

W. Douglas Wendt

Leveraging the Power of Difference

The seeds of entrepreneurship are often planted in unexpected ways. For Doug Wendt, the core of his entrepreneurial vision is rooted in three experiences that formed and shaped his worldview. One was his father's own passion for driving change. Another was Doug's truly unique educational journey. And the third was the emergence of new technologies that had a life-changing impact.

Through the 1960s and 70s, American cities were falling apart at the seams. It was a period of decay marked by rampant inflation, oil embargoes, and urban collapse, dwarfing the turmoil of the 2008 financial crisis and its aftermath. Revitalization was a pipe dream that would take years of carefully-planned and boldly-executed initiatives for cities across the nation to realize.

Thankfully, Doug's father was up to the task. Having built a career that included roles as the controller for the Rouse Company and later as an executive in the real estate investment divisions of both Prudential and the Travelers Insurance Company, Doug's father was at the forefront of projects that led to the revitalization of the American city.

From the Inner Harbor in Baltimore and Faneuil Hall Marketplace in Boston to the Embarcadero Center in San Francisco, Doug's father was a key player in packaging and financing projects that returned critical investment and energy to cities across the nation. "My father didn't realize at the time how much his example inspired me to think like an entrepreneur," Doug recalls today. "His insights and experiences created the formative framework that would ultimately shape my own entrepreneurial journey."

Now the founder and a Senior Partner of Wendt Partners, a business consulting firm dedicated to helping CEOs accelerate the growth

of their companies, Doug brings a lifetime of strategic thought to the service of his clients. "Strategy is about taking a disciplined approach to solving a problem," he explains. "It's creativity plus commitment. It's also about embracing technology, uniqueness, and change. Ultimately, it comes down to leveraging the power of difference."

For Doug, that focus on difference is more than a theoretical concept or a tactical checklist — it's an intensely personal belief. Wendt Partners is

the product of Doug's commitment to driving change, which he inherited from his father, and his stubborn commitment to excellence, which he learned from his mother. Doug was born in Baltimore, Maryland, where he spent the first year of his life before his family settled in Chatham, New Jersey. He developed close friendships with the children in his neighborhood, which endured later on when they went on to attend different schools. He loved soccer, swimming, and trains, and

his parents were always very supportive of anything he took an interest in. "I had a very active childhood, never sitting still," he recalls.

Doug was always intensely curious about the world around him, a trait that was nurtured from an early age when he spent his preschool and kindergarten years in Montessori school. There, children are allowed to wander through an open classroom with an array of activity stations that they can gravitate to based on their interests. A self-driven explorer, Doug flourished in that environment until first grade, when the public school system decided to create an open classroom setting without allowing students to wander. Pursuing the fad at the time, his local school district built a "one-room schoolhouse" of 100,000 square feet to house ten different groups of students, all being taught through traditional lectures.



Perhaps it was the strange setup of the classroom, which seemed to amplify every little distraction. Or perhaps it was Doug's inability to handwrite for longer than a minute at a time—the result of a motor condition that wouldn't be diagnosed as a legitimate learning challenge for several more years. Both factors certainly contributed to the early assumption that Doug had a learning disability, and he was quickly pigeonholed as a problem child. "Once you've been labeled, the label takes on a life of its own," he reflects. "I went through a litany of tests, sitting down for long sessions with all manner of PhDs. I got high marks from each one. Yet even though no one could figure out what was wrong with me, no one stopped to think that maybe that's because there wasn't anything really 'wrong' with me in the first place," he recalls.

Doug, however, rolled with the punches. The sessions became an opportunity to hone his verbal and intellectual skills, and as he was moved from school to school and classroom to classroom, he grew adept at adapting. His mother worked as an incredibly strong advocate for him through the process, and his parents and neighborhood friends remained consistent forces in his life. "Thanks to my curiosity and enthusiasm for new things—entrepreneurial skills I really credit to my father—I never saw change as a bad thing," he says.

Finally, in 1981, Doug's parents decided their son had had enough. A new private school, the Winston School, was being formed specifically for students who could benefit from a more personalized approach to learning than that being offered in the public schools, and they decided Doug would be one of its first students. That year, ten students of all ages and from all over the area convened in the rented basement classrooms of a nearby church for the first day of school.

And there, Doug had the opportunity for the first time since Montessori school to stop following someone else's model and rediscover his own. "It was an educational experiment in helping students who think and learn differently," he says. "The traditional education system had told me I didn't fit in—that I was outside the norm. So in this new environment, I was taught to embrace that as a strength. With the freedom to explore, I learned that one person's difference is another person's gift."

Just as transformative as this realization was the advent of a little piece of technology

known as the personal computer. Doug's father, always looking for ways to integrate new technology into his life and work, bought an Apple II computer when it first came out in 1983. Monitors had not been invented yet, so small black-and-white TVs were mounted on top of the devices. Doug really took to the new machine, and one evening, he decided to type up a school essay assignment instead of handwriting it. The result was a near-instant change in his experience of school, as his written work and the experience of delivering it with pride on typewritten sheets from his dot-matrix printer altered the dynamics of his relationship with teachers almost overnight.

For Doug, the personal computer gave him more than just a hobby or an outlet – it truly revolutionized his life. "The computer gave me the ability to craft, format and present my work with depth and precision" he remembers. "I honestly believe that if the personal computer had not been invented during that time, my life would have been a completely different story. Technology made it possible for me to achieve my true potential."

Doug's parents convinced the school to allow him to bring the computer into the classroom and mount it to his desk. Because the technology was so new, he had a tremendous uphill battle through the next several years trying to educate his teachers about the importance of the technology—something he looks back on with a sense of irony today, in the era of smartphones and tablets.

Beyond allowing him to find his stride as a top student, the computer also opened avenues of entrepreneurship for Doug. He taught himself how to use early desktop publishing software, and in no time was printing out custom letterhead, business cards, posters, cards, and banners for paying customers who sought out his services, often teachers and students alike. He ran a cottage print business all through middle school, continuing this effort when he started high school at the elite Hotchkiss boarding school in Lakeville, Connecticut.

At Hotchkiss, Doug taught himself how to use the new Apple Macintosh computers and became adept with PageMaker, the first truly visual graphic design software. This gave him the tools to communicate at an even more professional level. As a personal project, Doug created a newsletter for a youth group he belonged to, and

when the program's executive director included it in their annual fundraising letter, they received record-breaking donations. "People were hearing from the students themselves rather than just from administrators and staff, and even though we were high schoolers, we were communicating through a highly polished medium," Doug explains. "That was the first time I created a business-class communication output that had a direct financial impact on an organization."

Doug took this experience to heart, and it became a core part of his academic life from that point onward. Later, in college, he co-founded a scholarly journal named *Humanitas* dedicated to publishing undergraduate research. He and his college roommate produced it in their dorm room. "It was so well received that, soon, PhD professors were saying that they thought our publication would be an appropriate venue for their work," Doug recounts. "We were receiving article submissions from all around the world. Again, that was due to the power of quality, depth, and sophistication in written communication, as enabled through technology. It reinforced what I had always known—that if you want the ideas you put forth to be taken seriously, you have to communicate with gravitas at a professional level."

After college, Doug began his career working for an educational publisher in the Philadelphia region, then moved to New Hampshire and shifted his focus to the technology sector. Beginning in a marketing role with MTL, an international industrial electronics company, he soon found himself being asked to engage in key change efforts involving the company's ISO 9000 quality certification process, the development of new user documentation, and the launch of a groundbreaking new product line. Doug subsequently worked for a series of technology companies in sales, marketing and strategy roles that often focused on new product launches or new market entries.

In 2003, Doug was recruited to apply for a position in the public sector, and he ultimately became the President and CEO of an economic development agency in Pennsylvania that had sought him out to help build a technology-centric regional economy. Doug landed the job, where he became a turnaround architect, leading the agency out of a series of financial and strategic hardships and focusing aggressively on building a strong leadership team. "With the great support of the

area's elected officials and business leaders, I was able to turn the agency around and adapt a management consulting approach to economic development," he explains.

Under Doug's leadership, the economic development agency was spun out into a quasi-independent corporation, where it focused intensively on providing cutting-edge services to businesses and other partners across Pennsylvania. The agency was soon recognized for excellence at the state, regional and national levels with a series of awards for its achievements in strategy, leadership and communication.

As a next step, Doug originally conceived of creating a private, for-profit consulting division within the economic development corporation, with the idea that it would generate revenue for the agency without geographic border constraints. But Doug ultimately decided that a private sector consultancy within an economic development agency could become a political nightmare, even though it was both legally and operationally feasible. "To get anything done on a larger scale would be almost impossible, and our path would always be constrained by geographic boundaries because that's how politicians are elected," says Doug. "But that's not how business works, and it's not how I wanted to operate."

Nonetheless, Doug's feasibility assessment had generated a great deal of interest from businesses throughout the region, many of whom told him that they would love to partner with him in one way or another. As a result, he decided to pursue the management consulting model after all — but as its own company, rather than connected to the economic development agency he had built. "Instead of building other businesses through the economic development agency, I recognized that it was time to build other businesses while building my own business as well," Doug recalls. With that—and three signed contracts in hand before the company's first day of operation—Wendt Partners was born.

Within the firm's first year, it expanded to serve clients in New York, New Jersey, and greater Washington, D.C. Today, the firm is headquartered in the Washington, D.C. region and serves clients throughout the Mid-Atlantic and beyond. In addition, the firm has further honed its methodology, which focuses on synthesizing and optimizing sales, marketing, strategy, and leadership to drive growth in an integrated

manner.

Another milestone during the company's first year of operation was the addition of Doug's wife, Alice, to the management team. She brought extensive experience in law, accounting, and professional services, having worked most recently as the Director of Operations for a prominent CPA firm. Upon joining Wendt Partners, Alice helped build the firm's infrastructure and then moved her focus to business development, including development of the firm's powerful network of partners.

Today, in addition to advising CEOs on growth strategy and building his own team at Wendt Partners, Doug serves on the adjunct faculty for American University's graduate program in strategic communication, and also mentors young students and emerging professionals on their professional growth and career strategies. He reminds them that professionalism is not a list of things to be accomplished—rather, it's a list of attributes to be attained through experience. "Professionalism should be a goal," he says. "When you take a very professional approach to how you present yourself, you instantly command a credibility level beyond your age, overcoming barriers for yourself."

Beyond this, Doug reminds us that the most empowered, engaged, and successful people are those who see their journey as never over, but as constantly unfolding. "One of the keys to successful leadership is understanding that everyone is on this journey," he says. "No one

person has arrived. The wonderful thing about the business owners, CEOs, and executives I work with is that no matter where they are in life, they see the next weakness they want to overcome, the next mountain they want to climb, the next challenge in themselves they need to defeat in order to be even better and achieve even more. It's what makes us different, and therefore what makes us each powerful in our own way.

"I was able to become an entrepreneur, start a business, and flourish because I believed in the power of difference," he affirms. "Today, Wendt Partners exists to teach business owners how to embrace and leverage that difference for their own growth and success as well."

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President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit www.BernhardtWealth.com and [Gordon's Blog](#).