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## **Invisible Assets: 6 Characteristics of Self-Directed Workers**

By Gerry Sexton, M.D.

Life as a trainer 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.

Imagine. No worrying about making training stick. No meltdowns with participants who would prefer a root canal to a role-play. No more selling training to management.

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 - 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 believe what they do makes a unique contribution. 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. The reason many people are ineffective at setting and achieving goals is that they lose the ability to inspire themselves with dreams. Dreams create direction. Self-directed learners continually envision what they want their futures to be. How many people do you know who've quit dreaming and stalled unhappily in life, stunted by the practical and realistic conditions of their lives? 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 value their unique talents and skills. They leverage their strengths and manage their weaknesses. 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 and pursue their own definitions of success. They believe they are where they are because of the choices they've made. They

understand that any change in the direction of their future must begin inside them. Self-directed learners 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 intimidating and inevitable, but being immobilized by them is not. Growth and learning are impossible without movement. Initiating action - any action - sets into motion synchronous events that don't happen for people without the courage to begin. You'll do nothing but collect Manhattan-sized parking tickets if you plan to drive from New York to LA but decide to wait for all of the traffic lights along the way to be green before beginning the trip.

6. Self-directed learners thrive on interdependence. It's important to understand self-direction is not about being a Lone Ranger. 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. So for all their independence, the most successful self-directed understand they are part of a greater whole. 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.

I see the first challenge of being a trainer as the 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. Does that mean carving out specific time and money to focus on training for these characteristics? Does it mean making them a small but consistent part of every learning and development experience we create?

Either way, it's tough to make a case for these "soft skills" in today's marketplace. It seems intuitively clear, however, that if we don't find some way to foster self-direction at this level, we might as well be

running a big chunk of the \$60 billion or so we spend in corporate America on training every year through a paper shredder in the mail room.

Gerry Sexton, M.D., is a senior partner and chief explorer at GrowthWorks Inc., a Minneapolis firm that helps organizations by facilitating the creative and strategic involvement of their people in processes to deal with major business challenges. You can reach him via e-mail at [gsexton@growthworksinc.com](mailto:gsexton@growthworksinc.com) or on the World Wide Web at <http://www.growthworksinc.com>.

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