In my last two columns I have talked about “entrepreneurs”. Today I want to share with you a quote. “Great business people are more important than great ideas”. Think about that. Do you agree or disagree?

That quote comes from Jim Clifton, Chairman and CEO of Gallup. He is the author of a very interesting book titled, “The Coming Jobs War” and he is also coauthor of Entrepreneurial StrengthsFinder, a tool to measure the talents and strengths of business folks.

In his book, Clifton, asserts that political and business leaders pay far too much attention to innovation and far too little to cultivating talented entrepreneurs. They've got it backward, Clifton says. To create jobs, leaders must understand that great, thriving businesspeople matter far more than great ideas, which are a dime a dozen.

He illustrates his point by telling the story of Wayne Huizenga. When he was a garbage collection manager, Wayne decided to build his own trash collecting business. That was a bad idea because the world didn't need another trash collection company. Trash gets picked up pretty well. But nevertheless, he built his own trash collection business. And he turned it into a great multibillion-dollar worldwide organization, a Fortune 500 company, and a leader in environmental sustainability that was profitable and valuable to its customers, a great place to work, and an international powerhouse. You have heard of it: Waste Management, Inc.

The question is: Was it the idea or Wayne that made Waste Management such a successful American enterprise for tens of thousands of highly engaged employees and that created good jobs of all kinds? Most global thought leaders would believe it was Wayne's good idea more than his entrepreneurship.

Wayne's next idea was arguably worse. The big idea was to rent movie videos through branded outlets, malls, and small free-standing buildings. Clifton, said “It didn't sound very good to me -- and I did much of the research on it for him”. That became his second multibillion-dollar Fortune 500 company -- Blockbuster, Inc. And Blockbuster, too, was a great American organization that created millions of customers and a hundred thousand new jobs.
And with that, Wayne did what no one had ever done before: He created two Fortune 500 companies in one lifetime. Was it the ideas that made them Fortune 500 companies and great places for thousands of people to work -- or was it Wayne?

Then he had one more bad idea: a national chain of used car outlets. He called it AutoNation, Inc., and it became his third multibillion-dollar Fortune 500 company.

So what explains these staggering successes: the innovation or Wayne? This is a really important question because whatever idea Wayne chooses seems to become a good idea. The predicting variable of success in Wayne's case is "Whatever idea Wayne chooses is a good idea because he makes its business model work." It is not "Wayne is good at picking innovative ideas."

But most thought leaders still believe it's the second answer.

Clifton’s hunch is that if you took away everything Wayne has -- all his financial resources, management team, money, keys to his car -- and put him in a one-bedroom apartment in downtown Miami, a multibillion-dollar Fortune 500 company would likely burst out of that room. Because of his extreme optimism, his unstoppable determination, and his incredible energy, Wayne is able to build hugely successful enterprises, and he doesn't need a breakthrough innovation to do it.

It is wiser to study the person than the idea. That is exactly why SCORE volunteers spend their time helping business CEOs.

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