

The Seldom Asked Question of Minority Business

Fourth in the Getting to the Next Level series

by Melvin J. Gravelly, Ph.D



I have been thinking. What is the minority entrepreneur's role in improving minority business development? The question is not asked often but the answer may matter most. There are clearly many roles to be played. Communities must create an environment that encourages diverse entrepreneurship and opportunity. Major corporations and other large organizations must have an infrastructure that promotes inclusion. Minority business support organizations must understand the *real* issues impacting minority businesses and develop meaningful solutions to assist. But there is another player that is rarely overtly charged to play any particular role. Of all of the roles, the role of the minority entrepreneur is arguably the most important. What must these entrepreneurs do while the other players are doing what they must do?

It is a touchy issue. No one wants to appear to be "blaming" minority entrepreneurs. There is a thin and often fearful line between setting expectations and the perception of placing blame. The outcome is that few programs place significant expectations on the leaders of minority firms. This frequent approach sets up a dangerous and unproductive dynamic of everyone else giving and the minority entrepreneur receiving. It is too easy for programs to become more about minorities getting assistance than minority businesses get-

ting better. Of course this analysis is over simplified but the insight it provides is generally accurate. No matter what the other players do, responsibility for the progress we make rest disproportionately heavy on the minority entrepreneur; the power of their ideas. The discipline of their approach and the value their businesses add in the marketplace.

No one should confuse this message as an excuse not to play their role yet the principle truth is impossible to deny. You can not separate the entrepreneur from entrepreneurship and you can not separate entrepreneurship from the growth and success of a business enterprise. This subtle, difficult to measure yet significant point has not been made clear nor prominent enough. Minority business advocates should not take this as blaming. It just is. No one has been willing to establish much in the way of expectations. Basically, if minority business owners can get certified they have *earned* our support. Unfortunately business success is not that simple or the minority business success gap would have been closed years ago. Certification, contracts and even capital are important but just the beginning.

The minority business owner's prescription for *getting to the next level* is a demonstrated desire to be an entrepreneur and that means being increasingly competitive. The prescription is not just to get more contracts. Not to get

more access. Not even to get more capital. The prescription is an, "I get it to my core," level desire to be more able to compete and to win. Competing through adding value is the only true mission there is in business. Everything else is either a means to improve competitiveness or wasted noise designed to distract. For some this focus on competitiveness will demand a change in philosophy. For others this message will be confirmation they are on the right path. Debate it and even hate it but this is the reality of business. It is a reality that gets far too little attention. What is the minority entrepreneur's role in improving minority business development? If the role is not to focus on becoming more competitive, what is the role? What else is there?

No one has been willing to establish much in the way of expectations

Increasing competitiveness demands more than simply wishing it is so. Successful minority owned firms at the next level have figured out what it takes. Although their activities appear varied and often unrelated they really fall into three major categories. First, they know where they are right now. They understand their strengths and weaknesses. They ask themselves tough questions about important business elements like their financial flexibility, marketing and sales, operational effectiveness and even their reliance on minority business programs. They evaluate themselves based on the best in the industry and implement plans to continuously improve.

Second, firms improving their competitiveness are focused on two funda-

mentals; making the customer better and making their firms more difficult to replace. These fundamentals keep a business focused on adding value, adheres it to the customer and allows for the opportunity for long-term success. Without them a business is forced to play the me too game against competitors that are much larger, with more resources and often longer standing relationships.

Third, minority firms focused on their own competitiveness are mindful to stay out of the minority business. They realize the value they bring has to be more than just helping their customer reach minority spending goals. They focus on business

relationships that make good business sense not just good minority business sense. They bring value to their joint ventures and strategic alliances and receive value from their partners in return. Minority firms focused on their own competitiveness understand that their real opportunity for sustainable success is more about the value they add than the rules and measures related to the minority business industry.

If the role is not to focus on becoming more competitive, what is the role?

What is the minority entrepreneur's role in improving minority business development? The simple answer is to be focused on becoming increasingly competitive. The role of the minority business owner is to be more entrepreneurial. This prescription for minority

business may seem simple but the reality of making it happen can be quite complex. The temptations and avenues to manipulate the minority business system are significant. The pressure to make minority spending goals is considerable. Staying focused on increasing competitiveness in the current environment is not easy but it is what has to happen next. Getting to the next level means a new, more tangible focus on competitiveness. A sustained focus on competitiveness takes longer than it takes to get a contract or to gain capital but the results transcend minority business status. That is the seldom asked question of minority business. The only question now is, are we ready to ask this sensitive question. I hope we are. The next level depends on it.

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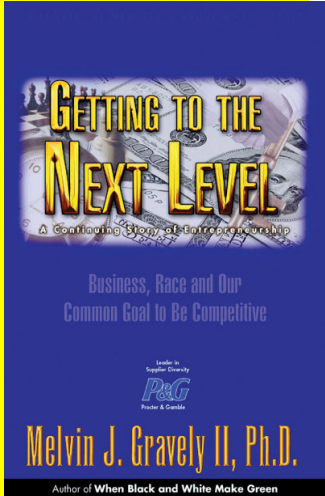
Getting To The Next Level: Business, Race and Our Common Goal to be Competitive

Mel Gravely, the popular author of *When Black and White Make Green* and *The Lost Art of Entrepreneurship*, is back with *Getting to the Next Level*. The book is full of the real lessons learned from the most successful minority business owners, the corporations that are most committed and the communities that truly understand their role in growing successful diverse businesses. *Getting to the Next Level* is direct, candid and at times challenging. The book makes no excuses, places no blame and finally makes the path to success clear. If you want to get to the next level this book will show you what it takes including answers to important questions like:

- Why is access essential but not sufficient?
- What are the two ultimate indicators of long-term business success?
- What lies in the trap of minority business programs?
- What is the most important element of business capability?
- How do you build effective business relationships?

Getting to the Next Level is a business parable with many characters you will recognize and others you will enjoy meeting. The pace is quick and the solutions are practical. This book holds the key to getting to the next level of thinking, expectation and business opportunity. *A must read for diverse firms and those who hope to understand our common goal to be competitive.*

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Dr. Mel Gravely is the author of the new book *Getting to the Next Level: Business, Race and Our Common Goal to Be Competitive* (www.GetTheNextLevel.com). He is also the developer of COMSDA.com, an on-line benchmarking tool for supplier diversity programs and the Managing Director of the *Institute for Entrepreneurial Thinking*. E-mail Dr. Gravely at Mel@Entrethinking.com.