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CLARION REVIEW ★★★☆☆ BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

Rough Air Ahead: The Life Cycles of Small Business

Vincent C. Lewis
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There's no reason to become alarmed and we hope you'll enjoy the rest of your flight. By the way is there anyone on board who knows how to fly a plane? —Airplane! [the movie] (1980)

Rough Air Ahead is the forecast for would-be entrepreneurs with an idea they wish to develop and carry through. In order to keep on course novices are advised to learn the financials but also to wage a relentless campaign of positivity. "…making it is more about that unbridled optimism than it is about such things as great market research" the author writes. Norman Vincent Peale's books are among Vince Lewis's favorites.

Lewis's main case study is the full forty-year arc of Hyde Park Electronics a family-run controls and sensors manufacturing firm in Dayton Ohio that he headed from 1999 to 2003 when it was sold to Scheider Electric of Germany. He capably outlines all four divisions of the small business life cycle—Startup Growth Governance and Exit—based not lightly on experience transmitted from mentor and father-in-law Bill Winger who co-founded the firm in 1963.

Nothing too trendy is championed here; the Rough Air Map is a sensibly defined model of small-business development with each phase centered around the challenge most crucial for advancement and survival. When small businesses fail it is usually because the owners don't recognize which phase of which cycle they're in; the primary task is under-addressed or overlooked altogether.

As a small organization leader Lewis favors personal concern for employees shares responsibility for meeting goals keeps meticulous documentation studies competitors like a detective and uses outside advisors to point out what needs attention. The author is a graduate of Harvard Business School's Owner/President Management Program. His current venture Rough Air Associates consults with and trains small businesses offers micro-office space as a startup incubator and selectively acts as an angel financier.

The approach is methodical not flashy with the most impact coming from charts and appendices. Page layout and general pacing are reader-friendly. The Hyde Park story fulfills the cycle wholly but it isn't a Horatio Alger rags-to-riches miracle. Potential entrepreneurs are cautioned that moderate returns on dedicated work is what they can reasonably expect. In fact things may not even go that well. Lewis says periods of steep growth which feel like success can empty the coffers if nobody watches for trouble: "…businesses are not expecting cash problems when they are growing probably because too many gurus out there have said that growth is nirvana…"

The sophistication of advice to startups isn't cutting edge but it's sound enough to save attentive strategists from predictable patches of destabilizing turbulence. It's best not to put the house up for collateral without first learning the fundamentals which are laid clear as day in *Rough Air Ahead*.
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