

2. What would you say is the perception of 'entrepreneurship' in your industry? Is this positive, negative or neutral? Why?

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3. To what extent would you say that your employer/self-employment embraces 'entrepreneurship'? In what way?

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### 1.3 THE 'HERO' ENTREPRENEUR?

When we hear 'entrepreneurship', very often the term conjures up mental images of gifted, infallible individuals who single-handedly build hugely successful business empires seemingly overnight and from next to nothing. You may think of, for example, Jeff Bezos, Richard Branson or Elon Musk. This 'hero' entrepreneur is certainly the image celebrated and reinforced by the global media as well as Western popular culture, where an individual is seen to be endowed with special skills and abilities that others do not have.<sup>2</sup> These individuals are also often seen as visionaries and creators; people with drive, ambition and a strong sense of personal direction and purpose who are able to come up with brilliant – seemingly 'world changing' – ideas.

#### FOOD FOR THOUGHT

##### PICTURING THE 'ENTREPRENEUR'

Take a moment and think about the first person that comes to mind when the word 'entrepreneur' is mentioned. Find and save an image of this person, before working through the questions below.

<sup>2</sup>Warren, L. (2005). Images of entrepreneurship: Still searching for the hero? *The International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation*, 6(4), 221–229.

1. Is this person someone you know personally or know through the media?  
Are they from your own country or another country?

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2. What are the top three characteristics that you would associate with this person?

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3. What do you like and dislike about this person? To what extent would you like to be/not be like them?

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For some of us, these individuals may be a source of great inspiration. Indeed, it can be motivating to witness people that seem so dedicated and driven every single day, when in fact our own drive can fluctuate and dip at points. However, for others amongst us, these idealised examples may be problematic for a number of reasons. First, it can be hard for us to personally relate in a meaningful way to these individuals, particularly if they do not reflect our own culture, gender, language, or background.<sup>3</sup> Second, when we compare ourselves to the perceptions we have of these ‘heroic’ individuals, we may end up consciously or unconsciously making a number of unrealistic (or perhaps even unfair) assumptions about ourselves and our own abilities:

<sup>3</sup>Swail, J., Down, S. & Kautonen, T. (2014). Examining the effect of ‘entre-tainment’ as a cultural influence on entrepreneurial intentions. *International Small Business Journal*, 32(8), 859–875.

- we may think that we just need to have a brilliant world-shifting idea as these individuals have (apparently) had and that everything else will fall into place
- we may think that success should come as easily to us as it seemingly does to these individuals
- we may think that if we have to try hard and encounter difficulty we are not entrepreneurial after all
- we may think that we should be able to pursue our goals without ever seeking anyone's input or help and that needing others is a sign of personal weakness or inability
- we may think that, if we have a dip in motivation or energy, we are not the real deal, we are lazy or not that dedicated to our goals.

Would we be justified in thinking the above? We would argue that the answer is NO!

As it turns out, on closer inspection the figure of the 'hero' entrepreneur becomes a lot less heroic and much lonelier. When we start to dig into the lives, decisions and actions of these individuals we often see that their stories are told in a biased and selective way, overemphasising achievement and success, whilst underreporting effort, struggle and even failure. If failures are reported, those are usually told from the vantage point of the success that eventually followed, thus glamorising failure. Yet, the many non-glamorous failed attempts that precede ultimate successes do not always appear in media stories and representations.

Similarly, we usually find that behind the face of the 'heroes' who make it to the cover pages of newspapers and magazines there are armies of co-founders, mentors, investors, skilled and knowledgeable employees, family members and other supporters and contributors who have helped that individual along the way. The latter are often the unsung heroes behind the visible hero.

## CHALLENGING ASSUMPTIONS

### BEHIND THE HERO ENTREPRENEUR

Many of us know the entrepreneur Elon Musk for his efforts in electric cars, but some will also know him for his passion for space exploration through the SpaceX programme. The success of SpaceX has been showcased all over the world media and rightly so, given its truly ambitious plan: to create reusable rockets that would cut the cost of space exploration. Up until now, it was assumed that rockets would be destroyed after every spaceship launch, at huge cost. Thus, Elon Musk's vision was ambitious and, by his own admission, laughable at first. So, what did it take for this vision to become a reality?

According to publicly available insights into the journey of SpaceX,<sup>4</sup> it took an army of highly skilled, ambitious and dedicated people who shared Musk's vision – to the point of taking risks with their own careers. It also took three failed attempts before a rocket successfully touched down intact on the fourth attempt. Admittedly, Elon Musk was not at all sure that the programme should go for a fourth attempt after the third failure. In **MARS: Inside SpaceX** he tells of the disappointment and doubt that he experienced at that crucial junction in the story.

Looking back from the vantage point of the successful fourth attempt, this story is worthy of celebration, of sharing. But what if we had peeked into SpaceX after the first failed attempt? Or the second? would we have deemed the story worth telling? what story would this have been? How would it have affected our perception of Elon Musk?

For further information see: <https://money.cnn.com/2015/12/21/news/companies/spacex-launch-rocket-landing/index.html>

## 1.4 THE 'BORN' ENTREPRENEUR?

Why then do we hold this 'hero' entrepreneur stereotype? Many of our assumptions about entrepreneurs generally stem from research conducted during the 1960s to the 1980s that assumed that entrepreneurs could be profiled and separated out from 'non-entrepreneurs' through a range of distinguishing *entrepreneurial traits*. Such traits are often considered a central part of each individual's *neuropsychic system*,<sup>5</sup> or the way in which we are 'wired', and are thus stable and cannot be easily changed. Psychological research recognises five universal personality traits in humans – openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and emotional stability (or, conversely, neuroticism) – and entrepreneurs are usually identified as scoring highly on these.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, the 'hero' entrepreneur is also considered to have a number of traits specifically conducive to entrepreneurial action including self-efficacy, achievement motivation, proactive personality, and innovativeness.<sup>7</sup> Does this then mean that entrepreneurs are born with something 'special'?

<sup>4</sup>MARS: Inside SpaceX [Film]. Directed by: Julia Reagan. USA: Radical Media; 2018.

<sup>5</sup>Allport, G. W. (1966). Traits revisited. *American Psychologist*, 21(1), 1–10.

<sup>6</sup>Antonicic, B., Bratkovic Kregar, T., Singh, G. & Denoble, A. D. (2015). The Big Five personality–entrepreneurship relationship: Evidence from Slovenia. *Journal of Small Business Management*, 53(3), 19–841.

<sup>7</sup>Frese, M. & Gielnik, M. M. (2014). The psychology of entrepreneurship. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 1(1), 413–438.