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CHAPTER

Running a Business Is Like Raising a Child

“It’s a girl!”—three words that changed my life forever. Six months later, another three words had a different yet similarly life-altering affect as well: Applied Creative Technologies, the company I founded when my first child was six months old. Outside of multiple births, adoption, or marriage to someone with kids, I know of no other way to have “children” so close in age.

Starting my own company was not something I had been dreaming of. In fact, I fought the notion for months before I finally took the plunge. Though I always knew I would have children, I did not see myself as an entrepreneur. Now over a decade later, I cannot imagine *not* being an entrepreneur. What changed?

My Third Child

My leap into entrepreneurship was somewhat of an accident. I was, in fact, looking for flexibility. My previous job required me to travel three out of four weeks every month. Don’t get me wrong—I loved what I did. Something changed, however, when my daughter was

born. When I first looked into her eyes, I knew I could not continue to travel at that pace. It was too much time away from home. At the same time I also felt strongly that I could not be a stay-at-home mom. Stepping out on my own seemed my best, albeit scariest, option at the time. I felt strongly, however, that I had nothing to lose. If it did not work out, I could always go back to my employer and work something out with my travel schedule. Besides, every other significant opportunity for change that I have encountered in my life had been frightening initially, but all of them turned out well.

The first year on my own, I was essentially aiming to replace my income by working from home. In reality, I made more that first year while working 30 hours per week than I had the previous year working 40-plus-hour weeks. Although I was going to work from home, we chose to keep our daughter in a family day care. She was in a caring, loving environment that we did not want to lose if things did not work out with my self-employment. Since she was only two doors down from my home office, I was also able to drop in and see her whenever I wanted.

My second year in business also saw the birth of my second child. I had continued a partnership with a company I had worked with in my previous corporate life and they were able to cover my contract for me while I took some time off to be with her. I went back at the end of my unpaid maternity leave and again saw an increase in my income from the previous year.

My third year in business was a turning point. That was when everything changed. My husband, Keenan, was frustrated and burned out with his engineering job. He started taking a computer programming class at night thinking he might be ready to change careers. We had toyed with the idea of his joining me in the business, but did not feel we were ready to make that commitment. At the same time, I was being offered more work than I alone could handle. I made an offer to a former colleague to join me on an hourly part-time basis.

Shortly thereafter, an argument with a colleague at work set Keenan off. The next day he resigned. Rather than finding another job, he decided to join me. We had some money saved up, a strong

prospect for future work (though not a contract yet), and a fallback option to go out and get a “real” job should the business not work out.

Suddenly, I had three employees including myself. I needed to identify opportunities for additional work. Our timing could not have been better. One of my clients was searching for a vendor to develop a new production and warehousing system. The company was erecting two new manufacturing facilities and their current system (which I had designed 10 years earlier) was not equipped to handle the new business requirements. The timing could not have been better. I boldly approached the client and offered an alternative proposal: I could grow my company to develop and support the software it needed. I was able to convince the client that, given my in-depth knowledge of its operations, we were their best option for meeting their tight deadline. With that, Applied Creative Technologies (ACT) changed from a sole proprietorship to a corporation and my third child was born.

I have found that being an entrepreneur has been one of the greatest opportunities for personal growth I have ever experienced. In the 10 years through starting, expanding, and exiting my business, I learned more about myself than through any other period in my life. Like most working parents, I struggled at first with the notion of being away from my children. Many of my friends thought I was crazy. For me, that guilt did not last as I discovered the flexibility that prompted me to go out on my own in the first place. I believe strongly that I am personally a better mother because I am an entrepreneur. How did I fit owning a business in with being a parent?

As I grew my business alongside my children, I observed that there are actually more similarities between these two roles than differences. Many of the skills I developed as a mother and an entrepreneur were nurtured simultaneously. As my children grew, my business evolved, and the crossover of skills, joys, and challenges allowed me to pool my internal resources and tackle both tasks head on. Being an entrepreneur provided me with benefits I could not find anywhere else, and being a mother helped give it all meaning and keep it in perspective.

Parenthood and entrepreneurship are *both* the toughest job you'll ever love. Each offer unparalleled growth opportunities and require similar skills to make it through with your sanity intact. The details of every individual's approach to making it all work for them is unique. For me, I found that integrating my work and my home life provided me with the ability to achieve the life I wanted. That is not to say that I never shut off work when at home or did not focus intensely on projects at work. Rather, being flexible about how and when I worked and played afforded me the ability to do both. By not erecting unyielding boundaries between the two and living my life holistically, I found that embracing the parallels provided an edge in business.

Embracing the Parallels

The word *ParentPreneur* is meant to describe entrepreneurs who are also parents. The number of people I have talked with, however, convinces me that many of the characteristics, and especially those that provide an edge, are not reserved for business ownership. Indeed, most working parents share the same experiences and develop comparable skills that can be drawn upon to provide an advantage in any business. The common bonds are the abilities and lessons they have learned in one facet of their lives that can be applied to the other. In talking with younger folks as well, they can learn from the similarities by drawing on their experiences with their own mom and dad or from caring for siblings. Unfortunately, not everyone recognizes the parallels nor embraces them to their advantage.

What parent has not had to clean up the mess from their child's uncontrolled bodily functions? Parenting can be hard and filled with ups and downs. The ability to remain passionate and persistent through the tough times is something all parents need to embrace. I have several friends whose babies experienced medical problems, and they could not come home from the hospital for weeks—sometimes months—after they were born. Those parents were at the hospital full time and would do whatever it took to get

their babies home. That shows their love, passion, and persistence. These are also critical characteristics that add to business success.

As much as we love our children, there are days when we question whether we are really qualified to be parents. I left the hospital less than 24 hours after my first child was born. I could not remember the last time I had held a newborn. Keenan had never held a newborn, though he was a quick study. But they let us leave the hospital with our baby, and from there we were solely responsible for her well-being. The same was true for our business. We were essentially on our own.

Many entrepreneurs and leaders, even the successful ones, wonder if anyone will ever discover that they are not qualified to be running their companies. I absolutely had periods through my decade in business where I was in that camp. It was clear I did not have a degree in parenthood, either. There is no entrance exam for becoming an entrepreneur or a parent. Most of us start businesses without all the skills or tools needed to succeed, but we do it anyway. Some are successful, many are not. If you are not successful, you can take what you learned and try again. While you can (and do) make mistakes as a parent, there are no real do-overs. We are, however, able to do things differently with subsequent opportunities. Both business and parenthood end up requiring some amount of on-the-job training. You don't give up on parenthood because you don't know how to do something—you figure it out. Treat business the same.

In both parenting and the business environment, you'll be working to get results through people. For that reason, I have often pondered whether a degree in psychology would have helped me. I have heard many a business manager refer to instances where managing employees had been like dealing with children. Some are maturing teenagers, while others regress to a much earlier age. Every experience is different. But in the end, your job as a manager is to help people grow, and the rewards of seeing that development can make all the frustration worth it.

The ultimate similarity between parenting and entrepreneurship or any type of leadership is that you are building a legacy. As parents, we want to raise children who are happy, responsible,

contributing citizens. We want them to make a positive impact on the world. They are our legacy.

As entrepreneurs, many of us are also creating companies that we hope will make a contribution to our customers, our employees, and our community. We want our business to make a positive impact on the world, or at least our corner of it. I have talked to many entrepreneurs over the years who maintain that their business fulfills their desire to be part of something bigger than themselves. They want to make an impact that is greater than their own financial gain. Even if financial independence is their goal, many cite philanthropy as one of the positive impacts that their success in business can enable. Providing people with gainful employment, at a minimum, is a significant contribution. There were 15.9 million people in the United States employed by businesses with fewer than 10 employees in 2003 (U.S. Census Press Release for *Small BusinessWeek* 2006, April 9–15), and those numbers have been rising. An estimated 25.5 million small businesses in America employ more than half of the country's private workforce, create three of every four new jobs, and generate a majority of American innovations (Small Business Administration, 2000). Small business is truly the fuel of the American economy, and what we have learned as parents can help us open our own service station to distribute that fuel.

Business or Parenting?

Jack Woelber had been at his new company as a manager for only three weeks when he received a Saturday morning call from his boss, the owner of the company. Not knowing his boss that well yet, he couldn't imagine that the call was a good thing.

"Jack, we need to discuss one of your employees."

The worst thought went through his mind—something tragic had happened to one of his team members. Before he could respond, his boss clarified.

"I came into the office last night to retrieve my theater tickets that I had left in my desk and I caught Elliott* (* indicates the name

has been changed) running out of my office with his pants around his ankles. He was there with Bridget*, one of the new secretaries.”

Silence.

“You know, Jack, I just redecorated my office and they were on *my* couch. I was fit to be tied last night, but,” he said chuckling, “I realized the reason I was so mad is that I had not yet been able to enjoy my new couch. They beat me to it.”

This story could have just have easily come from the parent of a teenager as a business owner. This notion is continually reinforced when I hear entrepreneurs—both men and women—refer to their company as their baby. There are, of course, differences that can’t be denied. I would never sell my children (unless the price was really good!) or shut them down because I was out of money or got tired of them. But after all, we give our business life, we nurture it, and then at some point, many of us let it go.

While Keenan was not involved in the conception of ACT, he adopted it when he joined me two years later. We both considered the company as our child even though it was kind of an accident.

Similarly, Jan King’s entrepreneurial adventure was unplanned. She had been working as an editor at Merritt Publishing for seven years when the owner approached her to run the company. While his offer surprised her, it did not take her long to accept it. When the owner passed away a year later, Jan adopted what she calls his 40-year-old baby. She considered it a start-up, albeit an *old* one, because she literally had to reinvent the company from scratch. They had to figure out who they were, overhaul the product development process, and change a culture that was deeply rooted. Just like taking in someone else’s older child, she had to define a new reality while preserving the things that worked. The changes came over time, as she could not disrupt everything at once, but she was eventually able to build her newly adopted baby into a company an outsider wanted to buy.

Donna Stevenson’s experience was quite different. She didn’t marry her business partner until years after they started their company together, which is why they claim their business, Early Morning Software, as their child out of wedlock. Today, some of her employees even jokingly call her “Mama.”

Graham Weston refers to the starting point of his now over \$200 million baby as the “magic moment of conception.” He met three recent college graduates in the early 1990s when they set up his office building in downtown San Antonio to provide a shared but secure high-speed Internet line for all of his tenants. At the time, such connections were uncommon. He was providing a differentiated service to maximize his occupancy rate.

After reading one of the first editions of *Red Herring* magazine, a periodical aimed at the growing base of technology businesses, he was compelled to ask his future business partners if they had any ideas for a technology company. Coincidentally, they had already started a small company, which at the time had 12 clients but not enough in revenues to cover their expenses. With Graham’s business development and financial savvy and the founders’ technical and business skills, they had the right mix of businesspeople and geeks to make it work. Even though there were approximately 200 other vendors vying for room in their chosen market, many of whom were better funded and further along, the time still seemed right to conceive this business. With a cash infusion from Graham, he adopted their baby and Rackspace was born.

Hollywood even gets it. In one of the final scenes of the movie *RV*, Robin Williams is trying to convince a small, family-run soda company to merge with his large national beverage corporation in order to take their products national. In the midst of his presentation to them, he has a change of heart as he describes their company as their “baby.” He talks about the pains of labor, seeing their baby learning to walk, growing up, and then the idea of letting it go. He proposed that they did not want their baby to be adopted and raised by his large (and now former) employer because of the severe differences in their parenting style. The nodding heads of the founders of that small company indicated that he was right on. Later, in the final scene of the movie, the owners come looking for Robin’s character to hire him because he gets it. It is their baby. Seeing the connection paid off for him. They want him to help teach their baby to walk and take their products national.

Jindra Cekan sees the similarities between parenting and her business as a matter of complex logistics. As the founder

and principal of Cekan Consulting, she coordinates humanitarian assistance efforts to get food aid and development to hungry people across third-world countries. She has to coordinate U.S. government food aid supplies and shipping, and juggle competing demands of the nonprofits and the local communities to get help to those in need. She likens this mobilization of food assistance to parenting. Her work efforts require constant juggling, diplomacy, and a community of involvement, much like her role as a single mother of two active sons. In addition to the daily grind required to ensure that her kids are well fed and get to school, she also has to coax them to share in chores, teach them good habits, and encourage them in best choices for after-school activities such as soccer, piano, and reading. Never mind what it takes to get her family and all their stuff to the beach for a week. Although these tasks differ in scope from her work, she cites them as requiring a similar personal effort. Additionally, once food is delivered, she has to help people set up the auditing systems to make sure the food reached the right people and provided a lasting impact on their ability to feed themselves better. With her sons, she is continually checking to make sure they are doing well in school, helping them make the best choices with their free time, and developing into caring, responsible kids.

As I raised my children and grew my business in parallel, the similarities became obvious and often humorous. It started when people would ask me if I was planning to have a third child, as if that was any of their business. I would quip that my business *was* my third child: It keeps me up at night, it takes all my money, and it sometimes sasses me back.

I realized the process that I went through when I was contemplating starting my company was similar to the steps I took in deliberating parenthood. I read *What to Expect When You're Expecting* when I was, well, expecting, but I could not find a *What to Expect When You're Starting a Business*. At least there was nothing on the bookshelves that seemed similar.

Naming my business and my baby involved similar difficulties. Control was not what I expected, either, as a mother or as a business owner. As I began to get my feet underneath me with both

my new roles, I noticed some crossing over. At times when I was frustrated because I could not get my toddler to behave, I would think about some of the problems I had worked through and survived with my business. Reflecting on that gave me a much-needed boost of confidence to take a deep breath and know that I could solve this problem, too. Likewise in business, thinking about my children often brought challenges I was facing into perspective. My kids were healthy and happy—everything else was secondary. As I pivoted back and forth between these demanding roles, I began to see more and more of the commonalities and realized that I could leverage lessons learned in one to the other.

As I progressed through the growth of my business and my children, I noticed that the progression of stages was identical. That observation inspired the organization of this book. Each chapter represents both a stage of development in parenthood and in business.

Parenting Stage	Business Stage
Getting Pregnant	Preparing for Entrepreneurship
Labor and Delivery	Launching
Baby to Toddler	The Early Days
Elementary School	Ramping Up: A Time to Learn
The Preteen Years	Growing Pains
The Teen Years	Emerging Independence
Letting Go	Exercising Your Exit

In addition, there are many lessons that are not exclusive to entrepreneurship. Business managers and leaders go through similar challenges as well. There is wisdom in this book for you whether you are thinking about starting a business, trying to grow your business, or looking for management and leadership tips you can draw on from your parenting expertise. The lessons actually span several business phases: Starting, Growing, and Managing.

Because there are so many different ways that a business can be successful, I did not want to provide only my side of the story. By bringing in the stories of other entrepreneurs, both male and female, I wanted to demonstrate that there are infinite ways to make it work. Your way may be yet another one to add to the list. The key is that being a parent is not a detriment to your business success; it actually provides you with *an edge*.

Embracing the Edge

As I began to research entrepreneurs to interview, I discovered that it was not easy to find those who had been successful in their business and had also raised children. Upon further digging, I discovered that entrepreneurs who are serious about their business, in general, do not like to advertise that they are also parents. It seems that there is a societal bias that says that you can't be serious about your business and be a good parent, or if you're a good parent, you must let things slide at work. I even had one entrepreneur indicate that she does not talk much about her family because she is worried that it will make her appear weak.

Realizing that your parenting skills can be an asset in business is half the battle. The other half is recognizing the benefits you provide for your child when you pursue your dreams and live a satisfied life, whether that means working a job you love or staying at home to raise kids. In reality, we are providing a service to our children by offering them a role model of someone who has a fulfilled life.

Children learn more by our actions than by our words. Carol Koch-Worrel teaches music to children. One particular child was having a difficult time with a specific note on the violin and was prepared to give up. Carol brought the child's mother over, who had never played the violin before in her life, and showed her how to hit the note they were working on. The child watched as his mom became frustrated but persevered. When she accomplished the goal, the child clapped and grinned. He proceeded to pick

his violin back up and do the same. She modeled success and he emulated it.

Some entrepreneurs I have met, usually women, tend to use their children as an excuse for why they can't start a business or the reason their businesses are floundering. They claim that their kids have to come first and they just can't find time to do what they want to do. I cannot argue that our children should take priority, nor would any of the entrepreneurs I have talked to. Our children do come first, just not every single time. We are actually teaching them that life is about balancing priorities and give and take.

I contend that if you are serious about your business, you can find the time. Sometimes you just need to get creative, and often you have to get help. There is no guarantee that your business will thrive, as there are a number of other factors that contribute to a company's success. But if the business is more than just a hobby and you are passionate and persistent about solving a problem for your customers while keeping an eye on the bigger picture, you have within you what it takes to make a go if it. Parenting helps us to hone those skills.

Test the resolve of a mother whose baby is in the intensive care unit. Measure the persistence with which a father works to teach his child to play baseball or tie his shoe. Calculate the moxie of a parent who remains calm when seeking help for his or her hurt child, only to collapse hours or days later when the danger has passed. As parents, we gain useful skills that not only help us to be entrepreneurs, but actually give us an edge if we're willing to embrace them.

The Personal Side

Donna worked with her father, who was an entrepreneur. In doing so, she saw that a family could be sustained through self-employment. Without that role model, her willingness to take the risk of entrepreneurship may not have not been there. She had seen firsthand that, at the end of the day, it is possible to be self-sufficient. In addition, Donna found that through being an entrepreneur, she

uncovered wells of talent within herself that she had no idea were there. She believes strongly that the greatest gift of self-employment is that you find the best within yourself.

In the beginning, my measure of success was strictly financial. I did not realize at the time how much more there was to it. I compared what I made in revenues against my final year's salary at IBM. The first year out, I made more money on a part-time schedule than I had made the previous year working full time. The year that I first paid more in taxes than I had previously made was beyond what I had imagined. Although it hurt to write that check, it was a good pain. When our company first hit \$1 million in revenue, I thought I had reached the top, but it just kept getting better.

I started to see the impact that the company had on others and on the community. We were able to provide good jobs for people. For some of the staff, we offered the only option for them to work and still be home with their children when they needed to be. We began to receive awards for our approach to work/life balance as we continued to give and to innovate. We were active in the American Cancer Society's Relay for Life to raise money for cancer and provided Christmas baskets to lower-income families. My business was so much more than just a job.

Each milestone achieved and life touched increased my belief that I could do *so* much more than I ever thought possible before. I found strengths I never knew I had and untapped capabilities that had yet to be exploited. I was an entrepreneur and I never knew it. The parable of "The Eagle and the Chicken" captures the challenge I overcame on my road to this discovery.

The Eagle and the Chicken

A man once found an eagle's egg
and put it in the nest of a barnyard hen.
The eagle hatched and grew up
With the rest of the brood of chicks
but noticed he didn't look the same.
Nonetheless, he scratched the earth for worms and bugs
and played the chicken's games.
The eagle clucked and cackled,

he made a chicken's sound. He thrashed his wings,
but only flew some two feet off the ground.
That's high as chickens fly,
the eagle had been told.
The years passed by and one day
When the eagle was quite old
he saw something magnificent flying very high
and making great majestic circles up there in the sky.
He'd never seen the likes of it.
"What's that?" he asked in awe.
While he watched in wonder
at the grace and power he saw.

"Why, that's an eagle," someone said,
"He belongs up there, it's clear.
Just as we, since we are chickens,
belong earthbound down here."
The old eagle just accepted that,
most everybody does.
And he lived and died a chicken,
for that's what he thought he was.

—*Author Unknown*

If you've got the itch, maybe you are an eagle. How will you know unless you believe it is possible, and spread your wings and really try to fly? The worst thing that can happen is you learn just how high you can soar. If you fail to reach the heights you were aiming for, life goes on. At least you flew higher than you would have had you not tried and you learned more about yourself than you ever knew before.

The greatest danger for most of us is not
that our aim is too high and we miss it,
but that it is too low and we reach it.

—*Michelangelo*