

Unlocking the Mystery of Inspiring Leadership

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Introduction

About five percent of the population will develop a stomach ulcer at some time in their lives. For many years, it was assumed that the cause of stomach ulcers was excess acid in the stomach that came from stress, diet and general lifestyle. The wall of the stomach became inflamed and sometimes this was so severe that the stomach would be perforated, in which case it often became a bleeding ulcer. Physicians recommended that patients eat bland diets and avoid stress because excessive stress and the production of stomach acid were known to go together. Some foods were thought to either be more acidic or to cause the stomach to produce more stomach acid.

Then in 1982 two Australian scientists discovered that the bacterium “*Helicobacter pylori*” was the cause of more than 90% of stomach ulcers. Discovering that the basic cause of ulcers was something totally different than had been assumed led, of course, to radically different treatment. Without that discovery we can only assume that physicians would still be prescribing bland diets and stress avoidance for ulcer patients.

A Leadership Mystery

Let us now switch to a totally different arena, the study of leadership. Despite all the research that has taken place about the nature of leadership, practitioners and scholars have long acknowledged that many aspects of leadership remain a mystery. What’s more, we have described these mysteries in terms that readily concede that they are something that we simply do not understand. We would like to address one such mystery.

Often, leaders have been identified as possessing some remarkable quality that sets them apart from others. This quality enables them to have a powerful influence on others. It causes people to be attracted to them. It enables them to achieve remarkable outcomes. We have labeled this quality “charisma,” coming from the Greek word meaning “gift.” It was thought that this quality was a gift that was bestowed upon some and not others. No one knew where it came from. Unlike other leadership skills such as giving compelling oral presentations or delegating, no one attempted to teach charisma.

But having given this quality a label allowed observers to say things like, “Well, the reason she has been so effective in her role is that she’s charismatic.” Others hearing this would nod their agreement and concur. Everyone pretended that they understood what was meant. In truth, no one had the faintest idea what “charisma” was, other than that there was a special quality a person possessed.

For those involved in leadership development the questions were even more profound. 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 charismatic or inspiring leaders behave or does charisma have several “flavors?”

Why “Charisma” or the Ability to Inspire is Important

It 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. It is the leadership competency on which leaders overall receive the lowest scores from their managers, peers and those who report to them.

Ponder that for a moment. It is the most important leadership quality and at the same time, it is the one area where leaders experience the greatest challenge in achieving excellence. That isn’t a good combination. How did we come to this conclusion?

First, we analyzed data on roughly 14,500 leaders to determine which of all leadership competencies was most powerful in predicting their effectiveness. To do this, we performed four studies:

1. We compared the best and the worst
2. We compared the best to the average
3. We looked at the competency that correlated most highly with employee engagement and commitment
4. We asked subordinates what skill they most wanted in their leaders

The information gathered by these studies was the same; each identified “inspires and motivates to high performance” as the key differentiator.

Then, when we looked at the overall scores on the competencies we measured for those 14,500 leaders we observed that the lowest ranking competency was “inspires and motivates to high performance.”

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. Here’s what we did. We found those leaders who received the highest scores on “inspires and motivates to high performance” from their manager, peers and those who report to them. We then analyzed what behaviors differentiated that group from all the others. Luckily this process was non-invasive. Better yet, it was based on large bodies of empirical data. No one needed to speculate about what makes people inspiring, provided the questions comprising the 360-degree feedback were comprehensive and analyzed the important behaviors. Out of that research came three major conclusions.

What Inspiring Leaders Do Differently

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

1) Attributes

The first was a set of attributes or somewhat broad and general qualities. These were:

- Role Model
- Change Champion
- Initiative

It is clear that inspiring and motivating leaders are excellent examples of what they want others to do. How conscious or unconscious this is, 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 constant and driving force to make things happen for the better. If status quo is the goal, then there is not a great deal of inspiration required.

2) 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 no one of them comes as a shock. These were:

- Stretch goals
- Clear vision and direction
- Communication
- Developing People
- Teamwork
- Innovation

3) Emotion

We hinted earlier that this quality of charisma or being inspiring may come in a variety of flavors. We have concluded that there is not just one way that it happens, but rather, there are many ways leaders can evoke emotion. Being highly energetic and enthusiastic, for example, is associated with powerful and proper use of emotion. The ability to make an emotional connection is another important key that allows leaders to inspire. We believe being inspirational hinges on the ability of the leader to evoke an emotional response in others, and does not merely rely on the emotion the leader personally projects.

Much research is currently showing the highly contagious nature of emotion and leaders are in a particularly powerful position to have their emotions infect those about them. Their position acts as an accelerant to any normal emotional contagion that occurs.

Inspiration and Motivation are the Energy Source for Leadership

To help us organize an approach for leaders to inspiring and motivating, we created the metaphor of a battery pack that is designed to power any device that requires an energy source. It seemed appropriate because, as we have learned, it is the ability to inspire and motivate others that gives leadership its energy.



This battery pack holds several individual batteries. It aligns the batteries' polarity, connects them, and enables them to deliver power to the device. The trio of attributes listed above forms the container for the battery pack and creates the "housing," so to say, for what it takes to inspire and motivate others. Those broad attributes are reflective of a leader's willingness to step into their role.

There is a switch to turn on the battery pack. That switch is indicated by a leader's use of emotion. As we previously mentioned, our research was clear that this was the most powerful tool a leader has at his or her disposal. Powerful, positive emotions turn the energy on. And as you can imagine, negative emotions shut down the flow of energy.

Into that battery pack the leader inserts one or more batteries representing each of the additional elements of being able to inspire and motivate others and creates progressively more energy. Which batteries get used at any one time doesn't make much difference, although our research indicates that having more battery power creates greater energy for inspiration. There are many useful combinations in which several batteries combine their energy to make good things happen. So a leader's ability to communicate powerfully a series of stretch goals that are clearly linked to a strategic direction has a multiplying effect. The exponential effect is simple; the more batteries that are used, the more energy is created.

Why We Label Some People as Inspiring

Our data indicates that inspiring leaders utilize a variety of ways to connect with those about them. They don't do just one thing. Indeed, it is the combination of several approaches that lifts people to a high level:

Conclusion

Becoming an inspiring leader is not limited to one set of core actions or values. Rather, inspiring leaders draw on a number of attributes and behaviors, all powered by their preferred emotional method, to be an inspiring leader or not. It is our suggestion that leaders implement one of the behaviors or attributes listed above and infuse it with positive emotion with their subordinates. Our research is definitive that by doing so, a leader will become more inspirational and, in turn, more productive and profitable.