

# Does the Concept of Enterprise Still Have Legs?

By Marcus Bolt

It was fifty years ago today Muhammad Subuh taught the band to play – then he went and introduced the notion of ‘enterprise’ into Subud [1] and, for some, the music stopped. Bapak continued to define and refine the idea in talks given right up to his death, thereby creating a set of goals, the achievement of which would be, in effect, ‘proof of concept’.

Those goals were:

- Enterprise would give us something to engage our hearts and minds in order to stop us thinking and fantasising about the spiritual.
- Enterprise would provide a structure through which we could put into practice in the arena of the big, bad world the reality of what we were being shown in the latihan.
- Enterprise would offer, to those members who had discovered their inner talents, a stage on which to express and develop them more easily.
- Enterprise would supply the readies to fund not only our latihan premises and national centres, but also specialist schools, homes for the elderly, hospitals and other social work projects caring for the poor and underprivileged thereby demonstrating how the material could be controlled by the spiritual.
- Enterprise would financially support cultural projects as members’ ‘true inner culture’ came to life.

Achieving these goals would demonstrate to the world that we were not just a bunch of humble, navel-gazing crazies, but a force to be reckoned with. And the inevitable result of this, it was believed, would be the worldwide spread of the latihan, heralding a new dawn – the Brother and Sisterhood of all mankind under the Fatherhood of God.

The reality is that none of the goals has been attained. In fact, the only positive results from half a century of energetic striving are a smattering of businesses run as Subud enterprises (the principals still attempting to adhere to Bapak’s principles), a collection of Subud members in ‘business’ and a few financially successful individuals (some of whom would have been successful anyway).[2]

The downside consists of the shambles of the large enterprises – Anugraha, BSB, PTS Widjojo, Premier Hotels *et al* – plus a large pool of impoverished, disillusioned members and ex-members, many still harbouring resentment over the loss of their capital, or their property, or their self-esteem, or all three.

In a recent talk (9th Dec. 2007, Pamulang) Ibu Rahayu asked, ‘Are there any people in Subud doing enterprises? Are there any enterprises *left* in Subud?’ The image of a general overlooking a battlefield littered with the corpses of his own defeated army

springs to mind.

On the face of it, the enterprise idea has self-eviscerated but, as hope springs ever eternal, it seems worth asking the following question. Does the concept of successful, latihan-guided enterprise funding Subud's charitable and cultural aims still have legs?

To begin to answer the question it is necessary to try to understand why the concept has so far failed.

Many large, and most small to medium businesses go under because of one or more of the following three main causes: these also apply to all failed Subud enterprises but have been exacerbated by certain 'unique to Subud' behaviours:

**Universal Failure 1:** The original business concept is flawed: there is no market and/or the product (or service) offered is not as good as the competition's. Market research is either not employed or the results are poorly interpreted or ignored.

**Unique Subud Behaviours:** A number of enterprises were based on 'received' ideas for businesses and/or inspired 'inventions'. Any positive feeling felt in testing about a proposed project's viability was interpreted as a thumbs up from God; consequently, further analysis was deemed unnecessary and never carried out.[3]

**Universal Failure 2:** The principals trade beyond their financial capabilities: the business is under-funded (expansion and trade opportunities are missed) or over-borrowed (interest payments exceed profit; the bank, or investors, have control).

**Unique Subud Behaviours:** No financial planning done because 'positive' testing invariably obviates a 'Plan B'. An over-reliance on/misinterpretation of Bapak's 'you are your own capital' dictum prevailed alongside a belief that the angels were actively working on our behalf as brokers and that, as Subud members, we were 'the chosen ones' with God solidly on our side.

**Universal Failure 3:** The principals trade beyond their management capabilities at board level by failing to recognise the need for strong finance, sales, middle management and production teams.

**Unique Subud Behaviours:** Major strategic and tactical mistakes are made because of a lack of experience aggravated by testing routine business decisions such as hiring and firing and promotions from within. Vested interest, backed up by testing,[4] was allowed to override principles – the enterprise's *raison d'être* being sacrificed for short-term gains. There was a commonly held belief (gleaned from Bapak's advice) that, because God was the Chief Executive Officer, we only had to start and success was somehow guaranteed.

Looking back, the sense of 'how can we fail with God on our side' hinted at in Bapak's talks and blown out of all proportion by ourselves, plus his continuous pleas for us to 'stand on your own two feet' seduced many members onto the enterprise bandwagon, many of whom should never have been businessmen ever. Thus was created, in many small businesses, an unholy alliance of exploiters and the gullible (cemented by the mantra of 'working together for God and Subud'), or a confederacy of clueless dunces – both concoctions being recipes for disaster.

I include myself in the latter category, and am guilty of many of the things I criticise.

Now, bringing all these polar opposites together may well have been part of Bapak's 'cunning plan' but, if so, he never warned us about what we were letting ourselves in for, merely once alluding obliquely to 'grains of rice rubbing together until they are smooth' as though that were an inevitable, positive outcome once we engaged – a spiritual equivalent of the bodybuilder's 'no pain, no gain'. But we had no idea how difficult, how painful that process was to be, or how scarring would be the effects on our lives. I do know, from a member on the board at the time, that Bapak was bemused and somewhat piqued at the failure of Anugraha, so perhaps he had no idea either, or basically got it all wrong.

Over my thirty years of working in or for Subud enterprises, I attended many seminars organised to help develop, or help save, existing businesses. The recurrent, underlying theme I perceived during conversations held between sessions, was one of steaming resentment. It became clear that this was due to our shared inability to confront our fellow board members, business partners or bosses over unacceptable actions and attitudes. This was not only due to a lack of courage; there existed an unwritten rule that 'negativity' was forbidden. Also, not only had disastrous business strategies become entrenched through the immutability of testing results, but the more powerful (whether through financial clout, charisma, or both) were ignoring the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of weaker brethren, creating *carte blanche* for themselves and for anything they could get away with, while still claiming it was all for God and Subud.

Ibu Rahayu also asked in the recent Pamulang talk quoted earlier, 'Why is it that Subud members still steal from other Subud members?' She went on to explain that it was because they often excuse their actions to themselves instead of correcting their actions and behaviour through their latihan (omitting any mention of manipulation by the Subud financial hierarchy or 'testing abuse' as discussed earlier). And of course, apart from money, one can also steal others' ideas, their opportunities for growth and their reputation.

Many years ago, I moved my business into offices owned by a fast growing group of Subud companies (now defunct). One of my clients had also been very involved with the group, but had pulled away with fingers burnt. I told the Managing Director (not a Subud member) of my plans, assured him there would be no collusion and politely hoped he didn't mind.

'You're in Subud aren't you?' he enquired and I said I was. 'Well, whatever you're doing with them, get it in writing because that won't protect you.'

I remember being shocked at the time, but later came to realise he was reflecting an attitude held by many outsiders after dealing with Subud enterprises and their 'God is our guide' way of doing business.

The sub-text to these negative stories is a basic lack of integrity, a strange denial of the tenet of morally correct living as laid down by Bapak but ignored by many of us who acclaimed him as God's spokesman on Earth. This seems to be on a par with the way fundamentalist Christians and Islamists so easily override the truths in their holy books – 'Thou shalt not kill' – unless it's to protect our oil supplies, that is – and the inner *jihad* perverted to 'Allah wills we destroy all infidels'.

If we Subud human beings – the basic building blocks of Bapak's enterprise concept –

are so flawed, so unable to get to grips with the material world, so incapable of plain honesty, the questions now are (assuming he knew what he was talking about): was Bapak casting his pearls before swine, and *could* the latihan have made silk purses from sows' ears had we used it correctly?

It would appear that the Quakers managed such a metamorphosis. Forbidden to enter the professions, they were forced into trade, becoming acutely aware of the temptations and dangers therein. The following passage from Arthur Raistrick's *Quakers in Science and Industry* sums up their position:

The unification of life among Quakers, their refusal to separate business activities from the principles and disciplines which regulated their religious life, gave them a stability and soundness of practice which was unusual in their day. The advice on trade are numerous and extensive, and the frequent letters addressed to Fox and others to all such as are engaged in trade, emphasise again and again the idea that trade and other occupations show forth truth to the world, and that traders must be scrupulous to keep their dealings in the spirit of truth. The advice of 1675 says: 'Let friends and brethren in their respective meetings watch over each other in the love of God and care of the Gospel; particularly admonish that none trade beyond their ability, nor stretch beyond their compass; and that they use few words in their dealings, and keep their word in all things, lest they bring through their forwardness dishonour to the precious truth of God.'

By keeping their dealings 'in the spirit of truth' and 'watching over each other' the Quakers eventually played a major role in the Industrial Revolution, introducing innovations in manufacturing, commerce and banking, as well as rearing a whole flock of billionaire, altruistic families (the Frys, the Rowntrees, the Cadburys *et al*). They simply succeeded where we failed – why?

It all seems to come down to one thing: a lack of personal morality and integrity – we have no *susila*, in Bapak's terminology.

Recently, I watched a dog training TV show called 'The Dog Whisperer'. The trainer/presenter took an unruly, totally out of control pet into his own dog pound to let the other dogs teach it how to 'be' in a pack - a matter of calming and synchronising energy levels. The unruly dog had been allowed, through its owners' lack of dog savvy, to become the family 'pack leader' and was, therefore, aggressively frustrated in its inappropriate role.

The other dogs simply wouldn't allow such errant behaviour, because they instinctively know a pack cannot keep its integrity with such a neurosis within. It was extraordinary to watch this aggressive animal quietening down, submissively allowing the other dogs to approach for ritual sniffing. Within a day, this neurotic dog was pack-integrated, and its behaviour completely changed 'back home'.

From this, I ask myself if such a turn-around in both group and individual dynamics can be achieved in the animal kingdom, why is it so difficult for us (with our highly developed languages, educated minds and, purportedly, latihan-grown 'inner selves') to achieve 'correct living' within our packs (our Subud groups and enterprises)? Why do we find it so difficult to be honest and caring, so hard to let go of our self-interest, to become fully integrated?

I can only answer for myself. I simply bought into the delusions that all members, by virtue of doing the latihan, were on the same righteous path and were, therefore, honest and caring by default, whereas the rest of the business world was on the 'satanic level' and bound for hell; secondly, that we, the chosen few, were corporately guided by the Almighty who was actively oiling our way to success because the spread of Subud was His major priority. Forty years later, I look back and think, 'Could I have been more naïve, more wrong?'

If we ever decide to revitalise and reintroduce the enterprise culture back into Subud, it now seems essential we do the following:

- Study our history of failure to fully understand the traps and pitfalls we created for ourselves (the past is always a harbinger of the present).
- Become extremely careful about whom we team up with (e.g. work with only those who have a proven business track record and use only proven financial and management advice sources).
- Start small.
- Ban business 'testing' (Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's).
- Constantly ask ourselves if we are being honourable in all our dealings.

And we need a good dose of Quakerly 'watching over each other' alongside 'dealing in the spirit of truth'. This is the only way the concept of enterprise will ever walk again.

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**Notes:**

1. Apparently, he used the word '*usaha*' which translates more into 'endeavour' - but that's for another essay.
2. Some of these groupings do put money, but not nearly enough, into Susila Dharma International, which maintains consultative status with the United Nations' Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and currently initiates and funds social projects worldwide.
3. It seems extraordinary to me now that we ignored Bapak's admonishment that we could only receive with 10% accuracy. It figures that tossing a coin has better odds.
4. For the unscrupulous, testing provided the ideal tool for manipulating events to their advantage or for overriding principles that got in the way, for promulgating 'the ends justifies the means' attitudes and for 'solving' tricky little problems presented by such trivia as debts, contracts and the notions of honour, trust and compassion. And, as a bonus, in Subud (still, today) there's no arguing with 'testing results' – the widely held belief that they are axiomatic being embedded in our culture.

