CHAPTER ONE

EYE TO THE HORIZON

Cultivating a Vision and Thriving Through Crisis

If you don't have a dream, what do you got?
—PENNSYLVANIA AMISH ENTREPRENEUR

The patchwork acres and stone barns of the Amish settlement in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, seem to reflect a way of life from a time well past.

Eighteenth-century forefathers laid the agrarian foundation that has supported the Amish for nearly three centuries in North America. Amish dress, transportation, and aversion to worldly ways have changed but slowly and incrementally in the years since.

Until a few decades ago, the farming vocation was the primary way to make a living as an Amishman. Milk checks made few Amish rich, but that was never the point.

Farming was a means to raise a family in an environment mostly shielded from the urbane influence of the world. Farming also meant continuity. The tangible assets of fields and meadows—and a way of life based around tending the land—were passed from father to son for generations.

Across America today, Amish farmers continue to cultivate their fields. But the real story is what's been happening in the buildings and shops that have sprung up next to the barns.

Driven by necessity, the Amish have laid a new entrepreneurial economy atop their agrarian heritage, in the process becoming one of the most unexpected business success stories in recent memory.

Amish businesses provide for vibrant communities whose members exist in a way their modern-living neighbors would consider primitive. Yet the firms the Amish run are far from backward when it comes to satisfying customers. Some sell nationwide and overseas—multimillion-dollar operations are not unheard of—while creating employment in their rural corners of America.

The Amish business example, pivoting around concepts such as integrity, family, and simplicity, is rife with insight for application in the modern business environment. And in examining the Amish business story, a good place to start is with the motives and visions that drive these robust small companies.

Regardless of whether you put on pinstripes or suspenders in the morning, having a well-formulated vision is an indispensable part of business success. A guiding vision proves particularly relevant when the start is harder than expected, when recession strikes, or when a newcomer challenges a long-established market position.

Ups and downs alike present challenges to owners and managers. A guiding vision, undergirded by integrity and personal commitment, can keep spirits up and focus sharp in lean times, and feet grounded in good times. A clearly formulated and internalized vision safeguards integrity when ethical issues are on the line.

Just like the family dairy, the Amish-owned business has served as a vehicle to support large clans and to entrust trades. While the temptations of prosperity have proven problematic for some, the typical Amish business motive is anything but consumption-centered.

Amish forefathers sowed their acres with the ultimate aim of perpetuating family and faith. Amish entrepreneurs today cultivate their businesses with similar ambitions in mind. Along with this cultural ideal, however, comes the individual vision of each Amishman, which naturally varies, just as it differs among non-Amish.

In this chapter we'll examine business visions of successful Amish entrepreneurs, and how they serve to buttress business achievement. We'll also look at some Amish start-up stories and lessons learned along the way.

The start can prove particularly difficult, especially when initial enthusiasm sputters out in the face of discouraging results. We'll explore what it takes to persevere when faced with weak sales figures or when all you seem to hear are doomsayers.

We'll also ponder the role that faith plays in running a firm—an unsurprisingly prominent element in a God-centered culture. Finally, we'll examine what to consider when formulating a business vision, a topic we revisit in the final chapter.

Amish may seem different from the rest of us, but their motivations, challenges, and hang-ups are frequently the same. Ultimately, the entrepreneurial experience of the Amish shows that business issues commonly seen in the "real" world in fact transcend cultural bounds, and that the tools and strategies they rely on are present in the modern toolbox as well.

CULTIVATING A VISION

Scanning Amish-themed features in the media, one comes across a well-worn journalistic template. It's the portrayal of the Amish as a standoffish, world-wary folk, suspicious of modernity and staunchly insular. Many pieces start with a standard assumption of the Amish as pious Luddites, wanting as little to do with us modern backsliders as possible. *"Get thee gone, Englishman,"* they seem to murmur between the lines.

True, the Amish *do* delineate their world from the non-Amish one, making important distinctions that help preserve the integrity of their faith and communities. But get to know enough Amish people, and the aloof and prickly portrayal starts to wear thin.

Case in point: Jonas Lapp. Jonas is a "people person" in every sense of the phrase. I recall first approaching his Pennsylvania home,

unannounced, on a muggy July evening. Suddenly, the Amishman materialized, nearly throwing the door off its hinges. Before I could open my mouth, I found myself tractor-beamed into the house. *Have we met already?*

I'd hardly recited my name before Jonas, bright eyes and beaming smile, had me at the kitchen table in front of a couple slices of his wife's pizza. On my return visit a half-year later, Jonas's children frolicked, and a handmade mailbox sign announced a new baby boy to passersby.

The second time around, the veteran homebuilder was no less hospitable, sharing ideas on his trade and on business in general. The whole time Jonas hammered away at one concept: *relationships*. That came as no surprise, based on my experience with Jonas, and his Amish neighbors' warm comments about him.

Jonas relishes what he does. But you can see that it's less the actual construction of homes or the financial payoff that drive him. Instead, it's the chance to be a father figure to an employee who never had one, to form a friendship with a "customer" who in the end never even does business with him, to do his small part to strengthen ties in his community.

"Builder" is a hat Jonas wears, one that allows him to achieve higher-plane ends such as these. But it didn't always come so easy, nor provide so much satisfaction. Early on, Jonas struggled with the *F* word.

Fear.

"I got into business . . . scared," he admits. "I knew there was a chance to make more money, a better opportunity." But, he says, "I probably believed a lot of lies about business."

Lies?

" 'It's tough.' 'You probably won't make it.' People talked about the ones that didn't make it—not about the ones that were doing well. And you kind of buy into that. So the first two to three years I was running the business scared.

"And that's aggressive," he concedes. "You get very aggressive when you have fear of not making it. But it's not healthy."

Fear poisons motivations. When operating anchored in fear, he explains, "you're not establishing relationships. You're in it for what you can grab today. You're after as much as you can get.

"You try to do a good job, but as fast as you can. And the relationship thing? Well, I don't know if I'm going to be in it long term.

"Because you have this thought in the back of your mind," Jonas continues, "that this might be the last year the economy's gonna be strong. This might be the last year before there's a recession. This might be the last year before I fall and break both legs and I can't do this again."

Talking to Jonas, you get the sense that he's been through his share of rough spots. Recounting start-up struggles, Jonas feels that early challenges are often rooted in a person's mentality more than anything else. And so having a solid grounding plays an important part.

And here's where the other *F* word comes in.

Jonas's *faith* is what grounds him. He returns to it over and over. "After a bit you start to look around, and you start to realize that God is long term. And the Lord's going to take care of you.

"And if you really believe he's gonna take care of you, then you should start doing business like God's going to take care of you."

Amish lean on faith. It's a seemingly bottomless source of strength and security. Faith helps them see hope when tragedy strikes. Faith fosters gratitude in the fortunate. It's a basic element of Amish life and, by extension, their approach to business.

Whatever grounds you—spirituality, family, core principles—what matters is being actively aware of it, and understanding its importance.

Mission statements have long fulfilled this "grounding" role, at least on a companywide level. Some firms take mission statements seriously. For others, they seem to serve more as wall decor or as marketing tools.

The idea of a mission statement does fit inside the concept of *vision*, but the two are not one and the same.

The concept of business vision can be somewhat difficult to pin down, but it typically includes a company's or business owner's more

general goals: the needs it plans to fulfill, the unique qualities it aims to bring to the table, how large, how much, what, when, and where.

Yet *vision* also takes in the individual's perception of his own role in the business, and how the business is meant to intersect with everyday, "nonbusiness" life. Vision, by its very nature, motivates.

Vision can include the potential positive impacts a company desires to have on a community, a market, and in the most profound cases, the country or world. Creating a vision encourages imagining how life could be different for you as well as for others whom your business can possibly influence—your customers, employees, neighbors, and family.

Mission statements typically capture a company's aims and ambitions in a market context and often take into account some of the impacts just mentioned. But a personal business vision necessarily includes in its scope how running a company affects the owner and his immediate environment, as well as what he and others can be or *become* through the business activity. A well-formulated, deeply held vision is often highly personal.

HEAD CHECK

Vision can also be a crucial source of strength. Fear takes over when we focus on failure. Jonas's vision has helped him battle and destroy this disabling emotion.

Jonas neutralizes fear by shifting his focus. "If you're a servant-leader, that means other people are gonna come first," he explains. "People have to be very important to you. You're not in it for the dollar anymore . . . you're in it to help people. And the profits? They come.

"People need people that will take the time to make them [feel] important." He sees the people focus as part of a personal mission. In Jonas's vision, he is a mentor to his employees, an ear for his customers, a reliable partner for his business peers. He executes in the day-to-day, while the far-horizon focus frames each decision.

When we are oblivious to all other concerns but our own, minor issues take on far more importance than they deserve. Directing our concern outward and acting to aid our fellow man is one of the greatest fear-destroyers in the modern businessperson's arsenal. But to do this, you need both humility and an ability to empathize.

Jonas raises another worthy point relating to vision: sorting out motives and ambitions before techniques and strategies. Vision is concerned with the *why* before the *how*. It may have taken a journey to get there, but Jonas has his *why* sorted out—in his case, to be a person who adds value to others' experiences, be it by mentoring, listening, or collaborating as a contributing, productive member of his community.

Are you long term or day-to-day? While entrepreneurs like Jonas stress the importance of the here and now, at the same time they realize they must have a long-term vision to be effective in the day-to-day—in Jonas's case to avoid the place of fear by residing in concern for his fellow man.

Small-business owners can be providers in numerous meaningful ways: products or services that improve lives; jobs for members of the community; contributions to charitable causes. Amish bosses who provide these things often stress the good of others before they get to talking about their own pockets.

At the same time, successful Amish businesspeople take great satisfaction in the roles they create for themselves and in the fruits of their labors. The examples of Jonas and others seem to suggest one question relevant to anyone who is considering, or reevaluating, a personal business vision: *Where's your head?*

HEAD CHECK, PART 2

Getting your head right also means locking down the raw, nuts-and-bolts knowledge needed to achieve competence in your field. At the same time, mastering the tech side is only one slice of the pie. And in some cases, in a managerial context, intimate knowledge of every

procedure in your firm not only is unnecessary but can even become an obstacle, leading overzealous managers to lose sight of the wide view.

In the business classic *The E-Myth Revisited,* Michael Gerber explores a basic error, which he terms the Fatal Assumption: Just because you are good at doing something means you're ready to make a business of it.

Like their English counterparts, Amish businesspeople often seek guidance at some point in their business lives. As we'll examine in the next chapter, this may take the form of offhand consulting with a father or brother or neighbor. It could mean seminars and books. It may even mean kicking ideas around with their current boss—some of whom are surprisingly supportive of their employees' entrepreneurial ambitions. The wiser entrepreneurs identify what they are lacking and supplement the missing bits. The Amish even have their own consultants.

Isaac Smoker is a deliberate man who weighs every comment carefully before speaking. Neighbors and fellow church members alike speak highly of him. Seen as an authority, Isaac is trusted for his no-nonsense business counsel. At the same time, Isaac, a bishop, fulfills a valuable function, guiding his business contemporaries and coreligionists on how to stay true to their beliefs and cultural practices while running successful firms in a non-Amish world.

A business owner himself, Isaac works with a number of Amish-run companies and is well positioned to observe the development of businesses among his people. Talking about typical mistakes, he says that one "problem is they go from working for someone else to forming their own company overnight." The main issue, Isaac points out, is that "maybe they're not really suited to be running a company; maybe they're not really suited for the business they're in.

"They think they know how to work, and they don't realize that running a business is something else." Ignoring the fact that business is about a lot more than just efficiently pumping out widgets is a common

hazard for would-be company managers. Gerber writes in *E-Myth* that "when the technician falls prey to the Fatal Assumption, the business that was supposed to free him from the limitations of working for somebody else actually enslaves him."

According to Gerber, what happens is that "the job he knew how to do so well becomes one job he knows how to do plus a dozen others he doesn't know how to do at all."

Lancaster homebuilder Elam Peachey realizes this today.

"That was me," he confesses, describing a start-up experience matching Isaac's example. "I knew how to build the house, but I didn't . . . know anything about [the business side]. But I wasn't gonna let it stop me.

"The office thing—I made some mistakes at first," Elam admits. "I do things differently now than I did when I first started. But I didn't make that many mistakes that I failed," he emphasizes, saying that he learned quickly enough "to stay afloat."

Elam, in his late twenties and running a company for five years, is street-savvy and a quick study. His approach may work, if you are quick enough to pick up what you lack, or get others to show you. It is not for everyone. "I would rather see a person start part-time, and learn not only how to do the work but how to run a business, before they do it full-time," says Isaac Smoker.

Quite a few Amish do just this, continuing to earn steady paychecks while learning and building a customer base.

In Ohio, furniture finisher Harley Stutzman followed this strategy. A bit uncommon for an Amishman, Harley worked on the railroad for a spell and drove a vehicle before being baptized in the Amish church, followed by a stint in a mobile home factory after rejoining the community.

About his chosen trade of furniture finishing: "I had no experience. I just jumped in. It was a little scary, I had two kids at the time, and I had a mortgage payment," Harley explains. "I stayed at the factory

when I first started. I didn't leave immediately, and I worked [on the business] in the evenings."

But business grew to the point where "it got to be too much" to hold down both. Today, nearly a decade later, Harley's firm—employing nine members of the community and fulfilling Harley's original vision—could be described as a success in many ways.

Harley's evolution from working full-time to half-and-half to full-time firm owner is a common and sensible example of how many Amish individuals reduce the risk of the start-up while acquiring the know-how and customer base necessary for long-term success.

WHY BUSINESS?

In a nutshell: children, faith, and real estate.

Amish tend to have large families, averaging around seven children per married couple. Significantly, the vast majority of those children tend to remain within the Amish faith.

With an exploding population, land has become scarcer, and—particularly in Eastern seaboard settlements such as those in Pennsylvania or Delaware—pressures created by urbanites fleeing the cities for suburbs and exurbs have caused prices of farm acreage to skyrocket. This has left Amish less able to acquire the 80–100-acre farms they've historically based their lives around.

In order to avoid work in non-Amish environments and to simulate the at-home dynamic of the family farm, small business has become an attractive option. A home business typically requires less start-up capital than a farm, and can be operated part-time while still receiving a steady paycheck.

Additionally, many of the trade skills that the Amish use in their wood-working or homebuilding firms are ones they have long honed on the farm. These labor-intensive, craftsmanship trades are among the most popular for Amish entrepreneurs.

Though both education level and cultural acceptability limit the scope of businesses, one still finds a diversity of firms represented in the Amish business roster. In addition to trades based around the wood and building industries, other Amish enterprises include horseshoeing operations, machine shops, market stands (some operating in urban areas such as Philadelphia

or Washington, D.C.), quilt-making businesses, dog breeders, bakeries, dry goods stores, and buggy builders.

Around the edges are a host of less-common pursuits, such as physical therapy, bookkeeping, horse training, herbal medicine, auctioneering, the occasional tourist-oriented businesses providing meals or even stays in Amish homes, guinea pig "farms," and even alternator and engine repair shops, in an example of an unusual meeting of cultural worlds.

PROPER EXPECTATIONS

An important part of the start-up calculus lies in recognizing and evaluating challenges—both physical and mental. Successful business owners are typically paid at an above-average level because of above-average sacrifices of sweat, nerves, or brainpower.

Harley Stutzman explains that "you have to be very determined and focused. If you like a lot of free time, starting your own business is not for you."

His tone attests to the seriousness of his experience. "I didn't see my kids. . . . I think I did the right thing. I'm glad I did what I did. But I wouldn't want to do it again," Harley admits, citing as especially challenging the times "when you need groceries, and you need supplies for the baby, and the money's not there.

"We never went hungry, but we did with a lot less."

Another of Harley's peers in the trade reflects a sentiment felt by most at some point, when he mentions "A.M." starts—meaning even 2 A.M. in his case. "When I was down there by myself in the morning," he says, "I'd think, '*Why* did I ever do this?' " Short nights and shoestring spending are a common reality. If it ends up not being as big a struggle as expected, call that a bonus.

As we'll examine in the next chapter, mentors and a support structure can be very important during early days. At the same time, entering the business-arena demands independent thinking, which means things can get lonely.

One longtime Amish business owner, no stranger to success, describes the initial reaction of his peers toward his entrepreneurial plans as terrible. "I was the black sheep everywhere," he explains. The way he tells it, he found pessimists around every turn. "People are cruel, baby!" he laughs.

"If you read through the Old Testament, that's the way it's always been," the Amishman continues. "We're prone to destroy other people who are successful. We like to do that.

"We like to see people failing that have been successful, because they're arrogant now. . . . It just gives us a good feeling!" he remarks, flashing a big ironic grin.

While the direct tone may seem surprising coming from an Amishman, this entrepreneur's words offer an insight on human nature, one which can perhaps explain tax-the-rich cheerleading, corporate scapegoating, and the satisfaction Main Street takes in watching Wall Street titans topple.

Though spoken with tongue at least partially in cheek, the Amishman's take points up a reality: a budding entrepreneur can't always count on emotional support, even from his own community. The people whose opinions you care about most may be the quickest to put you down.

Sometimes the critical eye comes in good faith. You should probably listen to skeptics when it's the trusted and experienced doing the talking. Other times, true motives for raining on your parade may be closer to what this Amishman describes.

Discerning whom to listen to while withstanding naysayers is a common challenge for entrepreneurs and executives. Not everyone will love you or your idea, especially when it's unproven or unusual. Part of running a firm is getting used to kickback and, in some cases, punching ahead regardless.

Sadie Lapp, a pioneer entrepreneur in the Lancaster settlement, describes similar challenges. Though female-owned businesses—often craft- or food-oriented, or smaller-scale cottage industries—are not unheard of today, starting up in the early 1970s Sadie was one of only a

few—female or, for that matter, male—Amish operating an enterprise. The Amishwoman admits she encountered "a hard time" from some in her community when starting up her quilting business. Sadie explains that while church leadership was understanding of her desire to open a company, they felt it important that her business be located in the home, reflecting universal concerns over the importance of family.

Today, some Amish females do own prospering companies, though traditional roles persist. Female entrepreneurs are more likely to be single or married and childless, or to have children already grown. Some run full-time operations generating a sizeable income, while others may have sideline affairs. The demands of home and family limit the latitude with which Amish females can operate. Sadie, whose company quickly achieved sales of hundreds of quilts per year, explains that she is happy that she was compelled to operate her business from home, as it allowed her to be around while her children were small.

Gender issues aside, novices sometimes approach first forays into entrepreneurship with a mind-set unanchored in business realities. Some start with the notion that putting up a few ads, picking out a fancy office, and putting on a grand opening will do to get customers rolling in.

The reality is often the opposite. "You gotta go out and look for work instead of waiting for it to come to you," says Ohio Amishman Jon Schrock. This may mean working the phones or flat-out pounding the pavement. It may mean offering initial work or early sales for free or at cut rates.

Considering the typically large investment of toil, trouble, and money, some Amish businesspeople also stress establishing a realistic time horizon and knowing when to cut losses. Having a logical plan removes emotion and minimizes guesswork in decision-making.

Jon finds it useful to set a reasonable time frame. Speaking from experience acquired running successful firms in a pair of industries, he explains that "the first three years in the business is the toughest years" and that "you can't expect to make too much money." If you're still not doing well after a certain allotted time, "then you have to make adjustments."

Those adjustments could be drastic or may even mean calling it a day. Time frames—three years, five years, one—will, of course, vary.

"There's businesses that go in, and the first year they make money, and they keep making money. But that wasn't the case with my business the first two to three years. . . . It's kind of a hump you have to get over."

What will your budget really allow? How will the business affect your lifestyle? What changes will be necessary? And are you being honest with yourself? An accountant's counsel, as well as that of other trusted individuals, can prove useful.

Though support is important, you can't count on universal approval. Negative voices are inevitable. Establish a reasonable time horizon dictated both by financial realities and an assessment of personal commitment. Formulating a vision means taking into account the reality of challenges and kickback as well.

DRIVEN

The underdog, against-all-odds aspect comes pretty much standard to the classic business fable. Early humps and shoestring hijinks make such stories fascinating in the retelling.

The Rubbish Boys, North America's largest mover of unwanted stuff (now under the name 1–800-GOT-JUNK?), was started by a high school dropout in a tight job market with little more than a beat-up, plywood-sided pickup and a tankful of motivation. Hewlett-Packard—and by extension Silicon Valley—famously began in a 12-by-8-foot shed, now a national historic landmark. And the founder of what became Frito-Lay got cooking on a $100 loan from his mother, frying up the first chips in her kitchen and hawking them from his Model T.

Accounts such as these are revisited today with a sense of awe and drama. "The classic business story is much like the classic human story," recounts author Mark Helprin. "There is rise and fall; the overcoming of great odds; the upholding of principles despite the cost; questions of rivalry and succession; and even the possibility of descent into madness."

What intangible qualities does an entrepreneur need to survive? In many cases it's the character and passion of the founder, galvanized by a concrete, all-important vision, that powers the sputtering business through troubled times.

According to some highly successful Amish, sheer inner drive can propel determined entrepreneurs through the early learning phase. And the importance of drive is not to be underestimated. Sadie Lapp had to fight through discouragement that came both from some in her community as well as from a competing quilt seller. Another Amishman admits, "I wanted it so bad, for so many years. . . . To do something like this. I just latched onto it, and it just took off. It's an interesting ride."

When asked about keys to success, veteran Jake Stoltzfus who has nearly four decades in business boils it down to two short words: *"Be hungry."*

Sheer hunger, it seems, can even stand in for other supposedly essential traits. Jake Stoltzfus is a gruff, direct man. Jake is, in a word, intense. He thrives on challenge. He has also become something of a business legend among his people. Early on, Jake did not have to search far for motivation.

"It was easy—pay the bills and feed the family!" Jake explains, reciting a common start-up story. "I had to feed my family; therefore, I had to work, I had to figure it out. There was no other option."

Practically speaking, this meant scrimping on extras—vacations, fancy food, social visits to friends—as well as late nights and near-twenty-hour days. Jake, displaying an inherent penchant for drama, considers the motivation issue simple: "When your back's against the wall, you better come out swinging—or you're gonna starve."

Drama aside, Jake views entrepreneurial hunger—of the type that can't really be learned so much as inspired, absorbed, or self-realized—as the main driver in founding and developing successful firms. He also sees lack of this desire played out in a common generational scenario. In the typical story line, the founder builds the company up from scratch. The second generation lets it stagnate. And in the third, "it goes down the toilet."

Similar tales of entrepreneurial decline play out again and again, even with the benefits, typically enjoyed by inheritors of family firms, of money and a business culture upbringing.

Describing characteristics of a "natural businessman," Jake emphasizes drive above all else. "Most businessmen do not consider themselves successful. . . . They never reach the goal," he explains, providing a glimpse into the driver mentality. "They don't ever say, 'Ah, I'm successful; now I stop.' "

Amish have differing views on business success. Becoming satisfied with success can be poisonous, according to Jake. Getting fat and happy means "you lost it, it's going downhill," he assures.

Yet, many of Jake's contemporaries, despite working hard for their success, would shy away from his hard-charger approach.

Numerous Amish make a "contentment mentality" an integral part of their visions, essentially self-limiting their firms to fit in with traditional Amish tendencies toward the small-scale and manageable. According to such thinking—and though it may sound heretical to some—learning to be satisfied with a measure of success is actually an integral part of *being* successful.

The money may be great. But in this view, if the push for profit and all it entails causes stress, discontent, and damage to your relationships, then you're missing something. *Success* also means knowing how to handle it, and how to be happy with accomplishments.

This tension between the impulse to expand and the desire to self-limit size in order to better realize a vision is something that many Amish grapple with.

For businesspeople attuned to the "growth is great" paradigm, the idea of limiting size is one that might never enter the picture. But managing growth can be key to modern business success as well. And not just on the level of personal vision. Carefully managed expansion can mean preserving attributes core to the identity of the firm, for example, or could be crucial to maintaining quality.

Growth can also come in ways besides upping production or payroll. Sometimes it simply means getting better at what you do—efficiency enhancements or improved quality, for example.

Modern companies with histories of restricting production in order to preserve brand prestige or in deference to production realities, ranging from motorcycle builder Harley-Davidson to luxury watchmaker Patek Phillipe, testify to the importance of self-limitation. Being mindful about how you grow, and to what degree, can also play into preserving a "family" culture, even in larger corporate settings.

Regardless of the motivation—personal or business-strategic—controlling growth has a real place in the business context. We'll make a further exploration of managing growth, the varying definitions of success, as well as the challenge of fitting a business into a life in Chapter Eight.

Hunger can make up for a lot. Honest self-examination can shine light on your own drive. At the same time, in a consumption-driven world, limitation and contentment are learned traits and not necessarily blasphemous ones in the context of business success.

THE TROUBLE WITH "THE AMISH"

When referring to America's best-known plain community, both scholarly and popular commentators use the term "the Amish" freely, though in fact it falls a bit short.

In truth, the Old Order Amish world is a diverse one. Diversity has emerged for a number of reasons, often having to do with the fact that the Amish are a highly congregational group. This means that there is no "Amish pope" with all-encompassing authority. As a result, groups with differing cultural characteristics have emerged under the Old Order umbrella, one that covers over 1,700 individual congregations across America and Canada.

While all Amish adhere to certain doctrines and beliefs such as nonresistance and adult baptism, peering through the magnifying glass reveals stark differences across the Amish spectrum.

Among other things, Amish vary in degree of conservatism, acceptance of technology, and appearance of clothing, homes, and transportation. Some Amish homes, for example, mimic suburban estates, while others seem closer to ramshackle turn-of-the-century dwellings.

Amish buggies may be black, gray, brown, yellow, or white. In some communities, Amish drive only carriages without a top cover, which can present challenges in inclement weather.

Amish differ in degrees of openness to the world as well. Many are naturally welcoming and interactive with outsiders, and intercultural friendships are common. On the more conservative end, others may be less apt to engage non-Amish neighbors or visitors or to subscribe to the local paper, for example.

In very rare cases, a few allow telephones and even electricity in the home, but the vast majority keep both at arm's length—with phones, for example, safely out in the shop or at the end of the lane in specially constructed shanties. The cell phone, meanwhile, has snuck into a number of communities while remaining mostly absent in others.

Amish businesspeople, typically closer than their farming peers to the non-Amish world, may take a more progressive stance on an issue than their agricultural counterparts would, as may Amish living in larger settlements with more frequent contact with outsiders, versus those in smaller, often more isolated and conservative ones.

Differences are most obvious across *affiliations,* the term for groups of churches that associate closely with one another. The most conservative, for example, differ in notable ways from the more progressive, though groups from opposite ends of the spectrum rub elbows in some areas and may be indistinguishable to the layperson. Most of the Amish who contributed to this book could be classified within the largest affiliation, a ''mainstream'' subgroup of the larger Old Order Amish family that is, somewhat confusingly, also termed ''Old Order'' Amish.

Still, for simplicity's sake, serious and casual observers, as well as the Amish themselves, tend to rely on the wide-net term ''the Amish.''

THE GIFT OF TRYING TIMES

Ivan Miller, a wholesaler operating in a wide-reaching coast-to-coast market, has reached success in the business he founded fifteen years ago on his Ohio farm. Ivan's journey, however, has not been a smooth one. The jovial Amishman hit two stumbling blocks early on: ''No experience, and I did not ask for a lot of advice.

''The harder I tried to show people what I was, the more I showed 'em what I wasn't,'' Ivan admits, humbled at the recollection. Now, he feels, ''it's more important to know what you don't know than what you know.'' On realizing his error, Ivan says, ''then I started asking people

for advice, that I should've . . . years before," although, he laughs, "I'm still paying for some of my education."

Ivan learned the hard way that with proper planning, study, and consultation beforehand, business start-ups can reduce errors. But inevitably, owners and managers make mistakes. Challenges and obstacles arise, independent of the moves you make or knowledge you possess.

"If you can stay in for the lows, you can do well in the highs" is how Pennsylvania entrepreneur Daniel King sums up his thinking on challenges. "I'm convinced that if we would always have a high, that we wouldn't learn to be efficient," he says.

"But if we have a low," Daniel feels, "it then stimulates—or educates—us to be efficient, when things pick up." Daniel points out the importance of this concept, not just regarding business challenges but in "all kinds of crisis." General-life issues come into play here as well: "You need to have a crisis to . . . be a strong person."

Daniel's words resonate particularly today, in the aftermath of the late 2000s global economic crisis and the governmental and public response to it.

Observers of modern society lament that we have learned to shun pain, struggle, and difficulty as hostile to "the good life." We want ours—and we deserve it, for that matter—and if it entails any extraordinary degree of hardship, we're not interested.

On the contrary, as Daniel explains, a dose of discomfort is often just the "stimulus" needed to grow and to escape stagnant modes of thinking and unproductive behaviors. In lieu of hand-holding and subsidized failure, sometimes a solid kick in the tail is just the tonic an individual or company requires.

"If you get into a low time," Daniel explains, "you can look at this as . . . giving me an opportunity of sharpening my pencil, tightening the belt, and staying competitive, even at low times," he points out. "Instead of saying, 'well, you know these times are just rotten,' and [having] a bad attitude on what's happening."

Daniel recalls an anecdote about a tree, one which ends up putting down roots in response to gusty conditions. "He was a strong tree, *because*

of the wind," Daniel explains. If he were protected at all times, "he would not have grown to be as strong," he says. "That's what we need to do in business."

Daniel agrees that this concept can be hard for new entrepreneurs to stomach. Survival in such cases may come down to simple perseverance. "It's not like the minute you're running into the red, that you're going to give up. Because there's numerous others going down the road at the same pace, that are now going to maybe say, 'I'm tired of it. I'm not going to do it.' And eventually that market will pick up again."

The idea that hard times are acceptable, and should even be welcomed, may seem counterintuitive. But the sentiment meets sympathetic ears in Amish society. The capacity to persevere through low periods is rooted in Amish agricultural tradition, with its historical ups and downs and reliance on uncontrollable factors such as weather patterns and milk and crop prices.

Being able to weather hard times results not only in a stronger company and character but in credibility as well. Talking of a once-ruined businessperson who subsequently changed his own fortunes and achieved substantial success, entrepreneur Ezra Miller points out that "he was on the low end, and now he's on the high end. And I can appreciate someone like that.

"He's been on both teams, and that's good," Ezra explains. "The guy that always did well?" Ezra asks. "Not the guy to get your answers [from].

"Because a lot of them are gonna fall sometime," Ezra points out. "And some people when they fall, they think they can't get back up. But you gotta be able to get back up and keep running."

Being able to fall. Just like the rest of America, Amish have had to weather slowdowns in the economy and in some of their key industries.

Along the way, the philosophy of businesspeople such as Ezra and Daniel has no doubt been tested. The blessings of hard times can be tough to appreciate. But sometimes, a gut check comes at just the right moment, and to just the right person. Failure is often just what we need to bring us back down to planet Earth, as Ivan Miller found.

With hindsight, Ivan feels his early struggles have even helped him to empathize and be more of a servant to others. "I feel I can help a lot more people now pull through the tough times, because of mistakes I've made," Ivan explains. "Sometimes when things go tough in the beginning, you have more heart for your people you deal with later on.

"And if my customers have tough times, I can feel for them. I don't just act like they're stupid.

"At the same time," says Ivan, "when something is supposed to be, God can make it happen."

FAITH MATTERS

The famous Amish pragmatism is balanced by spirituality. Ivan's comments reveal an element which features prominently in the visions of many business owners in his community—faith in a higher power.

In Amish America, God is ever present: from morning devotions through bowed heads at lunch to prayers on knees at night, faith manifests itself in concrete ways in the day-to-day.

God's benign hand works in all facets of existence. Amish commonly cite God's providence as essential to their success. In some cases, the language they use even concedes ownership to the Man upstairs. "It's not really my business. I just work here," says entrepreneur Sylvan Miller.

Giving thanks is the default Christian behavior and one that meshes with Amish emphasis on humility. But being human, even Amish struggle with pride at times. Entering the arena of business—where individual decisions are rewarded and personal business acumen esteemed—has sharpened the threat of this deadly sin in a traditionally self-effacing culture.

"Once the human being can do as he pleases, which money often allows you to do, he becomes corrupt," warns another business owner. Aware that some of his peers have at times been distracted by worldly gain, he remarks that "of course, we all wanna go to the same place.

It's the ultimate goal. That is when success becomes a four-letter word, if it might actually get in the way."

Being of strong faith brings many benefits—though business advantage is clearly not the wellspring of Amish piety. Among the tangential benefits of strong faith are a lessening of emotional burdens, a sense of groundedness and security, as well as guiding perspective.

Harley Stutzman, recounting struggling with low sales numbers early on, recalls that "there was times when I'd go home from work, and just think, I don't know if I can do it anymore, and I'd say 'Lord it's all yours, show me the way,' and you'd come in the next morning and here's some products showing up again."

Though falling short of a thinking which presupposes earthly payback for piety, strong faith instills a confidence that efforts will ultimately be rewarded. "I could tell you some stories where things just fell into place. I had no idea where to turn. I just decided I'm going to turn this over to the Lord," suit maker Sylvan Miller explains, describing times when troubles seemed to work themselves out.

In the Amish worldview, faith in God lightens burdens—if not materially, then at least mentally. "There was so many incidents, that I feel without His help I could not have done it," adds Sylvan.

Amish are also aware that though they may act with free will, in the end someone else holds the cards. Among Amish, there's a real sense of submission and of ceding the ultimate picture to a higher power. "We don't know what's gonna happen two years down the road. He might need to teach me a lesson. . . . I don't know," Sylvan concedes.

A Pennsylvania business owner emphasizes that "Whatever he lets happen is probably for the best. Maybe you're looking at a big job, and you don't get it. And that's frustrating," he admits, especially after committing one or two months of work to winning the deal.

But "you need to stop and think, 'maybe I wasn't supposed to have that job.' My prayer is usually for Him to let us have the jobs that He wants us to have."

At the same time, Amish admonish those who kick back and wait for riches to rain down from on high, or those who act irresponsibly and still expect rewards. "So far, if there was a need, it was met," says Sylvan Miller. "But I can't just go spend money; you still have to manage."

Or as one gazebo manufacturer puts it, paraphrasing from Scripture: "We can ask for stuff and pray for stuff, but if we don't take any action, it can't be fulfilled. We're being slothful.

"If we ask for something," he continues, "God expects us to go and do it, make a move on it. If you pray [that] you want to move this hill, you're going to have to make an effort to move it. That's kind of the way we're motivated here."

HAVING VISIONS

The driving desire to start off on one's own frequently springs from dissatisfaction. In such cases, real-life concerns are often the catalyst: higher pay, more free time, more control over one's life. Others gravitate toward business for higher-minded motives, such as solving a persistent consumer problem with a new product or service, creating jobs for fellow community members, or providing a family setting for work.

Well-defined goals and a meaningful, ingrained business vision are an essential part of running a prospering company. Pessimists, setbacks, and subpar early results all serve to discourage beginning businesspeople, and sometimes even prove fatal. A deeply rooted vision assists owners at all stages of their business lives, acting as an engine to power the individual through obstacles and on to achievement.

In many cases, the vision comes before specifics have been hammered out. "I was just about sure somebody could make it work. . . . How it was all gonna work out, I wasn't sure, all the details," one Amishman explains. But he had a good enough idea of what the final result should look like in terms of his business and the way his and his family's life fit into it.

Today his firm is a success, and you can read the satisfaction on his face; he takes pride in providing a service and employing a healthy handful in his community.

Your vision depends on you and reflects your personal drives, desires, and values. And you don't necessarily need a grandiose world-altering goal or a chorus of angels and trumpets to know a vision has arrived.

Gary Erickson, founder of Clif Bar, envisioned a better-tasting energy food during a 175-mile "Epiphany Ride," and was driven to take his all-natural athletic treat to others who'd also suffered the "unappetizing" and "hard to digest" workout snacks common at the time. Erickson sought to solve a common, nagging problem and in the end created a product that has made life better in a small way for scores of fellow sports enthusiasts.

Some Amish goals reveal a drive rooted in the appeal of challenge. One long-term business vet is selling his original firm and purchasing another, which had declined over a number of years. "It's boring if you have nothing to do. I cannot stand that."

He realizes it will take work to manage the new firm back to profitability. "That's a challenge. I like that. Now I can take something that's been screwed up, and build it up. I have no doubt that it can be done."

Some point to family. Another Amishman, speaking of a large investment in a market-stand business, calls being able to work with family the "number one reason" he became involved. "They were very much enthusiastic about it, and without my wife—without her support—I could never do it."

He also cites the possibility of his sons taking over the business in the future, nodding to the typical Amish desire to create something transferable to future generations. Similarly, a veteran points to a lack of desire on the part of his children to continue as a main reason for shutting his doors. "If you don't have family that wants to keep on going, then there's really no use having it anymore."

Other goals are more down-to-earth, sometimes literally: "I think the biggest thing was to get out of hauling manure," explains Ivan

Miller. "When I was a young man sitting at home plowing, I would sit back down to plow and think, what in the world can I do in life to make a lot of decisions in a short time?"

Whatever it may be, make it your own. As we've seen in these examples, business owners formulate a vision based on diverse motivations. It could be making money and mentoring people. It might be tapping into a new market to provide a product that fulfills a need and improves lives. Or it may simply mean becoming the best in your particular field in the face of challenges and naysayers.

Regardless of what your vision reflects—challenge fulfillment, family focus, a ticket off the manure train—the point is to have one. We'll reexamine vision and the big-picture context in greater detail in Chapter Eight.

So let's assume you have a clear vision in mind.

In the next chapter, we take a look at how Amish, with education ending at eighth grade, equip themselves with the knowledge and skills needed to bring vision to fruition—and at the insights their unorthodox approach to learning can reveal for modern-world managers, experienced executives, and budding entrepreneurs alike.

TEN POINTS ON VISION AND CRISIS

1. A personal business vision can be a powerful driver. Success is possible without one, but when it comes to reaching personal fulfillment and surviving challenges and problems, a deeply held, authentic vision can transform a grind into a vocation.
2. Vision can concern itself with market-oriented goals, but it necessarily includes the personal element—the role you play and the function your business fulfills in your personal and family life, for example.
3. Knowing how to make something or execute a task well doesn't mean you're set to run a business. Technical skill and managerial acumen are two different things. Honest assessment coupled with training and outside advice can help remedy managerial deficiencies.
4. It can be wise to spend time thinking through potential challenges—financial, emotional, or physical—and the real-life impacts they may have.

5. Support from outside is a luxury, not a given.
6. Successful business owners often exhibit one key trait—drive—rooted in a strong desire to accomplish a well-defined goal or vision. Developing and nurturing a powerful vision can help overcome inevitable challenges.
7. Challenges and trials are not necessarily negative. Sometimes we need the hard times to get better at what we do.
8. Amish take strength from their faith. You may, too. If not, what other reserves of strength will you tap?
9. Vision typically begins to germinate well before the ironed-out, tidied-up final plan.
10. Vision is individual and personal. It belongs to you and those you choose to share it with. Whatever it may be, make it your own.