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**LEADERSHIP**  
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# Unlocking the Mystery of Inspiring Leadership

*Jack Zenger, Joe Folkman, and Scott Edinger*

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## In This Chapter

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- The importance of inspiring and motivating behavior.
  - Why inspiring and motivating behavior has remained a mystery.
  - The 10 qualities that set inspiring and motivating leaders apart.
  - How leaders can make an emotional connection with those they lead.
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One of the more common terms we have heard used to describe individuals who are inspiring is “charisma.” Though not a perfect match, for a variety of reasons, it is illustrative that charismatic behavior has been recognized as being both extremely important for leaders and yet highly mysterious. Yet despite its importance, little attempt has been made to develop it within leaders. This chapter describes a unique approach to both defining and analyzing it so that its components may be understood and ways provided to develop it. Using an empirical approach, we break down inspiring or charismatic behavior into required attributes, and we explain how inspiring leaders make an emotional connection with their employees.

## **Mysteries Block Progress**

As a prelude to looking at the mystery of inspiring and motivating behavior, let's look at a former medical mystery, and how it blocked progress in healing. About 5 percent of people will develop a stomach ulcer at some time in their life. For most of the past century, it was assumed that the cause of ulcers was excess acid in the stomach that resulted from stress, an incorrect diet, and mistakes in general lifestyle. These ulcers inflamed the wall of the stomach and sometimes perforated the stomach wall and became bleeding ulcers. Physicians recommended that patients eat bland diets and avoid stress. These recommendations seemed impeccably logical because extreme stress was known to produce a surplus of stomach acid. Some foods were known to either be more acidic or to cause the stomach to produce more acid, and so these were also removed from people's diets. These treatments, however, were largely ineffective—because the basic assumptions about the causes of stomach ulcers were for the most part wrong.

In 1982, two Australian scientists discovered that a bacterium, *helicobacter pylori*, was the cause of more than 90 percent of stomach ulcers. This startling discovery led, of course, to radically different treatments—using antibiotics to kill the bacteria. Without this discovery, we can only assume that physicians would still be prescribing bland diets and stress avoidance for ulcer patients and experiencing minimal healing. Today we seldom hear of people with stomach ulcers.

## **A Leadership Mystery**

With this story of solved mysteries in mind, let's switch to a totally different arena, the study of leadership. Despite all the research that has been done on the nature of leadership, both practitioners and scholars have long acknowledged the existence of a mystery. What's more, we have described this in terms that readily concede that it is something that we simply do not understand.

This mystery is the quality that sets inspiring or charismatic behavior apart from other types of behavior. Throughout history, those people seen as possessing the attribute of charisma have had powerful influence on others because people were attracted to them. And this charisma enabled them to achieve remarkable outcomes. The word “charisma” comes from the Greek word meaning “gift,” which conceptually reinforces the notion that this attribute is a unique quality bestowed upon some and not others by an unseen hand. No one knew from whence it came. Because of that perceived reality, the topic of charisma was somewhat out of bounds as far as research and formal development were

concerned. The consequence was that unlike other leadership skills—such as leading effective meetings, giving compelling oral presentations, or delegating—no one attempted to teach charisma.

Despite the rather mysterious nature of inspiration or charisma, the fact that it was labeled allowed observers to say things like “Well, the reason she has been so effective in her role as vice president of operations is that she’s so inspirational or charismatic.” Others hearing this would nod their agreement and concur: “Yes, she’s extremely charismatic.” Everyone pretended that they understood what was meant. In truth, no one had a clear idea of what the others meant, other than that this person possessed a distinctive quality.

For those involved in leadership development, the questions were even more profound. Not only was there the question of understanding charisma and being able to define it but also, and more important, the question of whether it can be learned or acquired. Do charismatic or inspiring leaders behave only in one way, or does charisma have several “flavors”? These are the questions that piqued our interest, and for which we believe we have found some answers.

## **Disagreements About Charisma**

In fairness, there have been a few attempts to describe or define charisma. Some have argued that charisma has to do with charm and attractiveness. Often this has been equated with being highly extroverted. Thus, the stereotype of the charismatic person has been someone who enters a room with abounding confidence, speaking in a loud voice and commanding everyone’s attention. Or it could be the highly ingratiating person who rivets their attention on you and makes you feel as if you are the only person there. Some would equate charisma with the nobility of the cause that a leader pursues. Others have contended that it describes a leader’s willingness to take major risks. Still others have identified charisma with a self-sacrificing quality.

Charismatic leaders have often been identified with somewhat unconventional behavior, with proponents of this view arguing that this is what caused them to stand out. Being highly determined was also argued to be a necessary attribute of being charismatic.

Our experience has been that if you ask 20 people to describe “charisma,” you will get at least 30 different answers. (And if you keep probing, you could easily reach 40 or 50 answers, because most people invariably come up with more than one. As we have said, there are more than a few disagreements about what it is.)

## Why Understanding Charisma Is Important

Let's cut to the chase. Understanding charisma is important for two reasons:

1. Our research confirms that being “inspiring and motivating”—which we’re proposing as the best operational definition of charisma that we can find—is the single most important leadership competency.
2. Being “inspiring and motivating” is the leadership competency on which leaders receive the lowest overall scores from their manager, their peers, and those who report to them.

Ponder this for a moment. This most important leadership quality is at the same moment also the one on which leaders get their lowest scores. That isn't a good combination.

In researching this important issue, we first analyzed data on more than 10,000 leaders to determine which of all the leadership competencies were most powerful in predicting the best leaders' effectiveness. We applied four tests:

- We compared the competencies that separated the best from the worst leaders.
- We compared the competencies that separated the best leaders from those who were merely average.
- We looked at the competency that correlated most highly with employee engagement and commitment.
- We asked subordinates what skill they most wanted in their leader.

To our surprise, the answer to all four tests was the same: “Inspires and motivates to high performance.” We had not anticipated that four such different tests would lead to exactly the same answer.

Second, when we looked at the overall scores on the competencies for those 12,720 leaders, we also observed that the lowest-ranking competency was “inspires and motivates to high performance.” (Note, however, that this was not a low score in absolute terms—in fact, with a composite ranking of 3.51 on a scale of five points, the average here is certainly adequate. It just happened to be the lowest ranked. Yet it is the combination of this stack ranking and our data indicating the critical importance of this competency that was most troubling.) For the data, see figure 18-1.

## Deconstructing Inspiration

When the everyday objects around us were more mechanical, it was often fun to take them apart. It becomes clear what makes a mechanical alarm clock work when you take it apart

**Figure 18-1. Mean Scores of 16 Differentiating Competencies**

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and reassemble it. Such an analysis is easy when the object is simple and the parts can be disassembled, picked up, and put back together. It also helps if the process of deconstructing doesn't completely destroy the object, once and for all.

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 subordinates and on organizational performance. It allows the researcher to "look inside" leaders and analyze their perceived behavior in an unobtrusive and nondestructive way.

Here's what we did. We found those leaders who received the highest scores on "inspires and motivates to high performance" from their manager, their peers, and those who report to them. We then analyzed what behaviors differentiated this group of leaders from all the others. Luckily, this process was noninvasive. Better yet, it was based on large bodies of empirical data. No one needed to speculate about what makes people inspiring, provided the questions making up the 360-degree feedback were sufficiently comprehensive and addressed a wide range of important behaviors.

We readily acknowledge that, from a research standpoint, it would be nirvana to have a lengthy list of 350 questions that probe every conceivable behavior. But we live in a practical world. Respondents simply won't stand still for exceedingly lengthy questionnaires. If you want high participation and completion rates, you must be reasonable. Our instrument normally has 52 items—each vetted extensively with thousands of leaders as the most predictive items related to a leader's ability to meet organizational objectives. In addition, these are the most robust items in terms of separating the best from the least effective leaders. But we make no pretense at measuring everything.

## **What Inspiring Leaders Do Differently**

We found 10 qualities that set inspiring and motivating leaders apart from all the rest. These 10 fell into three arenas:

- attributes
- behaviors
- emotion.

Let's look briefly at each.

### **Attributes**

The first was a set of attributes, or somewhat broad and general qualities:

- role model
- change champion
- initiative.

It is clear that inspiring and motivating leaders are excellent examples of what they want others to do. How consciously or unconsciously they do this, we don't know. But people watch them 24/7, and there are never "time-outs" or vacations from being the leader.

The other two attributes describe the fact that inspiring leaders are constantly challenging the organization to change. They are a continual driving force to make things happen for the better. Their fingerprints are all over many initiatives. It has long been acknowledged that one of the most distinguishing differences between leadership and management is that managers make things run efficiently but leaders focus more on change. This change may mean moving in a new direction. It may also mean climbing to a new plateau of performance. But leaders are not content with the status quo.

### **Behaviors**

We also found six more discrete, actionable behaviors used by inspiring leaders. The importance of some of these was a bit surprising to us, but none of them come as a huge shock:

- stretch goals
- clear vision and direction
- communication
- developing people
- teamwork
- innovation.

## Emotion

The third major finding had to do with the importance of emotion. This had enormously high correlations with inspiring and motivating behavior. The more we analyzed the role of emotion, the more it seemed to be the energy source that makes things move. It turns things on and propels them forward.

An important concept, however, is that the emotion of which we speak is not necessarily emanating from the leader; instead, foremost, it is the emotion that is being evoked within the subordinate. It is also the feeling that is created on the part of the subordinate about the leader or the project on which they are embarked.

Most of us have firsthand experience watching this occur. Imagine yourself in a meeting where there is one extremely negative, dour, or angry participant. This person's behavior changes the meeting's tone and climate, stifling its productivity and creativity, and sucking the energy out of the room. But if this person could somehow be removed from the meeting and replaced with a cheerful, engaged, optimistic, contributing individual, on a psychological level the sun comes out and the climate of the meeting is transformed. The dark clouds disperse, and the meeting takes on a totally different tone. The bottom line is that emotions are contagious, and a leader's emotions are extremely contagious because they are multiplied by his or her power role in the group.

## Can Leaders Learn to Make an Emotional Connection?

We've learned that most people believe that the attributes noted above can be learned. Also, most people believe that the specific skills listed above can be acquired. But when it comes to making an emotional connection and arousing emotions in others, there appears to be a widespread belief that these cannot be learned. This may indeed be the reason why inspiring behavior or charisma has been labeled a gift.

If there was only one way for leaders to make this emotional connection, we would be more likely to concede that it can't be learned. But if there are multiple ways, the answer is much more likely to be "yes." This likelihood led us to conduct further research to see if we could better understand the various ways leaders make an emotional connection with their colleagues.



## Why We Label Some People as Inspiring

To better understand how inspiring leaders make an emotional connection with their colleagues, we identified the 1,000 leaders who were best at inspiring and motivating others from a database of more than 10,000 leaders. We then did a statistical analysis that helped us identify the different approaches leaders used to inspire. From this analysis, we discovered that leaders use six approaches:

- the enhancers
- the enthusiasts
- the experts
- the visionaries
- the principled
- the drivers.

Some leaders are particularly effective using one of these approaches rather than another one, and, thus, for them, this one approach clearly dominates. More often, however, leaders use several approaches, and these leaders appear to be the most influential ones. They don't do just one thing. Indeed, it is the ability to combine several of these approaches that lifts people to a high level of motivation and performance. Let's look at the key characteristics for each approach.

First, the *enhancers*:

- Often described as sociable and friendly.
- Get team commitment to a difficult goal by using their strong relationships with all team members.
- Like to build supportive relationships.

Second, the *enthusiasts*:

- Often described as passionate about their work.
- Get their teams committed to a difficult goal by sharing their passion and excitement for the task.
- Like getting others excited about a project.

Third, the *experts*:

- Often described as very knowledgeable.
- Get their teams committed to a difficult goal by using their knowledge and expertise.

Fourth, the *visionaries*:

- Are often described as always looking for a better way.
- Get their teams committed to a difficult goal by devising and sharing a strategy for achieving the goal.
- Like coming up with a new strategy for accomplishing a task.

Fifth, the *principled*:

- Are often described as honest and ethical.
- Get their teams committed to a difficult goal by always honoring their commitments.
- Like being able to consistently do the right thing in the right way.
- Like assignments where people honor their commitments and consistently deliver on their promises.

And sixth, the *drivers*:

- Are often described as highly focused on achieving the outcome.
- Get their teams committed to a difficult goal by leading the effort themselves and pushing each member to keep up the pace.
- Enjoy accomplishing something difficult.
- Seek assignments calling for extensive effort that ultimately pays off in success.

Four main conclusions are apparent about these six approaches. The first is the widely different personality styles that are represented. The person who gravitates toward the energetic and enthusiastic approach is clearly different from the visionary, who tends to be more cerebral. The enhancer is at the polar opposite end of a continuum from the person who operates as a driver. Yet each of these approaches can enable a leader to make an emotional connection with those being led.

Second, being inspirational is not confined to one specific pattern of behavior. There is no one single mold for an inspirational leader.

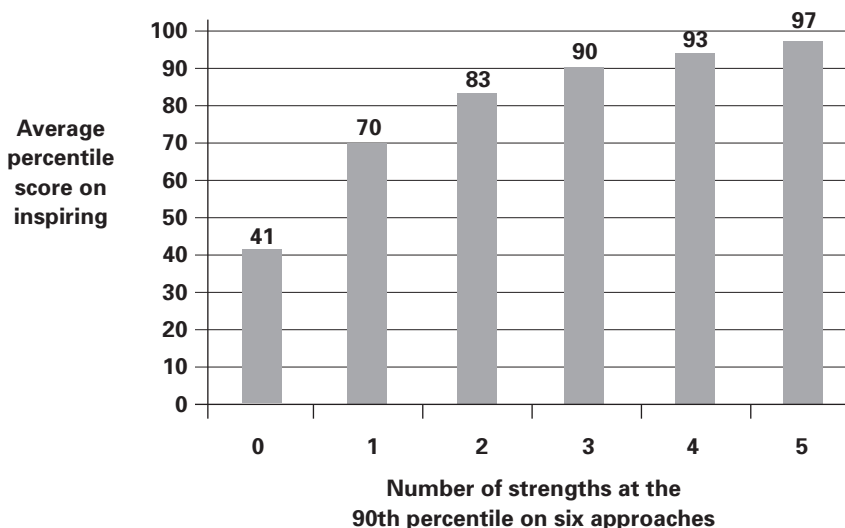
Third, this opens the door for practically everyone to find one or more approaches that he or she can use authentically.

Fourth, the use of several of these approaches by one leader greatly increases the likelihood of him or her being perceived as an inspiring leader. Indeed, we have some strong data to support this conclusion; see figure 18-2. The good news is that nothing in any of the six approaches is out of the realm of being learned and effectively practiced by any leader who seriously wants to become more inspiring.

## Conclusion

Over the past years, but before doing the research presented above, we talked with many leaders about the competency of “inspiring and motivating to high performance.” The response essentially was “Well, that’s just not me” or “I’m not that kind of person.” In hindsight, it is clear that many of these leaders assumed the only way to inspire was to be a highly voluble, energetic enthusiast. What’s more, they knew they didn’t have that type of personality and were not about to act in such an uncomfortable, phony way. Our recent research clearly dismisses that excuse because it shows that inspiration comes in many forms and

**Figure 18-2. The Impact of Multiple Approaches on Being Perceived as an Inspiring Leader**



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flavors. Certain leadership actions are highly correlated with being seen as inspirational, and these can be learned. The basic attributes of inspiring leaders can be acquired. There simply are no excuses for leaders not to find genuine ways to inspire their colleagues, who crave this from them.

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## About the Authors

**Jack Zenger** is the cofounder and CEO of Zenger Folkman. In 1994, he was inducted into the HRD Hall of Fame. He is the best-selling author or coauthor of eight books on teams, productivity improvement, and leadership, including *Results-Based Leadership* (Harvard Business School Press, 1999), which was voted by the Society for Human Resources Management as the best business book in 2000; *The Extraordinary Leader: Turning Good Managers into Great Leaders* (McGraw-Hill, 2002); *Handbook for Leaders*; *The Inspiring Leader: Unlocking the Secrets of How Extraordinary Leaders Motivate* (McGraw-Hill, 2009); and, most recently, *The Extraordinary Coach: How the Best Leaders Help Others Grow* (McGraw-Hill, 2010). He has also authored or coauthored more than 50 articles on leadership, productivity, e-learning, training, and measurement.

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