

Interview with Irina Baranov

Your thoughts on leadership...

In your work, what would you say are the 3 biggest leadership challenges you've encountered?

Just for the sake of honesty I suppose I should say that I've never viewed myself as a leader. Have I gotten people to do things they might not have otherwise tried? Yes. As a 6-year-old, did I really pull off a neighborhood circus, complete with costumed acts, animal tricks and refreshments without my Mom knowing until the entire block showed up in our back yard? Yes. Somehow, I marshalled the forces of the 50 other kids. That makes me an organizer, but I'm not sure it makes me a leader. Have I taken risks when others wouldn't? Certainly. Have I failed? Oh, yes! More than anyone will ever know. I didn't set out to be a leader, though, and even now, it's not on my bucket list.

As for my challenges, they're probably no different than what others face. As a boomer-era girl, it was gender bias. That was no fault of any one person or institution, just the nature of the world at the time. Thank for heaven Girl Scouts. It was the only outlet we had for sports, outdoor adventures, civic engagement and leadership experience. Oops, there's that 'leadership' word again!

The second challenge was finding role models. I wasn't looking for mentors. The word wasn't even in our vocabulary at the time. Luckily, I entered the workforce when senior-level men were beginning to see the consequence of gender bias on their daughters' future. Many reached out and some were outright champions. As a result, I was often the first – and for a long while the only – woman in the Boardroom.

The third challenge is feeling 'time-starved.' There's so much I'd like to do and it seems there is never enough time. This is the edge I'm working now, experimenting with an awareness of a *day's* time, a *week's* time and a *lifetime's* time to feel more time-satisfied and less time-starved.

What is the one characteristic effective leaders like you have in common, and why is it so important?

Constant learning. The people I most respect and find interesting are the ones who will talk about their challenges and how they navigated through obstacles. As an advisor to senior folks in governments and businesses, I've heard their struggles. Although some people might believe the best leaders have all the answers and never break a sweat, I prefer to place my confidence in those who know when they don't know and ask for help. I'm reassured when they listen openly and learn as they go.

What one way can leaders inspire excellence in others?

That depends on what excellence means. If it means perfection, I'm not a fan. Far too often, the perfect is the enemy of the good. In our search for perfection we get in our own way. An example from my government days would be cigarette labels. The public health community's internal wrangling about perfect labels caused years of delay. Lives could have been saved if a less perfect label had been introduced earlier.

My definition of excellence means 'getting better.' My goal for my dissertation was to complete it, but then to look back in three years and be embarrassed by it. For me, pursuit of a doctorate was a commitment to lifelong learning and doing it better next time. I figure that every few years I should learn more, develop new skills and do better as a result. I'm pleased to say I've succeeded at that more than once and I'm now embarrassed by just about everything I've ever done. Give me a 'do over' and it would be so much better now!

What one mistake do you see leaders commonly make?

Playing only to their strengths. A leader's greatest strength *always* becomes their greatest weakness. It's a polarity. Conversely, their greatest weakness *can* become their greatest strength. How's that for a contemplation!

How can leaders make sure that people feel safe enough to tell them the truth?

Aside from the obvious way of not shooting the messenger, they can't. By first grade, we're conditioned to be careful around those we view as more powerful. Add twelve years of basic education, four for college and even more for graduate school and most of us are experts are playing it safe.

But it's like anything else: walk the talk. To do that, you've got to be telling the truth yourself. This is something I've learned only recently from Terry Whitaker, whose authentic branding and truth-telling method has been invaluable in helping me to get to, clarify and even write down what I truthfully offer, especially within my new venture. Her counsel and the exercises she led me through helped structure my new start-up. It also spilled-over to my life. She took me deep into truth-telling and only recently have I realized how valuable that is. Being honest is not optional. Some people have questioned why I did that work early on, saying it was putting the cart before the horse in business planning. Quite the opposite, once I know the truth of the venture, it made all my other decisions lots easier.

But about other people...when it comes to others I draw a hard – but compassionate – line between my behavior and theirs. Whether it's about truth or anything else in work or life, I can only take responsibility for me, not for anyone else. As adults, even when we're not leading, we need to develop the courage to speak up and the talent to do it effectively.

Other than accurate information, what do you think helps leaders make good decisions?

Time to think. It's important to listen to the whole brain, the heart and gut. They all need to weigh-in on decisions and those parts of us work in different ways and at different speeds. That's why things like working out, gardening, long drives and sleep are so important. People need distance between their nose and the grindstone.

What advice would you give to aspiring leaders?

Don't try to be one. Just be who you are. If people start following, then by definition you're a leader and you're still you. If you *try* to be a leader, there's a risk of becoming not-you just to have followers. At the end of the day, and certainly at the end of your career or your life, you'll be much more successful by focusing on who you are. You'll have integrity and will be much more satisfied.

About your work...

Please share how you started your business and how your vision/work has changed through the years.

Remember the circus? What's more chaotic than 50 kids, dogs and an audience? Oh, and a bewildered Mom, who to this day claims the hospital gave her the wrong baby because nothing else could explain me winding up in that family! I've been organizing chaos, solving complex problems and talking my way out of trouble ever since.

My vision hasn't changed, but my work did pivot from time to time. People say call me the 'consultant of last resort.' Somehow, when everything else fails, someone finds me. I never know what problem is going to walk through the door and each one begins in chaos and me not knowing how to solve it. There must be some magic place in my mind though. Within minutes I see the pathways to the answer. Clients execute the plans, and I'm pleased to say the maps I create help them navigate the territory.

My new business – a tech start-up – does something similar. Where once I created those maps for governments and global businesses, now I'll be doing that to help busy business and professional people.

What is one of your favorite change or impact stories?

I met some health advocates who were planning an expensive 5-year clinical trial to prove they were right about a change they wanted in a health care policy. Over a cup of tea, I mapped an alternative on a napkin. They were able to succeed in getting the policy changed in only three months and for only about \$250. Congress passed a new law and President Clinton recognized the effort in a major speech. (Irina, I used Centricity Principle to do this...so it's a segue to the next question....)

Can you please share how you developed the Centricity Principle and Strategic Facilitation programs and what results they have produced for your clients?

I am good at pattern recognition and that's how *Centricity Principle™* emerged. I did not create it. I observed it. I watched people solving problems in big systems like governments, hacking-in to learn how they succeeded. *Centricity Principle™* came from distilling those observations. It's easy to learn, understand and apply and helps people create change when they're not in charge. And let's face it; most of us are not in charge most of the time. I teach it only with 'live ammo.' By that I mean that clients pick a real problem they want to solve. In 90 minutes, they learn the method and develop the plan. It's highly replicable, so in 30 minutes they solve a second problem.

Strategic Facilitation™ formalized what I learned from former President Jimmy Carter during my years as a Reagan Appointee. The presidents worked behind the scenes and I was the health care policy liaison between them. Mr. Carter taught me about how he worked with people to keep them talking until they reached mutually-agreeable outcomes. Naturally, I've had to adapt his method. As he said, "If I ask people to come to a meeting, they come. And if I stay, they stay." I don't have the cachet of a former US President. I learned over time that with the right preparation and by being fully present that I can help people have enjoyable, productive discussions.

What is the most important business decision you made in the past year, and why?

I've been working on public health and health care problems for 30 years with amazing and wonderful clients. It has been more difficult than I'd imagined to leave that behind to go on to something new. I've had a fair amount of grief.

What is one of the ways you set the bar high for yourself?

Everything I do is focused on making life better for people, their families, societies and nations. I see plenty of problems that need to be solved and plenty of people who suffer from disease, lack of education, poverty and loneliness. I also see plenty of talented people who could contribute more to the world if they could be turned loose to do so. That's what sets the bar for me, all those needs and opportunities.

Are you an introvert or an extrovert? How does that affect how you work?

I'm an introvert and thank heaven we're finally being recognized for the advantages we bring to the work world. I need to behave like an extrovert and that's easy because I like people. I do need downtime, though, and find ways to get that, even when I'm traveling and with clients. I can't do late nights. It's not because I need the sleep, but because I need the alone time. I make a joke about it being a 'school night' and head for my room.

Do you have a regular (daily, weekly, monthly) process of assessing your own progress?

I'm working with something called 'the 12-week year' and like it. It means planning on a weekly basis over 12 total weeks to accomplish big goals.

You've accomplished so much. What's next for you?

I will continue to organize chaos and solving complex problems. Instead of focusing only on health care with governments and businesses, I'll be focusing on individual people's lives with *SageMyLife™*.

About you...

What do people value and appreciate about you?

People have been calling me 'wise' since I was five years old.

What are your core values?

Perhaps because I am part Cherokee, the Native American Prayer of Approach resonates with my values. It goes like this: I honor your Gods. I drink at your well. I come to our meeting with an undefended heart. I will not negotiate by withholding. I have no cherished outcome. I am not subject to disappointment.

I think that sums up the respect I have for others not like me, sharing, caring and openness to possibilities beyond what I can imagine.

What supports you in staying true to yourself?

The hell I give myself when I don't.

What helps you personally during times of great challenge?

I won the genetic lottery. I got great health and immense energy. My grandmother raised children alone when my grandfather died from an infectious disease during the depression. She always worked and started her last career at 73. She worked at it for 20 years and never retired. My Mom is 85 and still outruns me. Regardless of how tough it gets, I can work. For several years, I had offices on five continents and visited each one every quarter. I think nothing of 24 hours in flight. Even now, I'm up at 4 AM working with clients in Europe or Asia. When it gets tough, my strong constitution allows me to power through.

And, I speed read. In 4th grade I wanted to study physics, but no one would take me seriously. That's when I realized that no one could stop me from learning whatever I wanted because I could read. In college, too poor to afford both text books and food, I learned to speed read in bookstores and libraries and glean the important elements of what I needed to know so that I didn't need to buy books. When it gets tough, I read to learn what I need to know next.

And, I'm willing to be the dumbest person in the room – in fact, I like it that way. Growing up, I was always the youngest in the crowd, so I got comfortable with everyone knowing more than me. I am a student of anyone with wisdom or experience – even Skya, my Springer Spaniel. When times get tough, I seek out those who can teach me. It's one of the things I look forward to in my tech start-up. I'll be hiring young people who are so savvy about the digital world. I can't wait to learn from them.

How do you rebound from mistakes?

You've got me on that one. I wish I did better.

How do you renew your own inspiration/creativity?

Sleep, good food, exercise and silence.

Do you have any regular practice of reflecting, recharging and renewing? How does it help? Why does it work for you and your style, values and schedule?

Meditation and yoga help me relax, work out the kinks from sitting at a computer and are good training for focusing for long periods. When I facilitate meetings, I sometimes need to focus for 6-8 hours in a stretch. Believe me, that takes practice!

Occasionally, I need serious downtime. I let people know how to reach me in an emergency and then regularly 'go dark,' away from other people and electronic devices. Sometimes I do that at home. When I really need to get away, there's an Inn on the Eastern Shore of Maryland that has no TV, bad cell service and a great chef. It's especially wonderful in the winter.

What one new habit do you want to develop and why?

I need to breathe better when I'm doing emails. I've realized recently that I suffer from 'email apnea' and hold my breath when checking emails. That adds to stress and decreases performance and so I'm working on a habit of relaxing more and breathing better.

What one thing from your life story would people be surprised to know about you?

I have a near-perfect memory for recipes. I read Julia Child's cookbook in one sitting which is not surprising to anyone who knows I was raised on that cuisine because my Mom's people are French Canadian. She taught me well and I mastered it....except for pastry. I couldn't do a great pie crust to save my life.

What are your hobbies?

I like to hike, but I live in the city so it's hard to get to forests. In the meantime, I practice a Zen art form called *Shodo* or *Mu Shin*, which means *non-doing creativity*. It works like this: the Zen Master provides an inspiration in the form of a poem, koan or song and you to paint it with black ink on rice paper. But here's the trick: it's something that can't be painted. An example would be this from Hafiz, "Ever since happiness heard your name, it has been running through the streets trying to find you." Can you paint that? Yes, but only if you get your mind out of the way. People like the art, so I put it to use. I donate prints of my paintings to raise money for children's charities. Several will be selected next week to make a writing journal for women living beyond breast cancer.

If you could travel back or forward in time, which period would you choose to "vacation" in for one week, and why?

I once lived for a week at Leeds Castle in Kent, England. This is where King Henry first met Anne Boleyn. I'd go back for the experience of the fashion. I'd like to see if the fabrics were as opulent as they look in the movies and what it would feel like to wear those amazing outfits, which surprises even me since I could live in jeans. I wouldn't want to stay for more than a week, though. I'm too much a fan of modern plumbing and email.

What's your guilty pleasure?

Action movies. Iron Man, Jason Bourne, and anything with Bruce Willis or Liam Neeson...bring it on!

We all have teams/networks/tribes/communities of people in our lives. When you think of yours, what one "position" (anything from best friend to accountant) is currently open and what would your ideal candidate need to be

I'm in the market for a nanny – for me. I get so involved in what I'm doing sometimes I forget to take care of myself. I'd like someone around to take care of me and to remind me to play more.