

Volume	3	Starting a Company
Chapter	01	Opportunity Identification
Section	03	Reality Check
Key Word Tags	Little White Lies, Rationalization	
Stage	Thinking about starting a business	

MISPLACED ENCOURAGEMENT

File No. 3.010303 | 2017-06-01

Quick Summary: Truthful feedback may be appropriate in the long run, even if it hurts others' feelings.

Abstract:

It is natural for all of us to be positive and encourage others to avoid hurting their feelings. We do this daily with almost everyone we interact with. There is no malice in telling people what we think they want to hear. However, encouraging others by providing positive feedback when we know that the opposite should be said can be destructive to the individual in the future.

Virtually all of us are sensitive to the feelings of others. It is a natural part of being part of any society. We often tell "little white lies" to avoid hurting others' feelings. We offer positive reinforcement with children even if they "struck out" when they "tried really hard" but still came in last place. We do this with adults too. Have you ever heard someone tell a woman their new haircut or style looked awful? This is clearly not a gender issue; most of us are constantly conscious of avoiding hurting others, whether they are friends, family, or business colleagues. Unfortunately, a few individuals take the opposite approach and, for poor self-esteem or other "personality defects," go out of their way to make others feel bad. When we encounter those individuals, we naturally try to limit our exposure to them.

Unfortunately, the "little white lie" can, in some circumstances, have significantly harmful effects. This misplaced encouragement can result in giving a false sense of security or validation to a person that, in the long run, may not be in their best interest. This situation commonly arises when entrepreneurs in the idea stage seek validation from others.

Typically, during the idea stage, an entrepreneur will share their idea and vision with friends, family, and perhaps some close business colleagues. Those individuals will probably be more inclined to support the entrepreneur as a person than as a potential startup CEO. The entrepreneur, who is a firm and passionate believer in their idea, is much more likely to hear supportive comments from others than to read between the lines and pick up any negative expressions. As the entrepreneur's plan becomes further developed, in part based on the encouragement of others, they expand their audience, looking for more of the same positive encouragement. Only when the entrepreneur asks others to join in and equally commit will they begin to experience honest feedback. Even then, the answers might be "not at this time" when the person has no real intention of ever joining. Another common response is "Great idea, keep pursuing it" when there is little doubt that the idea will ever succeed. To be fair, many great ideas were rebuked by many people, and only through persistence, against all odds of the entrepreneur, did they become reality.

An entrepreneur needs to remember the kind motives of those who provide encouragement. It is easy to take that encouragement at face value. However, entrepreneurs need to ask for candid opinions even if there is a high likelihood that the answers may not be what they want to hear. Misplaced encouragement to entrepreneurs can rob them of an irreplaceable commodity: time. Money can always be replaced, but time cannot. If an idea is genuinely not worth pursuing, it is in everyone's best interest to find out early to minimize the amount of fruitless time spent.

The misplaced encouragement notion should not be confused with the trend that seems to be common in Silicon Valley of "fail early." Googling that term will result in many opinions about the subject. The notion of avoiding misplaced encouragement is intended to capture the candid opinions of others who are interested in the long-term well-being of the entrepreneur as they see it. The goal is to help entrepreneurs not waste their most precious resource: time. Individuals are not likely to offer candid negative opinions on their own. Entrepreneurs must actively seek to separate criticism of ideas from criticism of themselves. It is easy to ask for candid opinions but often hard to accept them.

Following the "logic" that if you look for the worst, you will never be disappointed, questioning any positive encouragement can be just as erroneous as ignoring it. In the early days of inception, seek out friendly advisers with direct experience and willingness to spend the necessary time with you, delving deeper into your idea. Work closely with them to explain how you are addressing a problem that prospects will deem worth solving vis-à-vis the other challenges they face. Let them help you refine your ideas. Listen closely to what they say, and equally important to what they don't say. Thank them for their help and guidance, and then seek objective opinions from others. Focus on what they say and avoid attempting to address their objections. Accept them at face value. Avoid, at all costs, falling into the trap of "they just don't understand" rationalization. This will be a sure sign of your internal misplaced encouragement! Think in terms of "If they don't get it, I didn't give it!"

Another telltale sign that you have fallen into the rationalization trap is if you respond to their comments with "Yes, but..." When you respond with what you think is your purely rational explanation of "why they are wrong," don't be surprised if the other person smiles and shuts down. Another telltale sign of the rationalization trap is after the fact thinking, "They didn't get it." Perhaps, they didn't get it or perhaps, you didn't "give it."