

Do You Have the Gumption to Succeed? By Kathy Kolbe

If I ever start a button company, the first three buttons I'll mass produce will say:

- I'm not stubborn, I've got gumption!
- I'm not a troublemaker, I dare to stick my neck out.
- Gumption is It!

I love the word gumption. It not only has a rousing sound, it describes such an admirable approach. Have you ever failed to stop and admire an extraordinary show of gumption, whether it is a cross-country run by a young man with only one leg or the mental quest of a Picabo Street? Martin Luther King had gumption. So does Rush Limbaugh. Amelia Earhart had gumption. So does Betty Friedan. In this country's modern history, four events stand out for their show of good-'ol' American gumption: Rebuilding the naval fleet after Pearl Harbor, putting astronauts on the moon, the civil rights movement, and the technological-information revolution that has begun. But as much as we admire grand demonstrations of gumption, we too often have a hard time with it when it faces us off in the office or with our spouse or with our children. That's because gumption can easily be confused with stubbornness. How many times have you heard - or said - "You drive me nuts by insisting on doing things your own way." What you're actually hearing - or saying - is this: "You drive me nuts because you're secure enough to use your gumption." People who insist on acting a certain way have a good reason for that behavior. They're trusting their gut instincts.

I've spent more than 20 years studying and researching human instinct. I've developed an instrument that measures individual instinct - your "mental fingerprint" - and tested it in more than 400,000 case studies around the world. I've found that how we act can be categorized by four approaches. I call them the "Striving Instincts." If your natural inclination to a problem is to study all the available data and research the historical precedence, you're insistent in what I call Fact Finder. If your natural inclination is to develop systems and procedures that will assure the smooth operation of your company, I call that instinct Follow Thru. If your natural inclination is to experiment, to stick your neck out, I call that instinct Quick Start. If your natural inclination is to build a model, or focus on the quality control of the product, I call that instinct Implementor.

Each of us is born with talents in all four instincts, but in different degrees. We can be insistent in a particular instinct, or resistant, or accommodating. I call that range of talents your MO - modus operandi. Let me give you an example: I'm most insistent in Quick Start, which explains why I've started two separate businesses and launched the study of instincts. But I also have a strong insistence in Follow Thru, meaning it drives me crazy when projects don't come to closure. I need to see that all systems are in place and the business plan is being followed and producing the desired results. When it doesn't, my Quick Start kicks in and I change the business plan. You also need to know that I'm resistant in Fact Finder, which is why it has been so painful for me to write two major books on instincts. I've wanted to write the books, I knew they were needed, but the actual process of writing - and the detailed research needed to show the validation of my theories - aren't part of my natural nature. I'm also accommodating in Implementor: I'm not averse to fiddling with a three-dimensional model or using a "hands-on" approach. My business partner and husband is insistent in Fact Finder and resistant in Follow Thru. If we didn't know our instinctive makeup, I'd drive him crazy in not seeing any need to research or justify; he'd drive me crazy in ignoring my need for systems and patterns. But I know enough about instincts to know that when he insists on documented evidence, he's not trying to be stubborn. He's just showing the gumption of following his Fact Finder instincts. Nor am I being stubborn when my Follow Thru creates yet another management system that he will all but ignore. Instead of fighting each other, we both recognize the instinctive strengths we bring to our business. And between us, we've

pretty well got it covered.

I wish everyone could have that kind of insight. It would make the workplace so much more productive, to say nothing of pleasant. Winifred, a supervisor who considers herself a caring person, sat in a staff meeting and passed judgment on Jeff, a person highly insistent in Quick Start. She labeled him an "incorrigible scatterbrain." Even though she said this in a teasing tone, her remark wounded Jeff. Had she poked fun at his resistance to Follow Thru order - the very instinct in which Winifred is insistent - they might have had a mutual laugh over his foible of not finishing everything he started. Jeff may even have told some stories about himself. But Winifred had seriously miscalculated when she made fun of his Quick Start talents: she'd hurt Jeff to the core. Winifred later told me she just couldn't stand the way Jeff forced their team into constant turmoil. "It's as if he isn't happy if he's not disrupting the systems that are in place," she complained. How did Jeff react? He considered quitting, voicing a sentiment often heard in the workplace: "I've given this place my all, but rather than thank me for sticking my neck out to make improvements, I'm considered a troublemaker." For his part, Jeff resented Winifred's need to protect the status quo, to demand precise systems and procedures. He considered her nit-picky. Both Winifred and Jeff were acting with gumption, but it had become a source of conflict, not one of contribution.

As a consultant to the organization, I was determined to change that. Knowing Jeff was serious about leaving his job, I decided it was worth the risk to have him put on a special assignment. For sixty days, he did not attend group meetings or problem-solving sessions. At first, Winifred was glad Jeff wasn't around. "It's a relief to have him out of my hair," she said. Within six weeks, however, she was asking when the experiment would end. Jeff's absence had made his contribution clear to her. She missed not having anyone to question her desire for consensus or to suggest alternatives she had overlooked. In other words, there was no combative energy bringing her mind into sharper focus. I made her wait it out. Two months with no sparring partner also provided a good lesson for Jeff. "Much as she bugs me, I think she sometimes brings out the best in me," he said.

Gumption can be a double-edged sword. It can be the source of staff conflict, but it also can drive progress to new heights. Ed Hurd, head of one of Honeywell's rapidly expanding Global businesses, understands the value of gumption. Insistent in Quick Start, he describes himself by saying, "Gumption is I!" "You have to have the guts to go out on a limb and the initiative to make things happen," he says. "I'm relentless when I get a cause, pushing until I think everyone understands the concept. Finding that unique common thread is my talent. I develop a concept in my mind and take it to a bunch of people to see if it sells. If I get people excited, it's a go. The details don't matter to me." Ed Hurd is a business leader who has the gumption to trust his gut instincts.

So does Ruben - although it took a painful experience to bring the point home. Ruben didn't know his instinctive makeup when he made lots of promises to get a big promotion he wanted so badly. So he promised to become less rigid and ease up on his typical concerns for systematizing everything around him. He promised to become more "progressive" and open to change. "I read books on how to become more risk-oriented. I went to seminars. I listened to motivational tapes," he recalled. "I thought I had the intellect and the integrity that would allow me to do things any way I'd agreed they had to be done. I was dead wrong. So wrong, it almost cost me my marriage and my health."

By the time Ruben took the Kolbe Index, he knew things were very wrong. And seeing how his natural instincts clashed with promises he made to get the promotion, showed why it would never work. "What I couldn't do naturally I tried to do by working harder. In hindsight, I see that I caved in completely. I told them, 'If that's what you want, you've got it,' as if I had it to give." I wish I could report Ruben's bosses understood his need to follow his strong Follow Thru instincts, to listen to his resistant Quick Start instincts. They didn't. He lost his job, but saved his marriage, his self respect, and his integrity. And he was not discouraged. "I felt as if the weight of the world had

been removed from my shoulders," he said. "I stood up for everything about me that really matters - finally, I didn't care if I never earned as much money. I earned the admiration of my wife and kids and the friends who really care about me. The job I have now is a breeze because I took one where my Follow Thru is appreciated. My work is being recognized, so I'll move up. I feel good about myself again."

John James feels good about himself, too, even though he did what is considered unthinkable in the business world - he gave up a big promotion. James is a former New York Yankee pitcher who was so successful managing a Scottsdale, AZ, shopping mall that he was moved into an executive position overseeing all the other managers in the company. He was miserable. By the time his company hired me to work with its employees, James dreaded going into the office every day. I asked James to complete two indexes. One measured his own instinctive makeup. The other was his analysis of what his new job demanded.

There couldn't have been a worse mismatch.

While James is insistent in Quick Start, he resists acting in any of the three other striving instincts. His MO is clear. He's a new idea guy who leaves details and operating systems to others. Yet his new job allowed no Quick Start innovation and demanded action in the other three instincts. "I often think of that day when you told me I was in the wrong job," he says, sounding a lot like Ruben. "I felt the weight of the world lifted off my back." While it wasn't easy for James to turn away from all the perks of senior management, he followed his instincts back to his original job, which allowed him to use the full range of his natural abilities. "This is much more fulfilling than anything I've ever done," he says of managing the mall he has made into one of the busiest in America. "Now I can do my own thing and surround myself with people who provide other talents. I can hardly wait to get to work each day. The comments I get from friends and associates is, 'I thought you were crazy when you changed jobs, but you sure made the right decision.'" Gumption is your ultimate defense against anything that takes you out of your instinctive stride. By caring too much or rationalizing solutions, you can pull yourself off course, but acting with gumption will get you back on track. Asserting your instinctive self takes personal fortitude and great confidence in your ability to create solutions. It's well-placed confidence. If you have the gumption to use it, you have the instinctive powers to succeed.