MOVING FROM CEO TO CHIEF FIRE STARTER

ASAE Executive IdeaLink, July 2004
By Quint Studer

In early civilizations, fire starters taught others how to keep the flame alive. If they were successful, the tribe lived. If they were not, the tribe died. It was that simple. Now, apply this analogy to your organization. When you do, you'll realize that it's time to rethink your role as CEO. Are you overwhelmed with policy and procedure manuals and endless meetings or are you conceiving great ideas that get implemented, sparking the enthusiasm of everyone around you, and igniting and stoking the spirit (and profits) of your organization to blazing new heights?

Of course, there is no "magic bullet" for moving from CEO to fire starter. But there are some overarching principles—or sparks—that can help you on your journey.

Spark 1: Think of yourself as CFS...chief fire starter
Reposition the way you think about your role within the organization. If you think of yourself as a fire starter, in charge of lighting a fire in the soul of every man and woman in your company, everything you do will change.

Spark 2: Have an absolute passion for excellence and never waver
Having a passion for excellence can manifest itself in many ways. But one of its main hallmarks is the refusal to accept no for an answer, the refusal to look for someone to blame. Pursuing excellence means not giving into the temptation to accept the status quo, to assume there's nothing you can do about it. It's important to drive hard and find out what the real problems are.

Spark 3: Don't be too removed from the people who do the job
Solve problems by soliciting the advice and direction of the people who do the job every day. Walk up to employees and ask very specific questions: Is there anything we can do better? Do you have the tools and equipment you need to do the job? Even when you are too busy to walk around and talk to everyone, you can have leaders under you keep you informed about the personal details of individual employees. That way, when you meet with those employees, the inside information you'll possess will help you seem more visible.

Spark 4: Identify the major problems and other seemingly unrelated ones will fix themselves
It's funny how one thing builds on another in life. Fix one major structural problem and 10 others will correct themselves, too.

Spark 5: Work on the assumption that people want to do a good job
I really believe that when people aren't performing, it's almost always because they don't have the tools they need.

Spark 6: Make the connection between employee satisfaction and the bottom line
Remember, satisfied employees are always better performers. When employees feel appreciated and recognized by their leaders, they seek out opportunities to do good things for the company and its customers. They think like owners, not renters.

Spark 7: Hardwire your company culture with key behaviors
When you hardwire the right behaviors, tools, and techniques and align your focus organization wide, your company will be consistently successful, regardless of who the leaders are. Once the systems and processes are in place to sustain service and operational excellence, an organization is no longer dependent on a particular leader to ensure continued success.
Spark 8: Get rid of the we-versus-they mentality
It's easy to spot a we/they culture. If employees love their boss but hate administration, you will know they have the we/they disease. It's especially obvious at budget time, when a manager comes back from a budget meeting and says, "I fought for us but this is all I got." Don't let it happen in your organization. Even though it may feel easier or more comfortable at the time, ultimately you're dividing the staff when you should be uniting them. There is only one group, one team, and it is we.

Spark 9: Know and understand the impact of high and low performers and learn to deal with each effectively
It is easy to spend too much time with low performers and not enough with high performers. Strive to do the opposite. And here's a major point to remember: you must deal with low performers. Don't be afraid to let disruptive people go. If you don't, these low performers will affect your high performers, causing them to 1) leave the organization, 2) channel their positive energies into outside interests, or 3) pace themselves and slow down.

Spark 10: Create and develop leaders
Because an engaged, aligned workforce is so critical to hardwiring excellence, I believe that not investing in leadership development is the equivalent of organizational malpractice. In my former roles as a hospital president and 20-year health care veteran, I found that most registered nurses leave their jobs because of their relationships with their supervisors. The same is likely true in every segment of the business world. The best thing you can do for your staff and your organization is to invest in leadership training.

Spark 11: Harvest intellectual capital
Nothing drives individual accountability and a culture of ownership faster than soliciting bright ideas from employees. This not only drives innovation, but also can significantly impact the bottom line. Try budgeting and rewarding prizes for the best ideas, based on a percentage of savings from the idea.

Spark 12: Manage up
In essence, managing up means positioning people well. It means passing along positive comments to people whenever you hear them, spreading good news around, giving credit when it is due, and ensuring that senior leaders have information that allows them to make personal connections when they meet employees. This is an invaluable tool for getting buy-in for goals, creating more autonomy within the organization, saving time, and more. The power of managing up is amazing, too, from a human standpoint.

Spark 13: Understand the power of making a difference
Work hard to create an environment where your employees feel that they have purpose, that they have worthwhile work, and that they can make a difference. When you create a culture that's free of unnecessary irritations and distractions that keep people from doing their jobs, they will experience this sense of purpose and will begin to work with passion. Then, when they see the results of what they are doing, it refuels their passion and remotivates them to persevere and seek more results.

Spark 14: Realize that little things make a big difference
On my first day at a new hospital, I asked a nurse what I could do to make her job better, and she said she was frightened walking to her car at night because of the tall bushes by the parking lot. While she worked that day, I got the bushes trimmed and put up a small fence. Though it sounds like a little thing, to that nurse it was a big deal—it made her feel safe and, more to the point, valued as an employee and as a person.

Spark 15: Train yourself to look for what is right
It's a small wonder that departments have negative feelings toward each other: they hear from each other only when something goes wrong. Focus on what's going right and you can transform the mood in your entire organization. Clearly, there are many benefits to being a fire starter. But the best one is this: Fire starting is contagious. Once you become a fire starter, you spark the flame in others. The flame is passed from you to someone else and from that someone to another someone. Everyone in your organization gets drawn in. And in the end, you create a culture of excellence for everyone, which in turn creates better service for your members. Being a fire starter really is the key to hardwiring excellence. It doesn't
matter what field you're in or what problems your organization has. The sparks you light will make a difference, and it's amazing how good that feels.

Quint Studer is founder and CEO of Studer Group, an executive coaching firm and national learning lab, in Gulf Breeze, Florida. E-mail: quint@studergroup.com. This article was adapted from his book Hardwiring Excellence: Purpose, Worthwhile Work, Making a Difference (2004, Fire Starter Publishing). Copyright 2004 Quint Studer.