

# THE SPIRIT OF HEAD START

Dr. Tim Nolan

**W**hat really makes the work of Head Start special? It's all about SPIRIT!!

Spirit is a passion in our approach to our work. It may appear as...

- A person driven to accomplish important work—operating with deep commitment.
- Enthusiasm and excitement about our work—a person having fun
- A person on a mission—with focus to their efforts.

What the spirit of Head Start looks like depends upon the individual style of *how you show your passion*. There is not a single right way to demonstrate passion, but it is clear that there is a great deal of passion in those of us who have made Head Start an important part of our lives.

## **SPIRIT IMPACTS WHO WORKS HERE**

Spirit attracts people to a particular line of work and this is particularly true for Head Start. What it is that one does as their life's work and where it is that they choose to work is not random. People seek out and join IBM, the Marines, Mary Kay Cosmetics, or Head Start based upon assumptions that they carried into their first interview.

The spirit that makes a Marine a Marine is uniquely different than that which makes a Mary Kay Cosmetics sales person successful enough to drive a pink Cadillac. The spirit that attracts people to Head Start is also unique.

## **SPIRIT IMPACTS WHO STAYS**

Spirit enables an organization to retain key people even when job opportunities elsewhere may be quite attractive. People who remain with Head Start often do so based on the spirit that they feel in and about their work.

## **SPIRIT IMPACTS QUALITY**

Spirit maximizes the quality of work produced by an individual—because the individual is driven by the inner

force of values conviction. Quality in Head Start cannot be driven or commanded. Quality in Head Start, especially exemplary levels of quality, comes from the heart. We do our best work in Head Start when we have a spirit about our work.

## **SPIRIT CREATES ADVOCATES**

Spirit creates advocates and advocacy drives exemplary behavior. We not only "involve" parents, we advocate for parent involvement to everyone who will listen. We not only think that involving the parent in the process of work with their child is important, we live and breathe this importance. Advocacy comes from our spirit—and spirit grows through our desire to be impactful advocates.

## **SPIRIT HAS A VALUES FOUNDATION**

Spirit in the workplace occurs when we can passionately pursue our values as an important part of our work. Workplace values are widely variant. There are workplaces built around values foreign to those of us in Head Start, including such things as "achieving material wealth", "beating the competition", "defeating an enemy", etc. Values more commonly found in Head Start settings include such things as "making a difference in people's lives", "contributing to society", "caring for our customers", "developing and nurturing relationships", etc.

In the same way that the drive to accumulate material wealth shapes the behaviors of people in organizations where this value is strong, the values present within Head Start, drive Head Start forward with spirit. When the work that an individual does matches well with their values, this work becomes their passion. It is from this passion that spirit develops in one's approach to their work.

## **SPIRIT CAN BE SELF-RENEWING**

Spirit is self-renewing when we are aware of our values and see the connections to our work. As we strengthen the connection between our deeply held central beliefs and the work that we're doing, we begin to become a self-reinforcing package.



Our values push us to perform in particular ways. As this performance results in work that is successful, we feel gratified. This gratification of values-driven behaviors becomes a habit that feeds upon itself. The more we act upon our values and receive reinforcement for doing so, the deeper that our spirit in our work becomes.

### **SPIRIT FLOURISHES WHEN NURTURED BY LEADERS**

Spirit can be enhanced dramatically if the pursuit of value-based goals is encouraged and nurtured by organizational leadership. As identified above, we can be values-driven in our work at an individual level. What becomes even more impactful is when the whole organization carries forward a set of explicit, shared values that are modeled and nurtured by organization leaders. When there is strong modeling of values by individual agency leaders, this creates a culture that fosters and supports people acting upon the spirit that they feel in their work. When this occurs, this spirit becomes more and more of a shared experience. It becomes "the way we do things around here". It becomes our culture.

### **SPIRIT IS NOT A FORMULA... IT'S A "QUEST"!**

As we seek to understand the nature of spirit, it is tempting to try to identify the five, six, or seven "key aspects" of what constitutes spirit. As tempting as this may be, every effort to reduce spirit down to some linear framework negates the richness of the concept. We inadvertently send messages that there is a single right way to define the spirit in one's work.

In our work on the spirit of Head Start, it has been very effective to use a self-directed personal growth activity that we've called a Spiritquest™. This Spiritquest is an active individual exploration of values and how these relate to spirit in one's work. The answers that emerge from these Spiritquests indicate that people find their passion in our work in several different ways.

As we've further explored this concept, it is clear that spirit occurs on three different levels: at a personal level; at a work group level; and an organization-wide level.

### **SPIRIT AT A PERSONAL LEVEL**

You cannot understand spirit in the workplace fully until you identify what your spirit is in relationship to your work. What brings you passion in your work? When do you perform at 150% of your capacity? When do you feel particularly gratified in the results of your work? What do you value and how does that translate to your work? In answering these questions, you can help define for yourself where it is you find your source of spirit in your work.

In understanding spirit at a personal level, we begin with creating an environment where you can explore your personal, work-related values. Work-related values are those beliefs that you carry which shape your approach to your work. The process of exploring your workplace values is often survey-initiated. You would complete a values inventory, which helps you to begin to identify your workplace values.

Understanding your values is not easy. Most value surveys contain a listing of lots of positive values, most of which you would be in agreement with. True workplace values, however, are not long lists, but a very small number of key values. Understanding your values involves a process of examining those things that are important to you and pushing yourself to define the most important among them. It is these values, that become the source of your spirit.

An example of a widely held value within Head Start is that of "making a difference in another person's life". This is a value that repeats itself over and over in our work in Head Start agencies across the country. People are attracted to Head Start because they see it as an opportunity to live out their value of making a difference in someone's life.

Whole agencies are designed to enable people to make such a difference. The broad mission of Head Start is clearly in alignment with this value. When this is a value truly held by an individual, the Head Start environment enables it to flourish. Healthy agencies encourage it, nurture it, and build systems to support it. Head Start site teams seek to determine whether you have made a difference and what it is that you did which made a difference. While there are other values that are also intimately played out in the Head Start experience, this value of making a difference is at the core of the spirit of Head Start.



### SPIRIT AT A WORK GROUP LEVEL

The second major level where spirit plays itself out is that of work at the group level. Whether these are work groups, alliances, or true teams, spirit can be the "glue" that holds the relationships together and can shape the behaviors of the participants. Group level spirit comes as a result of individuals living out their personal values in a group context. When people with similar values find each other, they learn to appreciate one another, to learn from each other, and to develop a "team spirit".

Team spirit is achieved through coaching, careful selection of team or work group members, and through developing a "game plan" which fosters the living out of the values that are the foundation for the spirit of our work.

### SPIRIT AT THE ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL

Spirit shows up not only within individuals and work groups, but across whole organizations. Whole Head Start agencies pull together to accomplish those things valued by agency stakeholders. When full enrollment is the target, broad numbers of agency members can drive this agenda forward with spirit. When a key value-based expectation of the agency is the creation and nurturing of Compassionate Partnerships™, this agenda can be driven forward with spirit.

Healthy agencies clarify their mission—the reason they exist—and assure that all stakeholders understand it and live it. They develop a captivating vision—a picture of their ideal future that has meaning to those who must make it become reality. Both the mission and vision of a healthy agency are closely aligned with the values of the stakeholders. The mission and vision are driven forward with spirit because of this strong values alignment.

Spirit at an organization-wide level is particularly evidenced in a "cradle to grave" human resource development plan. From the moment a prospective employee hears of the agency through interviewing, hiring, probation, promotion, development, performance appraisal and termination of the relationship, the spirit of Head Start is shaped through values congruent behaviors on everyone's part. Spirit is grown as clearly as are job skills.

### SPIRIT SHAPES OUR POTENCY AS A MODEL

The spirit of Head Start not only shapes our work as individuals, work groups, and agencies, but tends to serve as a model for others. Head Start was originally conceived to be a model program. The passion with which many of us approach our work makes our behaviors as a model more worthy of attending to. Because we believe in the core of our work, our modeling increases our credibility. As successful values-driven organizations, we are more impactful models.

The business sector has only recently discovered the potency of designing their organizations around a core of spirit. Peter Drucker, widely accepted as the preeminent management authority in the United States, has, in very recent years, discovered the potency of mission driven non-profit organizations as a model that for-profit organizations might emulate.

A healthy Head Start agency is at the forefront of this modeling, since we've lived in this way throughout our history. Our commitment to our values—our spirit—makes us a model that can serve to influence others, both within and outside of the human services arena.

### OUR WORK IS A "CALLING"!

Those of us in Head Start are really very lucky. We have been given the chance to make a profound difference in people's lives. There are few professions that exist that surpass us in this ability. Those that do require such rigorous training that few of us would find ourselves in these professions—physicians, therapists, counselors, religious leaders, etc.

We come into people's lives by their personal invitation. They share with us. They ask questions of us. They ask for help. They listen to us. They value us. They do all of this because we value them, care about them and want to be of assistance to them and their families. This is true whether we are an administrator, a child development specialist, a driver, a family services specialist, or any other member of the Head Start family.

We are able to do our work because a "third party"—the Federal government—has chosen to support us in our work. Most of us could not do this work if someone

*We have been  
given the  
chance to make  
a profound  
difference  
in people's lives.*



would not fund it. Those we serve simply could not buy our services. In fact, even the most prosperous of our citizens would be hard-put to purchase a Head Start experience. Almost no where in America could you find the depth and breadth of services offered by Head Start, even if you had the money to spend to buy these services.

We often feel “down” about our work because money is tight, someone criticizes us, or the work itself seems overwhelming. This is natural. It is a human response to the real pressures of our work. But... step back for a moment. Would you really rather be anywhere else? Many of us are exactly where we want to be... exactly where we are meant to be!

Many of us came into this work to make a difference in the world. We found spirit in our work because it fit closely with our values. Head Start is designed to be a perfect match with what we believe to be of importance in our world—helping people be the best that they can be. We catch potential problems early. We help both young children and the adults in their life find the keys to their success. The fact that we found Head Start—or that it found us—is not random. We are meant to be here.

Some of us came to Head Start simply because it was a job. For those who continue to see Head Start only as a job, everything is a little harder. The hours go more slowly. That sick child seems a bit disgusting.

Many people who don't find a “values match” within Head Start tend to spend a limited time with the program. Others show up day after day in body but don't develop spirit. Since our work is so much tied to spirit, they tend not to be very successful in their careers at Head Start.

Healthy Head Start agencies seek to hire people for whom the work itself really matters. They work to screen out those that are only looking for a paycheck (ours are frequently low enough that these folks would likely become dissatisfied and leave anyway—probably about a week before a Federal team visit!). Healthy Head Start agencies emphasize the spirit important to our work in their mission statement, their vision of their ideal future, and most importantly, in their day to day actions.

Healthy Head Start agencies take folks who come only for a paycheck and convert some of them to our “calling”. They help them see the importance of their work. They help them find spirit. They help folks see successes and to celebrate them. They help them form the Compassionate Partnerships™ which are the key to success in our work.

## NURTURE YOUR SPIRIT

Our work is a “calling”—a profession with very special meaning and importance. Enjoy your special status. Reinforce one another regarding the impact and importance of our work. Approach your day with excitement and pride. Develop your own spirit in your work.

You are in the place you're meant to be. You are doing the most important thing that you could be doing—making a positive difference in the lives of others.

You are shaping the future—one child and one family at a time. And you're doing it with Spirit! Wow!

## WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?

If you care about the spirit of Head Start...

1. Learn about, clarify and nurture your own spirit in your work.
2. Identify ways that you can apply your spirit to your work. Design your work to align with your spirit.
3. Encourage your colleagues to nurture their spirit—and to use it to drive their efforts.
4. Tie spirit closely to your efforts to create Compassionate Partnerships™—they are what makes Head Start really work!
5. If you have broad-based agency responsibilities, look for ways to foster spirit in agency human resource development, program design—in all that you do.

*For products and services designed to foster spirit in your work, contact:*

### The Center for Leadership Excellence

N4 W22000 Bluemound Rd.

Waukesha, WI 53186

[www.LeadExcellence.com](http://www.LeadExcellence.com)

Phone: (262) 548-8080 FAX: (262) 548-8084

E-Mail: [TimFuture@aol.com](mailto:TimFuture@aol.com)