

I wasn't cut out to be an entrepreneur. I hated taking risks. Could I really start a business...?

On My Own?



by Ted Corwin, Hickory, North Carolina

Things had been going fine at the factory where I worked in Conover, NC. I was general manager of an upholstery division of The Lane Company. And then the ax fell. Our company was caught in a corporate takeover. Soon a new boss rolled into town and changed things overnight. One morning he called me into his office and demoted me to merchandise manager. "You're lucky," a colleague told me. *"I heard the guy wanted you fired."*

As I drove home that night, I kept replaying the scene in my mind. What did I do wrong? I had a degree in business and a strong background in retailing. My wife, Lucy, and I had moved down South so I could learn the furniture manufacturing business. Over time I had done well enough to be put in charge.

"Don't you see?" Lucy said when I told her. *"It's all political. It has nothing to do with how good you are. You're part of the old team, and that's why this man wants you out."*

The demotion was devastating to me. I had always succeeded in life, and here I was failing. I knew Lucy was right. Still I began to doubt myself. I was so unhappy with my job, but I didn't know what else to do.

Then I got an idea. I called my friend George Pickard for advice. A distinguished-looking gentleman, he had started his own upholstery company years earlier and knew the ins and outs of furniture manufacturing like no one else. George had been a mentor to me. Well into his seventies, he still worked for one of the Lane divisions. He came to Conover to give me some pointers. He walked around the factory with me, extolling the benefits of hands-on management. *"To understand your business,"* he told me, *"you've got to understand what your people do every step of the way."*

But nothing I did made a difference. My new boss was constantly on my case. One day he chewed me out about a production problem. *"Ted, you're no good at handling people."*

I always thought that was one of my strengths, I grumbled silently. Back in New York City where I'd been a manager at Bloomingdale's, I was often praised for my people skills. Could my ability have soured that much?

"Go into business for yourself," George said when I complained.

"I could never do that. I'm not the entrepreneurial type." "I had succeeded in business by doing things carefully, not by taking risks.

George stroked his goatee. *"If you trusted yourself a little more..."*

I changed the subject. There was no way I was going to start a company and risk losing my steady income--not when I had a family to support.

That night I told Lucy about my conversation with George. *"What kind of business?"* she asked.

"Well, we've had some success with those upholstered dining room chairs. George came up with the idea of selling them along with glass tables. You buy four chairs, you get the table free. That type of thing."

"Sounds good to me," Lucy said.

"I'm not even considering it," I retorted. *"I don't have it in me to start a business. I'm too conservative, and I don't want to fail."*

Yet things at the factory only got worse as the months went by. The more my boss criticized me, the more I doubted myself. My self-esteem hit bottom. I started missing deadlines--something I'd never done before. When I got home from work, I was so down I wasn't much of a husband to Lucy or a father to our three girls.

Maybe starting a business is my only hope, I thought. I should talk seriously to George. We agreed to meet in Memphis, a couple of hours from George's home in Tupelo, Miss.

On a Friday night in late September 1987, I flew to Memphis. George drove up early the next morning, and by 6:30 A.M. we were sitting at a table in my hotel room.

"If I only had a partner," I said.

"You don't need a partner. You need to get rid of your fear of failure."

"My boss tells me I'm not very good with people."

"You don't have a problem with people. If you're no good with people, how'd you get Lucy?"

After I'd gone on for about an hour, George announced, *"Ted, you've got the ability, but you'll never start a business because you don't really want to. It's clear your heart isn't in it. The best thing that could happen to you would be to get fired."* He stood up abruptly.

"Where are you going?"

"Back to Tupelo. You're wasting my time and yours."

It was 8:00 A.M. and my only hope had just walked out the door. Here I was, 42 years old, without a clue as to what I would do with the rest of my life. George is right. I can't start a company. But what am I going to do?

Since I had a nonrefundable plane ticket, I couldn't go home until Sunday. After eating lunch, I went out to the hotel pool and sat on a lounge chair. Please, God, I prayed desperately, show me what to do with my life. The only response was the water lapping at the sides of the pool.



Ted and his wife, Lucy, try out the Designmaster line of dining chairs

Back in my room I took out a notepad and wrote down my thoughts, just as I did when I ran into a problem at the factory. But this problem was bigger than anything I'd ever faced.

I wrote, *"Lord, what do you want of me? Let me be obedient... 'Thy will be done.' I'll do anything."*

"I need to be where others can depend on me — Lucy, the children, my family, the church. I wish to serve." How best to serve?

As I continued to write, my sentences changed to imperatives, as though God were writing through me: Build a Christian organization. Share your faith. Help others grow. Be an example of a house built on a solid foundation. Be humble. Care. Go into business.

"Lord, please use me."

I will. Don't worry. Trust in me.

"On my own I can't start a business, but with your help, Lord, I can."

Nothing like this had ever happened to me before. I felt so close to God. When I went back home, I told Lucy about the amazing experience I'd had. Even so, I couldn't bring myself to do what I thought God wanted; I didn't believe I was capable.

Finally, though, things at Lane got so bad I did surrender and start a company — on God's terms. Designmaster Furniture was incorporated in March 1989. We would specialize in manufacturing dining furniture, as George had suggested.

Once we were up and running, I talked to George on the phone every day, and he visited every month. He arrived on Friday and spent a couple of hours at the factory, in the plant and in the offices, talking to everyone to learn down to the last detail what was really going on. We had dinner together, then talked business all day Saturday. He couldn't have given more to me and to Designmaster if it were his own company.

"How will I ever repay you?" I once asked.

"Someday, if you have a building of your own, make a cornerstone that says, 'George Helped.'"

In 1994, at the age of 87, George died. I missed him terribly. A month later our plant manager gave notice. *"Who's going to open the plant?"* the office manager asked.

"I guess I am," I said.

The next morning, I got to the factory at 6:30 A.M. I didn't know how to sew or upholster. The only things I could do were cut down empty boxes and sweep up. And, it turned out, watch and learn all about the production process. George would have loved this, I thought. I learned as much that day as any other in my career. For two months, until we found a new plant manager, I got to know my employees and what they did.

Today, Designmaster is a success. We employ more than 50 people, who make thousands of chairs.

We try to run the company according to the principles God gives in scripture. We want to put God first, and often begin meetings with voluntary prayer. We build the highest-quality product we can.

We always strive to do what we say we are going to do. We pay our bills on time, and we tithe from our profits. One day I hope to keep my promise to George. We think of Designmaster as a family. When an employee has a sick child, we know where he or she should be.

God has blessed us in so many ways. He gets the credit and glory for starting and keeping this company going. I know myself, and I know I couldn't have done it on my own. I'm grateful to be a part of his business.

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