

The Wayward Way of Enterprise

A continuation of the story of a future group

By Sahlan Diver

Like Fred and Ed, I too moved to Wayward because of my job. My name is Ted, by the way!

I was opened during the time that Bapak was still alive. I attended several of his talks when he visited the city where I used to live, and, inspired by his words from those times, I've always had a personal interest in 'starting an enterprise'. So I was a little bit disappointed to find out that, amongst the many clubs and special-interest groups in the highly active Wayward group, there was not one dedicated to the subject of enterprise. I say 'disappointed' rather than 'surprised' since enterprise is very much a non-topic in Subud nowadays. Not that the various attempts in Subud over recent years to revive the enterprise concept have been that helpful — busy, harassed, nine-to-five employees like myself need more than the pep-talks, social networking and attitude-testing sessions of 'enterprise workshops' to stand any chance of starting up on our own. We need ongoing hard support, by which I mean investment and the advice of successful business people of experience.

As a newcomer to Wayward I was naturally unfamiliar with the town's street plan and made a point lunchtimes of getting to know the place by taking a walk in different areas of the town adjacent to where my employers' offices were situated. On one such walk I came across a building with a prominent sign saying '*The Wayward Latihan and Enterprise Centre*'. This was puzzling, to say the least, as I had never heard this spoken about at the Wayward latihan. While I was staring at the building wondering whether it was in fact connected with the Wayward group or was some kind of rival set-up, two men, whom I recognised from the Wayward latihan, came out of the building. Their names were Jack and Frank.

'So, you've found us,' said Jack, 'I didn't know you were visiting today!'

'I wasn't visiting,' I replied. 'In fact, I didn't know this building existed until just a moment ago. I came across it by chance. Does it belong to the Wayward group?'

'As you know,' said Frank, 'the Wayward group is strictly a neutral organisation dedicated to the latihan. Everything else, like our enterprise venture for instance, is the private activity of individuals within the group.'

'So you're not a "*Subud* enterprise" then?'

'Subud Enterprise,' continued Frank, 'is not a concept we recognise in Wayward, nor do we like to recognise it, because of its association with the confusions and disasters of enterprises decades ago. You see, back then, people thought that Subud members could get some kind of magic power for business. If they held on to the right attitude and feelings, "Almighty God" would reward them by guiding them to a guaranteed success, whereas if their enterprises failed, that was because their enterprise wasn't yet "Subud" enough, so they were punished for their wrong attitudes with business failure. When Bapak talked about "Subud Enterprises", his listeners put all the emphasis on "Subud" as being the more important of those two words. It never occurred to them that Bapak might be saying something quite mundane, just that Subud members should do enterprises, the more important of the two words being "Enterprises", not "Subud".'

'But, surely, there was something special about Bapak's ideas on enterprise,' I protested, 'the idea that 25% of profits should be donated to charitable purposes. That's a very big thing. Imagine if all the successful businesses in the world did that, what a difference it would make.'

'Agreed,' replied Jack. 'And that particular idea is one that we put into practise here. Why don't you come inside and we'll show you around.'

I hadn't eaten lunch yet, but this encounter with an obviously substantial enterprise centre run by Wayward latihaners was fascinating. I accepted their invitation for a guided tour. I could always grab a quick sandwich later.

The enterprise centre building was on two floors. The lower floor was divided into units that seemed mainly dedicated to light-industrial activities. One such unit housed a two-man business selling some kind of specialised computer-controlled machinery; in another, two women, who I was told were university post-graduates in chemistry, were working on formulating additives for industrial concrete. Another unit was engaged in producing expensive designer jewellery. Upstairs were smaller office spaces, several of which had start-ups involved in IT or the Internet. One in particular, I was told, was the centre's best investment yet. It had grown so fast it was already occupying nearly half the upper floor and was soon to move out to a new building of its own. Apparently other enterprises had started in the centre in previous years, outgrown it, and moved out also.

'We started all this over ten years ago,' said Frank. 'Jack gets the credit for the original idea, a very simple one — gather together some investors and some business people with a proven track record of success in business and set up a non-profit organisation dedicated to providing start-up finance for people with the right mix of skills, ideas and personal qualities. Not only provide the money, but provide the mentors to help the new businesses stay on track and not fall prey to the usual mistakes that all inexperienced new business people are prone to make. That way our investment is well-protected. Our scheme doesn't guarantee that all our sponsored enterprises will succeed, of course; we have lost on quite a few investments, but it does increase the chances that the good ones will produce good returns.'

'Frank is too modest,' said Jack. 'He should take credit for a key decision which was his idea. There was nobody else in the Wayward group, apart from the two of us, with the requisite business skills or financial means to be an investor, so Frank said, "Why not go outside? Our idea is a good idea in itself, potentially of benefit to the town and to local people and it has a charitable aspect as well." Frank guessed we should be able to attract interested "outsiders". And he was right!'

'So how do you justify all the investment going exclusively to practitioners of the latihan?'

'We don't, and it doesn't,' replied Jack. 'There's no favouritism; we are interested in any good business idea from any local person with potential. Currently we only have one investment in an enterprise started by a Wayward group participant. Funnily enough that's our best yet, the IT enterprise you saw taking up most of the space upstairs.'

'Then I don't understand how you can force the businesses run by outsiders to give 25% of their profits for ever and ever to charitable purposes.'

‘Again, we don’t,’ replied Jack. ‘This is where we have our own variation on Bapak’s idea. For each new enterprise we invest in, we provide a level of investment commensurate with our taking a 25% shareholding in that business. The remaining investment they must provide themselves, or we source third-party investors for them. Their enterprise has no obligation to make charitable donations. They only pay us a dividend on our 25% shareholding in the normal way. Alternatively, if they do well and wish to buy out our shareholding, we may realise a profit that way instead. Out of the money we make from dividends and share sales, 75%, less operating costs, is reinvested in new ventures. That’s how we have grown from humble beginnings ten years ago in rented office space to having our own building today. The remaining 25% of our profit is donated to charitable causes, fulfilling Bapak’s aspiration for enterprises started by Subud members.’

‘Wouldn’t you make even more money by investing a higher percentage in your sponsored enterprises and not involving third parties?’ I asked.

‘Yes and no,’ said Frank. ‘Potentially more profit, but also much more financial risk. Also we learn from building partnerships with others. Their experience acts as a mentor for our own mentoring, so to speak. And the willingness of others to get involved with us raises our profile and the confidence of others that we are legitimate and capable.’

‘Do you also offer the opportunity of buying shares in your company to Wayward latihan practitioners, to get more of a profile in it for the Wayward group?’

‘How can I put this?’ replied Frank. ‘We don’t, because we believe that would be unethical. We would even go as far as to say that Bapak behaved unethically in encouraging Subud members years ago to invest in the big Subud projects.’

I was somewhat shocked by Frank’s words. ‘That’s a very strong statement to make, isn’t it?’

Frank replied, ‘Think of it this way. You have a collection of ordinary people who mainly know nothing about investing in shares. Additionally, most of them would not even be interested in such an activity. Those with money to invest would normally only do so indirectly, through professionally-managed pension funds or trust funds, that sort of thing. Bapak comes along and asks for these people, who have no means to judge the advisability of the investment, to invest big sums in Subud enterprises. Worse, these are not even businesses with a proven track-record, they are start-ups, and therefore very high risk. Worse still, because the directors are almost exclusively Subud, they are selected from a very small group of people and inevitably compromises have to be made as to their suitability to take on such ambitious projects. The only justification for investment is that people should have faith in their leader. How is that much different from those sleazy tele-evangelists asking for donations from their followers as an expression of faith?’

‘The difference is it’s an investment, not a donation; they weren’t being asked to give their money away.’

‘Granted, but you can’t really call it an investment when an unsophisticated investor is being pressured to put money into an unproven, high-risk start-up. Although technically an investment, in essence it’s very much more like a donation made on the basis of faith alone. That’s why we don’t encourage the ordinary Wayward latihaners to invest in our schemes. We want investment from experienced investors,

who can make informed judgements as to whether our supported ventures have a good chance of success or not.'

'By the way,' I said, 'there's something I was meaning to ask you both. I notice you have an office with two members of staff. What's their role?'

'I'm glad you asked about that,' said Jack, 'because those people are key to our success. We have three employees actually, but one is part-time, which is why you didn't see her here today. What causes businesses to fail? There are many people out there with a great idea and with the talent and energy to develop it from concept to product or service, but you can't be good at everything, and what such people often fall down on is the knowledge of how to present their products and drive sales. So we have a full time marketing director who assists all our business start-ups. The other skill new businesses tend to lack is in handling money and cash-flow, so we employ an accountant to advise them also, and we insist on having access to their books in the early stages, so that we can look for the danger signs of bad financial decision-making.'

'And your third employee?'

'That's the part-time lady. She does general admin, a lot of routine work that would otherwise tie up all of my time and Frank's.'

'Well I'm really impressed. This has been a fascinating and inspiring half hour. I only wish more Wayward group participants could be involved, then you'd...'

Frank interrupted me. 'You still don't get it, do you? Don't you see how you're still harping back to the old "Subud enterprise" misunderstanding that it must be exclusively or mainly "Subud" to be worth doing? Isn't it already a noble enough aim that a centre like this is dedicated to the task of helping people better their lives, directly through entrepreneurship, and indirectly through the distribution of 25% of profit to worthy charities? Why do we have to stick a Subud flag on it and wave it about under people's noses? In fact, if we did that, we'd be likely to arouse suspicion that our seemingly innocent activities were in fact a front for a sinister cult.'

'But you hold latihan here. Isn't that a problem?'

'We make the latihan room space, which doubles up as our conference room, available for once weekly evening latihan. If anyone asks, we explain that the latihan is an activity our directors are involved in and like to support. And we refer enquirers to a page on our web site, explaining how Pak Subuh founded the latihan and inspired the particular enterprise ideas that we promote, so it seems natural we should support both activities within the same building. We make it very clear that these are separate activities, however. There is no pressure on our entrepreneurs to consider being opened, nor on our latihan practitioners to consider starting an enterprise. Nor do we indulge in the old Subud propaganda that the latihan will guide your enterprise activity to success.'

'And have any of your entrepreneurs been opened?'

'About a third, actually. They've benefited from our sponsorship of their business, so naturally they have a good feeling about the place. That good feeling rubs off onto our other activity, the latihan, by association.'

I looked at my watch. 'Sorry, gentlemen, but I have to go. My lunchtime is nearly up. I

have to get back to the office and grab a sandwich on the way. Incidentally, I have a little something I have been working on — an idea for a portable smoke alarm. I have a working prototype, but raising finance from banks has proved impossible and I feel lost in the business world. I need help and advice, as well as money.'

'That sounds very interesting,' said Frank. 'We'd certainly like to talk to you about that. Make an appointment, please!'

Author's note:

Recently Ibu Rahayu has been attempting to revive an interest in enterprise. What model of enterprise should be considered? Some members have suggested we should repeat the types of enterprise recommended by Bapak, but this seems ill-advised. The first enterprise recommended by Bapak was a Subud bank; in the context of the current financial turmoil, a new bank would be a risky undertaking indeed. The bank was followed by the Widjojo building, which project ended recently with a huge amount of legal and financial wrangling between competing factions of investors — not an experience anyone would want to repeat. The Widjojo building was followed by Anugraha. Since there are still unresolved issues twenty years on from that project's demise, it would seem equally unwise to embark on another Anugraha. If large-scale enterprise is not advisable, what about small enterprises carried out by individuals and partnerships? This article has attempted to envision an entirely different but workable model of enterprise based around projects that start out on a small scale. — S.D.