

# How to Ignite Entrepreneurial Spirit in Your Organization

A WORLD-CLASS ENTREPRENEUR SHARES HER TIPS.

BY DEBBIE GISONNI

Sometimes it seems as if the nonprofit sector is another planet, separated from the real world of business, guided by its own set of rules.

But I don't think it needs to be that way. After 15 years in the high-tech publishing industry in Silicon Valley, I came to realize that the nonprofit and for-profit sectors have much in common and a great deal to teach each other. In 1998 I left my six-figure income and stock options behind to create a company that bridges the gap between nonprofits and for-profits. The result is Real Life Lessons, a company dedicated to producing informational projects that help people change their lives at work or at home. I donate 10% of my proceeds to nonprofits. My first product is a book, *Vita's Will*, about some of the life lessons I've learned from personal tragedy and professional success.

One lesson I learned in business is the importance of entrepreneurial spirit in both nonprofit and for-profit realms. Most nonprofits are started by people with a passion for a cause—a definite, instinctual entrepreneurial spirit. Somewhere down the road, however, this spirit is too often lost under a sea of legalities, financial struggles, and separation from the characteristics that drive successful businesses.

It's never too late to re-ignite the passion. Just as corporate America constantly reinvents itself, repositions its products, and reorganizes its staff, nonprofits should be no different. Evaluating how things are done and how they could be improved should be an ongoing process for any kind of business. That's what entrepreneurship is all about. It's about constantly seeking and implementing change. It's about sticking your neck out just a little farther than the rest and taking a risk. Nowhere is this kind of attitude needed more than in the nonprofit sector. Here are 10 ways to rekindle that entrepreneurial spirit in your organization.

## 1. Stay in touch with former colleagues.

If you're one of the many people who have crossed over from for-profit to nonprofit work, you may be suffering from the "I'm not part of that world anymore" syndrome, which leads your old colleagues to talk about you in the past tense as if you didn't exist any more. Keeping connections with your for-profit buddies is important. You never know how they may be able to help. I recently met up with a former business acquaintance and found out she volunteers for a nonprofit that I've selected to receive a portion of revenues from my book, *Vita's Will*. She's now helping me get exposure within her organization, which will not only help book sales but increase the donation amount as well.

With e-mail and voice mail, it's easy to stay in touch with your former colleagues. Keep them on your mailing list and let them know what's going on with your life and job. Something you're doing might just strike a chord with one of them and lead to opportunities for your organization.

## 2. Network with friends and family.

If you can't count on them, who can you count on? Your friends and family have networks that can help you with staffing needs, finances, and marketing opportunities.

Being nonprofit gives you an unwritten privilege to talk about your cause. Tell your friends and family what you're doing. Put them on your organization's mailing list. Invite them to your organization's events as your guests. Ask them to volunteer.

When my book was published, I sent all my friends and family a letter, suggesting ways they could spread the word and create a buzz in the market. One suggestion was for them and their friends to order the book during a specific week. As a result, it became the publisher's number-one best seller for that month.

### 3. Propose “win-win” partnerships with corporate America.

Don't put this idea on the back burner because of the time involved to cultivate such relationships. Remember the first two suggestions above and this could be an easier task. There is a theory in sales called the “funnel concept.” The more you put in the funnel in the way of connections, phone calls, and meetings, the more you'll get trickling out the bottom in the way of sales. It's truly a numbers game. Once you get the contacts, the next step is to develop creative ideas that benefit both parties. Sometimes, all you need to do is show up.

Ellen Scheetz started a nonprofit called Sisters for Success to teach teenage girls about career options and business. One day she noticed a newspaper ad about a contest run by an antiperspirant company. She entered the contest in the “helping others” category and wrote an essay about Sisters for Success. She won \$25,000 for her organization and a myriad of free cosmetic products to give to her teens. Ellen says, “Entering a national contest could have been intimidating to a one-woman organization with a handful of volunteers, but I figured why not try all the avenues. I had nothing to lose.”

### 4. Drop the “I can't because we're nonprofit” attitude.

Remember when you were a child and thought you could do just about anything? Then somewhere along the line, the words “I can't” crept into your vocabulary and you started believing in your own limitations. Don't make excuses. Don't think of nonprofit as handicapped in any way because if you do, so will your potential backers. Hold your head up high and you'll get the respect and response you want from people inside and outside your organization. Where there's a will, there's a way!

### 5. Act like a real company.

Don't forget that a business is a business is a business. Act like one. While you may not have the millions of dollars on the bottom line that some companies have, you still have a P&L statement, complete with income, loss, assets, and debts. The objective is to have more income than loss. Don't lose sight of that. Nonprofit doesn't

equate to “non income.” Many people join the nonprofit sector because they think they don't have to worry about business issues. Eleanor Jacobs, who has worked in the nonprofit social services sector for 25 years, says, “That's called denial, fear, and insecurity. Just doing good work is not enough. If you are truly passionate about your cause, you don't have the luxury of not attending to the business side. You need to get out of the ivory tower and show results.”

### 6. Get noticed (publicity, publicity, publicity).

Make sure you're constantly “working the press” and developing relationships with the local media. There's always something, even the slightest thing, to announce about your organization or someone in it. If you don't have a new press release going out at least once a month, take a closer look. You can get on the local newspaper calendar by creating a monthly idea input meeting for the community. You may even sign up some volunteers. You can start a work-study program for local students. You can have your volunteers and employees hand out flyers about your organization or events where they work and live. As Ellen Scheetz from Sisters for Success says, “You can't get anywhere unless you get the word out.”

### 7. Create events.

In addition to the usual fundraising activities, think of other events that could increase your visibility. Brainstorm with your staff to come up with ideas. Get demographic information on your community residents to create events that meet their needs and desires. Many times, you can piggyback on existing programs or events. For example, a local community group or church may give you free space at their bazaar. If your neighborhood is predominately Spanish speaking, distribute information in Spanish. Contests are a great way to get people's juices flowing, including the media. Maybe you could sell raffle tickets at that church bazaar or sponsor an essay contest pertinent to your cause in the local schools.

### 8. Conduct research (then promote or sell it).

The media and the public love statistics. What can you do as an organization to educate the public on an issue? You can keep costs low by teaming up with a college, university, or marketing firm. Get help from students in the marketing department, or ask a market research firm for a discount in exchange for using their name in the study results. Ask yourself what kind of data would be

## The Secrets of Entrepreneurial Leadership

In today's unpredictable nonprofit environment, nonprofit leaders need to operate like risk-taking entrepreneurs. To be an entrepreneurial leader, you must do the following:

- 1. Take responsibility for the uncertain outcome of new projects.** You must be able to say to employees, "If I'm wrong, it's my problem, not yours." This allows employees to operate under uncertainty without worrying about the repercussions should the project fail.
- 2. Outline challenges that push employees to their limits.** But know when a challenge may push workers beyond their abilities.
- 3. Get support from key stakeholders inside and outside your organization.** To operate as an entrepreneurial manager, you'll need to convince decision-makers to back you up when things go wrong or right.
- 4. Build commitment from employees.** You must foster a willingness among employees to work toward a common goal. You need to motivate and cultivate effective teams.
- 5. Make the most of people resources.** Break down team members' perceptions and stereotypes of what can and can't be done. You'll need a sense of how people resources have been undervalued.

—adapted from Knowledge@Wharton

most useful to your membership, constituency, or the public, and form a study around it. If it's something controversial, even better. The media will love it! It could also serve a dual purpose in obtaining government or private funding. Is there research you're planning on conducting for your own internal use that you can tweak to contain more marketable data for public consumption? Are there parts of the data that you can maintain and then sell to other organizations?

## 9. Save Money.

Entrepreneurial spirit lies in creating ways not only to raise money but also to save money. Sometimes we do things the same way for so long we don't realize there are new, more cost-effective processes. For the Women's National Book Association, rising postal costs were the catalyst for creating a new renewal form with e-mail addresses. Reminders about renewing memberships and

attending meetings, once sent via regular mail, are now sent via a group e-mail box. The group reduced its costs by hundreds of dollars.

## 10. Spread the Spirit.

The entrepreneurial spirit is an infectious one. If you have it, others in your organization will, too. The way to create an environment that breeds good entrepreneurs is just a matter of having good management skills. That means motivating people to stay positive, bringing them in the loop on ideas, and asking for their advice and opinions. Don't assume that you and upper management have all the answers. Give others in your organization responsibility, and encourage them to think beyond the box. Let them know it's OK to make mistakes. Some of the best ideas come from failure. Remember, without the people, there is no organization! Respect them. Value them. Trust them. ■

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These resources are available from the Society's Resource Center, [www.snpo.org](http://www.snpo.org).

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