

The Spark Plug: A Leader's Catalyst for Change

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Before getting into this column's topic, I want to comment about the inclusion of the word "leadership" in our journal's new title. Don Riggs, friend and colleague for many years, avidly espoused LLAMA's adoption and formal use of the word. In no small way Don influenced us to think about our roles as leaders *and* managers. Don, now deceased, would have been gratified to witness the incorporation of "leadership," however overdue and inexplicably delayed, into our *raison d'être*.

Spark plug is my term for someone who, because of high energy, good humor and people skills, and a can-do attitude, helps leaders realize important objectives. The spark plug is the catalyst that triggers good team chemistry. Personally, without a spark plug's support, many of my leadership efforts might have faltered.

So who are these people? What is a spark plug person? How do they contribute so much? Why are they essential to leaders? And, what can leaders do to encourage them?

In my career, spark plugs are those who act on good ideas, who initiate ideas, who need no more than a little encouragement. They'd consider a project and tell me, "I've been thinking . . ." followed by an improved idea. They do not seek permission to do something, nor do they wait to be told what to do. And in the doing—which is key—they inspire others to ramp up their involvement, to go that extra step, and to do more than just enough.

They are often selfless individuals—an unusual quality in our competitive workplaces. Spark plugs seem content to be the fourth or fifth violin without envying the first chair. They have little administrative ambition and rarely would consider taking on supervisory work because administration would remove them from doing the work; their satisfaction is in the doing, in the giving. They do not need a star (or title) on their door; they appear to derive considerable satisfaction from getting results outside the

limelight. And, after enjoying the passing pleasure in the accomplishment, they are ready to move on to whatever is next.

When in a group, spark plugs do not order others around; it's simply not their style. Rather, they help break the ice and get discussion underway; they value other ideas and often build on them, candidly opening up their thought processes to others. Instead of succumbing to impatience when the group dithers, and telling others what to do, the spark plug collaborates for the best ideas and then follows through. Their energy and input spark ideas in the group. Spark plugs are vital to idea survival; they help free up the log jams and open the flow of ideas to lead the group to solutions. Through their own willingness to take risks, they encourage others to experiment.

While a take-charge person may get the task done in half the time, the result may not be the best. And, if this is a group that will be together for some time, being told what to do—and, however nuanced the bossing, we know when we've been bossed!—may result in little relationship building and even resentment among participants.

Much more than cheerleaders, spark plugs are immersed in the work. In group effort, the spark plug counters the wet blanket, the participant who does not want to do the task. Enough wet blankets, nothing gets done beyond complaining about lack of support, the unreasonableness of the task, the ambiguity and complexity, and a dozen other reasons for inaction. The spark plug, undeterred by these inertial forces, suggests, "What if we do this?" and does it. Often, this small step can trigger a group to act, to try out things.

A recent paper by Casciaro and Lobo is relevant to my discussion.¹ They studied likeability versus competence in work teams and identified four stereotypical group members: the lovable fool, the incompetent jerk, the competent jerk, and the lovable star. Their paper, an assigned reading in my management class, resonates more than most for the students. Students *know* these four characters from personal experience! While my spark plug does not quite fit into Casciaro and Lobo's model—only perhaps as a mixed persona of lovable star and lovable fool—their study



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makes clear the influence of personality on group success or failure.

The spark plug's talk and enthusiasm prompts others to be more friendly, enthusiastic, or energetic. Casciaro and Lobo's competent jerk is less of a jerk when the spark plug is around. The spark plug's ability to bring out the best in people may well lead others to rethink their assumptions about the competent jerk. I can envision a line graph that illustrates how spark plugs add value to a group. The spark plug's behavior influences others to a higher level of *commitment* (a long x axis) to getting the job done, which can lead to higher *productivity* (a long y axis) and accomplishment by the group. If the spark plug is absent, then the group may tend toward lower commitment (a truncated x axis) with lower outcome or productivity (a shortened y axis).

A spark plug example comes from a study I did several years ago of a women's basketball team. Lauren Rice, as I think of her, was a spark plug, a team catalyst. A senior and starter, she was not a star, nor was she the most accomplished athlete. This team had no stars; in what they called a "rebuilding year," the team was predicted to finish somewhere in the middle of the league. The team's strengths were its coaching, chemistry, and players like Lauren who would not settle for mediocrity. Here's my evocative impression of how Lauren sparked this team to its first ever league championship:

It is the championship game: The Duke women against the University of North Carolina (UNC). With 2:29 minutes left on the clock, Duke is down by three. Every basket has made a difference, tying the score or reclaiming the lead. Lauren Rice, Duke's 6' 2" tall center, is visibly spent from the shoving and pushing under the nets. UNC's players have the height and heft advantage with two over 6' 6". Scrambling for a rebound, Lauren is knocked down in the corner, left in a daze, struggling to get up. UNC sends the ball down the court and puts a shot up on the run. It's intercepted. The long pass to Lauren finds her still in the corner, slightly swaying, but on her feet. Flatfooted, she pushes the ball in a straight line toward the distant basket. It swishes through, dropping from the net, bouncing once, before a chagrined UNC defender grabs it. Tied again.

Lauren had prepared for this game-changing moment—I'd seen her in grueling, all out practices, shooting foul shots through the thirty-second sit-down breaks, denying herself the respite, transcending the aching fatigue. And, in the process, modeling for the freshmen players (two of whom were starters) the anticipated level of grit.²

Another example comes from my management class. Because I use an array of teaching techniques—mystifying and challenging some students—the spark plug student is

an essential ally. My most recent ally inspires the rest of the class through her eagerness to engage the activities, her question-asking and relevant observations. She takes assignments to the next level of inquiry, often linking the current learning with previously discussed concepts, and sharing what she finds. She is not showing off, hers is a genuine wanting to share what she has learned. That this comes from her, not the instructor, appears to help the students ratchet up their own effort. Like Lauren the basketball player, this student raises the bar for the entire class and because of her outgoing and inclusive personality—just like Lauren—brings other students along on her learning journey.

The Spark Plug's Value to the Organization

The library profession, like many mature enterprises, seems to err on the side of passive reaction rather than proaction. Because much of a leader's power to implement change is granted by subordinates—they decide how far to go along—the spark plug assures the upward flow of that power. While spark plugs are not the deal makers, they are essential to the leader in gaining commitment.

When the spark plug is absent, group dynamics change, and rarely for the better. True, others ought to "step up" but that is hard to do—it may happen, but most groups revert to form. It is as if they need someone to take the lead, to accept the risk in leading.

Probably because spark plugs are selfless, their egos are in good shape; they do not fear coming off looking foolish. Action oriented, they learn from mistakes, adjust, and try again. Others join in and excel, because they don't have to take the initial responsibility, that much-dreaded first step off the cliff—even if the "drop" is less than a few feet. Spark plugs do what common sense urges them to do, swerving past what tradition maintains and cutting through to the essentials. And, in so doing, they may help lift the lethargy lowering like a dark cloud over those who have lost the pleasures of striving and accomplishing.

Also, as your ally, the spark plug compensates for *your* personality differences. A low-key leader is complemented by the spark plug's exuberance. A loquacious leader benefits from the spark plug's good humor in letting the leader know it is time to act. A reluctant leader is emboldened by the spark plug's confidence and willingness to try out ideas.

There is another way in which the spark plug helps the organization. Because spark plugs have less of a career agenda than other staff, their observations and insights about the overall organization or some specific policy may be particularly of value. If they see something that does not seem right and let you know about it, I suggest you follow up. As I've tried to explain throughout this column, the spark plug is more likely to rock the boat because he/she is not an "organization man"—it is not part of their

nature. When they see an unfair practice, they'll speak up. Pay attention.

Interestingly, much of the spark plug's effectiveness comes from an innate sensitivity to what is happening around them. Pardon the cliché, but their emotional IQ is at a higher level than most. They bring others along by intuiting anxieties and hesitations, and working from that tacit awareness. A good friend from years ago at the University of Colorado perfectly demonstrated this ability. On social occasions she would do palm readings—just for fun—with amazing insights into people. As far as I know, she didn't read palms at the circulation desk where she worked, but used her fine-tuned gift of insight to get outstanding results from her colleagues and in resolving customer grievances.

Encouraging the Spark Plug

Some of our organizational policies and practices may be unwelcoming to the spark plug. Remember, the spark plug wants what we all want when it comes to the work place: the freedom to achieve. If they encounter repeated administrative inflexibility, the spark plug, more than most, will have less patience and may well leave.

As a leader, give spark plugs the freedom to experiment and not be tied down by creativity-hobbling rules and regulations. Also, be aware that the spark plug's lack of conformity may cause resentment from those content in their comfort zone. The spark plug's quiet confidence and energetic achievement probably will be disconcerting to those settled in for the long haul, the "lifers." Similarly, a spark plug from the ranks of the support staff may rub the professional staff the wrong way. The entrenched professional may care less about the spark plug's accomplishments than they do about the spark plug's obliviousness to status—their status!

Because spark plugs tend to be productive individuals, they often achieve at a higher level than other staff.

This puts them at risk of being treated like a "rate buster," someone who exceeds the tacit productivity standards. The worst thing you can do is to ask the spark plug to slow down, to do less!

Even if the spark plug is not a star performer, their personality and their social skills make them invaluable to group process. So, if it is a choice between hiring the competent class clown or the socially clueless techie, give the class clown a second look for his people skills. Personally, I would err on the side of attitude over certification, because a new person's positive attitude will contribute more to the organization than a colorless someone who meets the job's educational or experience requirement.

In large part, I have written this column as a reflection about the many spark plugs I've known—this is a composite portrait. They greatly benefited my career and the libraries in which I worked. Several are long-lasting friends. Because I was aware of some of my weaknesses as a leader, I naturally gravitated toward these people for help—they never threatened me and from our easy interactions it appears I never threatened them. I also knew that while I didn't endow the spark plug's qualities, I could help set them free, and whenever I could, I did.

Finally, I've learned that the human spark plug is a seeking, learning, inquiring sort—they are destined to go on to other adventures, often outside of libraries. So, appreciate and recognize them for their contributions while they are around.

I would enjoy hearing from you about the spark plugs in your career.

References and Notes

1. Tiziana Casciaro and Miguel Sousa Lobo, "Competent Jerks, Lovable Fools and the Formation of Social Networks," *Harvard Business Review* 83, no. 6 (June 2005): 92–99. For a very useful summary see: <http://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/4916.html> (accessed Nov. 12, 2008).
2. To learn more about the basketball team studies, see my website at lubans.org.