

The Fire Within: The Two Types of Entrepreneurial Determination

By Lindsay Trout



Transformative enterprises are built around the idea that its members—and particularly its founders—can see things before others do. Building the leadership team for such an organization often requires similar foresight about people—having a sense of what they are able to accomplish before it has been achieved. Even someone with a silicon-clad track record may not have the experience working at the scale or velocity required in a new role.

Because of this, we at Egon Zehnder spend a great deal of time and energy thinking about not just how to tell if someone is a great leader, but how to tell if they will be a great leader. Through the assessment of thousands of executives, we've determined that the executives who have the most potential exhibit four attributes:

1. **Curiosity:** A penchant for seeking out new experiences, knowledge and candid feedback, and an openness to learning and change
2. **Insight:** The ability to gather and make sense of information that suggests new possibilities
3. **Engagement:** A knack for using emotion and logic for communicating a persuasive vision and connecting with people
4. **Determination:** The wherewithal to fight for difficult goals despite challenges and to bounce back from adversity.

A closer look at determination

While this model transcends sectors—it applies in oil and gas companies just as it does in retailers—it strikes particularly close to home today for those of us in the digital sector. With so much innovation and disruption with digital, we are often seeking talent to accomplish what is breakthrough, defies common conception and often hiring ahead of where the industry is. As such, we recently took a closer look at one of the four components—determination—amongst leaders in the digital arena. Determination is exhibited by a disregard for common wisdom, taking confident & decisive action for an idea even in the face of personal or professional risk, and commitment to achieving the goal or mission. Leaders with high determination are often purpose-driven, tireless and focused.

In recent conversations with executives from a range of leading digital companies, we found that while all were highly determined, they could be divided into two groups based on the source of their determination:

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The first group was motivated by an **obsession to solve problems**. This group embraces long odds as a challenge. They have internalized a mission and are motivated by the impact they can have on the world. They often keep working long after they have made more money than they will ever need because there is always a new process to perfect, an inefficiency to eradicate or a new offering to introduce. As you can imagine, determination among this group spikes along with their curiosity and insight.

The second group was motivated by **setbacks**. Among this group, significant (and often public) failures or shortcomings were common, which led to a relentless drive to prove themselves. It put it simply, for this group, it's personal. Perhaps not surprisingly, this group also seeks external signs and objective measure to qualify their success.

Of course, the two groups can overlap, and neither source of motivation is inherently better than the other. Serial entrepreneurs and long-standing founders are counted among both types. But recognizing the varieties of determination provides a deeper and more nuanced understanding of this personal attribute that has led to the establishment and growth of so many tremendous companies.

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