



# The Inspiring Leader

Unlocking the Secrets of How Extraordinary Leaders Motivate

by John H. Zenger, Joseph R. Folkman and Scott K. Edinger  
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## Focus

### Leadership & Management

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## Take-Aways

- As a leader, you must be able to inspire others.
- Take the initiative, force positive change and act as role model.
- Of course, to be truly inspirational, leaders must also possess other core leadership competencies.
- How a leader's subordinates perform is the best way to judge his or her leadership.
- Inspired employees are highly productive and committed to their work.
- Set "stretch goals," then instill confidence in your subordinates so that they can achieve them.
- Set up crossfunctional teams, where the real work gets done.
- Inspiration and innovation go hand in hand.
- Leaders who say one thing but do another do not inspire; they demotivate.
- Training motivates employees to work hard and stay with the organization.

## Rating (10 is best)

Overall	Applicability	Innovation	Style
<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>7</b>

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## Relevance

### What You Will Learn

In this Abstract, you will learn: 1) Why the ability to inspire and motivate others is the most important leadership trait; 2) Why inspirational leadership matters to any organization; 3) How inspirational leaders motivate others; and 4) What behaviors to avoid because they will demotivate your subordinates.

### Recommendation

In every type of organization and in every culture, people want to follow leaders who motivate them to achieve difficult goals. In *The Extraordinary Leader*, the authors' previous, highly acclaimed book, John H. Zenger, Joseph R. Folkman and Scott K. Edinger examined the 16 core competencies that distinguish superior leaders from merely good ones. In this new work, they employ statistical data and empirical evidence to prove conclusively what people intuitively know: The ability to inspire is, by far, the most salient leadership trait. The authors discuss the strategies that great leaders employ to motivate others and explain how to use them. *getAbstract* recommends their book to managers, executives and others who want their organizations to accomplish great things.

## Abstract

### People Want Inspirational Leadership

An analysis of more than 8,000 leaders at 100 organizations proved that among the 16 core leadership competencies, the ability to inspire others is the most important. Additionally, "more than 100,000 assessments" of leaders' subordinates confirm that the ability to "inspire and motivate to high performance" is the main characteristic they look for in their leaders.

Inspirational leaders are charismatic. They are confident in their abilities and make subordinates feel the same way. Their employees are satisfied and fully committed to their organizations, resulting in high productivity and profitability. Measuring a leader by how his or her subordinates perform and how productive they are is perfectly fair. Leaders must create a hopeful, positive, confident, self-actualizing and resilient corporate culture. According to survey research, the inspirational leader's three primary attributes are that he or she is a "role model, change champion and initiator."

### Role Model

People learn how to perform by "behavior modeling," or imitating what others say and do. Superior leaders, through their actions, behaviors and attitudes, exemplify what they want from others. Organizations want leaders who encourage positive "organizational behaviors to proliferate":

- The pace at which the leader works creates a rhythm for the entire organization.
- How hard and long the leader works, both in and out of the office, becomes the standard that all within the organization strive to match.
- The manner in which the leader utilizes company resources becomes the default setting for everyone else.

*"Inspiration is a topic that most people see as 'soft' and 'mysterious'."*

*"The word 'inspiration' literally means 'putting life into something that had been lifeless'."*

*“In today’s organizations, with fierce competition and ever-increasing demands, there is a significant need for leaders who can inspire.”*

*“Peter Drucker made the observation that if most businesses increased the productivity of employees by 10%, they would double their profits.”*

*“The leader’s shifting moods bring sunshine or frostbite to those about them.”*

*“A leader leads by example, whether he intends to or not.”  
[– Anonymous]*

- How the leader interacts with his or her executive team and other employees is how everyone else within the organization strives to behave.
- The issues on which the leader focuses become the issues that are most important to the organization’s employees.
- When the leader holds him- or herself accountable for mistakes, so do subordinates.

Here is how you can become a superior role model:

- **“Lead through example”** – Set the standards for your subordinates. “Do as I say, not as I do” is not an effective leadership technique.
- **“Maximize exposure”** – Subordinates will have a hard time modeling their behavior on yours if they cannot see what you do and how you act. Get out in front so everyone can see you in action. Hold “all hands” meetings. Begin a “management by walking around” (MBWA) program. Get out of the main office and interact with workers at satellite offices.
- **“Selectively model behaviors that need to be emphasized in the organization”** – Most importantly, assume responsibility for yourself. When you do, your subordinates will do the same.
- **“Seek feedback regarding inconsistencies between a leader’s behavior and the espoused values of the organization”** – Go out of your way to request feedback from subordinates and others regarding your performance.

### Change Champion

Maintenance of the status quo does not require anything of a leader. True leaders stand and deliver when they must make tough choices. No one likes change. But competitors quickly run over organizations that are stuck in the past, and in times of transformation, organizations look to their leaders for direction.

Leaders who function as change champions can explain to subordinates why changes in operations and procedures are necessary. Focus on outcomes. Recognize subordinates who reach important milestones on the road to your goals.

### Initiator

As the leader, your job includes being the catalyst for action. Effective leadership means taking the initiative. When others see you step up and act, they recognize that you are powering the organization and keeping it moving ahead.

Survey results indicate that individuals who do not measure up well as leaders always have a difficult time showing initiative and taking action; indeed, that is often their “fatal flaw.”

Showing initiative involves these three factors:

1. **“Decisiveness”** – Leaders must initiate actions – but thoughtfully. Decisiveness does not mean simply heading in one direction. It involves carefully mapping the path first. It is not about a single instant in time. Rather, it involves all the moments you spend sorting through data and planning the best actions to take.
2. **“Accountability”** – Finger-pointers make poor leaders. Always hold yourself personally accountable for your words and actions. As a consequence, your team members will feel responsible for what they do.

*“Nothing says ‘leader’ like being the initiator.”*

*“An army of sheep led by a lion would defeat an army of lions led by a sheep.”  
[– Arab proverb]*

*“The extrovert has more influence and provides more inspiration than the introvert.”*

*“One of the most frequent complaints from employees is that priorities are constantly changing. Everyone needs a clear line of sight about which work is critical and which is a lower priority.”*

3. **“Risk”** – Taking action is always a gamble. The outcome of a decision is never 100% predictable. However, you can deal with risk responsibly: Make sure you are aware of the risks yourself, and help others understand them.

### **Emotional Leaders Are Inspirational Leaders**

Inspiration and emotion are “two sides of the same coin.” Therefore, as a leader, become comfortable showing emotion to others. Become an extrovert: History does not record many shy leaders.

Because emotions are contagious, make sure the emotions you demonstrate are positive ones. One of the best ways to show positive emotion is to smile at others. Strive to be at ease with subordinates and others. People have a hard time following leaders who make them anxious. Everyone has bad days sometimes; when this happens to you, limit your interactions with others.

Pay attention to others’ emotions and become a good listener by taking these steps:

- **“Good listening begins with not talking”** – Instead, let others speak.
- **“Acknowledge what the other person is saying”** – Nod. Smile. Say “Uh-huh.”
- **“Listen for the emotions”** – How does the other person feel about the points he or she is making?
- **Take action** – Do something appropriate about what you’ve just heard.

Set a positive tone in meetings. Use meetings to solve problems as a team, not to attack others or to be negative. At social gatherings, “work the room”: It is a great way to meet and inspire subordinates. Make them feel good about themselves: Happy workers are productive workers.

Warning: Some of these actions and attitudes may move you out of your own emotional comfort zone. That is good. Great leaders must always push the envelope, emotionally and in any other way.

### **The Six Actions of Inspirational Leaders**

Inspire people with these six behaviors. Think of them as “rungs on a ladder”:

1. **“Setting stretch goals”** – Challenge subordinates to do their best. Set difficult yet realistic goals. This communicates that you have faith in others’ abilities to overcome obstacles and attain challenging objectives. Subordinates internalize these good feelings, begin to believe in themselves and rise to the occasion. When they do, don’t take your foot off the gas. Keep pushing. Gather your team together and talk about how you can perform even better in the future. Guard against complacency and a “we know best” attitude, and strive to be a “learning organization.”
2. **“Creating vision and direction”** – Point everyone in the right direction and show which paths to avoid. Make sure everyone understands the organization’s strategic vision and where it is going. Set priorities and clear targets. Explain to subordinates how their work will help the organization reach its objectives. Remind everyone constantly of the vision.
3. **“Communicating powerfully”** – Communicate thoroughly and frequently. Shelve those archaic ideas regarding “need to know.” Today, everyone in the organization must understand what is going on. Focus your communications on the primary issues. Stay positive and speak with passion. Use all media: meetings, presentations (keep them short and sweet) and one-on-one sessions with subordinates. Spice up your

*“Having the team set its goals collectively can be a powerful technique. Invariably, one or more of the team members would like to reach higher.”*

*“Stretch goals deserve stretch rewards and ought to be celebrated in a way that is appropriate for your organization.”*

communications by telling stories. Effective communication is a two-way street. Don't issue directives. Instead, ask questions. Listen carefully to the answers.

4. **“Developing people”** – To motivate employees, train them. Research indicates that next to pay and benefits, employees value formal and informal training. They like challenging projects and assignments that help them expand professionally. Training employees benefits the organization as a whole in many ways. Well-trained workers are more inclined to remain with the organization. They are satisfied and productive. The quality of their work improves.
5. **“Being collaborative”** – Inspirational leaders prefer energetic and engaged employee teams to hierarchical schemes that arbitrarily lock everyone into a designated slot. Teams reduce unproductive competition between employees. Spurred on by smart and savvy leaders, many forward-thinking organizations now make teams their “basic building blocks.” They “dismantle silos,” the configurations that appear on organizational charts. In most organizations, the real work gets done through connections.
6. **“Fostering innovation”** – When it comes to innovation, Apple CEO Steve Jobs put it best: “I want to put a ding in the universe.” Great leaders love creating products, processes and operations. They always try to find new ways to do things better. They are receptive to new ideas, no matter where they originate. Indeed, smart leaders incorporate innovation in the systems that their organizations rely upon to operate.

### Ten Leadership Don'ts

Poor leaders exhibit one or more of these 10 negative behavior patterns:

1. **“No energy”** – Subordinates won't feel excited if their leaders don't.
2. **“No clarity”** – Goals or plans to achieve them are never clear.
3. **“No challenging goals”** – People don't need to work hard if the goals don't require it.
4. **“No personal growth”** – You can't become a great leader if you don't improve your professional abilities.
5. **“No coaching”** – Your subordinates need your coaching and mentoring.
6. **“No sharing of information”** – If you hoard information, subordinates will think you are stupid about the organization and its activities.
7. **“No credibility”** – Your actions must be consistent with your words. Subordinates will not follow leaders who “say one thing and do another.”
8. **“No collaboration”** – Pitting one group of employees against another just tears apart the organization.
9. **“No interest in new ideas”** – This is the death-knell of any organization.
10. **“No feedback”** – How can subordinates perform better without it?

Inspiration is an essential characteristic of a great leader. But inspiration alone will not do the job. Combine your inspirational qualities with the other core leadership competencies. Ultimately, the test – and purpose – of inspirational leadership is that your organization can achieve its goals. Set them as high as possible, communicate them clearly and inspire your subordinates to achieve them.

## About the Authors

**John H. Zenger, Joseph R. Folkman, Ph.D., and Scott K. Edinger** are executives at a leadership research and development firm.