

# UNLIMITED POTENTIAL

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Newsletter

## 4 Uncommon Leadership Qualities...& 5 Common Myths

Everyone agrees great leaders have vision, energy, authority and good strategic direction. They must also have enthusiastic followers; leadership requires skills in persuading others to commit to company goals and embrace initiatives determined by others.

In today's environment of Gen-Xers and Millennial workers, it isn't that easy to engage "empowered" people.

For all the leadership training workshops – and despite the thousands of business books published every year – very few people can confidently explain how they take charge, engage others and develop their leadership skills.

"Why should anyone be led by you?" It's a great question, as well as the title of an excellent September-October 2000 *Harvard Business Review* article coauthored by Robert Goffee and Gareth Jones. It's worth summarizing here.

### 4 Qualities

To be inspirational, leaders need four essential qualities besides vision and energy. These traits are probably not what you'd expect, but they can be honed by those willing to dig deeply to find their inner values.

Few executives embark on the necessary personal-development journey because it requires painful soul-searching and challenging one's assumptions and beliefs. Not everyone wants to undertake such intense personal work with an executive coach or consultant. Those who do, however, significantly expand their repertoire of leadership skills.

Inspirational leaders share four unexpected qualities:

1. They selectively show their weaknesses. By exposing some vulnerability, exceptional leaders reveal their approachability and humanity. The



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key is to be discerning and maintain a level of comfort, while acknowledging any inherent risks.

2. **They rely heavily on intuition to gauge the appropriate timing and course of their actions.** Their ability to collect and interpret soft data helps them determine when and how to act.
3. **They manage employees with “tough empathy.”** Inspirational leaders empathize passionately—yet realistically—with people, and they care intensely about the work employees do.
4. **They reveal their differences.** Effective leaders capitalize on what’s unique about themselves. Some in top positions may not have the right kind of unique qualities, or they fail to share them. As a consequence, they never elicit the necessary energetic followership. Few people want to be led by them.

The focus here is not on financial results per se, but on how leaders capture the hearts, minds and energy of those who report to them. In truth, great results are hard to obtain without these qualities.

## Reveal Your Weaknesses

**A**dmitting a flaw or weakness shows people you’re human. This is essential for building trust and rapport. When you share that you’re not a morning person, can be somewhat disorganized or are nervous when speaking in front of large audiences, you’re being transparent and authentic.

This authenticity displays your willingness to trust people enough to be vulnerable and real – and they generally want to return that trust. Exposing a weakness helps get people on board. If you solely communicate your strengths, others will have no desire to help you out. Revealing weaknesses creates a collaborative environment, building solidarity between followers and leaders.

That said, you should select which flaw to reveal wisely. Never expose a weakness that can be seen as a fatal flaw critical to a central aspect of your professional role. Confessing to a lack of attention to details is inappropriate in a financial leadership role. It would be better to admit to tangential flaws that don’t affect your performance.

Another well-known strategy is to pick a weakness that can be considered a strength, such as being a workaholic. Again, the most important quality here is authenticity. If you expose a vulnerability that isn’t real, people will be quick to spot the incongruence. You won’t gain anybody’s support. You shouldn’t

feign absentmindedness to cover up inconsistency or dishonesty.

## Refine Your Sensors

**I**nspirational leaders have finely tuned situation sensors. They can sniff out and interpret “soft data” – environmental signals that aren’t spelled out or overtly expressed. Leaders with great sensors can easily gauge unexpressed feelings and accurately judge when relationships aren’t working. They can read silences and pick up on nonverbal cues.

Sensing can create great problems, however. It’s very easy to misinterpret or misjudge based on personal assumptions and biases. In making fine judgments about how far they can go, leaders risk losing their followers.

For this reason, sensing capability must always be framed by reality testing. The most gifted leaders always validate their perceptions with a trusted adviser or member of the inner team.

## Practice Tough Empathy

**R**eal leaders don’t need an interpersonal-skills training program to convince people they care. They already do. Successful leaders empathize fiercely with the people they lead and care intensely about the work.

Tough empathy means giving people what they need, which isn’t always what they want. It balances respect for the individual and the task at hand. Attending to both isn’t easy, particularly when times are challenging.

Caring leaders must give selflessly to the people around them and learn when to pull back. When this is necessary, it’s tough to be tough.

## Dare to Be Different

**I**nspirational leaders capitalize on their unique qualities, using their differences to great advantage. This is probably the most important trait of the four we’ve been discussing.

The most effective leaders deliberately use their differences to maintain a social distance. Even when drawing their followers close to them, they also signal a separateness.

This may be a distinctly different dress style, physical appearance or manner of speaking—or it may be a larger-than-life personality. Typically, such leaders will show imagination, loyalty, expertise or even a unique handshake. Anything can be a difference,

it's important to communicate it.

Many people are hesitant to communicate their uniqueness. It may take years for them to become fully aware of what sets them apart. This is a serious disadvantage in a world where networking is so critical and teams need to be formed overnight.

Inspirational leaders use separateness to motivate others to perform better. They recognize instinctively that followers will push themselves if their leader is just a little aloof. After all, leadership is not a popularity contest.

The danger is that leaders can overdifferentiate themselves in their determination to express their separateness. Losing contact with followers is fatal. Once they create too much distance, leaders lose their ability to sense out situations, identify with people and care about them.

## Leadership in Action

There are no universal formulas for becoming an inspirational leader. That's why so many of the recipe-style business books fail—the ones that prescribe leadership according to Moses, Shakespeare, Lee Iacocca or Jack Welch.

No one can ape another leader. The four qualities discussed here are essential for inspirational leadership, but they cannot be used mechanically. Indeed, there is a lot left unspecified in each.

It's up to you to develop your own leadership style. The challenge is for you to be yourself but with more skill. Accomplish this by making yourself increasingly aware of the four leadership qualities and manipulating them to come up with a personal style that works for you.

What's needed will vary from context to context. It's up to you to develop and refine your intuition and sensors, find ways to be different, selectively reveal your flaws and empathize while remaining steadfast.

There are no cookie-cutter leadership development programs that will turn out inspirational leaders with these four qualities. But it's possible for most leaders to become aware of these qualities and use them advantageously.

Consider doing the exploratory work with a trusted executive coach or consultant. Leaders who are confident enough to risk being vulnerable and do the work will grow in ways that ultimately benefit their organizations and the people they lead.

## Five Common Myths About Leaders

Executives often profoundly misunderstand what makes an inspirational leader. Here are five common myths:

1. **Everyone can be a leader.** *Not true.* Self-knowledge and authenticity are necessary for leadership, and not everyone has them (or strives to develop them).

Individuals must also want to be leaders, and many talented employees have no desire to shoulder the responsibility. Some may profess interest, but they're primarily focused on the benefits versus costs to them. Others prefer to devote more time to their families and private lives.

2. **Leaders deliver business results.** *Not always.* If results were always a matter of good leadership, picking leaders would be easy. In every case, the best strategy would be to go after people in companies with the best results. Things are not that simple.

Businesses in quasi-monopolistic industries can often do very well with competent management rather than great leadership. Equally, some well-led businesses do not necessarily produce results, particularly in the short term.

3. **People who get to the top are leaders.** *Not necessarily.* One of the most persistent misperceptions is that people in executive positions are leaders. But people who make it to the top may have done so because of political acumen, not necessarily because of true leadership quality. What's more, real leaders are found all over the organization, from the executive suite to the shop floor.

By definition, leaders are simply people who have followers, and rank doesn't have much to do with this. Effective military organizations like the U.S. Navy have long realized the importance of developing leaders throughout the organization.

4. **Leaders are great coaches.** *Rarely.* A whole cottage industry has blossomed around the belief that good leaders ought to be good coaches. But this thinking assumes a single person can both inspire the troops and impart technical skills.

Of course, it's possible for great leaders to also be great coaches, but we see this only occasionally.

## Five Common Myths About Leaders, continued

More typical are leaders like Steve Jobs, whose distinctive strengths lie in the ability to excite others through vision, rather than coaching talents.

5. **Women make better leaders than men.** *It depends.* One popular myth asserts women are relationship-oriented and nurturing, so they make more natural leaders. But are the women competitive enough to make it to the top typical of this stereotype, or are they exceptional people regardless of gender? Are we capable of sorting out our own stereotypical biases?

Can we judge leaders on their actual qualities, abilities and results? Are our perceptions colored by our preconceived biases about appearance, education and class? If we acknowledge these assumptions and beliefs, we may be better equipped to choose those who will lead us.

Clearly, becoming aware of our own participation in these four uncommon leadership qualities will help each of us become more inspirational.

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