

TRAINING

viewpoint

BY GERRY SEXTON



LIFE WOULD BE SO MUCH BETTER IF ONLY WE COULD FIGURE OUT WHAT IT IS THAT MAKES SELF-DIRECTED LEARNERS SELF-DIRECTED... AND HOW TO PUT THAT STUFF IN A BOTTLE.

I've wrestled with this fundamental question the last decade as a trainer, consultant and knowledge seeker myself.

I've come up with six characteristics — *invisible assets* — that I believe distinguish those who successfully take personal responsibility for their learning and careers:

1. *Self-directed learners work with an underlying sense of purpose.* The meaning of their work goes beyond job descriptions. They're guided by passion that exceeds the narrow definition of tasks performed. These are the people who install hoses on an incubator assembly line and see their job as helping save the lives of premature babies.

2. *Self-directed learners never surrender the art of dreaming and re-dreaming.* Many people fail to set and achieve goals because they've lost the ability to inspire themselves. Dreams create direction. How many people do you know who've quit dreaming and stalled unhappily, stunted by the practical conditions of their lives? How many are resigned to quiet desperation because there are bills to pay, kids to put through college, too many years invested in getting to where they are...

3. *Self-directed learners focus on their gifts.* They know that attempting to become all things leads to mediocrity at best. Ask any top performers about their success and they will emphasize having focused on doing what they do best. Oliver Wendell Holmes once observed that "Most people go to their graves with their music still inside them." The self-directed are life's music makers.

4. *Self-directed learners see themselves as volunteers not victims.* At the core of self-direction lies an internal locus of control. The self-directed take responsibility for their choices. They understand that any change in the direction of their future must begin inside them. They respect the external forces in their lives but refuse to be controlled by them.

5. *Self-directed learners act despite their fears.* Uncertainty and change are inevitable, but being immobilized by them is not. Initiating action — any action — sets into motion events that don't happen without the courage to begin.

6. *Self-directed learners thrive on interdependence.* All the benefits of self-direction can be lost in an organization or team unless self-directed learners master the art of interdependence. It's essential to trust and rely upon others. Success is impossible without interconnections.

Can this stuff be bottled? Can it be taught? I've concluded that a better strategy is to think of uncorking what already exists.

Invisible Assets

We trainers need to help people tap into their invisible assets. For some that means identifying their sense of purpose, dreams and gifts for the first time. For others it means cutting through the fog that "working for a living" can create so they can once again see these characteristics clearly within themselves. With that clarity will come the courage and commitment to grow and learn.

In 1923, Kahlil Gibran wrote in *The Prophet*: "No man can reveal to you aught but that which already lies half asleep in the dawning of your knowledge. The teacher who walks in the shadow of the temple, among his followers, gives not of his wisdom but rather of his faith and his lovingness. If he is indeed wise he does not bid you enter the house of his wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind."

If we can bring people to the threshold where they can see their invisible assets, they'll do whatever else it takes. ■

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