

Commentary **Mark Richardson**

Entrepreneurial Excellence

Among many exceptional remodeling company owners, what makes one business leader stand out?

It's easy to use the words "leadership" and "success" without thinking too much about them. When we speak or hear these words, we have a clear sense of what they mean. And, like the concept of "quality," given examples of specific people or organizations, we can usually identify those who fit these terms and those who don't.

When it comes to leadership and success, we are all pretty sure we know them when we see them.

That's not the same, however, as being able to identify the criteria that qualify an individual as a leader, or a business as a success. It's a critical difference because until we know the ingredients of leadership and success, we are unable to improve and move in that direction ourselves.



This past year, as a judge for the Fred Case Remodeling Entrepreneur of the Year Award, I have had the good fortune to be able to reflect on precisely what are the criteria for leadership and success. [Editor's note: John Abrams, of South Mountain Co., was honored as the first winner of this award at the Remodeling Show, and was profiled in our October 2007 cover story.]

Before I and my fellow judges could identify appropriate candidates, we had to determine the characteristics that define not just what it means to be an entrepreneur in our industry, but what is required to single out one individual who everyone would agree has achieved "success."

THREE KEYS

We considered many of the traditional measures of success, such as company size and longevity. But an individual can run a big company that does not otherwise distinguish itself. And while longevity is important, many entrepreneurs do their most impressive work when they are just starting up.

After months of discussion, we determined that of all the varied characteristics that go into the mix, three primary

criteria stand out when judging entrepreneurship in today's business environment.

Business acumen. An entrepreneur takes business fantasies and brings them to life. That requires a keen understanding of the fundamental economics involved, and an appreciation for the principles of marketing and sales. But it also demands the ability to identify and continually motivate top-performing individuals to build and inspire a team.

These qualities may appear in varying measure in different individuals, but some combination of all of them must be present to enable an entrepreneur not only to hatch an idea, but to nurture it so that it takes on its own life.

Community service. Today's entrepreneurs operate not just within the four walls of their business, but also in the public arena of their community and the world around it. They give back through active participation in causes and activities about which they are passionate and that they believe will make the world a better place.

The best among them make this contribution without calling undue attention to themselves.

Innovation. Entrepreneurs are creative thinkers. They conjure up new products, novel methods, and original approaches to personal and business challenges. Sometimes they are ahead of the curve and must persist until the market catches up. In other cases, they may embrace a real problem, such as sustainable remodeling, and come up with unique ways to deliver solutions.

Although it may be true that "there is nothing new under the sun," an entrepreneur looks for ways to take an idea to a new level.

MEASURING UP

How would you and your company score when measured against these criteria? What would it take to improve your score? As part of an entrepreneurial enterprise, you are in a unique position to evaluate where to concentrate the most effort to influence the outcome. With a well-executed good idea and a little luck, you can measure up to these standards of success. —Mark Richardson is president of Case Design/Remodeling and Case Handyman Services, in Bethesda, Md. In 2006, Ernst & Young named him a Maryland Entrepreneur of the Year.