



Inspirational Leadership

What does inspirational leadership look like in your organization? Let me ask: what impact do inspiring leaders have on performance, both organizationally, and at an individual level?

Consider this: while an employee's mindset is important to their overall performance, without support from their leadership, even the most committed and motivated employee may not reach their potential. This became very clear during the pandemic, as studies now find. When uncertainty and anxiety are high, employees must have clear expectations and emotional support.

Unfortunately, some leaders have risen to the top through marketing or hype. They sway others to do as they ask (or command) with a lack of genuine concern for their well-being. As a result, there is a large degree of distrust and reluctance.

Conversely, inspiring leaders take action because of their care and concern for others. You see, inspirational leadership is not about being *in charge*, it's about taking care of those *in our charge*. While rank or title may indicate leadership *authority*, they are not indicators of leadership *ability*.

Inspirational Leadership Can Be Developed

Inspiring leaders are often described by their innate traits, characteristics (i.e.: authenticity, passion, resilience, etc.), strengths, or title that describe their leadership style or level of authority. Fundamentally, inspirational leadership is the ability to positively influence and/or motivate others. In today's world, inspirational leadership is about connection: connecting with those you lead in ways that are meaningful to them.

The relationships you create determine your abilities as an influencer. If you build trust and practice empathy in your relationships, you'll create higher-quality connections. This may sound simple, but it poses certain challenges that require nuance and practice.

A Message from Nancy...

Let me ask you:

- Are the people on your team engaged and committed or just collecting a pay check?
- Do you have the right people in the right seats on the bus? Are *you* in the right seat?
- Is the high cost of turnover eating away your organization's bottom-line?
- Are your processes and procedures (or lack thereof) delivering productive and efficient results?
- How comfortable are the members of your senior team managing and leading others?



In today's highly competitive environment, it's no surprise that "*what got you here may not get you there.*"

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Fortunately, we can develop inspirational leadership. At the core is our ability to see those around us.

Why We Need Inspirational Leadership

In today's world, we need inspirational leadership.

In a 2017 survey recently published in [Harvard Business Review](#), 85% of 14,500 workers across a variety of industries said they were not working at full potential. Only 15% reported working at 100% of their potential and 16% reported less than 50%. What's happening in your organization? How do you motivate employees?

We know that external incentives or benefits alone are not enough to motivate workers. Great leaders inspire their people with *why* they do what they do, instead of the *what* and *how*. When employees believe their work matters; when they have a purpose that aligns with the mission of the organization and their leader, they are more creative and productive.

Have you noticed this? Inspired people are the glue that hold an organization together, especially during times of crisis and recovery. They care because their leaders skillfully communicate genuine care.

Engage the Heart and Mind

Great examples of this in action are those leaders who engage both the heart and mind. If you haven't heard it recently, I urge you to listen to the entire [speech of Martin Luther King Jr.](#) delivered on August 28, 1963. He didn't begin with "I have a plan." Nor did he open with the changes that needed to be made. He began by telling us *why*: why all people need to bond for a better future.

When we begin a communication with *why*, we engage the part of the brain most responsible for decision-making. Let's call it the WIIFM (what's in it for me) part of the brain. It searches for data on pleasure versus pain, friend or foe, help or hurt.

You see, while messages are simultaneously processed by all parts of the brain, the area most responsible for decision-making registers subconscious thoughts, lacks language, uses gut intuition, and is heavily influenced by feelings and drives for survival. And it impacts our level of trust. When leaders share a greater cause and higher purpose, listeners are sifting, sorting, and deciding whether and how much to trust, and ultimately, commit. Then, leaders can focus on the *how* and *what*.

How Leaders Inspire

The pressures of the pandemic have affected our communication. We've reverted to old school communication styles that are less effective.

You see, the traditional communication approach is to define the problem, analyze it, and recommend a solution. While this appears logical—it appeals to reason—it is actually limiting in that it only serves to pass on information to those who desire it, or are looking for direct orders.

If you want to inspire and motivate others, this approach does not work. Worse, it can create more problems. Employees who disagree, have other ideas, or ingrained habits won't respond well to a perceived command and control order, or a lecture on beliefs.

Have you noticed this? When a communication does not align with what we know or believe, we dismiss it as irrelevant or wrong. We question the source. All of this takes place in the part of our brain that is responsible for emotional reactions, rather than the areas of logic and reasoning. This is often the reason presentations bomb.

When confirmation bias has been activated, you face a skeptical, cynical, or hostile audience. We see this all the time in social media. Regardless of your intended message, it will be heard as reasons not to believe or act. And it's contagious.

Communication That Inspires

Leaders inspire their audience when they pay careful attention to communication details and understand the importance of:

- Word choice
- Patterns of words
- Order of patterns

Successful leaders don't rely on a single communication. As implementation proceeds, they reinforce communication and work with their people to co-create the future by continuing the conversation.

In addition to words, the language of leadership is most effective when you:

1. Can share intelligent stories and narratives
2. Display appropriate, congruent body language
3. Demonstrate an understanding of the audience's story and context

What Your Audience Wants to Hear

To be sure, inspiring leaders are always needed, in good times, and in times of crisis. It doesn't matter what industry you're in, the size of your organization, or your title. If you and your colleagues want to reach your full potential, you need inspirational leadership. Language matters.

Most of our communication is done electronically (email, phone, video-conference, etc.) and people aren't necessarily listening. They may be multi-tasking: preparing for their next meeting, thinking about others things, responding to texts, etc.) Inspiring leaders understand this, and use four methods to grab focused attention.

1. Sharing a personal story or message - sharing "why"
2. Triggering emotion - sharing "how"
3. Presenting trustworthy data or reliable source - sharing "what"
4. Using concise language, without relying on jargon (i.e. industry specific terms, abbreviations, etc.)

The Role of Positive and Negative Messaging

Studies have found that the combination of personal stories that trigger emotion are more than twice as likely to resonate with your audience. Negative messages are also more effective with attention-getting when they illustrate the seriousness of a problem, the trajectory, and how it was and can be overcome. However, negative messages can deter enthusiasm and actually demotivate people.

Positive messaging creates a desire to change and sparks imagination. If you want your employees to reach their full potential and/or change course, present stories and clear examples of how others are making a difference. This appeals to the heart, and the mind.

Inspirational leadership is not about imposing your will on your audience, rather, it's to enable your audience to see the possibilities and create their own conclusions. Practice telling positive, concise stories that illustrate how successful changes have occurred. This approach connects you and your audience on an emotional level, leading to action and willingness to imagine a new future.

What Your Audience Needs to Hear

As a leader, do you know what your audience really needs to hear to be inspired? How do they

respond to your appeals for change?

Inspirational leadership relies on the establishment of an emotional connection, as well as sound reasoning.

The Importance of Connection

At its core, inspirational leadership is about connection: connecting with those you lead in ways that are meaningful to them. You see, the relationships you create determine your abilities as a motivator. For example, if you are empathic and establish trust in your relationships, you'll create higher-quality connections. This may sound simple, but for leaders it poses certain challenges.

Generally speaking, leaders have access to others. Higher-quality connections are authentic: they require a certain amount of vulnerability and genuine respect. When there is an imbalance in access—when a leader has access to others and it is not reciprocated—trust may be weakened. Of course, too much vulnerability can be interpreted as weakness. When leaders demonstrate competency *and humanity*, trust and high-quality connections grow.

Inspirational leaders encourage individuals to speak truth to power. They create an environment where there is safe-space to share ideas, including disagreement and dissent. This enables greater collaboration and innovation.

The Importance of Compelling, Sound Reasoning

Any desire or willingness to change will wane unless it's reinforced by compelling, sound reasons. When we encounter new ideas, we can easily fall into a confirmation bias: we search for reasons to preserve our existing point of view.

Appeal to your audience in story forms that communicate:

- **Why:** why the change is needed
- **What:** what the change is and how it will impact them
- **How:** the change will be implemented
- **Why** this change will work: the sound reasoning

Leaders who inspire establish an emotional connection and stimulate a desire for a different future. Without an emotional connection, nothing happens. Inspirational leadership creates a scaffolding—a catalyst for a creative process—that enables an audience to see the world for themselves, view their relationships in a new way, and make progress in reaching their full potential.



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