

Sparkplug Leaders for Projects and Organizations

By Harold S. Williams

For years, rhetoric about the importance of leaders in projects and organizations has been belied by practice. Grant-makers, for example, give proposals points for their needs statement, goals articulation, workplan, organizational experience and letters of support. When it comes to the key individuals, in many instances only a job description is needed. As long as people have the right paper credentials (e.g., a masters degree, 20 years' experience or whatever) they are presumed interchangeable. It is the plan that matters most.

In reality, human gain projects, like other ventures, are largely determined by the mettle of the specific individuals who lead them. Plans can specify targets but only individuals can reach them. Think of your own experiences. Consider any example of effective human enterprise – a church, civic organization, organizational bureau, or whatever. Ask yourself why it works so well when compared to others of its kind. The changes are high that the answer is not the presence of a long plan, a big committee, or even an expensive budget. The explanation is probably a person.

You have moved to a new community and want to select the best possible elementary school situation for your kids. You have an appointment with the principal, who tells you all about the curriculum, improvements to the building, school-based management and the vision and mission statement. At first you are impressed. Then you pause to ask yourself: just what is the correlation between these factors and the quality of education my child will receive?

When the door closes on the classroom which would you rather have: the right building or motto or the right teacher?

The Entrepreneurial Context

Most forms of turnaround may usefully be viewed as an entrepreneurial act. Under conditions of uncertainty, an intervention is framed which must be sufficiently strong to surmount obstacles, stretch limited resources, and sustain energy. Entrepreneurs are not needed to carry out the *status quo*. But they are essential when decline must be reversed. Entrepreneurs, simply put, spark change. Because the term “entrepreneurial” can be taken negatively in education, we chose a different word for our context: sparkplug.

One useful starting point is the group which makes something of a science of finding entrepreneurs (including those who turnaround failing enterprises) in business. This is the venture capital community. These investors, who are very different from bankers, are presented annually with hundreds of would-be entrepreneurs, each fervently believing that his or her idea will make millions of dollars in short order. They use the results of a number of studies to help them to define and select entrepreneurs.

Most studies are empirical rather than theoretical. They begin by putting successful entrepreneurs in one pile and other individuals in another, then asking, "What's the difference?" Among approximately twenty attributes usually generated by studies of entrepreneurs, here are six distinguishing characteristics that show up most repeatedly in this research.

- *Knowledge and love of their business.* Entrepreneurs are as ordered in content as in method. Most have grown up with a specific area (retail trade, manufacturing, etc.) and gain strength from specific experience, insights, and passion associated with that business area.
- *Excellent use of feedback.* Entrepreneurs in business have often failed at least once before they succeed. But they can relate exactly why and how they failed, and are clear that they would not make the same mistakes again. When people always blame external forces (whether the mail, the environment, luck, "timing" or anything else presumed beyond their control), they have all their mistakes left to make.
- *Divergent in thinking.* One of the greatest challenges for an entrepreneur is the expression. "It can't be done." These people tend to go around problems by finding new routes to old destinations. They have a knack for looking at things in a fresh way. They are as interested in working smart as in working hard.
- *Moderately high risk-taking.* Entrepreneurs are willing and able to invest their own money and their reputation in solving a problem by creating a new solution. At the same time, they wish to ensure that the factors leading to success are under their control, with risks that can be understood. Entrepreneurs, in part because they want to have personal responsibility, tend to operate in that middle ground between certainty and chance. They want to understand the odds, not "bet the farm."
- *Tenacity.* Entrepreneurs are generally characterized by a steadfast determination, which is narrowly and intensely expressed. Entrepreneurs are not out to save the world, but to achieve an important performance target. Their focus is strong and intensive.
- *Optimistic and enthusiastic nature.* Most entrepreneurs are optimistic about what their innovations can do. It is an optimism born in a general rosy faith (everything turns out for the best), but in a conviction that they can pull off their dreams. Indeed, many entrepreneurs are not only optimistic but naively so. They think they can achieve results deemed "impossible." At the same time, their naïve optimism is a far greater driver of change in life than is a "realism" that nothing strongly ambitious will generally succeed.

Other studies of entrepreneurs show that social factors can be as important as personal ones. Perhaps the most common such factor is displacement. A surprising number of people become entrepreneurs when they are fired or otherwise dislodged from a comfortable state of being, for example. Others gain freedom from an inheritance or all kids out of the house.

While popular literature tends to romanticize entrepreneurs, those who know them best tell another story. While acknowledging their brilliance and importance, those who fund and work with entrepreneurs find many to be abrasive and even obnoxious. There is a thin line between strong self-confidence and arrogance...between a strong intense focus and an obsession. Bill Gartner (Center of Entrepreneurial Studies, University of Virginia) puts it this way:

The self-made man has a vested interest in being unique, in believing that the organization maker is born and not made. As a result, when he tells the story of success, he always begins with his childhood. (This is an almost foolproof way to tell you've got a self-made man on your hands, the way certain bright plumage marks a species of bird.) When the self-made man offers advice to budding organization makers the advice is always to "be like me."

Most entrepreneurs are neither compliant nor dutiful!

Entrepreneurs Beyond Business

From our work with a variety of public benefit projects, we have come to the conclusion that the traits found in effective public service sparkplugs are remarkably similar to their entrepreneurial counterparts in business. And the available literature on the subject agrees. Here is a short list of eight factors often found in individuals deemed highly effective at what we might call social benefit entrepreneurship. This, like the above traits of business entrepreneurs, helps us lay the foundation for defining leaders for School Turnaround. The passages are quotes from individuals captured in a fascinating book by Bill Berkowitz called Local Heroes (Lexington Books, 1987) which profiles such people as Phyllis and David York, founders of Tough Love, and Candy Lightner, who founded MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving).

1. The source of the entrepreneurial act is a person. None of these acts grew out of a committee or a report or a needs assessment. Or a grant! Indeed, most started on a timely shoestring...with far less money than most established social service agencies get for even one project.

So I was in that slump of just arriving home, and I went for the phone, picked it up, and started calling local convalescent homes and said, "a performer, and I are interested to know if you'd like to have some music brought for no cost..."

If you don't try out ideas, they rest with you for the rest of your life. They rest in the back burner area, and you find yourself talking to your children about what you could have done. And that in itself should be enough to kick you into action.

I couldn't get anybody else. Actually, I tried at least a dozen different friends of mine to do it. They never were interested. "I'm too busy with something else," "I want to be with my grandchildren," "I want to take a trip to Europe." They weren't interested. People that I considered my bosom friends – not interested. And I said, well if there's nobody else that will do it, I'll have to do it myself.

2. Personal enthusiasm proves vital. Energy can be born in outrage just as readily as in pleasure. In either event, enthusiasm is inherent not in the idea but in the person who pursues it.

I will hook people. I'll talk them into it. I'll con them into doing something that they don't really... 'cause I can beat them down, with sheer enthusiasm. Back in the privacy of their room, they're not sure they want to do it at all. And I've overdone it a couple of times, on that basis. You know what I mean; I've carried them along or swept them along with my enthusiasm, or excitement about doing something.

I have this vision of little green men coming down to this planet, and visiting us and looking around. Seeing these people – perfectly able-bodied people, all their hands and all their facilities about them; eager, capable, intelligent, skilled – sitting around and not doing a damn thing because nobody's paying them a dollar. It doesn't make sense. And you take it from there, you know. There's got to be some way. You can't be hypnotized by the green stuff...

3. The structures for action are straightforward. There is a simple clarity about fundamentals and core assumptions.

My main premise was that people who are isolated and lonely probably would like some music, and joy in their life. Everything I saw verified that. I wasn't discussing it with anyone yet, so everything I saw was from a very pure solo point of view.

You know, the flowers, if you look at them, it just sort of calms you down. I see people walking there on the street. I see the young people, I don't hear a whole lot of carryin' on or loud noise; maybe they do it somewhere else. It's just not as loud as it used to be; it's really not.

I believe that we need more physical work: families do; community groups do. The crazy class system that we have – we have an educated type that never gets its hands dirty – is I think terrible, destructive both for that person and for all the other people that just do the manual work all the time.

4. The sparkplug often is outside the professional mainstream. Indeed, in many cases, he or she is clearly at odds with traditional service delivery systems.

Professionalism is a decision by a society to give more resources to fewer people. It is to say that one does better by developing a cadre of people with special skills, instead of dispensing those resources over a broader number, giving everybody a certain modicum of those skills.

You end up having a group of people who say that they're so professional no one else can do it. Lawyers have a monopoly on dispute resolution. Doctors have a monopoly on anything to do with medicine.

People like that seem a little strange, and maybe threatening. They're so on fire, so apostolic, that they won't fit well into the department or the agency team. We don't want their waves in our boats. High excitement, in the sense of full-bore passionate excitement, risks both professional and personal costs, for an implicit but powerful part of our professional ethos is not to get too charged up, but instead to be well-mannered, to hold excitement down.

5. These people are local, not national. Indeed, their strength comes from fully understanding and being anchored in local dynamics, not in seeing a project as a stepping stone to national visibility or broader networking.

I took it just as a challenge, almost like working on a puzzle. I was convinced from my analysis that it just had to work. And, since we had no model, we had to figure out as we went along. It was just something that was due for its time. We started from scratch. I got someone who had an office with a room they weren't using, and they let me use the room. I didn't want to charge for people to belong to the system, because I figured they don't know whether it's going to be of advantage to them or not, so I just put my time in on it. For three years I put in five hours a day running the thing, running the exchange.

After the first play, we had to take ourselves seriously. Somehow we had done something, and now you have to do it again. And that was very fear-inspiring, because it was kind of like, well, we pulled it off once, that's kind of lucky, maybe we should stop right there.

6. A crisis often triggers the action. Phyllis and David York started Tough Love after personal experiences with teenagers; Lois Gibbs started Citizen's Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste after living at Love Canal. These people are not constant entrepreneurs; rather, they become entrepreneurs when and where necessary.

We said, this is what happened, our daughter's in jail; would you help us out, would you go see her? Please go down and see her, please see what we can do, what we need. That kind of thing, 'cause we're doing everything wrong.' So that's what they did. They went out and did actual work. They didn't sit and talk.

When I first started MADD five years ago after Cari was killed, I had no idea what I was going to do. I didn't think in terms of legislation, I only knew that I did hurt, and people needed to know about this problem, and other children perhaps would be saved.

7. Moral and spiritual values are one wellspring. For many, moral convictions – generally of an explicit and often religiously based character – go even deeper than the most consuming of projects. More important they precede the project.

I was going through your questions and I kept getting back to the Jesuit spirituality. What is it really in life that you're looking for? (softly) The only important thing worth doing in life is being a saint (with passion). That's the only thing worth living for. I can't go out and say that I mean, I can say it, but you can't say to people (whispers) "What is it really that makes you tick, Quayle?" "I want to be a saint." Because it's the only thing to be; nothing else matters. ...you wake up in the morning, with ideas that are gifts, and with hope that's a gift, and with energy, that's a gift, and with enthusiasm, that's a gift, and go out and work on that and give it back (laughs softly).

8. Laughter is important. While the mission is serious, effective entrepreneurs tend to live life to its fullest and part of their zest is a sense of humor. It is expressed not so much the hearty laugh as the ability to see wit, irony, and other kinds of humor in the midst of serious business.

The pacing and the humor. The fun. I would say they're the critical elements. In the early days we used to go to the horse races. We'd just close down St. Ambrose on Wednesday s. We'd say, "Oh shit, let's go to the track tomorrow. Put the phone on hold, Anna, we're not coming in tomorrow. We're all going to the track."

Well, my wife Pat and I sort of came up with the idea – I don't remember how except probably just talking about it – we thought we should have some celebration of this phenomenon. The humor of it seemed to be natural, and it seemed to be a nice idea to celebrate the wackiness of it and have a good time. So we just started making lists of contests – we sort of fantasized about this festival, without really ever thinking that it could happen.

The entrepreneur in business and the sparkplug for human gains share many characteristics. But note the many areas in which research is silent for both profit and non-profit applications. Entrepreneurs are not necessarily old or young, first born or last. They are not extroverts or introverts, poor or rich, highly educated or illiterate. Those and hundreds of other factors are simply not found to be associated with those who lead entrepreneurial acts. This should not surprise us since such measures are largely input factors and the focus of people who find and bet on entrepreneurs is on what comes out. When all is said and done, sparkplugs anywhere are defined much less by who they are or even what they believe than by what they achieve.

A number of questions remain about the source of these factors and even their precise meaning. Is tenacity or enthusiasm a part of one's core personality? Are we born with these traits or are they learned? Are sparkplugs better explained by their values or their habits? It is very difficult to answer such questions. But, thankfully, it is not necessary. We may think of these kinds of characteristics as dispositions or tendencies. A person is or is not disposed to show a great deal of energy...a tendency to seeing the positive side of things. In many cases, the definitions may be difficult but the distinctions are not.

Characteristics of Sparkplug Leaders

Since not all sparkplugs work equally well in all engines, we must focus specifically on principals who can lead effective turnarounds as one kind of entrepreneurial individual with

specific opportunities and constraints. Examples of opportunity include more resources than are typically available in a failing business. Constraints include an inability to shut down a failing division or to quickly make personnel changes.

Here are five factors that appear strongly associated with those individuals who have successfully lead projects in the non-profit as well as for profit realms; 1) energy; 2) a bias toward action; 3) a result orientation; 4) personal responsibility; and 5) desire for collaboration. In each case, we think of the factor, not as a personality trait, but simply as a general tendency or disposition that can be defined in behavioral terms with indicators to signify its presence. We all add a few cautions for each.

1. **Energy.** Energy in our terms is the scarce resource that brings a plan to life. It brings drive, motivation, work, and an ability to stay the course. Further, this is the commodity that not only “winds up” the leader but proves a galvanizing force to get and keep the involvement of others. Without strong human energy many projects will begin...but few will finish.

Indicators of energy:

- Reasonable physical condition. The mind must be willing...but the body must also be able. This is not, however, a matter of brawn or even overall health. The question is the stamina needed for a given project.
- Enthusiasm, optimism, self-confidence. While pessimists occasionally have strong energy, theirs is devoted to criticizing and tolerating conditions, not changing them.
- Sense of humor. Humor is one basis for both renewal and for insight. We have in mind not the practical or bawdy jokester but the person who sees humor and irony in situations. Most especially they can laugh at themselves.

Cautions:

- Energy can take quiet as well as frenetic forms. Remember “The Little Engine that Could”?
 - Some forms of human energy remain dispersed and diffuse, as in “nervous energy.” We are looking for the person who can harness energy in a specific direction to achieve intensity and duration.
 - Optimism should not be confused with boosterism. For our sparkplugs, it is less a matter that “all works out the best” than that they are confident of achievement.
2. **A bias toward action.** Many people are at heart critics, planners or observers. Our sparkplugs are actors. They want to solve a problem, not bemoan or even fully define it. Further, they favor stopping the preparations at some early point in order to get underway. This orientation is required give the tendency of so many educational projects to favor prolonged preparations. This is frequently encouraged by funders who want a detailed needs statement or a feasibility study as well as widespread “involvement” and letters of support.

Indicators of the action bias:

- A focus on solving a problem rather than discussing it. Most people remain problem-centered.
- A sense of urgency. A person who believes that next year or even next month is as good a time as now to begin is unlikely to hold a strong action premise.
- A focus on opportunities. A person who sees opportunities as well as obstacles is more likely to be ready to act.

Cautions:

- We are looking for the person who pivots from problem to solution, not for the person who simply shows the most impatience.
- We are looking for the sparkplug's clarity on what should be done – not initially on whether we happen to agree with that proposed approach.

3. **A results orientation.** Effective sparkplugs are those who believe that the outcome, not the process, is what matters most. They define and believe in achievement and are turned-on by the challenge of a finish line. This orientation helps to overcome the emphasis on process while giving a strong and intense focus.

Indicators of a results orientation:

- A sense of achievement. Many people have great needs for power or affiliation. Our sparkplugs have a stronger need for achievement than they do for exerting control or being well liked by everyone. Sparkplugs stand up for their programs under fire.
- Some competitive instincts. In many instances achievement is defined as a competition, if not with what other communities or state government might attain than as internal competition to set the best target or get the best deal.
- Desire to keep score. Those preoccupied with setting and hitting a target will want a way to know where they stand.

Cautions:

- A results focus is not necessarily “bean counting.” Many results have strong qualitative dimensions and most have some clear threshold of success rather than a range of results which must be measured.
- There is a profound difference between setting a target in advance of a project and defining achievement at the endpoint. Those with specific targets outperform those who pledge best efforts. We look not for those who say, “I’ll try hard,” but rather, “I’ll *do* it.”

4. **Personal Responsibility.** Most of us are great at accepting praise for success but are quick to blame outside forces – fate, luck, the weather, others – when things go wrong. Sparkplugs

believe that people own the consequences of their own behavior in bad times as well as good ones. As a result, they are excellent learners who can make needed course corrections.

Indicators of personal responsibility:

- Ability to acknowledge error and mistake as the essential basis for behavior change.
- A focus on personal as much as on group accountability. We look for people who have no inclination to let themselves or others hide their personal responsibilities within collective action.
- A belief that responsibility is not something that you are delegated by a group or organization but something that you assume whenever you can see how you can contribute.

Cautions:

- There is a difference between taking responsibility and taking credit. Our sparkplugs tend to see victory as happening because a variety of people each take responsibility and share the credit.
- While effective community entrepreneurs focus on what everyone can do better, they are much less interested in blame or in full explanation than in improvement. To them, a well-documented failure is far less useful than in imperfectly understood success!

5. **Use of Teams.** While entrepreneurs in business may go it alone, those in schools have no such luxury. They are invariably dependent on other people and forces whose cooperation is critical. The concept of a team brings the full set of needed leadership skills, as well as the full compliment of “people power” to get the job done.

Indicators of teamwork focus:

- An ability to compensate for rather than duplicate skill weaknesses in forming a leadership team.
- An ability and desire and harness differences for better solutions – vs. a desire to increase harmony and cooperation.
- An interest in not simply coordinating but collaborating – creating something new that no individual team member could achieve.

Cautions:

- Great teams build on divergent not similar views. Remember Mark Twain’s line: if five people think alike, four of them are redundant.
- The point of a team is to achieve a result, not feel good about a process.