

Charisma? To Her, It's Overrated

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This interview with Wendy Kopp, founder and chief executive of [Teach for America](#), was conducted and condensed by Adam Bryant.



Wendy Kopp is founder and chief executive of Teach for America, a corps of teachers who agree to serve in urban and rural public schools for two years. "Some of the most successful teachers," she says, "are some of the least charismatic."

Corner Office

Every Sunday, Adam Bryant talks with top executives about the challenges of leading and managing.

Q. Tell me about the first time you started hiring and managing people.

A. I was dismal at it. Some people seem to sort of have a gut for hiring. I literally had a gut that was exactly the opposite. So whenever I thought someone would be great, it was sort of the opposite.

You meet people and they seem nice and charismatic and they seem to have presence. And at that time, I was looking for people who could, in fact, build a movement on campuses. So maybe I was going on that, versus diving into people's past experiences and figuring out how they actually operated. But I have since become obsessed with building the right team.

Q. So how do you hire people now for staff positions?

A. I start with someone's experience, just to try to understand how they've operated in past environments and challenges, to see if they have demonstrated what we would think of as the core values for Teach for America.

Are these people who operate with a relentless pursuit of results, and with a sense of possibility and disciplined thought and respect and humility and integrity? I'll just dive into people's pasts and try to look for evidence of that. And then if it seems like someone would be a fit here, based on that, then we'll actually try to simulate the job.

I used to hire people and then realize within two days whether someone was going to thrive or not. So I said, "Let's actually find out what we're going to know two days in, before someone starts." We just send them a bunch of stuff that they would get otherwise on their first day and say, "Here are the challenges of the day." And we ask them to write up their answers, and then actually engage with them deeply so that we understand whether they have the skills that a particular role is going to require.

For most of the leadership roles around here, we desperately need people who are going to be visionary thinkers, set big goals and own the responsibility for meeting them.

Q. Talk about the art of goal setting.

A. It's all about setting a goal that's at the right intersection of ambitious and feasible. We do see the incredible power of setting stretch goals. But if you set a goal that's really not within reach, people will just give up on it and you really don't have a goal. We've seen this over and

over. I think there's as much talking down of goals around here as there is of actually saying, "You're not thinking big enough."

Q. What are you looking for in teachers you recruit?

A. We've done a lot of research on the characteristics of our teachers who are the most successful. The most predictive trait is still past demonstrated achievement, and all selection research basically points to that. But then there is a set of personal characteristics. And the No. 1 most predictive trait is perseverance, or what we would call internal locus of control. People who in the context of a challenge — you can't see it unless you're in the context of a challenge — have the instinct to figure out what they can control, and to own it, rather than to blame everyone else in the system.

In this case, there are so many people who could be blamed — kids, kids' families, the system. And yet you'll go into schools and you'll see people teaching in the same hallway, and some have that mentality of, "It's not possible to succeed here," and others who are just prevailing against it all. And it's so much about that mind-set and the instinct to remain optimistic in the face of a challenge.

Q. What else?

A. The ability to influence and motivate others in a sophisticated way — but not necessarily charisma. And that's an interesting one, right? Because people think of teachers who are born to teach, and you think of all these charismatic folks. Some of the most successful teachers are some of the least charismatic, interestingly. But they have a gift of figuring out what motivates people.

Q. How do you create a sense of mission?

A. Maybe this is easier in our endeavor than some, in the sense that we're looking for people who are magnetized to this notion, this vision, that one day all children in our nation should have the opportunity to attain an excellent education. And that magnetizes certain people. And so it's more about them — it's their vision, it's not my vision. It's our collective vision, and so that creates a sense of internal drive at some level.

At one point, I also had this revelation that we were no longer going to go through all this development of strategic plans. We would go through this massive process of creating these endless strategic plans and reviewing them. And I don't know how many years we did that until I said: "Forget it. We don't even need to do this anymore. Let's figure out our priorities and how we are going to measure our success. And then we're going to let people run after those goals." And that just freed up all the energy.

That was sort of foundational — then lots of other people came into the picture to figure out how you really create a kind of data-driven organization where, at every level, we've got the right goals.

We spent the last year asking ourselves, "Where do we want to be in 2015?" And that led to this analysis of our priorities. How are we going to measure our success? What should our goals be? But it wasn't a plan for exactly what everyone in the organization should do, or what should even be the key strategies. It was this massive, from-the-ground-up inclusive process that just got everyone aligned with our priorities and goals.

Q. It sounds like you're really focused on measurement.

A. We had a very rocky start in the first decade, and it was not clear at many points that we were going to actually make it financially. For three years, every single payroll was a huge question. But ultimately that near-death experience led us to see the power of really clear,

measurable goals. We realized the only way out of this mess was to raise money in the communities where we're placing teachers.

Fund-raising is so measurable, and it's easy to manage that system. And then once we worked ourselves out of our financial crunch, we stepped back and said, "How do we bring the same kind of rigor to the rest of the organization?"

Q. Have you read any leadership or management books through the years that you found helpful?

A. I am sort of obsessed with Jim Collins. "Built to Last," "Good to Great" — loved those. Those have probably been the most instrumental. Another book that was important for us was "The Leadership Pipeline."

Q. Any particular time-management techniques?

A. The best time-management thing I do is reflect an hour a week on the overall strategic plan for myself — what do I need to do to move my priorities forward? And then there are the 10 minutes a day that I spend thinking about, "O.K., so based on the priorities for the week, how am I going to prioritize my day tomorrow?" I don't know how I could do what I do without spending that time.

I am obsessive about that system because the world seems to be moving faster and faster, so you have to figure out how to still drive things proactively instead of just becoming completely reactive.

Q. When do you make the time to reflect?

A. I get up very early. I just can't even admit how early I get up. But I go to bed really early. I put my kids to bed about 9, and I'll go to bed at 9 p.m. or 10 p.m. I'll get up at — I don't know — early.

Q. 3 a.m.?

A. Sure. I'll get up at 3 a.m., make a pot of coffee and plow through e-mail. And then I'll go run and then I'll just assume I'm just going to be in meetings until — if I'm in New York — about 7.

Q. Thoughts on failure?

A. I think that the near-death experiences of our first decade were completely formative. Every single day, I feel like I think differently and probably we operate differently as an organization because of that.

Q. How?

A. I'd say a few things. There are certain lessons — you could read them in any textbook. But because we learned them the hard way, they're just so deeply ingrained. One of them is the importance of focus, the importance of saying no.

There was so much good momentum and we were asking all sorts of good questions and launching new, good ideas. But ultimately, they took away resources and energy from the fundamental core of what we do, which we came back to believing was the most powerful thing. The obsession with truly staying focused on our core mission, I think, came from that.

And also, I'm obsessed with the idea that what goes up comes down, and the need to be very, very careful. And not to get too caught up in all of the good stuff and just to constantly be thinking about whether we are getting out in front of ourselves.

Q. What's your two-minute commencement speech?

A. My two-minute commencement speech would be to tell graduates to take on the world's inequities now, because they're huge and have such important human consequences. But they are solvable. It's just that it takes incredible amounts of time. They're very complex problems. So better to start early so that you have enough time.

And also, I just think there's actually a huge power to inexperience. In the context of deeply entrenched problems that many people have given up on, it helps to not have a traditional framework so you can ask the naïve questions. That can help you set goals that more experienced people wouldn't think are feasible.

You set those big goals, and you wake up a year later after insane amounts of work and realize you actually met them. So I think that that would be my message.

Q. How did you come to learn that?

A. I was so lucky. The way I got to this was that I was in a desperate funk my senior year in college — when I realized somehow for the first time, in October, “I have to figure out what I'm going to do next year.” I just thought, “Well, I'll apply for jobs.” But it hadn't really clicked that I was actually going to have to figure out what I wanted to do with the rest of my life.

And I was just uninspired. I just couldn't find the thing that I really wanted to do. And that led me into a funk for the first time in my life.

And that's what ultimately led me to this. Because I thought, “You know what I'd want to do?” Having never previously even contemplated teaching, I thought, “I'm going to go teach in New York City.” And I started exploring it and realized what a maze it was to try to teach in New York City.

That's what led me to realize: You know what? We should recruit people to teach in low-income communities as aggressively as people were being recruited at the time to work on Wall Street.

I'm glad that I somehow landed on this thing that I became so passionate about. Because I've spent not one bit of energy for 20 years trying to figure out what I really want to be doing.