the year to hear them out. The Three Rivers Entrepreneur Network and Pacific Northwest National Laboratory's Mentor-Protégé Program are just two examples.

Don't be afraid to seek out advice, regardless of an entrepreneur's specialty. You're likely to come away with an enriched perspective and possibly a better understanding of some fundamental truths about business that could be valuable to your own success.

Ali Madison is with Pacific Northwest National Laboratory's Economic Development Office. She can be reached at ali.madison@pnl.gov. This column on Tri-City diversification and economic development appears monthly.