

## The Entrepreneurship Marathon

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### Introduction

This paper describes an unusual experience aimed at motivating undergraduate students at the University of São Paulo, Brazil, to behave in an entrepreneurial way. The experience has been repeated every month since October 2003. The original point of it is that it was developed to work with attitudes and motivation, rather than with skills and abilities. The whole experience is extra-curricular and available to all undergraduate students.

The Entrepreneurship Marathon (EM) consists of 25 hours of experiences, organized in three consecutive days. Most of the activities encourage the participant to think, act and react as an individual and as a member of a team. Notwithstanding the reference to the sport, all activities are indoors.

Two facilitators are necessary for each EM, though not all the time. About 30 to 40 students can participate on each marathon. The EM is the first step of a 8-step program on entrepreneurship. Table 1 shows a short description of each step.

Table 1 – Steps of the CME entrepreneurship program

Step	Description	Objectives
1	Entrepreneurship Marathon	Getting the right attitude and behavior toward entrepreneurship
2	Generation of social capital	Fieldwork on creating social capital within the near community
3	Whole-group accomplishment	Organizing an event or social movement directed toward a specific objective, for instance the improvement of traffic conditions at a neighborhood
4	Outdoors training experience	Challenging personal limits and developing team work
5	Creation of a low-tech enterprise	Making a living like most of the people have to
6	Social voluntary work	Working at third-sector companies for at least 90 hours
7	Entrepreneurial skills	Training on writing a business plan
8	Creation of a Business plan	Developing, proposing and defending a business plan for a technology-based company

This work describes each activity of the EM and discusses the motivation for each of its sessions.

## The reasons behind the Entrepreneurship Marathon

The first efforts toward creating a class for extra-curricular study of entrepreneurship issues for undergraduates at the Centro Minerva de Empreendedorismo (CME) at Escola Politécnica da USP (EPUSP) faced the following problems:

1. As time progressed, the dropout rate increased due to demands from standard curricular activities; so, the ideal course should be intense and concentrated on a very short time.
2. The students were not prepared to understand the relevance of most of the questions concerning entrepreneurship and business, which demand specific attitudes and previous experiences that they did not have yet; so, another requirement was to center the activities on attitudes and to provide experiences as real as possible to the students.
3. The very concept of the entrepreneurship program as a whole at CME, which is very costly and demanding, depended on delivering a very strong first experience to the participants and filtering out all that were not motivated enough to deserve the spent energy.

The idea for a marathon format came after it was decided that it might be interesting to do a crescendo, little by little, as in any physical exercise, beginning with stretching and warm-up sessions. Moreover, the course must be as difficult as possible, so that the challenge for the participants is to go as far as they can, which is generally much more than they imagine they are able to.

Once there was a decision concerning the overall format, the following accessory definitions were set:

- Give as little instruction to the participants as possible.
- Let them act freely.
- Control the results and give them as much feedback as possible.
- Establish an atmosphere of mutual trust from the very beginning.
- Define from the start that the EM is not a course but an experience. There are no teachers and there are no students.
- Treat everyone very informally, on a first-name basis.
- Get them compromised with permanent feedback, secrecy and truthfulness.
- It is not a competition; there are no losers.
- Prepare the participants for the next phase (generation of social capital).
- Stress the importance of personal productivity and personal planning of one's own time.
- Define being an entrepreneur as being your own very demanding boss.
- Stress the importance of personal experience, even of failure.
- Introduce the difficult concept of social capital through examples and real experiences.
- Show how to act in an entrepreneurial way in very practical terms.
- Make them analyze and express the reasons for not acting in an entrepreneurial way.
- Make them reflect on the term *venture* and compare it to *enterprise*.
- Make them get in contact with fear.
- Make them get in contact with rejection.

After several fruitful experiences in 2002 and the first half of 2003, the authors arrived at a specification that seems to meet the defined requirements.

## **First Day: Warm-up and Stretching**

In the first day (usually a Friday), the activities begin at 6:30pm and go until 10:30pm. The room has a flipchart and movable tables and chairs. Only one facilitator must be present at the beginning.

The first day is devoted to winning the good will of all participants. As in a real marathon, most of the time is devoted to warming up the muscles one by one. Now the important muscles are the ones that control the degree of involvement and mutual trust.

The facilitator introduces himself and tells his experiences related to marathon running, the sport. Usually two or three of the participants are long-distance runners and can give their testimony concerning how hard running a marathon is. Some general idea is given about the program as a whole, but no details. The key data to transmit is that it will be very hard and demanding. It is up to each one of them to give his or her best and get to the end on the third day. This introduction is no longer than 15 minutes.

Next, the facilitator tells the participants to engage in a 5-minute conversation with someone in the room with whom they have never spoken before. The subjects are who they are and what are their expectations concerning the EM. After five minutes, each pair in succession stands up and issue a cross introduction (A introduces B and B introduces A). The facilitator writes down on the flipchart all the expectations that keep pouring out. The whole process lasts about 30 minutes.

Right after that, participants receive a copy of the contract with the objectives of the Entrepreneurship Marathon, what is expected from them and what is the facilitators' duty. The participant and one of the facilitators must sign the contract. Figure 1 shows the standard text of the contract.

The contract is discussed with the participants, item by item. As each participant signs the contract, one of the facilitators signs it too and they shake hands. The facilitator welcomes the participant to the EM and wishes him good luck. The contract presentation and signing takes about 15 minutes. Each participant keeps his own copy of the contract.

Now there is a full one-hour discussion on creativity and innovation, during which the participants are aroused to speak their minds concerning the process as a whole, beginning with the perception of reality and going on with the launching of solutions, the generation of options, the selection of the viable options, the execution and the focus on results. A good text on the subject is Sutton's.<sup>1</sup>

After a fifteen-minute interval, the facilitator proposes an exercise to the participants, for example, do a brainstorm to find ways to improve specific products or to arouse interest in certain boring activities. The results are discussed and the process itself is detailed, in order to underline the strengths and the weaknesses of working as a team. This exercise takes about 1 hour and 30 minutes.

To finish the first day, the senior facilitator assigns homework for the second day: write down two ideas about entrepreneurial activities accomplishable with no substantive initial capital.

*Objectives of the Entrepreneurship Marathon:*

*To give each participant an honest, candid and complete appraisal of his potential as an entrepreneur*  
*To reinforce the tendency and the ability of the participant:*

- *To think and act creatively;*
- *To increase his personal productivity and his capacity for self-organizing his life;*
- *To evaluate and run risks;*
- *To work in partnerships;*

*Contract*  
*After discussing the objectives of the EM, I am interested in participating.*  
*I understand that the facilitating team is responsible:*

- *for keeping the overall quality of the program;*
- *for issuing useful and practical material for the participants;*
- *for giving honest feedbacks.*

*In return, I am obliged:*

- *to participate in all the sessions with punctuality and giving my best;*
- *to search for practical and significant ways to integrate my insights in my everyday life;*
- *to assure that whatever I share during the EM with others originates from real facts and persons;*
- *to give support to one another;*
- *to keep secret all the experiences, so as not to harm future participants;*
- *to give feedback to the facilitators.*

*The delivery of the certificate is conditioned to a complementary activity.*  
*Participant Name..... Facilitator Name.....*  
*Signed..... Signed.....*  
*Date.....*

Figure 1 – the standard contract

Table 2 presents a summary of day 1.

Table 2 – summary of the first day

Day	Start time	Issue	Duration
1	6:30pm	General proposal	00:15
	6:45pm	Introductions and objectives	00:30
	7:15pm	Contract	00:15
	7:30pm	The creativity process	01:00
	8:30pm	Coffee break	00:15
	8:45pm	Exercise on creativity	01:30
	10:15pm	Assignment of homework for next morning	00:15
	10:30pm	End of day 1 (total 4 hours)	

## Second Day: Encouraging Teamwork

The second day starts with the same facilitator. He collects the homework assigned in the previous evening, which is read, annotated and returned. As each idea is brought forth, the facilitator provokes a general discussion concerning what entrepreneurship really is. There are no formal definitions to write down. The general climate still looks like a normal experiential class. In fact, this facilitator is a well-known professor and the participants cannot avoid giving him the role of a teacher.

After the 15-minute coffee break, a new facilitator takes charge. The more he is unknown by the participants, the better the process will work out from now on.

The group is organized into six or seven teams. They now have 60 minutes to face the same problem no more individually but as a team: write down one entrepreneurship initiative that does not depend too much on financial issues. Each team must write on a flipchart sheet.

Up to this moment, this is an intellectual exercise. After 50 minutes, the facilitator tells them to add a second line, stating the reason why the idea in discussion is not put into action. He imposes a firm limit of time now: ten more minutes to write the idea and the perceived reason and stick it to the wall.

From the authors' own experience, there is a sudden change of climate inside the room. The theoretical exercise becomes real, because each one has to get in touch with one's own fears. One minute before the final call, the facilitator issues the warning again — 60 seconds left.

Usually the teams behave in a foreseeable way. One or two of the teams are very quick and have their sheets stuck on the wall when there are still five or four minutes left. They are concerned about the time restraint, though generally the important issue is they feel an urge to get rid of the task very fast. Mark them well. Other teams wait until only one minute is left and then run to finish the task successfully. However, usually one team is too late and is not allowed to stick the sheet on the wall, for the surprise of all participants.

One of the points to discuss concerning improvements on the EM is how to assure that one of the teams do not finish on time. The facilitator tells the late team that they cannot show their results, because they were not on time and that is how real life is. This is the first moment when the participants grasp the idea that this is not a regular class.

Now each team has three strict minutes to present their idea and one minute more to state the reason it has not been ventured yet. At the end, the facilitator categorically states that the only acceptable reason was *nothing*. He wants no lame reasons for inaction; that is the way people generally reason to forestall their actions: find a rational reason not to do something, any reason at all.

After lunch, the facilitator raises the discussion about where desires come from and what would be described as a smart goal to be satisfied. The discussion turns to define SMART goals, as expressed below:

- Specific - it defines in practical terms what one wants to get;

- Measurable - it must be relatively straightforward to discover how successful the venture was;
- Attainable - the goal can be reached;
- Relevant - the goal is personally worth going after;
- Timely - a specific date must be set for its accomplishment.

Now the teams meet again for 30 minutes to train the definition of a SMART goal.

The next session is a rather monotonous discussion on accounting principles and enterprise costs. At the very beginning, one of the facilitators tells the participants to go to another room one by one to participate in an individual activity that should not be discussed with the other people after they return to their seats. Meanwhile, the rest of the class gets a general view of taxes and accounting principles.

In the meantime, in the other room, the facilitator gives three balls to the participant and points a basket to him. He must define the place from which he will throw the three balls toward the basket. There is only one rule: after he throws the first ball, he may not change to another place. The relative distance from the chosen place to the basket is registered. The participant must not see the results from the other people who came before. The facilitator thanks him and tells him to go back to the first room and tell the next participant to come.

After everyone has had his chance, a coffee break is called. The accounting class is but a secondary activity to keep everyone busy while the individual activity is being done. During the coffee break, a second chance is given to everybody, with one difference: now there are no rules. Each ball may be thrown from a different place. The new results are written down.

Later on, the facilitator presents a brief discussion about the throwing exercise, stressing that generally people tend to gather into three different behaviors. The first group is made up of those who want to get rid of the task and tend to define very easy goals. The second behavior is to face everything as a romantic adventure, defining very difficult goals just for the fun of it. The third group gathers those who tend to be entrepreneurs. These people usually analyze their risks very carefully and define relevant but attainable smart goals for themselves.

For the next exercise, the participants are urged to form groups based upon their ability to work and study together, since collaboration will be foremost for a good result. They are given a case concerning castaways on the Moon who must define what they should take with them as they travel to the mother ship in order to maximize their chance of survival. First, each one will write down his own decision. Then the group will discuss and define a decision for the whole group. The whole exercise including discussion takes a little less than two hours.

As a last activity for day 2, the facilitator brings forth the importance of critical thinking and the need to be able to separate important issues from merely urgent issues in life. The participants are asked to prepare a study plan covering the rest of the quarter. This ends the second day.

Table 3 shows the activities and durations on day 2.

Table 3 – activities during the second day

Day	Start time	Issue	Duration
2	8:00am	More on creativity and entrepreneurship	2:00
	10:00am	Coffee break	0:15
	10:15am	Team work: discussion and choice of the entrepreneurial activities	1:00
	11:15am	Presentation (4 minutes per group)	0:30
	11:45am	General discussion	0:45
	12:30am	Lunch	0:30
	1:00pm	The dream – the goal – smart goals	0:30
	1:30pm	Group exercise: definition of smart goals	0:30
	2:00pm	Accounting – creation of an enterprise (in parallel: first throw)	1:30
	3:30pm	Coffee break (in parallel: second throw)	0:45
	4:15pm	Risk analysis	0:30
	4:45pm	The Moon exercise	1:30
	6:15pm	Homework assignment: study plan	0:45
	7:00pm	End of day 2 (total 11 hours)	

### Third Day: Giving One's Best

The third day starts with an excerpt from the movie “Phenomenon”, which shows how intelligent people see opportunities for cooperation where others do not see any. It is the chance to discuss the concept of social capital<sup>2</sup> as defined by Putnam<sup>3</sup>:

*“The term social capital emphasizes not just warm and cuddly feelings, but a wide variety of quite specific benefits that flow from the trust, reciprocity, information, and cooperation associated with social networks. Social capital creates value for the people who are connected and - at least sometimes - for bystanders as well.”*

Other movies like “A Beautiful Mind” can be used. The idea is to stress that the rational decision is to act not only on my own best, but also on my group's own best.

After coffee break, the group goes through an exercise to emphasize the importance of efficiency and quality. The participants are randomly organized into teams that will compete against each other for a client. They will have to train specific manual tasks that are part of the process of production of a specific good. There are very rigorous standards of excellence that must be attained in order to have the product accepted by the client. There is a training phase, and then each team defines a supervisor. The supervisors are then gathered separately. They are told two things: that the cost of the goods depends on specific parameters based on the cost of labor and raw material and that they need to cut costs in order to survive in the market. There is something that they cannot avoid doing — it is necessary to lower the labor costs by downsizing the process.

The supervisors get back to their teams to complete the planning phase. Now comes the training phase, with a surprise: each supervisor is assigned to a new team. Sometimes the teams are defined again, matching men against women or short people against tall people. During the training phase (five minutes), the supervisor must define who is cut and how the team is going to work.

The process runs for each team separately, so that results can be accurately measured. While this is happening, the ones sent away are given a second chance: they can organize their own team, which will be the last one to produce.

Generally, the results for the second-chance team are the best. This is used to discuss the value of experiences, even if they are bad. The discussion takes about one hour and usually is very rich.

Later in the third day, the concept of Power and the way to use it are discussed. The participants form pairs — a buyer and a seller —, and are given texts where certain conditions are defined for each part, stating what is important and what is desirable for a negotiation to be successful. Evidently, the buyer does not know the seller parameters and vice-versa. The negotiation must be completed on a strict time limit of 20 min. A third participant is assigned to be the passive observer that must pay attention to the behavior of the negotiators and control the time. If the negotiators reach an agreement within the time limit, the observer must take note of the agreed conditions (price, quantities, etc). If not, the observer must write the reasons why they did not complete the deal on time.

The discussion of the negotiation exercise comes next. It is stressed that it is a win-win situation. The best seller is not the one who gets the higher price, but the one who works for a sustainable long-term relationship with the buyer. The best buyer is not the one who gets the lower price, but the one who can be sure that the supplier can meet the schedule of delivery. The observers are the ones that can give an impartial report about the behavior of the negotiators and feedbacks on what may have hindered a win-win negotiation.

Now is the time to discuss the next phase of the program. In order to get a certificate, the participant must do a work of generation of social capital in the near community. He is to become acquainted with the manager of a small business, get to know his problems and tell him that, as a school assignment, he is supposed to help him in any way he can within the business, under the conditions below:

He will not be paid for the work he will do.

The manager must send a report to CME at the end of the work with the answers to three questions:

- a) Was the work of any value?
- b) If yes, how much was it worth?
- c) Would he accept paying what it was worth for the same job or something similar, to be offered to a partner of his in the same neighborhood?

Finally, the facilitators ask the participants for an assessment of the EM. Up to now, all the evaluations have been very positive.

Table 4 presents the overall organization of day 3.



Table 4 – activities on the third day

Day	Start time	Issue	Duration
3	8:00am	The concept of social capital	2:00
	10:00am	Coffee break	0:15
	10:15am	The efficiency and quality exercise	2:00
	12:15am	Lunch	0:30
	12:45am	Efficiency and quality exercise discussion	1:00
	1:45pm	Power and Negotiation	0:30
	2:15pm	Negotiation exercise instructions	0:15
	2:30pm	Coffee break (in parallel: negotiation exercise)	0:30
	3:00pm	Negotiation exercise discussion	1:30
	4:30pm	Discussion about the next phases	1:00
	5:30pm	Closing and general assessment of results	0:30
	6:00pm	End of day 3 (total 10 hours)	

## Results

Up to this moment, the EM was run four times. As table 5 shows, 142 students have already passed by the EM. Only four of them have given up before ending the Marathon. From those 139 students that did conclude it, only two expressed they would not recommend it to friends.

Table 5 – Results from EM editions (up to March 2004)

Group	Date	Number of participants			
		Beginners	Drop outs	Don't recommend	Passed phase 2
1	Oct. 03	33	0	0	30
2	Nov. 03	36	4*	1	28
3	Feb. 04	34	0	0	31
4	Mar. 04	40	0	1	Under execution

\* One of them due to health problems

The high percentage of students that continues the program by completing the second phase demonstrates the motivation and engagement achieved by the effort, specially if one takes into account that the program is extra-curricular, with no credits assigned to the students.

## Concluding Remarks

The experience described in this paper is far from getting to its full maturity. The authors perceive that major and minor revisions can be done. On the other hand, maybe it is too early to make any significant changes. Some of the participants are now on the final stages of the program. Some of them were picked to be facilitators in future entrepreneurship marathons.

1. Sutton, Robert, *Weird Ideas That Work* (New York: Free Press, 2002), 1-174.
2. Franco, Augusto, *Capital Social* (Brasília: Millennium, 2001).
3. Putnam, Robert, *Bowling Alone*, <http://www.bowlingalone.com/socialcapital.php3>.

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