



THE INSPIRING LEADER: UNLOCKING THE SECRET BEHIND HOW EXTRAORDINARY LEADERS MOTIVATE

By Dr. Jack Zenger and Dr. Joseph Folkman

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 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 she has been so effective in her role is because she’s charismatic.” Others hearing this 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

Our firm works with leading organizations to create systems for developing their leaders. One of the compo-

nents 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 360 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 4 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 boss

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.

WHY OUR HIGH INTEREST IN INSPIRING AND MOTIVATING BEHAVIOR

Described above are the four reasons that explain why the competency of Inspires and Motivates to High Performance was 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.

Not only is there a question of understanding it and being able to define it; but 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 simply not moving. What typically happens with parents is the volume goes up, 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 exactly 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

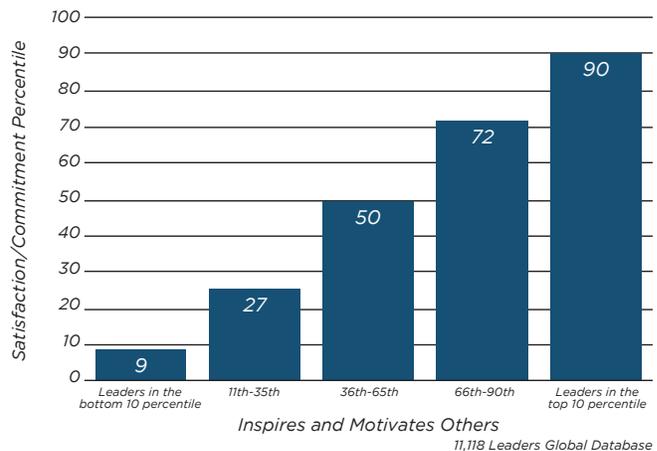
of you know how to pull harder? How many of you, if you were challenged to pull more, would know what to do?” This question left many of the audience members silent. The challenge behind becoming inspiring is “Do people know how to do it?”

The subject of motivation in the workplace has been recently addressed by Daniel Pink in his book, *Drive*.¹ 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?”

This graph 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 his or her ability to be Inspiring and Motivating, the level of employee Satisfaction/Commitment goes way up.

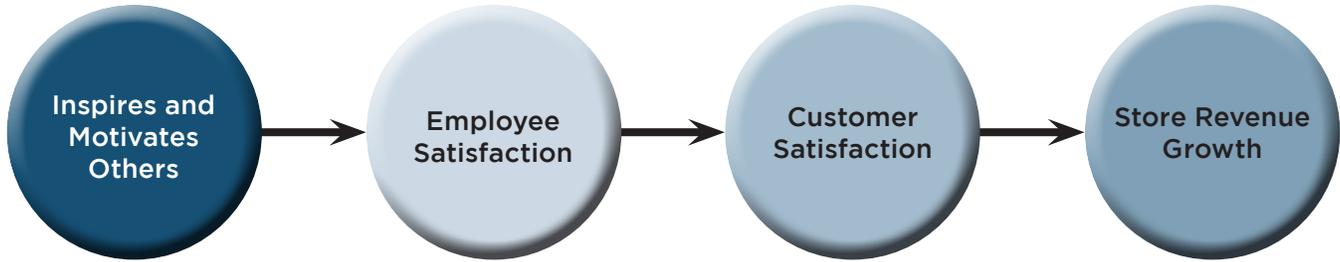
Impact on Employee Engagement



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.

The chart you see on the following page is a specific example that has been published in the Harvard Business

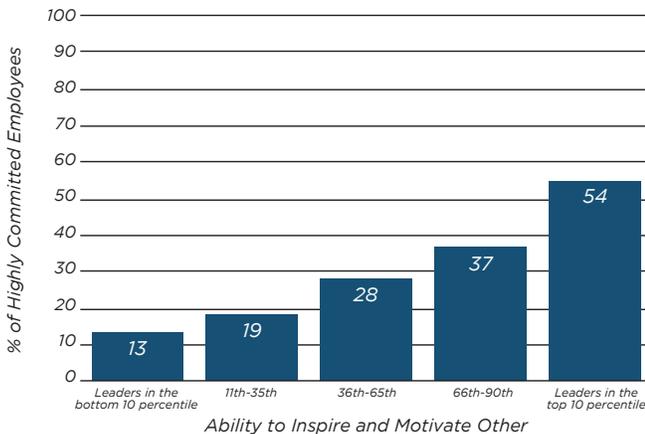
¹ Daniel Pink, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, Riverhead Books, 2009.



Review about Sears.² For every 5-point improvement in employee satisfaction, customer satisfaction goes up 1.3%, which in turn increased revenue 0.5%, which if you are a firm with \$50 billion in revenue, translates into \$250 million a year in added revenue. Best Buy, JC Penney and Marriott Corporation 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. The graph shows the significant difference between the bottom ten percent who have only thirteen percent of their employees willing to go the extra mile, compared to the top ten percent who have more than fifty percent.

Percentage of Employees who “Go the Extra Mile”



“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 subordinates and on 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”

² *The Employee-Customer-Profit Chain at Sears: Rucci, Kim, and Quinn, HBR Jan/Feb 1998.*

from their manager, peers and those who report to them. 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. Making the Emotional Connection
2. Setting Stretch Goals
3. Clear Vision
4. Communication
5. Developing Others
6. Being Collaborative
7. Innovative
8. Taking Initiative
9. Champion Change

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

For example, take a look at the companion behavior above, “Develop Others.” Leaders who care about developing their subordinates 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 such conversations inspires subordinates. 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 “Making The Emotional Connection” to “Setting Stretch Goals,” to being a better creator of a “Clear Vision” and giving people a direction about where they should be going; 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?”

Warren Buffett is a very inspirational leader whom people trust because of his expertise as an investor and business leader. He is folksy, downhome and generally understated. If he invests in railroads, railroad stocks go up; if he sells, they go down. He definitely inspires others who invest and lead companies.

But so does Oprah Winfrey inspire people. Her method is very different. She is warm and inviting, and is probably known as the best interviewer in the world. Very public and more flamboyant, she too is a successful businessperson. Two people, both inspiring, but going about it in completely different ways.

How can we understand how people make these emotional connections differently 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 found six very different and effective approaches that people used to be inspiring.

We determined that there were six 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% of the time as a primary or secondary approach; while the last two were used far less frequently.

1. Driver

What do drivers do? These 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 *setting stretch goals* and *taking initiative*.

2. Principled

These leaders' 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 who 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 practicing *powerful and prolific communication*, placing emphasis on the *development of people*, 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 extraverted individuals who generate energy and excitement. Enthusiasts breathe life into organizations.



The companion behavior that is most identified with this approach is the practice of *making an emotional connection* via their enthusiasm.

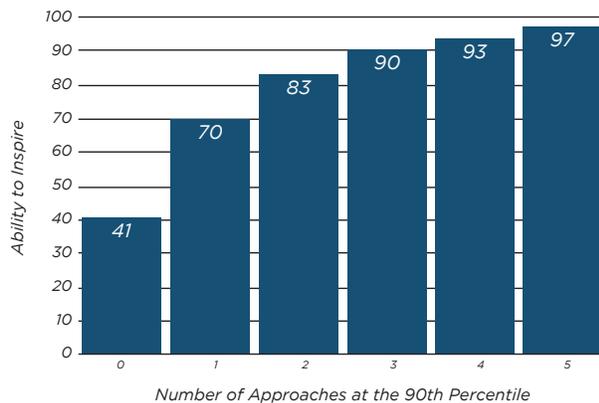
6. The Expert

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% of the time.

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

IS THERE A BEST APPROACH?

Each approach is beneficial, however, leaders have a tendency to use or favor one more than another. Based on personality, it is clear that some approaches come easier to some people than another. Most leaders we've analyzed seem to gravitate toward a primary and secondary approach. However, the more approaches a leader uses, the more likely it is that this person will be perceived as an inspiring leader.



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 the middle management. There is a need for this kind of mentality and mind set 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 first level 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 that yearly speech where leaders get up in front of all the employees and get 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 is sharing with colleagues her optimism, excitement and passion for the work ; that counts. When a leader comes in, and ducks into their office and hides in their cave all day; that counts. But if a leader will just take 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.



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The CLEMMER Group is [Zenger Folkman's](#) Canadian Strategic Partner. Jim Clemmer was co-founder of The Achieve Group (which became Canada's largest leadership training firm) when they worked with Jack Zenger's previous company, Zenger Miller.

ZENGER FOLKMAN

Elevating Leadership Strengths

Zenger Folkman helps organizations flourish by increasing the effectiveness of leaders at all levels. Our unique, strengths-based development methodology enables leaders to move faster and higher. Each offering is solidly grounded in research, utilizing our extensive empirical database. The end results are statistically significant improvements in how leaders lead, how their employees engage and how their companies profit; allowing both leaders and organizations to soar to new heights.

Jack Zenger, D.B.A., is the co-founder and CEO of Zenger Folkman, and is considered a world expert in the field of leadership development. A highly respected and sought after speaker, consultant and executive coach, Jack was honored in 2011 with the American Society of Training and Development's *Lifetime Achievement Award in Workplace Learning and Performance*. He is the author or co-author of twelve books on leadership and teams, including the best seller: *The Extraordinary Leader: Turning Good Managers into Great Leaders* (McGraw-Hill, 2009).

Joe Folkman, Ph.D. Joe is a frequent keynote speaker and conference presenter, a consultant to some of the world's most successful organizations, and the author or co-author of six books. His research has been published in The Wall Street Journal's National Business Employment Weekly, Training and Development and Executive Excellence.

CONTACT US **phone** 519.748.1044 **email** service@clemmergroup.com **internet** www.clemmergroup.com