



## A Source of Inspiration

Business leaders can produce results in any of three ways. Using *coercion*, such as intense pressure, direct threats, or personal intimidation of workers they may be able to force or compel the desired performance from their people. However, only the weakest executives will choose to rely on their power to do this, for it is a sure indication their abilities to lead are limited.

Applying *motivation*, they may convince, encourage, or incentivize employees to act in a manner that will produce the necessary results. Executives who rely on motivation believe they ultimately have to push people to deliver the desired results.

Through *inspiration*, leaders can energize individuals around interests and beliefs that are aligned with those of the enterprise. The greatest leaders are inspiring to those with whom they are engaged.

### What Inspires Us?

Inspiration is highly personal and different for everyone. People are inspired when they hold an emotional connection to anything that unlocks their passion and ignites their energy. They develop an intense determination to pursue a goal or objective. A vivid dream, an unforgettable image—even a simple word of encouragement—can be the basis of a lifetime of inspiration. Among the most common sources of inspiration are the visions we adopt, the challenges we accept, and the problems we encounter. The people we touch and the aesthetics of life that surround us also may serve as powerful sources of inspiration.

Visions are the ideas or images we hold of a desired or potential future state. For those individuals who agree with it, a given vision is a source of inspiration. Moreover, it provides direction and helps focus their activities.

Founder Bill Gates' vision of a personal computer on every desk inspired a generation of software engineers and staff members at Microsoft. They came to work each day to help achieve that vision. Now that it has become reality, company leaders are crafting a new vision for those building the next-generation in Microsoft's history.

Visions often create challenges—events or circumstances, sometimes self-imposed, that test one's abilities, resources, and resolve. Understandably, some

turn away from serious challenges, judging them to be laden only with difficulties and hassles, not opportunities. Others are emboldened to find ways of overcoming hurdles, reaching difficult goals, or demonstrating high levels of capability. They may find great promise in exploring uncharted territory or devising innovative solutions that permit the goal to be reached.

Challenges are personal. For example, some amateur and professional athletes may envision themselves ultimately as champions in their sport by becoming perpetual winners, all-time record holders, or legends of the game. Other athletes may have different visions of success. They challenge themselves to an even higher standard: achieving their "personal best" in every event in which they participate. Their focus is not outdoing competitors or achieving perfection, but rather constant improvement amid a quest for excellence.

A third source of inspiration stems from the need to confront serious problems. Whether affecting individuals, organizations, or entire segments of society, those problems and their accompanying frustrations can incite a quest to find answers to perplexing questions or devise resolutions for unacceptable situations.

For instance, the frustration of dwelling in unacceptable living conditions day after day, with little opportunity to find jobs, can drive push some people to become fatalistic. They ultimately conclude that they simply must "accept their unhappy lot."

For others, that frustration can ignite an inner drive to do something about it—to find a way out. Hard work and education can both play a pivotal role. Howard Schultz, CEO of Starbucks, had determination. Schultz grew up in a Brooklyn, New York subsidized public housing project. This setting did not naturally afford him many career opportunities. However, while still a young man he realized that hard work and perseverance were the quickest ways to get to the top. Although Schultz, who became the first of his family to graduate from college, speaks openly of the frustration of his childhood living conditions, he hopes to prompt others to create their own success. "Success is not an entitlement," Schultz says. "You have to earn it,"

Fourth, the people we touch can also change lives. Just a few words or an act of encouragement may

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boost one's confidence, fueling an unending determination to excel despite formidable obstacles. Through the care and confidence they show, coaches, mentors, spouses, and parents can often play pivotal roles in the aspirations and achievements of those around them. Valued guidance and inspiration it seems often go hand-in-hand.

Efforts to make a difference can ultimately touch many lives. Guided by the belief that every life has equal value, Bill and Melinda Gates established and generously funded the foundation bearing their name. Their conviction to help improve and reduce inequities in lives globally led to creation of the Gates Foundation, the largest private foundation in the world, and also has influenced the substantial contributions of others to their foundation an to helping humanity.

The aesthetics of life—the nature and expression of beauty—are a fifth source of inspiration, especially in artistic endeavors. Artists seek to capture a certain feeling or emotion through the images, colors, and shades they select for a painting, in their composition of photographic images, or through their orchestration of musical sounds. Aesthetics also serve as a significant source of inspiration in the design of products and packaging, as evidenced by the sleek form factor Apple's designers chose for its iPhone and iPod products.

### Leaders Inspire Others

How can business leaders inspire those on their team? The greatest opportunity for any enterprise to benefit from inspired, high achieving employees occurs when they are committed to advancing a vision, cause, or purpose they judge to be meaningful. This is why the most effective business leaders will want to help team members focus not only on assigned tasks and responsibilities but also on their importance in achieving a greater purpose or goal.

The difference between doing a job well and pursuing a vision can be dramatic as illustrated by the proverbial story of three bricklayers engaged in a huge construction project. When asked what he was doing, the first indicated he was using his best skills to perfectly put down layer after layer of bricks. The second's focus was broader. He said he was building a very long and exceptionally high brick wall. The third brick layer announced enthusiastically, "I'm very fortunate. I'm proud to be building a beautiful, ornate cathedral that will last for centuries." It is evident that he was inspired by having vision and purpose.

Good leaders know that even the most skilled workers look to them as a source of inspiration. Such


leaders know also that the metrics and key performance indicators commonly used to gauge enterprise performance—aggregate sales, profitability, cash flow, return on investment (ROI), change in share price, and the like—are seldom a source of worker inspiration. Workers simply do not come in each day to hit an ROI target or to deliver a maximum profit to the enterprise (though they can be coerced or motivated to do so).

Of course, no leader should ever assume that even high levels of worker inspiration will be sustained. Although successful accomplishments are themselves rewarding, people want their achievements noted and acknowledged. Everyone craves recognition. Moreover, recognition for good work boosts performance, builds loyalty, and even aids in retaining top performers.

Sadly, research reveals that leaders within two out of three organizations fail to recognize the achievements of their managers and employees. Consequently it is not surprising that a substantial portion of people who leave an enterprise do so because they feel underappreciated and subsequently have lost their zest for a particular initiative.

Finally, good leaders will aspire to help team members develop their individual potential. They know that identifying and developing talent, while also ensuring the pipeline of future leaders remains full, is an essential part of an executive's responsibility. Moreover leaders who engage their high potential managers and employees in challenging assignments—not meaningless or mundane jobs—and who provide coaching and support, are building both the individual and the enterprise.

### Executive Leadership Today

Inspirational leaders are a powerful force and should be a valued asset within any enterprise. The evidence is overwhelming that employees can deliver amazing accomplishments when they are not coerced, threatened constantly, or told what to do. Moreover, employees will come to work excited when they know they will be with people they enjoy or will be successful in advancing their own purpose, or when they feel they can make a difference in something they value. They are likely to be highly inspired when they can do all three. 

— Jim Senn  
Director, Center for Global Business Leadership

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