Sonae's Intrapreneurial Culture

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According to the Oxford English Dictionary, an **entrepreneur** is commonly defined as: *"A person who owns and manages a business, bearing the financial risks of the enterprise"* or *"A person who sets up a business or businesses."*

There is a LOT more to long-term business value creation than this definition of entrepreneurship implies. Many of the very best long-term business value creators on earth would fall far short of this narrow textbook definition of being an entrepreneur. In our ongoing research meanderings, we uncovered an interesting clue.

Little-known Portuguese listed **Sonae** is a wonderful family-owned business, with an excellent long-term record of business value creation. It was established in 1959, and amongst other things had survived, of all things, a failed nationalization attempt in 1978. We stumbled upon a unique word of their own creation that they use to describe the type of people who work and can thrive at Sonae - **Intrapreneurs**.

This is their own definition: "***Intrapreneurs** are…innovative people, characterised by a nonconformist, proactive and challenging spirit, who are willing to develop projects and businesses within Sonae. These are agile, astute talents, mastering communication and persuasion skills. Analytical thinkers and organised, they have a mind of their own, having developed a solid network, with energy, passion, and tolerance. For you, every challenge is an opportunity to find new ways to get things done better and faster. At Sonae, potential is what we make of it. That is why we just see boundless avenues to discover, experiment and drive our path forward. That is what makes us a community of intrapreneurs. People who thrive on different ways of thinking, challenge the status quo, and leave things better than found."*

Being a long-term business value creator therefore entails having a certain, let us just say, *attitude*. Such a state of mind is clearly independent of any ownership deed, inheritance, or inherited and hierarchical station in life and in business.

However, people operating with this special 'attitude' would get fired in a heartbeat at a traditional corporate-type business. Corporates do not invite nor tolerate such deviant behaviors as being non-conformist, challenging, having different ways of thinking, and of challenging the status quo.

It makes sense that an intrapreneurial attitude can only function and thrive within a carefully designed ecosystem that knows its true value, and that recognizes, celebrates, and rewards it.

An interesting last point is that every successful, rapidly growing enterprise will at some critical junction either remain true to its founding culture or depart from it. A key question is whether they even knew or realized they were busy making a critically important choice in this regard? Sonae clearly knew - and for this we salute them.

Our work continues...

Clément Vautrin
Investment Analyst
clement@perspectiveim.co.za

Perspective Investment Management
www.perspectiveim.co.za
