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When the going gets tough, the tough entrepreneurs take a break

By FOO MAW-DER

While Alibaba founder Jack Ma's recent comments endorsing the 996 work culture were criticised by proponents of work-life balance, they are likely to resonate with many entrepreneurs here and elsewhere.

Two of China's well-known richest entrepreneurs raised a few eyebrows recently by talking up long working hours. Alibaba founder Jack Ma said: "If you do not do 996 when you are young, when will you? Do you think never having to work 996 in your life is an honour to boast about?"

He was referring to the 9am to 9pm working day, and a six-day week.

Not long after, Mr Richard Liu, founder of e-commerce giant JD.com Inc, complained that "the number of slackers has rapidly grown" in his company in the past five years or so. "If this carries on, JD will have no hope!"

While the two billionaires' remarks were widely criticised by proponents of work-life balance, they are likely to resonate with many entrepreneurs here and elsewhere.

For entrepreneurs, slogging for long hours — along with risks, income and outcome uncertainty — is part of the job description. Many entrepreneurs would even argue that taking breaks in between work is a luxury they could ill afford, especially when they are involved in start-up ventures.

In fact, a 2012 study I conducted with my colleagues found that novice entrepreneurs — those starting their first business — could be filled with guilt and fear when they took a break. This could be due to their belief that such temporary "letting go" would put them further behind in developing their ventures.

For those aspiring to be the next Bigo Technology, Carousell or Ninja Van, taking short breaks when the business venture is not yet on solid ground or facing headwinds, does appear to be counterintuitive at first glance.

However, the idea is not far-fetched if one considers an important but often neglected aspect of entrepreneurship: The importance of an entrepreneur's psychological well-being, which in turn can affect the firm's performance or even threaten its very existence.

Many entrepreneurs have been known to throw in the towel due to burnout even though the ventures still have strong fundamentals.

The study found that those with prior start-up experience actually improved their psychological well-being after taking short breaks. Given their past experience, these entrepreneurs were aware that alleviating stress by taking a break was a helpful way of re-energising.

Taking a break could mean something as simple as eating out with a friend, or engaging in temporary forms of behavioural and mental disengagement, such as exercising, which happens to be Virgin Group founder Richard Branson's favourite way of beating physical and mental stress.

Some entrepreneurs who recognise the importance of taking a break would even leave all their electronic devices behind for a while, or go somewhere far away from the office so that they would not be tempted to return to work.

For example, AirAsia Group chief executive Tony Fernandes had said in an interview that one way he coped with stress and low moments was to watch planes land and take off at the runway.

In the 2012 study, 156 entrepreneurs were assessed on how they used "active coping" and "avoidance coping" strategies while running their business.

The participants, both novices and those with prior start-up experience, were from an entrepreneurs' association in Manila. Their average age was 32.

In active coping — or problem-focused coping — an entrepreneur directly addresses venture problems, such as confronting a problematic employer or approaching a supplier to extend the credit period when faced with a cash flow problem.

Avoidance coping — or emotion-focused coping — involves temporarily distancing oneself from the stressful situation, or temporary disengagement to seek relief from the unpleasant situation.

During the study, participants were first asked to describe their most stressful work-related experience within the past two months, and then told to rate the coping strategies they had used to deal with the event on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much).

Active-coping strategies in the study included statements such as "focused on the problem to see how I could solve it" and "worked to understand the situation". Avoidance-coping included statements such as "went out for a snack or a meal" and "took some time off to get away from the situation".

Based on the participants' responses, the study found that active coping, not surprisingly, was something readily embraced by entrepreneurs — novice and experienced alike — and it was beneficial to their psychological well-being.

Psychological well-being was measured using a 12-item General Health Questionnaire, a commonly used scale to determine psychological well-being. Questions included ability to concentrate, enjoy daily activities, and extent of worry.

The results on avoidance coping on the other hand showed a divergence between experienced and novice entrepreneurs.

Avoidance coping still helped the former to improve their psychological well-being but the latter actually scored lower on this count. The findings indicated that novice entrepreneurs did not see the value or importance of temporarily distancing themselves from the stressful situation in the immediate term.

In fact, they feel guilty and anxious when they take a break. They think that as entrepreneurs, they should be “doers” and always tuned in on their business.

More experienced entrepreneurs on the other hand know that entrepreneurship is a long process and that taking a break to recharge is part and parcel of this process.

In recent years, Singapore’s entrepreneurial scene has made great strides, with the number of technology start-ups alone growing from 3,400 to 4,300 between 2012 and 2016.

More millennials today are eager to forego the stability of a salaried employee in favour of the risky, stressful yet rewarding life of an entrepreneur.

A survey in 2016 found that nearly three-quarters of the millennials polled in Singapore planned to be entrepreneurs within the next 10 years, and more than 30 per cent started their current business while in school.

Amid the thriving entrepreneurial scene, paying greater attention to emotion-focused coping may help millennial entrepreneurs here avoid burnout before they are even halfway to the finishing line.

And taking a break during stressful times should go beyond having a KitKat. Learning how to distance themselves from the work environment temporarily even when there are problems to be solved — without going on a guilt trip — may allow hard-pressed entrepreneurs to see that the glass is half-full rather than half-empty.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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#### Topics

Entrepreneurship; work break; career

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