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Your Start-Up Life: Find Leaders Better Than You

Your Start-Up Life is a business advice column featuring conversations with successful entrepreneurs, creative thinkers and innovative leaders. Send your questions about work, life and play to rana@creativeclass.com

A modern day super-activist, [Jamie Drummond](#)'s adversaries are global poverty, hunger, climate change, AIDS and other infectious diseases. Drummond is the Executive Director and co-founder of [One](#), an organization whose mission is literally to help save millions of lives.

Backed by a movement of more than three million members and a board of directors that includes such high-visibility leaders as Condoleeza Rice and Larry Summers, Drummond and his co-founders Bobby Shriver and the rock star Bono have persuaded governments to support programs and policies that are making a measurable difference in the lives of millions.

Thanks to their efforts and in partnership with other activist groups, 6.6 million Africans now have access to life-saving HIV medication. Malaria deaths have been nearly cut in half and 46 million more children are going to school. More than 300,000 jobs have been created in Africa and Haiti has received more than \$450 million in hurricane debt relief.

Not content to sit in an ivory tower, Drummond has traveled widely in his campaigning. At the Global TED series last summer he [challenged](#) citizens to use crowd sourcing to help build on successes and use the latest technologies to collectively design a new set of global goals to beat extreme poverty, hunger and disease. "Our world leaders need our help," he declared. "They need the cavalry, and the cavalry's not going to come from Mars; it's got to come from us."



Photo caption: Drummond in Tanzania

Q. How do you find your passion?

A. A mix of Catholic guilt; anger about British imperial policies causing famine in Ireland (some Irish ancestry mixed with the British); the amazing experience of working in a Gandhian social justice activist ashram as young man; and the optimism of coming of age at a time when the Berlin Wall fell, Mandela was released and the Cold War came to an end. Having seen how campaigning has moved issues from the margins to the mainstream (such as with African debt, AIDS, Malaria) and have such huge positive lifesaving impacts, how could I not be passionate about the need for more such efforts?

Q. What advice would you give to those who want trade their high paying job for something with purpose and meaning?

A. Firstly, please don't automatically leave the high-paying job -- consider instead what more you could do from within that job to make a difference. For example nudging your local politician to improve policies -- if you have local political influence that might be the most significant thing you ever do.

Secondly, there's usually a natural evolution from that job into something which is a social enterprise which uses those same skills in other ways. Lawyers, bankers, accountants, journalists, politicians -- these are often considered the least liked professions, but those sorts of skills are often exactly what is needed in the campaigning and non-profit sector. There are many options for those with such skills. Please don't leave behind your hard-headedness when you get into the non-profit world. Look at people like Ray Chambers as an example, he has helped transform the

issue of fighting malaria using his business experience.

If I have one plea, it is for people with resources and skills to get involved in advocacy and campaigning for change, not just the conventional charity sector.

Q. How do you balance a local vs. global perspective?

A. Most people think mainly about local so it's ok for some people to think mainly from a global perspective -- it balances things out. But the global needs to be rooted in local realities or it can drift off into a global abstraction. However great a lifesaving intervention is in a laboratory or in "ideal conditions" in controlled experiments, if it doesn't work in the real world -- and that means in local communities, with local politics and cultural norms -- well, it ain't gonna fly. Antiretroviral drugs, insecticide treated bednets, and certain vaccines have each been carefully piloted in various local settings then carefully scaled-up and have gone onto save millions of lives. But there are still many local places these globally effective interventions haven't reached.

Q. How important is it to find the right partners for a project or initiative?

A. The trick is to find individuals within effective institutions who want to get real practical things done, and don't just want to sit around talking about them. For some reason the world of [NGOs](#) has some excellent talkers, but it also has some excellent do-ers. There are a mix of both in every organisation. Find the do-ers and build coalitions of them from within a range of different organisations, which each inhabit different parts of the overall ecosystem within which your campaign exists. This network of doers can get amazing things done.

Q. How do you tackle challenges? How do you deal with failure?

A. Maybe the biggest problem in development policy, and especially in the use of aid, is the fear of failure. It's similar across the public sector. Any private sector investor or entrepreneur will tell you proudly of things they've tried that didn't work, because it tells a story of what they learned and how that informed what then did work. But in development, because of the politics of having to pretend that all aid has to be spent perfectly all the time, there is a fear of being honest about failure. If a political or development expert admits failure, political opponents of aid will use that as ammunition to fight against aid overall. This scares off transparency, which in turn scares off honesty about what doesn't work.

This is a big systemic problem. A more honest debate would be great, because it would improve the efficiency of aid and other development policies.

One other fascinating failure we're considering at the moment is why it is that so few people know about the huge successes of recent years -- such as the near halving of deaths from malaria, the increase by 8 million globally of the number of people receiving life-preserving HIV treatment, the saving of 5.4 million lives through vaccines... these stunning successes are completely unknown. In fact many people still maintain that aid is ineffective. Some is effective, some isn't. Ideas on how to help promote our successes are very welcome. I wonder sometimes if the lack of transparency around failures in aid has fed a certain skepticism about successes.

Q. How do you get momentum and support behind a great idea?

A. I call it "the 5 Ps." These have worked for us on things like campaigning for debt cancellation, for investing more in the fights against AIDS and malaria and for lifesaving-vaccines. We are employing them now in efforts like promoting transparency and fighting corruption in the global oil and gas sector.

Firstly, make sure it's based in hard-headed data, that it is empirically sound. That's the first P of good evidence-based **Policy**.

Secondly, try and get the **Politics** right -- make sure you've gamed who the political opposition to your idea might be, and try to win them over before they've developed their oppositional tendencies. Maybe they could be an early adopter not an early opposer.

Thirdly, try making it **Pop** -- involving popular culture often helps. This doesn't just mean celebrities, though in many cases they can help popularize an initially marginal idea. They certainly helped popularize debt cancellation, for example, in the Drop the Debt campaign. But this could also refer to intelligent marketing through social media or to good relations with key broadsheet media.

Fourthly -- it's OK to be **Pragmatic**. Especially in the early days of getting momentum for your issue, except some incremental wins on wedge or pilot issues within the overall thing you're pushing for. They will show hard headed politicians and commentators that you're prepared to engage with the real world of policy-making, getting things done. Many worthy causes are wary of rolling-up their sleeves and actually engaging with the tough stuff of policy making, as it's easier to just critique the broken system and not really engage with it to try and change things. In my view, a failure to engage with policy making is laziness masquerading as political correctness. If you really cared about something, you would engage to get it done.

Fifthly -- don't lose touch with the **Prophetic**. This sounds a bit weird to many, but what I mean is don't forget the visionary big picture, the march for justice and equality which drives campaigns forward, that deep well you draw from. It must underlie the overall effort and you must check-in with its underlying imperative to ensure that your compromises aren't too compromising, that you aren't being too pragmatic.

At the end of the day, the 5 Ps are a balancing act, rules of thumb rather than strict doctrine, but I found them helpful.

Q. Does your leadership style change when working in other countries? If so, how?

A. We have many amazing leaders across our organization in the different offices and with our partners, and they do the leading, I don't have to. Finding other leaders who are better than you is the key.

Q. How important is technology to furthering a mission?

A. Massive. I'm a techno-optimist, and I wasn't always (Gandhianism has some Luddism built in) but when you've seen so many technologies come along and save so many lives, how could you not be? But technology doesn't mean we can avoid having to work with real people, at scale, in all our wonderful diversity and complexity. Take social media. On the one hand what a fabulous way to engage more people and build globally connected constituencies for change. But on the other, disintermediation is breaking us down more than ever before into sub-niches and cliques of interest that can make building big global constituencies for change much harder.

Q. Do you alter goals as you move through execution stage?

A. Of course -- so long as you're aware of why you're doing it, and are clear about who is being held accountable for any cock-ups, or whether the change is just because of a change in the set of facts around you that are beyond your control.

Q. How do you set a vision for the future?

A. There's already a lot of vision out there, with lots of people invested in their various visions. The key is to find the best of it and help it build towards things which are both visionary and prophetic, but which notch up serious, incremental, measurable wins along the way to buy people into the idea that this progress is doable as well as visionary and important. It is absolutely possible for the human race to quite efficiently and significantly improve planetary peace and prosperity in the twenty-first century. It has never been more possible for people to help make the world a better place for themselves, their family and others on the other side of the planet. But ironically people have rarely felt less engaged and less optimistic (at least in the OECD-defined developed world) about the possibility of progress. This disconnect can yet be turned into an historic opportunity.

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