

Unlocking the Secret Behind How Extraordinary Leaders Motivate

by Jack Zenger and Joe Folkman

Unlocking the Secret Behind How Extraordinary Leaders Motivate

Despite all the research that has taken place about the nature of leaders, many practitioners and scholars have acknowledged that some aspects of leadership remain a mystery. We would like to address one such mystery that seems to have remained outside the arena of rigorous analysis.

Often, leaders have been identified as possessing a remarkable quality that set them apart from others. It enabled them to have a powerful influence on others. It caused others to be attracted to them and enabled them to achieve remarkable outcomes. That quality has most frequently been labeled “charisma,” a term coming from the Greek word

Often, leaders have been identified as possessing a remarkable quality that set them apart from others. It enabled them to have a powerful influence on others.

meaning “gift.” In ancient times it was believed that this quality was indeed a divine gift that was bestowed upon some and not others. The practical consequence of this has been that unlike other leadership skills, such as being results-focused, giving compelling oral presentations, or delegating, no one attempted to teach charisma.

Because the popular press often describes leaders as charismatic, this characteristic has then been used to explain this person’s success. We often hear remarks like, “The reason they have been so effective in their role is because they’re

charismatic.” Upon hearing this, others nod their heads in agreement and then act as if they understand and agree with that appraisal. But because it was ill-defined and mysterious, there was actually little agreement about the nature of charisma or the results it produced.

The difference between being inspiring and being charismatic

Zenger Folkman works with leading organizations to create systems for developing their leaders. One of the components we strongly recommend is a world-class 360-degree feedback assessment that

measures the most powerful leadership competencies.

One of the competencies that we measure with our 360-degree feedback assessments is “Inspires and Motivates to High Performance.” Our interest in this competency has intensified as we discovered that it was the single most powerful leadership quality. Our four reasons for focusing on this competency are:

- It best differentiates high performers from low performers.
- It best differentiates high performers from the average.
- It correlates most powerfully with employee engagement and commitment.
- It is the competency that employees say they most want from their manager.

Through a process that some might describe as “reverse engineering,” we believe we have a reasonably clear understanding of what makes leaders inspiring and motivating. What do they do? How do they behave? Can anyone learn to be more inspiring? Is there a clear path to being inspiring or many paths?

As we began a deeper analysis of what

made leaders inspiring and motivating, we fell into the seemingly logical trap of thinking that charisma, as the term was most often used, was simply a synonym for being inspiring. That is no longer our view. We now believe that it is possible to define with some reasonable accuracy what people mean when they say someone is charismatic. We have concluded that being charismatic helps in a small way, for some people in specific circumstances, to be perceived as being inspiring and motivating. But there are countless leaders who are identified by their colleagues as being highly inspiring who are definitely not charismatic. Conversely, there are also people who are seen as quite charismatic who fail to meet the test of being inspiring and motivating—especially in the long run.

Our high interest in inspiring and motivating behaviors

Described above are the four reasons that explain why the competency of Inspires and Motivates to High Performance is so important. But there is one more highly compelling reason why we focus on this: It is also the leadership competency on which leaders overall receive the lowest

scores from their manager, peers, and those who report to them.

Ponder that for a moment. It is the single most important leadership quality and at the same time it is the one area for which leaders receive their rock-bottom scores. That isn't a good combination and it both supports and illuminates our intense interest in this topic.

There a question of understanding and being able to define it; more importantly, can it be learned or acquired? Can it be measured? What kind of impact does it really have? Is there one way that inspiring leaders behave or does inspiration have several "flavors?" Our research has provided the answers to those questions.

The Big Picture

"How Do Organizations and Individuals Go About Getting Better Performance?"

Imagine the frustrating process of getting kids out the door to school on time. It's a battle when they're moving too slow or not moving at all. What typically happens

with parents is the volume goes up and there's an escalated amount of energy, but mainly there is a lot of pushing children out the door. If you think about when you need high performance, what behavior do you fall back on? A good ninety percent of us push harder. We call that competency, "Drive for Results."

There is a different way of getting high performance which has the same goal. It can be described as "pull." It is the ability to "Inspire and Motivate Others."

When speaking with a large group in Massachusetts, one of the authors asked, "How many of you know how to push?" They all raised their hands. But then he asked, "How many of you know how to pull harder? How many of you, if you were challenged to pull more, would know what to do?" This question left many of the audience members silent. The challenge behind becoming inspiring is "Do people know how to do it?"

The subject of motivation in the workplace was addressed by Daniel Pink in his book, *Drive*. He makes compelling arguments

for the fact that our conventional theories of motivation in the workplace are simply wrong and proposes a fundamental new understanding of those forces that truly lead people to high performance. He contends that true motivation has much more to do with having a clear purpose, being able to attain mastery, and being able to function with autonomy. His research provides a useful framework for a better understanding of what drives people to perform at a high level.

“What Effect Does the Ability to Inspire and Motivate Others Have on Business Outcomes?”

Figure 1 shows the 360-degree feedback scores of managers on the ability to Inspire and Motivate Others, plotted against levels of Satisfaction/Commitment. Notice this almost perfect linear correlation. When a manager becomes more effective in terms of their ability to be Inspiring and Motivating, the level of employee Satisfaction/Commitment goes way up.

There is a different way of getting high performance which has the same goal. It can be described as “pull.”

Fig. 1 – Inspires and Motivates vs. Satisfaction/Commitment

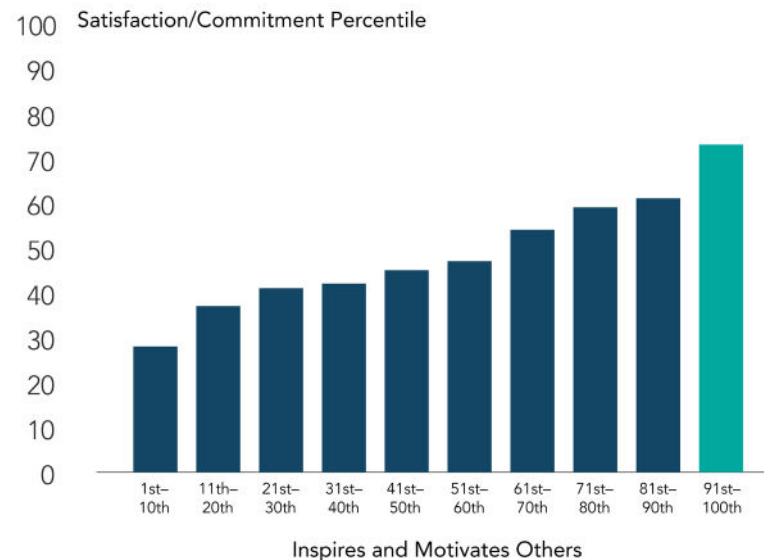
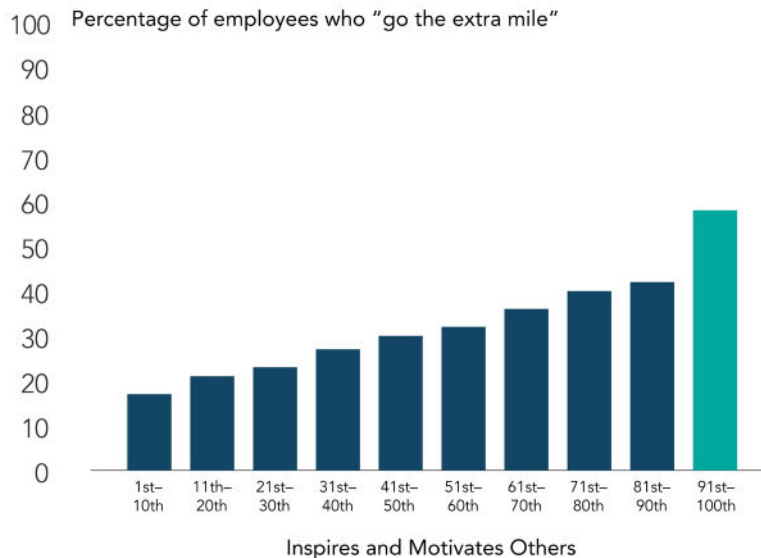


Fig. 2 – Inspires and Motivates vs. Percent of Employees Who Go the Extra Mile



Impact on Employee Engagement

What effect does that have? As employees become more satisfied and committed, they create better customer satisfaction levels, which has some impact on the revenue generated.

A specific example of this correlation within a retail company was published in Harvard Business Review. The study found that for every 5-point improvement in employee satisfaction, customer

satisfaction improved 1.3%, which in turn increased revenue 0.5%. If you are a firm with \$50 billion in revenue, that translates into an additional \$250 million a year! Other retail and hospitality companies have also done similar studies and found comparable relationships.

Another study we did took the same 360-degree feedback scores and plotted them against the degree to which people were willing to go the extra mile. Figure 2 shows the significant difference between

As employees become more satisfied and committed, they create better customer satisfaction levels, which has some impact on the revenue generated.

the bottom 10 percent, who have only 13 percent of their employees willing to go the extra mile, compared to the top 10 percent, who have more than 50 percent.

“What Behaviors Help a Leader Become More Inspiring?”

The existence of extensive 360-degree feedback data is a marvelous gift, especially when it is accompanied by other information about a leader’s impact on direct reports and organizational performance. In this study we looked at the assessments of 183,000 raters on 14,466 leaders. We then found those leaders who received the highest scores on “inspires and motivates to high performance” from their manager, peers, and direct reports. Next, we analyzed what behaviors differentiated that group from all the others. The questions comprising the 360-degree feedback were comprehensive and analyzed a wide range of important behaviors. Our research showed ten companion behaviors that described what an inspiring leader actually did.

1. Makes an Emotional Connection
2. Establishes Stretch Goals

3. Has Clear Vision and Direction
4. Communicates Powerfully and Prolifically
5. Develops Others
6. Is a Collaborative Team Player
7. Fosters Innovation
8. Takes Initiative
9. Champions Change
10. Is a Role Model

It’s the combination of these behaviors that help a leader to become inspiring.

For example, take a look at the companion behavior above, “Develops Others.” Leaders who care about developing their direct reports know what they want to do in their future. They have periodic conversations with them and ask, “So how do you feel about your career? Are you on the right track? Are you moving forward? Can you think of any opportunities in your job that would help you move further?” Having these conversations is inspiring. We know statistically that the quality of being committed to the development of your people is a very powerful tool.

Are these ten behaviors overly complex or impossible to acquire? From “Makes an Emotional Connection” to “Establishes Stretch Goals,” to having “Clear Vision and Direction,” every one of these skills is a leadership behavior that can be acquired. These are common behaviors that are uncommonly practiced.

The good news is a leader doesn’t have to be perfect in all ten companion behaviors to be inspiring. Leaders can’t have a fatal flaw in any of them, but if a leader strengthened just two or three of those competency companions, they would become more inspiring.

“Are There Different Approaches to Inspiring and Motivating Others?”

We can all think of well-known leaders who inspire us. It may be a business guru, who uses their expertise to inspire. It may be a talk show host, who inspires through their warmth and generosity of spirit. Both are inspiring, but in completely different ways.

How can we understand how people make these emotional connections differ-

ently and go about being inspiring and do it so differently? This is where we applied what some might describe as reverse engineering. The 1,000 most inspiring leaders in our database were clustered together to find out what “approach” they took to inspire those around them. By finding those leaders who received the highest scores on being inspiring and motivating, we could then analyze our data to find the other behaviors that went hand-in-hand with being inspiring. We determined that there were six very different and effective approaches that leaders used. Most leaders tended to use one or two most frequently. Each of the first four approaches described below were used more than 20 percent of the time as a primary or secondary approach; the last two were used far less frequently.

1. Driver

Drivers are the leaders who are very focused on achieving the end result. They understand what the organization needs and expects from them. They see deadlines and commitments as unmovable and they’ll do whatever it takes to get there. They are ones who seemingly walk

through brick walls in the pursuit of a goal. They know that being on time and on budget is something that is necessary, so they rally the organization around them to accomplish those kinds of objectives. Based on our research to date, this is the most common approach to being inspiring.

The companion behaviors most associated with this approach include establishing stretch goals and taking initiative.

2. Principled

The Principled leader’s number one priority is to emphasize integrity. They never compromise on what is right or ethical as they see it. They walk their talk and keep commitments. They are very focused on following the rules and doing things the right way. They do not shade the truth. Organizations need these people. We can’t get along without them. This is the second most common approach to being inspiring.

The companion behavior most associated with this approach is acting as a role model.

3. Visionary

Visionary leaders are very skilled at creating a compelling, clear picture about the future. The big picture comes to life through their clear sense of direction and forward thinking. Tactical priorities don’t stand in the way of their very attainable but lofty goals. This approach is a close third in frequency of use.

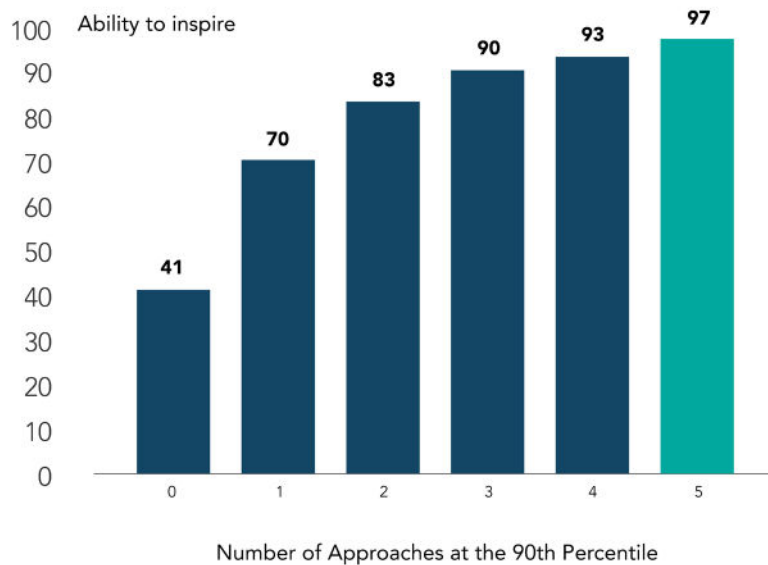
Companion behaviors to the visionary approach include having a clear vision of the organization’s future and being a champion of change.

4. Enhancer

What do enhancers do? They bring us in, make us feel comfortable, listen to us, and treat us with respect and dignity. Theirs is definitely a pull, not a push, approach. Enhancers can build positive relationships that can go anywhere and do anything. You’ve heard someone say, “I’d do anything for that person.” Why? “Because I really felt like they cared.”

The companion behaviors most associated with this approach include communicating powerfully and prolifically, devel-

Fig. 3 – Number of Approaches Utilized vs. Ability to Inspire



oping others, and practicing collaboration and teamwork.

5. The Enthusiast

Enthusiasts show passion, vitality, and vigor. Passive behaviors are foreign to them and dynamic decisions are naturally made. They are extroverted individuals who generate energy and excitement. Enthusiasts breathe life into organizations.

The companion behavior that is most identified with this approach is the prac-

tice of making an emotional connection via their enthusiasm.

6. The Expert

Leaders who are experts bring important information to every meeting. People love to have them around because they are full of useful, technical information. Because of their grasp of the technology they help solve problems that are very difficult or somewhat thorny. They are willing to use that personal expertise to implement better solutions for the organization. This is

by far the least frequently used approach, with leaders relying on being the expert only 5 percent of the time.

The companion behavior most associated with being an expert is innovation.

Three approaches done extremely well lifts a leader into the top 10% of all leaders in an organization. Given that most start with one or two, the challenge for the great bulk of leaders is to add a third.

Who needs to be more inspirational?

Developing a strength in these areas is not something that is meant for just a few people at the top of the pyramid. Nor is it appropriate for just middle management. There is a need for this kind of mentality and mindset to permeate the entire organization at every level.

It is obviously helpful if the senior leadership of an organization is inspiring and motivating. These individuals have broad influence and raise the bar for everyone. However, the CEO of most organizations does not interact on a daily basis with the sales force or those in a factory. The

supervisors and front-line managers are the ones who impact the great bulk of the employee population. Their ability to inspire has the strongest impact on the largest numbers of people.

Little things count

The data is in. We've done the research and we know that organizations will experience a significant increase in productivity and performance as they focus on this ability to inspire.

Some believe that inspiration is just something that leaders do on big occasions.

They see it as a yearly speech where leaders get up in front of all the employees and gets them all revved up and inspired. Inspiration is much more than this. Everything a leader does every day has an impact on the employees. When a leader comes to work in the morning and is in a bad mood, that counts. When a leader comes in and shares with colleagues their optimism, excitement, and passion for the work, that counts. When a leader comes in, ducks into their office, and hides in their cave all day, that counts. When a leader takes a few minutes to go around and ask people how they're doing, thank

them, and encourage them to do more, that counts. Everything leaders do counts. Everything every employee does on every level counts.

When a leader takes a few minutes to go around and ask people how they're doing, thank them, and encourage them to do more, that counts.

About Us

Zenger Folkman relentlessly seeks to rise above the inconsistent, and sometimes misleading, nature of popular leadership philosophies and beliefs brought on by opinion. The discipline of leadership and those who pursue it deserve better. Our most valuable asset is the expertise of combining hard data and statistical analysis with logical explanations and actionable application that help individual leaders thrive and organizations succeed.