Q: I’VE GOT GREAT IDEAS AND PASSION. NOW WHAT?
A: LISTEN TO ALUMNI ENTREPRENEURS TELL WHAT HELPED PAVE THEIR WAY TO SUCCESS.

Do you believe there’s something inherent about agriculture or life sciences that (pardon the express) provides a rich soil for growing entrepreneurs?

Roger Underwood: Absolutely! Agriculture and life sciences are changing rapidly due to the many “input” advancements in seed (genetics), equipment and services and “output” advances such as food, energy and feed utilization. In all of these changes there is unending opportunity for entrepreneurs to create new value. Entrepreneurs thrive when any market is changing rapidly so the ag and life sciences markets are ripe for entrepreneurship.

Charles Sukup: There really is something with agriculture and the people in it that see the day-in and day-out risk that contributes to an entrepreneurial attitude. Farming is being independent and being an entrepreneur. You’re in control of many things, but in the big picture you’re not in control of weather, government programs or markets. You have to focus on what you can control. That is a good analogy for all sorts of entrepreneurs.

What’s the best decision you made as a college student at Iowa State that influenced your life as an entrepreneur?

J. Lyell Clarke: One was my decision to get a graduate degree and working for Wayne Rowley, professor of entomology, who became a very good friend of mine. If I hadn’t gone to grad school I’m not sure I’d be where I am now. I wouldn’t have the appreciation for the research and development and technology that we’ve made part of our company.

Murray Wise: There used to be a weekly, required noncredit class called Agriculture 100 that brought in successful ag professionals that had a major impact on me. Dwane Sandage’s (of the Sandage farmland management companies) presentation was so unique and so creative. It had such a strong influence on me that I ended up going to work for him three or four years after graduating. As a result I bought a portion of his company and that turned into Westchester Group, a successful asset management venture.

How important are mentors? Who was a mentor to you and what made them invaluable to you?

Clarke: I had three people that were most important. My father taught me about business and hard work. Wayne Rowley about hard work and science—it’s because of Wayne that it took me until my mid-forties to realize not everyone worked on Saturdays. My father-in-law about the importance of family. Each mentor will provide a different piece of the puzzle for you, will see potential in you.

Underwood: Mentors are critical to one’s success. Mentors can help smooth the rough ride when making operational decisions or thinking through the big and small decisions that will arise. Vallie Pellett, a no-nonsense local farmer, taught me the value of hard work, the basics of production agriculture and how simple decisions can be critical decisions. Paul Pellett, a fertilizer and ag chemical retailer, taught me the value of making money creatively. Paul taught me that the best money you will ever make is
the money you never spend. My father, Ray Underwood, taught me about the value of the customer, including sales and marketing strategies. I learned from my dad that the best idea can be worthless without loyal customers who are served properly.

**How do you make the world listen to you when you know you’ve got a great idea?**

**Sukup:** There is too much shouting in this world. You can’t just shout louder. You need to be consistent and persevere. You need to show up and not give up. Sow the seed all over the place and a few will fall in good soil and take root and grow.

**Underwood:** Keep it simple. I found that I needed to be able to explain my idea in so few words that the listener needed to be able to hear my idea and explain it right back to me—otherwise it was too complicated.

**Clarke:** Passion is not overrated—that’s what it is all about. We talk about passion as a core value of our company. We are passionate about public health. Our employees will do anything if there is a major emergency. It’s all hands on deck. If you’re not passionate about what you’re looking for in a job, if it doesn’t fit your value system and you’re not passionate about it, then you need to find another job or you’ll be miserable.

**What have you found to be the most underrated skill or resource for being entrepreneurial?**

**Sukup:** Perseverance and contrarian thinking

**Wise:** Accounting

**Underwood:** Financial understanding, managing cash flow

**Clarke:** Salesmanship

**Is “passion” an overrated word in the entrepreneurial world or is it still at the heart of innovation?**

**Wise:** Passion is underrated. I firmly believe if you don’t have a passion for what you’re about to embark on, your probability of success will be minimized. I know very few successful people in life that don’t have tremendous passion for what they do.

**What’s the most inspiring thing you could say to someone who is a fledgling entrepreneur, or who may be and doesn’t know it yet?**

**Clarke:** Be prepared to work very hard. If you follow your heart and your passion, you’ll find it’s not hard work at all. You can’t wait to go to work. Don’t be afraid to ask people to mentor you. If they know you’re interested in their industry, innovation or a particular market, they will realize you are serious. Most are happy to let you tap into their knowledge.

**Underwood:** Don’t be afraid to take a calculated leap at creating value from an idea or strategy. Always be on alert for an opportunity that needs to be exploited as a new business or new product. But when you see that window of opportunity, go through it sooner rather than later. There is always some other entrepreneur who will see the opportunity and capitalize on it.

**Sukup:** Keep trying. Work hard. Be honest. Be moral. You get ahead by helping others get ahead. Go for it. The worst advice is to be a risk taker. There are a lot of bad ideas out there, too, and people need to figure out what is a good idea. Successful entrepreneurs never felt like they were taking a big risk. They saw the need and had the vision.

**Wise:** If you are starting a new business venture you probably are underestimating the amount of capital you need. I cannot stress enough the need to be well capitalized. Whatever you think you need, you are probably undercapitalized by at least 50 percent.