

# LEADERSHIP Excellence

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THE MAGAZINE OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT, MANAGERIAL EFFECTIVENESS, AND ORGANIZATIONAL PRODUCTIVITY

JUNE 2010

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**Extreme  
Leaders**

**Take a Radical LEAP**



*"Leadership Excellence is an exceptional way to learn and then apply the best and latest ideas in the field of leadership."*

—WARREN BENNIS, AUTHOR AND  
USC PROFESSOR OF MANAGEMENT

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# Extreme Leaders

*They take a radical LEAP.*



by Steve Farber

**M**ANY PEOPLE WHO call themselves leaders are only posing. They're wearing the label or accepting the title without putting their skin in the game. I invite you to approach the act of leadership as you'd approach an extreme sport: learn to love the fear and exhilaration that comes with the territory. And that takes a personal commitment.

As Terry Pearce writes: "Many people think they want to be matadors, only to find themselves in the ring with 2,000 pounds of bull bearing down on them, and then discover that what they really wanted was to wear tight pants and hear the crowd roar."

If you choose to leap into the ring, do so because of your love of the challenge and adventure. Love is what makes the fear of the "sport" worthwhile. You accept the fear as part of the experience, and fear creates and defines the experience. *Extreme* would not be *extreme* without fear, and fear would not be worth it without the love of the game.

The same is true of Extreme Leadership—the dynamic interplay of fear and love. Those who actively use the experience of fear and love daily in their attempts to change the world for the better are Extreme Leaders.

*Extreme Leadership is intensely personal and intrinsically scary.* You are striving to change the nature of things, and that's a scary endeavor because you're asking yourself and others to give up the familiar. It is scary because you have no guarantee of a positive outcome and don't know how you are going to be judged; your credibility is on the line. Therefore, you can't participate in an authentic leadership experience without fear.

While it's true that fear can save your life or keep you from doing something stupid, avoiding it can also keep you from doing something great, from learning and growing. *Fear is a natural part of growth*, and since growth, change and revolution are all on the Extreme Leader's agenda, fear

comes with the territory.

Your experience of fear (or exhilaration) is your internal indicator that you're moving in the right direction—that you are leading. If you're using all the buzzwords and reading all the leadership books, and holding forth at every meeting on the latest management fads, but you're not experiencing that visceral churning in your gut, and you're not scaring yourself every day, you're not doing anything significant—let alone changing the world—and you are not leading anyone else.

## Take a Radical LEAP

Extreme Leaders take a *Radical LEAP* (love, energy, audacity, proof) daily.

**L: Cultivate love.** The Extreme Leader's personal credo is akin to this



theme: *Do what you love in the service of people who love what you do.* Many consider the emotion of love to be inappropriate in business; they believe that good business people keep their hearts out of their work. The opposite is true. It's the heart that brings the fire of creativity to bear and inspires drive, loyalty, and leaps of innovative brilliance.

Love is a key element in productive leader-follower and coach-employee relationships. To be an effective coach, you have to care about the person you are coaching. It's not that you should fall passionately in love with everyone you work with. However, you need to find something to care deeply about in your business and in each individual that touches your business. And it has to be real—and they have to know it.

The key, then, is to find a way to genuinely and sincerely love your customer, for example, and then act from that level of motivation. Great business

relationships are won in ways analogous to romantic relationships: by paying nearly obsessive attention to the needs, desires, hopes, and aspirations of the other person; by knowing not only when to stand firm on your principles but also when to sacrifice your short-term needs for the long-term relationship; and by proving through your actions that you mean it. Extreme Leaders actually love the customer and strive to enhance their customer's life.

**E: Generate energy.** Energy is real, tangible, and palpable. You know when you have it, and when you don't; you know when you have to drag yourself out of bed in the morning, and when you have to use the law of gravity to slide your slack, lifeless body off the mattress and smack on the floor.

I can tell within 30 seconds of walking into the reception area of a company whether the place is energetic, exciting, and scintillating, or a morgue. And unless it's a morgue, it shouldn't feel like a morgue. It's not an accident, either way. Someone is creating that environment; and if it's your place of employment, that someone is you.

Ask yourself: "Do I generate more energy when I walk into a room, or when I walk out of it?" Some people are walking vacuums of the human spirit. They are energy vampires. All they have to do is walk into the room, and they instantly suck the life out of the place. Everyone else seems to wither and die—until that person leaves. Be sure that you're not that person, that you put more energy in than you take out.

*Energy is what keeps us coming back to work day after day without waning in passion or enthusiasm.* It comes, in part, from having a higher purpose. People want to feel a passion for the company's work, to become part of a higher purpose. The Extreme Leader's job is to help define and redefine, day after day, what that higher purpose is—and that's very energizing to most people. As Michael Cunningham writes, "If you shout loud enough, for long enough, a crowd will gather to see what all the noise is about. It's the nature of crowds. They don't stay long, unless you give them reason."

**A: Inspire audacity.** Audacity is a bold and blatant disregard for normal constraints. Love-inspired audacity is *courageous*, not impudent (the word, *courage*, has at its root the word, *cor*, meaning heart). The Extreme Leader is courageously audacious in his or her actions. As Carly Fiorina said, "A leader's greatest obligation is to make

possible an environment where people can aspire to change the world.” That’s an audacious statement of purpose, and it begs the question: “How are we going to change the world?”

That’s the *right* kind of audacity, and it demands a bold and blatant disregard of the most insidious constraint we impose on ourselves: *I can’t do that. I’m not Ghandi, Mother Theresa, or Martin Luther King; I’m just me.* Frankly, that’s a dangerous self-inflicted constraint. And, it’s a convenient lie; in believing that lie, we abdicate our responsibility for changing *the world* to someone else.

You have direct influence over the world of your industry, company, team, community, neighborhood, family, or person in your family. These *worlds* are no less noble, they add up, and they are within your scope.

So, step up to that challenge and ask: *How can we change the world of our employees, customers, and marketplace?* That’s audacity. I admit, it’s a much easier question to ask than it is to answer—and do something about. Even so, you have to do some something.

**Provide proof.** Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner have shown that *credibility* is the foundation of leadership, and they define credibility behaviorally as *Do What You Say You Will Do*.

**You have to put your skin in the game, put yourself and your reputation at risk.** You have to prove yourself through observable, daily action. It’s insanely easy to talk a good game. Do you say you *love* your team? Prove it! Do you say we need to be *bold and inventive* for our customers? Prove it! Do you tell your folks that they’re your *most important asset*? Prove it in every action that you take.

When you say, “I can’t do that here” or “they won’t let me,” your credibility as an Extreme Leader is shot. When you’re convinced that you can change things for the better, you have to prove it through the radical courage of your action. Gandhi said: “Be the change you want to see in the world.”

We typically express *accountability* as *what we desperately want other people to be*. While change, improvement, and success are ultimately the results of a collective effort, nothing ever happens unless you hold yourself ridiculously accountable to your own words. That’s how you prove you’ve earned the status of Extreme Leader. That’s how you prove you’re not a poser. **LE**

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**ACTION: Take the radical LEAP.**

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