

Stand Back and Help It Happen

Sometimes you can accomplish more by doing less.

By A. Blanton Godfrey, Ph.D.

Once in a while you meet a person or read something that totally changes your thoughts about a subject. A year ago both those things happened to me. At an emerging issues forum at our university, Ernesto Sirolli gave a short presentation based on his experience and his book, *Ripples from the Zambezi* (New Society Publishers, 1999). In it, he summarizes what he has learned about facilitating projects in Africa, Australia and the United States. The lessons are so simple, I asked myself the inevitable, "Why didn't I know this already?"

Years ago, Sirolli and a group of young colleagues traveled from Italy to Africa to help grow tomatoes. "We knew we wouldn't fail because if there's one thing Italians know, it's tomatoes," he described. However, they did fail. The people they were trying to help quietly did what they were told and collected their wages. But the entire time, they knew far more about growing tomatoes in their country than the five volunteers from Italy; the African natives just didn't say it.

Other examples of misplaced altruism in this region abound. The French sent a team of professors to the Ivory Coast to test students for a high school certificate. They were later shocked at the students' poor results on a test designed in Paris.

Shaken by the well-meaning but clearly ill-conceived venture, Sirolli went back to Italy and started reading everything he could about how projects like his should have been run. One of the seminal books he discovered was Fritz Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful* (Perennial, 1989). He has subsequently learned in the past 20 years that these lessons should be required study for every quality manager, facilitator, team leader, and Green and Black Belt. Schumacher's first two lessons in the book are:

- If people don't ask for help, leave them alone.
- There's no good or bad technology to carry out a task, only an appropriate or an inappropriate one. Something big, modern and expensive isn't necessarily best; it all depends on the circumstances.

We all have painful memories of trying to force help on someone in our organizations. We know our way is better, and if they'd just change, we could improve throughput, reduce costs and improve quality. We want to help them change so much; why do they resist?

We've all worked on projects in which the goal seemed to be justifying new and expensive technology. There's a certain amount of cynical truth to the old joke that a problem can be solved in only three ways: more people, more money or a bigger computer. What Schumacher stressed was that we shouldn't take for granted our ability to identify other people's problems or offer solutions that are appropriate to the situation.

Based on his work in economic development in Australia and the United States, Sirolli states that the facilitator's first task is to find the passion. You can only help someone who

truly has a passion for that particular project or business.

The second task is to put it together. The facilitator best serves not by improving the work done by the passionate person—the true expert—but by helping fill in the other pieces where the person isn't an expert. Here's where the facilitator's true talent can shine. The hard work is pulling a team of diverse people together, designing a plan in which everyone shares the work and the rewards, and keeping everyone moving forward toward the goal.

Sirolli also recommends that we must be passive. Our job isn't to talk someone into going somewhere but to help those who have already decided they want to make the journey. One of the key skills in being passive is active listening. We must absorb everything we can and ask skillful questions. Often the very act of explaining things to us in great detail helps the presenter understand his or her task far better. It also helps the would-be entrepreneur understand what's known and unknown about the project. Sirolli stresses the absolute necessity of keeping all discussions totally confidential. This project is someone else's baby, and we have no right to share it with others without permission.

Often we can bring our business planning skills to bear. We can help create an early rough draft to see what will be needed and then help put the right team together to write the complete plan. Here's where we can truly add value by using our contacts and past experience to create a network of skilled people who can do their parts and begin to form the project team or even a new company.

One of the most important traits we can bring to a project is a love of action and wanting results. Sirolli's final recommendation is one of the most important and too often ignored: Give all credit to the team; they did the hard work. It's their passion and their future, not yours.

Sirolli's advice to facilitators is to:

- Find the passion.
- Put the right team together.
- Be passive.
- Learn to listen more than talk.
- Be visible.
- Work in confidence.
- Help create a real plan.
- Build a network.
- Love action.
- Give credit to the client.

About the author

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