Introduction
Being inspired is a virus. It raises the temperature of an organization. Inspired leaders vibrate, and their organizations resonate with them. It’s almost palpable.

But inspired leadership is rare. The Gallup Organization’s research on employee engagement finds that 29% of employees are engaged, 55% are not engaged and 16% are actively disengaged.

There are seven secrets to inspired leadership:

1. **Leadership is viral - pass it on.** People want to lead their own lives. Inspired leaders give others the context, the resources and the support they need, and they let them get on with it. Your job, paradoxically, is to create more leaders, not followers. Inspired leadership is viral leadership.

2. **You’re not fooling anyone.** You’re naked - get used to it. This is the era of leadership in a goldfish bowl. Information transparency and the erosion of deference mean that if you want to move up to the level of inspired leaders, you have to ditch the game and find the authentic, naked you. You actually have no choice. The emperor has no clothes.

3. **They have to want to follow you.** To engage people’s energies and talents, inspired leaders make people an offer they can’t refuse. You’re a creator of meaning, a re-recruiter.

4. **Make a difference.** Literally, leaders used to lead the making of things or services. Inspired leaders lead the making of difference. We’ve gone beyond competition to what lateral thinker Edward de Bono calls surpetition. When everything in the marketplace looks increasingly the same, different stands out like color in a sea of gray.

5. **Lead from the edge.** Inspired leaders are edgy. The action takes place on the front line where the customers are, not in the middle, where the senior management team huddles together for comfort (and to keep an eye on each other). Inspired leaders take themselves to the edge.

6. **There’s nothing out there.** Inspired leaders don’t see global business in terms of geographic boundaries, import/export, a home territory and the regions. They see global business as all around them. Local is global. There’s a new global soup and you’re standing in it. It’s lapping at the edges of your desk. Come on in, the water is lovely.

7. **The impossible isn’t.** "Impossible" just means something that hasn't been done yet (or even imagined).
Who would have thought Hannibal could cross mountains with elephants? Well, he thought it was possible - and made it happen. You can think the unthinkable and lead the undoable.

**Leadership Is Viral**
The 21st-century leader's paradox is that the very act of leading is traditionally associated with stepping out in front of others and saying, "I'll decide what we're going to do and where we're going." Yet people increasingly won't be told. They want to be in control for themselves, or at least in control of themselves.

While the generation that grew up in the 1960s and 1970s came home from school and switched on the TV, a passive medium, their kids have grown up interacting. That changes the way they think. Generation X and Y are, in fact, smarter, faster, more flexible in their thinking, more motivated, fresh, less jaded, more in sync with the digital age, more action-oriented and innovative than their older bosses. Procter & Gamble introduced a reverse mentoring system - you couldn't make it into the Top 200 in the company without a mentor under the age of 21.

Sinclair Beecham, co-founder of [Pret A Manger](https://www.pret.com/), says, "I used to think my role as a leader was to be indispensable, with the phone always ringing, showing what a good leader I was by always being there to solve problems and fight fires. Now I know my job is to stop that phone ringing. The less it rings, the more dispensable I am, the better."

The key to spreading the leadership virus is not being afraid to help other people achieve greater levels of control, not feeling threatened by their increased power or independence. Dianna Thompson, CEO of the world's largest lottery operator, Camelot, says you have to be enthusiastic about appointing people who are better than you are.

Developing leaders is time-consuming. As Warren Bennis puts it, "You can't put a person in a microwave and out pops the McLeader. It doesn't happen like that. Leadership evolves." That's why Jack Welch, legendary former CEO of General Electric, spent a large portion of his time developing GE's leaders.

**You're Not Fooling Anyone**
Leadership in the 21st century is like being permanently on stage. But you're not faced with an adoring public throwing flowers at you. Your employees, investors, customers, the press, suppliers - your public - are generally wised up and wearing X-ray glasses. You can't fool them. To win their attention and respect, you have to be real. There's a deep hunger for authenticity and truth in the opening years of this century. And organizational leaders aren't satisfying it.

The failure is being played out in the small misdemeanors and other disappointments that accumulate around leaders who habitually fail to match rhetoric with behavior. That failure to "walk the talk" has been amplified, of course, by the damage that the reputation of business has sustained with the corporate scandals of Enron, WorldCom and the like. Inspiration needs a true culture in which to thrive - true in the sense of honest and congruous, with very little slippage between words and action.

**Dee Hock**, the founder of VISA, applies the law of reciprocity to inspired leadership. His four elements are a short course on leadership:

- Make a list of things done to you that you abhorred.
- DON'T DO THEM TO OTHERS, EVER.
- Make a list of things done to you that you loved.
- DO THEM TO OTHERS, ALWAYS.

**They Have to Want to Follow You**
People are increasingly questioning whether they have to, or indeed want to, be full-time employees any more. Choice has entered the arena of work. Increasingly, your best workers are volunteers. It's up to you to re-recruit them constantly. You need to realize they could easily work with someone else if they found that more interesting, or less stressful. Or they could choose to spend less time working and pursue other passions instead.

The big question - what's the meaning of life? - now has a little brother, which you have to help people answer: "Since a large chunk of my life is spent working, what's the meaning of work?" Inspired leaders anticipate and respond to this need for meaning by re-inventing work, by humanizing the organization to a degree. Simon Woodroffe, founder of Yo! Sushi, found his inspiration in a work of fiction, Arthur Conan Doyle's *The White Company*, about a band of people who travel around, bound together by common values. "That's the kind of thing I always wanted to create and be a part of - I never wanted to be employed," he says.

In inspiring others, Sir Nick Scheele, Ford's chief operating officer, advises not to underestimate the power of three: "I can only remember three or so objectives for a period of time, so I assume our people are wired the same way. It
helps achieve a sharp focus when you’re engaged in a turnaround or channeling energies in a turnaround."

**Make a Difference**

If you’re going into uncharted territory - and that, by definition, is where innovation lives - then you need inspired leadership to get you there. Management is about predictable results. Leadership is about an apparent paradox - planning for unpredictable results. If you want to be a little bit better, stick with management. If you know the only way to compete is to be radically different, then you’ve opted for leadership whether you like it or not.

Innovation is not, in fact, mainly about coming up with new ideas. Apple’s graphical operating system, for example, is widely thought to beat the pants off Microsoft’s Windows and to have inspired it. But which one is dominant? Ideation is just the front end of the innovation process. Coming up with new ideas is relatively easy compared to what you have to put them through next - the development phase, which Leo Roodhart of Shell GameChanger calls the “valley of death.” Shell calculates that for every 1,000 ideas generated, one becomes a profit-making business idea while the other 999 have to be killed off.

Good artists copy. Great artists steal. Adapting innovation from other sectors reduces risk. And it increases the chance of consumer acceptance because the consumer is familiar with how the concept works.

When you encounter resistance to a new idea from older hands who know better, ask, “Why don’t we start from the customer’s standpoint?” Nobody can argue with that. It’s code for, “Give me some consumer research, not sectoral jargon.”

**Lead from the Edge**

Alfred Sloan, the founder of General Motors, brought product differentiation to the auto industry and nearly killed off Henry Ford’s monoculture of “any colour you want as long as it’s black.” In an age of hyper-choice, however, offering yet more choice collapses as a differentiator. Customers want a level of control, not necessarily to be overwhelmed by choice.

The 21st-century equivalent of Sloan’s innovation is a customer experience that takes the hassle out of the customer’s life and shows them some empathy - whether the customer is a multinational outsourcing its IT or a stressed executive looking for a 15-minute respite disguised as a Starbucks skinny latte. It's less about product and services and more about wraparound experiences - and a compelling story to drive the point home.

Last century was the Supplier Century; this century is the Customer Century. Leading a customer "pull" organization means dismantling push thinking, abandoning the assembly line of the mind and learning to practice post-industrial leadership on the edge instead of at the center. Jan Carlzon began the turnaround of SAS (Scandinavian Airline System) by spending a few weeks simply hanging around with customers, understanding the SAS experience from their perspective, and learning to fix the moments of truth when the company interacted with them.

**There's Nothing Out There**

We’ve moved a long way from the days when Harvard professor Ted Leavitt first described globalism as selling the same thing to everyone everywhere. What Goldman Sachs calls the BRIC’s - Brazil, Russia, India and China - made no dent in the rest of the world’s business consciousness not so long ago. Yet China and India, in particular, have moved from the edge to the center of the map. There has been a marked acceleration of this global change.

McDonald’s is perceived as the icon of American imperialism, rolling out homogenized product and forcing Big Macs into the world’s open mouths. But the truth is the company has been practicing localization for years, adapting menus to local preferences. McDonald’s most successful expansion market in 2003, when it was opening a restaurant every six days on average, and where its franchises are most profitable, is ... France.

Should your strategy be global, local or glocal, in which you think globally but act locally in each area? Probably all three.

**The Impossible Isn't**

Martin Luther King didn’t say, "I have a critical path schedule." You need to dare - build castles in the air. Then build the foundations from the ground up.

If your sector defines something as impossible, make your own rules. Mike Harris, executive vice-chairman of Egg, a leading Internet bank, says that perhaps 80% of what his company does is to achieve predictable results and about 20% falls into the impossible category. "We call it smart risk to distinguish what we do from the irrational exuberance that others practiced in the 1990s. Yes, we set out to redefine what’s possible. But we never invest more than we can afford to lose," Harris says.

**Conclusion**
How important is inspired leadership? Warren Bennis, who has written 27 books on leadership and virtually invented it as an academic discipline, says, "All the studies I have looked at find that leadership is responsible for roughly 15% of a corporation’s success. The thing is that in highly competitive times like the ones we’re experiencing now, that 15% can be the make-or-break factor."

- End -

About the Author: Phil Dourado is a writer, editor and analyst. Phil Blackburn is co-founder of The Inspired Leaders Network.

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