



**BOLD LEADERS**

# Use It or Lose It

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by Michael Donahue

## **The Idea of Elemental Human Resources**

“We become adapted to the lack of use of our basic human resources and they respond by becoming unfamiliar to us.”

It was 1998 and I was pointing to the quote above, scrawled on a sheet of flipchart paper resting on a tripod, in a dark classroom in Denver’s East High School. Most of the assembled teens were students of color. There were more boys than girls and they were part way through their freshman year of high school. All had been identified by the school administration as “likely to drop out of school.” Some of them had parents seated at the back of the room.

Off to the side, several volunteers sat at the ready, armed with pens and stacks of paperwork in case the youth decided they wanted to enroll in the voluntary program. I had recently designed this enrollment workshop for a local Denver nonprofit, Colorado Youth At Risk. Today, for the first time, I was using the Alexis Carrel quote I had written on that flipchart paper.

After pointing to the quote, I asked for a volunteer to read it. No one responded, so I read the quote aloud several times. At this point, most of the teens were looking up at the paper.

Next, I asked this question: “In your own words, tell us what you think this guy was trying to tell us.”

At the back of the room sat a young man. Actually more like an older boy, but behind his eyes, when he let you see them, was deep pain. In his gaze I saw dullness, sadness, and most of all, anger. He looked up and answered my question in a surprisingly confident voice:

“Use it or lose it.”

## Refining the Conversation and Concept

Since that day long ago, we have started every program in this manner. Thousands of young people and adults, from 18 countries on four continents have been exposed to that quote, and have been asked to put it in their own words. “Use it or lose it” remains one of the more succinct and on target answers I have heard. Yet the ongoing conversation -- and what we have uncovered with it -- has been profound. As Carrel warned, and as this young man quickly saw, we get used to not using our basic human resources, and they (the resources) then become less familiar to us. This quickly led us to confront a key question: What *are* basic human resources?

We first focused on three underlying premises of the quote:

1. These are *human* resources, meaning they are aspects of a person – not physical resources such as food, the environment or water.
2. Carrel’s use of the word “we” means all humans – everyone on the planet and all those dead and buried. So whatever the resources are, they have to be common to everyone.
3. If they are ‘basic’, then they are fundamental to us, even to the point of being present at our birth.

Building on these premises, we began developing a list of basic human resources; familiar qualities that we were quick to ascribe to being fundamental to and present in all human beings. Among the resources we identified were:

- Creativity
- Communication
- Imagination
- Interaction
- Compassion
- Curiosity
- Observation

These seemed to be a good starting point in light of Carrel’s quote. Yet people identified other possible resources that gave us pause, including:

- Movement
- Touch
- Voice
- Tears
- Instincts
- Fear
- Emotions

These could certainly fit within the first three “human”, “we” and “basic” parameters as well. When we began to posit their value as resources, participants in our programs would invariably find a strong connection to one or more.

It would be years later, after hundreds of similar conversations with young people and adults around the world, that core members of the BoldLeaders team began to think that there was likely a deeper implication to Carrel's warning. We asked ourselves: "Is something like 'creativity' inherent in a child? Does it come naturally, as part of the package at birth? Even if the answer is 'yes' or 'maybe,' is there something underneath driving that creativity?" We suspected so, and began to observe, play, and research. It eventually caused us to refine one parameter and add a fourth to the framework:

1. If they are 'basic', then they are fundamental to us *at birth and potentially even in the womb*.
2. The list is *finite* – there are a limited number of resources we come into the world with, and it is possible to identify them all.

These refinements pushed the conversation even farther forward, and grew into something we now consider to be truly game changing: The Elementals.

### **Educational Reform and BoldLeaders**

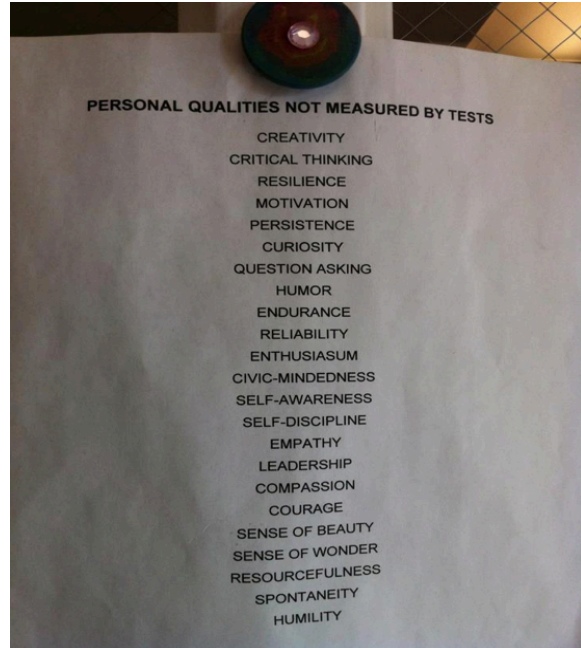
Though the BoldLeaders program appears to have a focus on "leadership", we have always fundamentally presented ourselves as an educational organization, with a focus on a particular path of development. Philosophically, we have always asserted that there are two paths of development. One we refer to as *knowledge*, (divided into informational and transformative knowledge), and the other is the developmental path that is the self-aware and reflective nature of our being human. It is a part of the human condition that could be described as the unalterable part of humanity that is inherent and innate to human beings and not dependent on factors such as gender, race, culture, or class. This is the developmental path we have called *Being*. We often refer to the knowledge path as having an origin in the external (i.e. the knowledge comes to you from somewhere), and the being path becomes one of continuous exploration of the internal life and the impact it has on the external. Using these two paths as a lens, it is easy to see that the common avenue of our current education systems is knowledge based, focused and delivered as such in an informational way.

Our commitment to what we call the "rebalancing of knowledge and being" causes us to constantly monitor the processes of education we observe both in the U.S.A. and abroad. Because of this focus, we have noticed a key disconnect in the educational world between neuroscience research and the concepts of social-emotional learning, non-academic, 21st century learning (one may easily view our notion of "being" from those labels yet we urge the reader to consider there is a deeper consideration as well as potential impact). Educational testing and accountability laws, developed after the advent of No Child Left Behind, seemed to fuel the debate for more so-called social emotional learning. At the same time, others advocated for more focus on concrete knowledge. We have continued observing and developing our methods as mobile technology has advanced (or caused mischief, depending on perspective) from nearly non-existent to omnipresent. We've seen successive waves of the latest and greatest education fads come and go. First there was the Rigor, Relationship and aRithmetic movement, then "service learning, civic engagement and social entrepreneurship" programs. Diversity conversations shifted to

inclusion. Anti-bully campaigns became “restorative justice,” and morphed into compassion programs. Now there is a focus on “empathy”, movement and play schools while mandated testing directs much of what a teacher must do in the classroom.

In the midst of these ebbs and flows, several years ago an educator we know posted the following photograph on her Facebook timeline in protest of testing.

Most of those words had, up to that point, been considered one of the basic human resources we listed in the early days of that conversation, while others such as self-awareness, self-agency and leadership have always been the major focus of our efforts at BoldLeaders.



Yet that list of words stopped us in our tracks and forced us to re-examine our fundamental activities. Those words in various combinations were what we heard most from people when asked what they wanted for themselves as a person, as a student, even as future employees. Did that list constitute what it is to be human? Why had we heard most of these, yet there were several others not on the list, which we also considered among the basic human resources: voice, touch, movement, mimicry, observation, participation, even tears and laughter? Where did those come into play?

Most importantly perhaps, we wondered why our participants consistently went out from our programs intending to practice reclaiming a basic human resource or two (tears and observation, for example) and return to us sharing experiences of self-advocacy, humility or compassion? Could it be that there was an underlying source of these much sought-after human qualities, dispositions and competencies?

We began to consider that our workshop around the Carrel quote was potentially identifying the wellspring of essential human qualities. In short, we found ourselves creating a framework to develop these qualities at the source! We soon found ourselves considering *the doing of being*.

### The Source

We had started an ongoing dialogue and debate among ourselves about the third premise: just what did come into the world with us at birth? What are the attributes that comprise the basic human resources? We became more rigorous in our thinking and talking about this. As a result the list of basic human resources grew ever shorter. Imagination, creativity, curiosity, love - all commonly listed before - were now falling away. Those that remained were truly more basic and fundamental to all human beings.

Yet even as some words were falling off our list, we understood many of these attributes were of great importance to people who were advocating for change in the world of education. Educators consistently call for **more** focus on attributes like empathy, compassion, grit, curiosity, character, critical thinking, civic engagement, service, mind-body connections, as well as employment-related skills like collaboration and teamwork.

The crux, however, is that there is not a common notion of how to develop these attributes in young people. Many people are turning to neuroscience as an underpinning. Others are designing environments that foster such qualities externally, or declaring that they can specifically *teach* such qualities.

So on the one hand, we were listening to the conversations in education that described a need to develop competencies: what we call *being qualities* of compassion, curiosity, imagination, etc., without knowing what the source of those qualities were. On the other hand *we were identifying basic human resources that were somehow different from but connected to these 'being' qualities.*

In our work we witnessed people reclaiming those basic human resources they were unfamiliar with, and saw fantastic results: high levels of participation, personal interest, investment, fast growth, and what can only be described as human *being* development - the manifestations of the personal qualities listed in that photo above.

Now we began noticing what worked when we asked people to practice basic human resources they had adapted to not using. We asked them to self-identify a resource, to practice using it, and to report back. At first we asked them to simply practice one, falsely assuming one at a time was best and would help them focus.

Then, inspired by the idea that objects are a combination of things, and it is the changing of combinations that alters or even creates objects, we began to ask people to act on selected resources (plural) they had adapted to not using. When people started looking at reclaiming more than one basic human resource, something unexpected began to happen. Yes, they readapted to or reclaimed several basic human resources. But when they shared the result of that experience they described it as something different.

For example, a young woman who worked on reclaiming “touch and voice”, shared in a note two weeks later: “Thanks for showing me that I can still experience love with my mom and have compassion.” When asked how she got to that result, she said: “I practiced becoming more familiar with touch and voice.”

We began to discuss the possibility that what drove the development of those personal (‘being’) qualities sought after by educators was actually the practice – or doing – of other and more elemental human resources. One can imagine that the young woman mentioned above, through some combination of activities where she used her voice and the human sense of touch with her mother, experienced herself as loving and compassionate. She developed those qualities in herself by becoming more familiar with

and actually practicing the use of what we now call Elemental Basic Human Resources, or simply - The Elementals.

We observed people practicing the Elementals, which led them to label their internal state and external demonstrations as distinct from one another – they were *doing* specific actions that could be defined and quantified, while using more subjective terms to describe the *being* it caused - the results. We began labeling these results, experiences or personal qualities as Compound Basic Human Resources. *The elementals, in combination and practice, create the compounds.*

We now believe we are getting to the source. In essence, what we are proposing is that when one is exposed to a list of elemental human resources, which are then reclaimed or reused, compound human resources result. In other words, *effective being requires practicing the elementals in combinations.*

### **The Perceived Value**

We would love to have readers of this piece share what value they see in this. Here are some valuable things we have seen.

- Even the act of noticing a lack of familiarity with an elemental is profound. We have the experience of seeing people name a gap they have known exists within them but have not been able to label. A feeling of relief and intense interest quickly emerges as the identification of an elemental basic human resource makes immediate personal sense.
- The act of noticing allows for a shift in perspective, and that shift can be transformative actions as well as thoughts. Identifying and choosing to become more familiar with a basic human resource takes self-agency. Giving people an experience, within a relatively short amount of time, to identify and choose to go to work on reclaiming a personal gap in their 'self' is not an everyday experience. The fact that it comes by choice rather than by coercion, or statement of fact from someone 'outside' is even more valuable and unusual.
- The act of simply practicing the elementals will lead to positive habits intellectually as well as socially.
- For educators, exposure to the Elemental Human Resources and the simple understanding this exposure provides, ("we all share these resources"), allows us to notice gaps within ourselves. It also generates conversations among educators that are more precise and on point. An educator can enter a classroom practicing his or her own Elementals. He can now observe his students in a less abstract way than through the lens of character traits. The list of character traits seems to shift with social norms, cultural practices and the easy wisdom of the latest bestsellers. The Elemental Basic Human Resources are not similarly subject to the latest trends
- We envision educators being able to not only relate more deeply with students, but also with each other and the entire community of the school, shifting entire cultures, which is centerpiece to any reform.

- Educators will be able to design imaginative curriculum, referencing the elementals as they consider what will best serve their students.
- Students exposed to the practice of elementals will understand the nature and purpose of their education, becoming interactive partners, as well as providing a viable framework to overcome any real and perceived limitations and circumstances that have been considered in the past.
- We find that “learning styles” are best served by the presentation, uncovering and practice of these elementals.
- Finally, at a philosophical level, we assert that the practice of the Elementals, has us less focused on *self aware* techniques, and more focused on a return to a state of *being aware*. *A human state we believe as valuable as intellectual knowledge and self awareness*

The list of Elementals *may* be finite, and shared by us all, but the combinations are individual and limitless. Elementals are about practice. Practice has us be aware. Awareness creates opportunities. In creating opportunities for ourselves, what naturally occurs is the possibility of opportunities for others.