The Inspiring Leader
Unlocking the Secrets of How Extraordinary Leaders Motivate

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Research shows that inspiration is the most powerful of all leadership competencies. It is the best predictor of overall ratings of leadership effectiveness by direct reports, peers and managers. It is the quality most valued by employees. Inspiration is also the factor most correlated with employee commitment and satisfaction.

Leaders who possess the ability to inspire and motivate outperform all others. Through a four-year study involving more than 200,000 respondents, co-authors John H. Zenger, Joseph R. Folkman and Scott K. Edinger found that the impact of inspiring and motivating others is consistent across different kinds of organizations and within different cultures.

The Inspiring Leader reveals the co-authors’ newest research on how top leaders inspire teams to greatness. It discusses the behaviors exhibited by the most successful leaders and includes advice on how to implement them.

Drawing from statistically significant data and objective empirical evidence, The Inspiring Leader lays out the strategies and concepts used by the world’s greatest leaders to motivate their teams. You will also learn how to put those strategies to work in your own business.

The Inspiring Leader reveals the principles and behaviors top leaders use to build an emotional connection between themselves and their teams.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

• How to establish a clear vision and direction.
• How to use the power of emotions.
• How to create stretch goals for your team.
• How to foster innovation and risk taking.
• How to encourage teamwork and collaboration.
• How to champion change.
Inspiration: The Most Important Ingredient

The question, “What makes an outstanding leader?” has been asked many times. The researchers at the leadership development firm Zenger Folkman attempted to find a valuable answer to that question. Their approach came from having an extensive database that consisted of more than 200,000 multi-rater or 360-degree feedback instruments that described 20,000 managers.

First, they identified those who received the highest aggregate scores and compared them with those who scored less well. By doing this, they were able to identify those competencies that most powerfully differentiated these groups.

As time went on, they were frequently asked to identify which of these competencies was the “silver bullet” that made the greatest difference. It became increasingly clear that one of them, “inspires and motivates to high performance,” was the single most important quality or competency for the leader to possess.

Three Distinct Pathways

Three distinct pathways each led to the same conclusion:

First, research showed “inspires and motivates to high performance” to be the most powerful predictor of someone’s being seen as an extraordinary leader. From a field of 16 such competencies, this one clearly stood out.

The specific measures that were used to describe this characteristic and that most powerfully made that separation of best and worst leaders were the statements “inspires others to high levels of effort and performance” and “energizes people to achieve exceptional results.”

Next, when the subordinates of tens of thousands of leaders were directly asked what leadership competency they most wanted their leader to have, their resounding first choice was “inspires and motivates to high performance.”

Finally, when researchers measured employee commitment and engagement in organizations and analyzed what leadership behaviors were most associated with the highest levels of employee commitment, “inspires and motivates” again was the competency at the top of the list. It was consistently the most highly correlated with those employees who would recommend the organization to a friend, seldom thought about leaving and were willing to go the extra mile.

There is no single silver bullet for leadership. But the ability of leaders to inspire those around them comes the closest to being that all-powerful solution.

Inspiration and Charisma

The word inspiration literally means “putting life into something that had been lifeless.”

We have also associated this dimension of inspirational leadership with the term charisma.

Charisma means “grace” or “gift” in Greek, and it has come to be associated with a special gift or power displayed by a leader. The sociologist Max Weber described it as “a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities.”
Researchers from Zenger Folkman studied the impact that leaders who were highly effective at inspiring and motivating others have on employee retention.

They found that the more effective a leader is at inspiring and motivating others, the higher the percentage of employees who are highly committed. And for those leaders who truly excel at motivating and inspiring, over half of their work team behaves this way. What kind of impact do you think that has on the other half?

Highly Committed Employees

The impact of inspiring and motivating others is very consistent across different kinds of organizations and within different cultures. Researchers found that leaders who are skilled at inspiring and motivating others tend to have direct reports who are more satisfied and committed overall. Such leaders are also better able to retain employees, especially their highly committed employees.

Researchers often ask leaders about the impact of having a large percentage of highly committed employees in their work groups. Their response is very consistent. It affects everything — productivity, the ability of the team to get projects done on time and the willingness of less-motivated employees to work hard.

Management expert Peter Drucker made the observation that if most businesses increased the productivity of employees by only 10 percent, they would double their profits. When most people first hear this statement, they are skeptical, but once they consider the fixed cost of their employees and their companies’ profit margins, most of them agree that Drucker was correct. Their observation is, “That small increase in productivity all goes to the bottom line, and it doesn’t cost the company anything.”

The Impact of Inspiration

While inspiring others is a very critical competency, the true impact of this skill is substantially greater when it is enhancing another competency. Research shows that two competencies working together create enormous synergy. Inspiring others is much like an excellent seasoning that brings out the flavors of your favorite foods.
the organization by virtue of having a position of responsibility. The stronger the emotions that are expressed by the leader and the more willing and able the leader is to convey these emotions, the more change occurs within those being led.

A Foundation for Understanding Inspiration

Research shows that all leaders seem to have some weaknesses, but the real difference between great leaders and poor leaders is that extraordinary leaders have profound strengths and use a variety of mechanisms to compensate for any weaknesses. In some cases, that means hiring someone with complementary skills. In other cases, it means restructuring the job so that others perform the activities that the executive struggles with.

Many people assume that the path to extraordinary performance is to eliminate all weaknesses. Their unspoken assumptions are, “Whatever strengths I have will take care of themselves” and “Getting better means discovering what I’m bad at and fixing that.” Therefore, they focus their development efforts on the things they don’t do well.

The problem with this approach is that typically people are not very interested in or passionate about their most significant weaknesses, and therefore they don’t improve much. The key to improvement for every person is to have passion. Working on a behavior that you are interested in creates a much higher probability that real change will occur.

The Interaction of Strengths

Researchers analyzed three competencies — technical/analytical skills, drive for results and people skills — to understand the power of the interactions between them. The analysis demonstrates that being moderately good at one competency does not guarantee that you will be perceived as extraordinary in an overall way. In fact, the probability is so low that you could describe it as almost impossible.

Researchers then looked at leaders who possessed more than one of these three competencies. When leaders possessed combinations of strengths, they were elevated to the highest ranks of leadership in their organizations.

The way leaders develop strengths is by utilizing other skills. It is the combination of skills that creates profound strength.

There is a trio of fundamental characteristics that are vital in order to make inspiration come to life: role model, change champion and initiator. These attributes are the cornerstone of what it takes to inspire and motivate others.

They are broad attributes or qualities, not specific behaviors that the leader practices. They create the foundation for all the other attributes that are important in motivating and inspiring others. In short, these attributes have a pervasive quality that makes them stand apart because they play into so many different areas of leadership and are not defined by a singular area of competence.

Energy

Inspiration is what gives leadership its energy. That energy is stored and channeled, and it fuels inspiration. Consider the metaphor of a battery pack that is designed to power any device that requires an energy source — possibly a camera or a flashlight. This battery pack holds several individual batteries. It aligns the batteries’ polarity, connects them and enables them to deliver their power to the device.

The three attributes — role model, change champion and initiator — are akin to the battery pack container, into which are inserted several batteries. The battery pack represents the leader’s willingness to be a role model and example for others, to push for constant change and improvement, and finally, to continually take the initiative to make good things happen.

The use of emotions becomes the “on-off” switch on the battery pack. The attributes are the container for specific leadership behaviors leaders can use. The leader now inserts one or more of six batteries (behaviors) into the overall battery pack. The more power the battery pack can produce, the more the leader is able to inspire and motivate.

The batteries are setting stretch goals, creating vision and direction, communicating powerfully, developing people, being collaborative and a good team player, and fostering innovation.

Which batteries get used at any one time doesn’t make much difference, although research indicates that having more battery power creates greater energy for inspiration.
Using Emotion: The DNA of Inspiration

No matter how tough-minded you are, there comes a time when you must acknowledge the role of emotion in people’s work lives. Jack and Suzy Welch wrote, “Real leaders touch people. They get in their skin, filling their hearts with inspiration, courage and hope. They share the pain at times of loss and are there to celebrate the wins.”

The entire topic of a leader’s ability to inspire subordinates comes down to the leader’s willingness and ability to both be aware of and comfortably use emotion. One broad and extremely important kind of emotion is enthusiasm. We think of enthusiasm as describing a feeling of excitement, anticipation and elation about some prospect for the future.

Facial Expressions and Body Language

The most inspiring leaders are those on the transparent side. They are expressive. And the research is especially clear about the power of expressing positive emotions through your facial expressions and body language. Many of us need to become more attuned to our own moods and emotions.

The effective leader does not hesitate to state opinions with an extra dose of emphasis. Don’t hesitate to make your message strong.

Powerful messages need to be delivered frequently. When people hear the same message for the seventh time, it becomes clear to them that the leader is very committed to this idea.

Effective leaders use dramatic, unconventional behavior to inspire people. They also take personal risks. It is always impressive to see the leaders of an organization get outside their comfort zone.

Setting Stretch Goals

There is a great deal of conserved energy in every organization. Setting stretch goals can release some of that conserved energy, bringing increased productivity and success to the organization. When people accomplish challenging objectives, they are happier about their jobs and more pleased with themselves.

Here are 10 steps a leader can do to set stretch goals:

1. Review the work assignments of those reporting to you and ask the question, “Are these assignments challenging?” Then determine how these assignments could be made even more fulfilling.

2. Believe that your organization is capable of producing at a higher level than it is doing at the current time. Think of what could happen if a crisis arose. What could your team accomplish?

3. Discuss with your team its ideas for exciting new goals to which the team members would aspire. Involve them in defining ways to raise the bar.

4. Make sure your lofty goal is not unreasonable. Do your people believe that it is realistic?

5. Stick to goals until they are realized. Keep previous commitments and expectations alive and in perspective with anything new that is added.

6. Benchmark your organization to other high-performing organizations. Send your employees to visit other organizations that have a reputation for doing something extremely well. Xerox sent a team of people who were working on a process to speed distribution of its products to Domino’s Pizza, an early pioneer in speedy delivery of its products.

7. Identify peak performers in the organization. Give praise and make an example of those in your organization who are unusually fast or good at what they do.

8. Utilize team dynamics and support to achieve stretch goals. Have your team collectively set goals. People support decisions that they helped to make.

9. Improve processes and remove bureaucracy. Challenge individuals or teams to streamline the processes that they use.

10. Celebrate and recognize the achievement of goals and milestones. Plan frequent celebrations and rewards.

Creating Vision and Direction

Inspiring leaders excel at creating vision and providing clear direction to the people around them.

Here’s how the leader goes about creating greater clarity of vision and direction:

First, the leader orchestrates a process that creates a concise, compelling and clear vision for the organization. This is not a “solo” activity for the leader. Leaders ought not to think that it is incumbent upon them to have the answer. Nor does this need to be for an entire corporation. Middle managers in any functional area can do this for the group they lead.

This vision combines a strong statement of the guiding principles that shape the organization with a vivid picture of what it aspires to be in the next few years. Don’t confuse having a vision and providing clarity of direction with having a mission statement. The vision is not a “forever” picture, as a mission statement tends to be.
A Clear Line of Sight

With this vision clearly stated, a clear line of sight can now be established between each individual’s work and where the organization wants to go. This enables all individuals to be engaged in day-to-day activities with a clear sense of direction and purpose and knowledge of how what they do fits into the larger picture. Work now takes on greater meaning.

This clarity of direction also resolves questions about what is trivial and what is titanic. A clear vision and direction for the organization also defines on a daily basis what should be ignored or put on the back burner. Individuals can then stay focused on the most important activities and issues.

All systems and new initiatives can now be brought into alignment around the vision.

Finally, effective strategies and optimum tactics flow more easily from this clearer vision for the organization.

At the most fundamental level, providing clear vision and direction is a tangible expression of the leader’s treating other people in the organization with dignity and respect.

Communicating Powerfully

Something sets the highly inspirational leaders apart from those who are not, and it isn’t simply that they are good communicators. Research shows that inspirational leaders:

• Seek opportunities to communicate. Inspiring leaders welcome opportunities to communicate. They don’t turn down chances to talk at a leadership development seminar or at a meeting of the company’s internal auditors. There are no bad opportunities to communicate if a group of company employees is assembled and if the event can possibly fit into their schedule.

• Expand the volume and frequency. Widening the circle of people with whom you communicate and multiplying the frequency of meeting with front-line employees represent a complete reversal of thinking about how senior leaders communicate within a giant organization.

• Communicate passion and enthusiasm. In their book Senior Leadership Teams, a team of researchers writes: “What does it take for a chief executive to inspire a leadership team with a vision, to get members to focus intently and passionately on what is special about the enterprise? One popular image is that of a leader on a podium, revving up the troops with a rousing talk. That can help, and if you are an inspirational speaker, you should, of course, take the pulpit whenever you have the chance. But what if you are neither comfortable nor particularly effective in giving talks that bring people to their feet? There are many other ways to inspire.”

The researchers recount an experience with Don Burr, founder of People Express Airlines. “Nothing is more important than charismatic leadership,” he explained to his team, “and if you doubt it, look at what Mike does with his team.”

Demonstrate Deep Commitment

Burr’s comment took everyone aback because Mike was rather shy and normally quiet. Burr proceeded, “Mike doesn’t stand up and make long speeches like I do, but his understanding of our precepts and his deep commitment to our customers shine through in everything he says and does. He has his own special kind of charisma. And that’s what I expect of you, to use your special gifts, whatever they may be, to inspire others to share your vision for our company.”

The researchers conclude, “Inspirational leadership is indeed an essential competence for the leaders of senior teams. But there is no one best way to provide it. The key is to identify which of your skills and styles can best be used to create in others the passion you feel for your work and then to hone and develop those resources as one core element in your personal repertoire of team leadership skills.”

Developing People

When team members think about the rewards they receive from their jobs, after the pay and benefits, the next most tangible reward is the learning and development that comes from training, job assignments and experiences at work. Leaders who create positive developmental experiences for their team members are much...
more apt to create an inspired and motivated team. Conversely, when team members see a job as just work, with no learning or development, then it is far more difficult for them to find their work inspirational.

Benefits of Development

When people have opportunities for development, there are several personal benefits: They are more likely to stay employed by the organization, their satisfaction with their jobs increases, they are more productive and they produce higher-quality work.

However, in addition to the individual’s personal satisfaction, there is a secondary payoff from the leader having created a learning environment. Simply put, the organization keeps getting better, and people like to be associated with a winning organization. When the leader creates a climate of learning, the outcome is continual improvement on the part of the organization. Mistakes do not get repeated. Information that is held by one group is freely passed to others who can benefit from it. The dependency that the organization might have had on a few people is now shared more broadly.

What the Inspirational Leader Does to Develop Others

To develop subordinates, inspirational leaders:
1. Give coaching.
2. Provide actionable feedback.
3. Delegate in a manner that develops people.
4. Structure the job with development as the objective.
5. Make developmental experiences available (classes, courses, trips, site visits and benchmarking opportunities).

Being Collaborative and a Good Team Player

Collaboration and teamwork are norms that need to be established in the culture of the organization. For them to succeed, many other elements need to be in place.

Effective teams ideally require diversity of skills, talents and experience, along with other kinds of diversity. The culture has to become one of putting the organization’s and the team’s interests higher than anyone’s self-interest, no matter how senior that person is in the organization. Ideas and proposals have to be evaluated on their merits, not on the role power or position that their proponent holds in the organization. There is a far greater degree of empowerment for the people, and thus leadership is shared more broadly through the organization.

Five Steps to Better Collaboration

For better collaboration in your organization, take these five steps:
1. Strongly consider the advantages of creating a team-based structure rather than the traditional organizational form of people working alone.
2. Minimize destructive conflict between groups. If you hear people taking potshots at another group, begin immediately to bring the groups together.
3. Don’t pit groups against each other. Temporary contests can be fun and have a positive effect, but be cautious in dragging them out.
4. Reward team effort and accomplishment wherever possible; it encourages collaboration and cooperation.
5. Tear down silos. Remove the barriers that separate groups from one another.

Fostering Innovation

General Electric has long enjoyed a reputation for forward thinking. Under CEO Jack Welch, it was recognized for its decision to become No.1 or No.2 in each market it served, and if that was not possible, Welch wanted GE to get out. Its reputation was one of a strong focus on delivering results and operational excellence. Welch expanded the organization through diversification into new industries. He acquired countless new operations and divested companies that did not meet his standards for producing a positive return.

Upon Welch’s retirement, Jeffrey Immelt was elected chairman and CEO of the firm. His emphasis shifted to a much stronger focus on innovation and internal growth. All executives were expected to come up with one or two bold initiatives that would grow their part of the business in a dramatic way. Small, incremental gains were to be augmented with serious innovation and growth plans that could have a significant impact on GE’s bottom line. Immelt paid close personal attention to the top 20 projects that were selected by the management team to receive corporate support.

Innovation Becomes Embedded in the Systems

When the right environment is created and combined with the expectation that everyone will contribute to the innovation process, then a steady stream of good ideas for new products, services, marketing techniques and ways to better manage the business come forth on a regular basis.
Discovering your receptiveness to new ideas requires asking your people some direct questions, either as a group or one-on-one. You can ask questions like these:

- “Do I ever say or do things that discourage people from proposing new ideas?”
- “Have you ever seen me react in a way that suggested that I wasn’t eager to take a risk or try some new approach?”
- “To what degree do you think I want to get ideas from the group about new products or better ways we could work?”

While reflection and introspection may help, nothing compares to your asking people some probing questions and then patiently listening to the answers. This first step is important because many leaders who think they are open to new ideas are not seen that way by their subordinates.

**Most Common Mistakes in Inspiring Others**

What does it take to have a nearly complete “charisma and inspiration bypass”? When researchers analyzed the data, the following emerged as the most detrimental behaviors for leaders:

- They lack energy or enthusiasm. When these people walk into the room, you feel the energy leave. They absorb and consume energy, rather than injecting it into the group.
- They rarely provide clarity of direction or purpose. With these leaders, team members are not clear about their goals or how they contribute to the success of the organization.
- They avoid setting challenging goals or objectives. The lowest 10 percent of leaders do what needs to be done, but they always work hard to lower the expectations of others.
- They have no plan for personal development. These leaders assume that their skills are sufficient just as they are.
- They provide no coaching or mentoring. The least inspiring leaders lack interest in helping other people develop new skills or capabilities.
- They gommysack critical information. These leaders prefer to control information and share as little as possible.
- They say one thing and do another.
- They have little or no interest in ideas or input from their direct reports.
- They rarely provide helpful feedback on performance. As human beings, we are all guilty of making such errors from time to time, but they need not become fatal flaws if we are attentive to them.

Leaders with such weaknesses need to improve. The good news is that positive improvement on any of these items will have a significant impact on your ability to lead others.

**Conclusions**

**Steps You Can Take**

Here are five actions that every leader should consider as ways to inspire and motivate the troops:

- **Use emotions more frequently.** Express heartfelt appreciation.
- **Reach out to people.** Initiate conversations and interactions.
- **Set an aggressive target.** With the involvement of your team members, set a target that will stretch the group.
- **Create a vivid picture of the organization three years from now.** Get each person to identify how this affects his or her job.
- **Practice lavish communication.** Set up mechanisms by which you get feedback on how people are reacting to your communication.

**RECOMMENDED READING LIST**

If you liked *The Inspiring Leader*, you’ll also like:

1. **Blink** by Malcolm Gladwell. The subtitle says it all: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking. Drawing on cutting-edge neuroscience and psychology, Gladwell changes the way you understand every decision you make.
2. **Leadership Gold** by John Maxwell. Maxwell shares a lifetime of leadership truths, which can guide anyone who currently leads or aspires to lead.
3. **Leaders at All Levels** by Ram Charan. Ram Charan takes aim at the current crisis in leadership: the shortage of leaders prepared to face the complex business challenges of today. Charan offers a solution that outlines a new model for succession and leadership development.