



Stanford eCorner

Advice for Social Entrepreneurs

Wendy Kopp, *Teach for America*

January 12, 2011

Video URL: <http://ecorner.stanford.edu/videos/2604/Advice-for-Social-Entrepreneurs>

"Embrace your inexperience," says Wendy Kopp, CEO and Founder of Teach For America, as "inexperience can be an asset because you don't know what is impossible." Kopp reminds social entrepreneurs they will need a lot of help, and to not try to do it all alone. Kopp also encourages social entrepreneurs to remain on a constant search for allies who can help you fulfill your mission.



Transcript

So the question is can you talk more about sort of the initial entrepreneurial process essentially. So one of the biggest assets I had was the fact that there was a thesis requirement at Princeton. In all honesty, because it sort of it was my opportunity to develop the plan and argument for the creation of this organization. And I think, I'm not sure I would have spent four months and then lots of research and developed at least what I thought at the time was a well thought through plan for the launch of this. If I hadn't had that and I mean this is sort of obvious but maybe not to everyone. I think really taking the time to do the research and developed the plan initially is clearly step one. I'd say all the time to and it sounds maybe flippant but I really, really truly mean it. I mean I think the other big asset I had was my inexperience. And I didn't know what was impossible. And I think there's much to be said for that.

There's also much to be said for experience but I don't think we would have Teach For America today if I had known at some level more than I need then. So embrace, the point is, embrace your inexperience. Don't be held back by it. It can be an asset. I think, yeah, I mean the other thing I would say I think is in order to get this off the ground, I needed a lot of help. And in particular and most dauntingly at the time I needed a lot of money. So I spent my first that seemed like the most daunting piece of this to me like I developed this plan. I had this idea but it just had to start with five other people. I mean that was based on various convictions around conveying that this was a movement not a little program. I needed to surround it with a sense of urgency and national importance.

That was going to cost \$2.5 million. And where was that money going to come from. So I spent the first, after I got the initial seed grant, I spent from one of those people included in the Fortune article I mentioned earlier. And I mean I just wrote letters to these people blindly. Those people and some other randomly selected corporate executives like the CEOs of major companies I heard from. I mean talk about the power of inexperience. Some of those people actually met with me. So just go to embrace the inexperience. But I spent the first three months after I graduated from college just trying to get into doors. Of course, it's more challenging than it seems now.

I would send a hundred letters and get a meeting or two but then we worked out from those people to try to meet others. And I think, I got lots and lots and lots of no's. And I think one thing I came to see and probably just knew intuitively is this is a search for allies. You actually don't need everyone. You need a few true allies. And I feel like my whole last 20 years has been a search for allies. And what I ultimately realized too is that the people you meet in that first summer may say no and no and no for the next 12 years and in your 13 could be your biggest enabler. And I wished I'd known that then because I would have been much nicer to everyone. Get in touch with everyone. But it really is a true I mean gosh it's just a law of life that I've now discovered.