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## How to Be Exceptional

### Drive Leadership Success by Magnifying Your Strengths

#### THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

You run a business department, a division or an entire company. Everything is going smoothly, everyone respects your abilities and no one complains about you. You are a good, talented business leader.

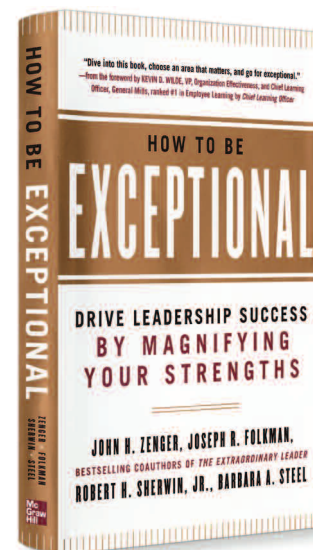
But are you *exceptional*? Because in these difficult business times, true success requires nothing less.

From the leadership gurus of Zenger Folkman, *How to Be Exceptional* provides a revolutionary approach to leadership development. Instead of focusing on your weaknesses and how to overcome them, focus on your strengths — and learn how to magnify them.

When you magnify your leadership competencies to the level of exceptional, employee engagement increases, productivity rises and profitability soars. Learn how to make your business and career dreams a reality.

#### IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- How to pinpoint your best leadership traits and choose the right development target for yourself.
- How to use feedback and action learning on the job to elevate your strengths.
- How to apply Zenger Folkman's revolutionary cross-training method to escalate your leadership competencies into the top 90th percentile.
- How to ensure that your fully developed strengths are sustainable by building follow-through into your development plan.



by John H. Zenger,  
Joseph R. Folkman,  
Robert H. Sherwin, Jr.,  
Barbara A. Steel

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# THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: HOW TO BE EXCEPTIONAL

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For additional information on the authors, go to [www.summary.com](http://www.summary.com) or [www.zengerfolkman.com](http://www.zengerfolkman.com).

## PART 1: WHAT LEADERS CAN LEARN FROM THEIR STRENGTHS

### Organizations Flourish With Strong Leaders

As you observe organizations with an abundance of great leadership talent, several characteristics become apparent.

- 1. Great leaders attract others with talent.** Like magnets that are properly aligned, there is a huge attraction. Other competent leaders want to work with them.
- 2. Great leaders discover and pull out hidden abilities in those around them.** Good qualities emerge. Strong teams develop and collaboration abounds.
- 3. Great leaders tend to stay and build.** Not only are they initially attracted to the organization and the other leaders in it, but they thrive in place, build off each other and grow the garden they're in.

In a study of 5,285 leaders working in five different organizations, we examined the effectiveness of leaders at different levels of these organizations. This measure of leadership effectiveness was derived from our research on extraordinary leaders, utilizing 360-degree feedback instruments.

We have worked with organizations in which the senior teams had overall effectiveness scores hovering at

the 65th percentile. That means that in all likelihood the next lower level will be at the 50th percentile, and each successive layer well below that. Indeed, that is what occurred. The consequences were far-reaching. Employee commitment scores in those organizations were at the 32nd percentile.

A handful of organizations had gaps of only 3 to 5 percentile points between levels. This small gap created a dramatic shift upward in the effectiveness of leaders at all levels. It became apparent that the smaller gap was the result of several differences in these organizations.

First was selecting the right people as leaders. Second, the talent management processes being used identified a clear set of desirable leadership competencies. Third, senior executives believed that a significant part of all leaders' jobs was the development of their direct reports. Fourth, the bar for effective leadership was set high. The expectation was that the leaders needed to be outstanding, not merely adequate or good, and that everyone, regardless of position or level in the organization, could improve. ●

### Why Emphasize Strengths?

For the past several decades, we have worked with firms that were focused in large measure on helping managers and key professional associates identify their weaknesses and then fix them. We developed assessments that identified strengths or weaknesses with equal effectiveness. But the fact of the matter was that they



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were used primarily to identify weaknesses.

Here's the bottom line: If a leader has some trait or competency that is a profound weakness, and this behavior is both important on the job and readily observed by others, this could be considered a fatal flaw. One or more fatal flaws have the potential to sink this person's career unless those flaws are fixed.

Kevin is a salesperson who is very good in one-on-one discussions and in building individual relationships. However, his company recently reorganized the sales team and selling process, requiring him to now make regular presentations to large groups. Unfortunately, he has lots of trouble communicating effectively to groups of almost any size. Because he gets very nervous when he has to be "on stage," Kevin regularly loses his train of thought as he is presenting, and he has difficulty responding to any questions. Since group presentations are now a critical part of his job and his lack of skill at making them is easily observed, this change has uncovered a profound weakness and a potential fatal flaw for Kevin. If he can't quickly develop a competency in this area, at best he'll have trouble hitting his sales targets; at worst he may lose his job.

If leaders have significant weaknesses, ones that could be considered fatal flaws, improving those weaknesses can have a substantial positive impact on their overall effectiveness. Although focusing on a weakness gets you to a position where the behavior is no longer detracting from your overall performance, it doesn't elevate you much beyond that.

As we get people to identify the best leaders they have known or with whom they've worked, we ask them whether these great leaders had any weaknesses. The answer is always the same, "Yes — they were not perfect." Our next question is, "If they had weaknesses, what made them so exceptional?" The answer is always that it was their strengths. It was what they did extremely well that made the difference and always far outweighed any weaknesses they may have had.

If people spend all their time focusing on fixing weaknesses, their potential strengths will never become profound strengths. It is that shift in focus — from trying not to be below average in anything to, instead, being outstanding at relatively few behaviors — that makes such a huge impact on others and causes these leaders to be viewed as exceptional. ●

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### Strengths Can Be Developed

Effective leaders are created through a mixture of "made and born," and the weight of evidence is clearly

on the side of leaders being made.

The development of strengths is a complex process. The process involves six elements or stages:

**1. Learn the basics.** Young employees in an organization watch how the boss conducts a meeting. They watch how the boss delegates an assignment. They watch how the boss responds to questions regarding the organization's services, or how he or she replies to a question about the firm's products. Some have estimated that possibly 70 percent of what we learn is via this informal process.

**2. Learn through formal development.** In some skill areas, such as our use of various applications for the computer, formal classes provide extremely helpful information and jump-start a person's progress. The same holds true for learning leadership skills. Content for formal programs is extremely varied and ranges from specific skills, such as coaching, giving presentations, delegating, solving problems, or interviewing, to broader topics, such as understanding emotional intelligence or being more inspirational and motivating.

**3. Build in feedback processes.** One way of increasing the value of formal development is to add feedback into the learning experience. This feedback provides people with a clearer picture of their abilities.

**4. Do cross-training.** Cross-training is a type of nonlinear development. When athletes aspire to become more than just casual participants in a sport, they often turn to cross-training. Aspiring runners, for example, take up cycling, swimming and weight lifting.

From the research that identified the 16 differentiating competencies of the most effective leaders, we have identified between five and 12 companion behaviors for each of them. The correlations of the companion behaviors to the differentiating competencies are statistically significant.

For example, the companion behaviors to the competency of *practices self-development* are mostly those that describe the leader's involvement with others and their development. These include listening, being open to the ideas of others, respecting others, exhibiting honesty and integrity, and taking the initiative and being willing to risk and challenge the status quo.

Competency companions provide a new and more complete pathway to developing a strength. A person who gets a high score on one tends to also get a high score on the other. This suggests that raising the score of one will have a high likelihood of raising the score of the other.

**5. Learn while working.** Strengths may also be

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developed by deliberately creating opportunities for improving our skills through practice in the normal course of daily work.

**6. Create sustainability.** This final step in building a strength is the one that locks the strength into place.

Sustainability and follow-through come from:

- Creating a supportive environment from managers, peers and subordinates.
  - Providing clearly defined outcomes for the development.
  - Establishing well-defined accountability and responsibility for participants' implementing and applying what they learn.
  - Building systems that provide visibility.
  - Implementing various methods of follow-up, such as additional sessions, telephone calls and accountability partners within the organization. ●
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### Leadership Cross-Training

Cross-training is an optimum solution for someone who is reasonably good at something and who wants to continue excelling at it and then move into the higher ranks in any given activity or sport.

Dave is the manager of an organization's research and development unit. He is by nature an introvert. He is not an active contributor in most meetings. When he participates, his comments are offered with some hesitation, almost an apology. In past meetings with customers and representatives from other departments, there had been occasional comments questioning his technical competence and the reason for his being in this position.

Specifically, on a recent 360-degree feedback instrument, he was given feedback regarding his level of technical competence that indicated that some peers had questions about his knowledge regarding the firm's technology. His knee-jerk response was that this should be fairly easy to fix. Just bump up the level of knowledge about the firm's technology so that he could answer every question and never be stumped with anything tossed at him.

Then Dave recalled that as a part of the 360-degree feedback process, the facilitator had talked about a different approach to developing important competencies. She had called that new approach "nonlinear development." He recalled talk of cross-training and how the best way to develop some important skills may well be to build around them and not run straight into the headwind.

Dave got out his manual and looked at this specific

competency of technical competence. After examining the behaviors that described this competency, and after reviewing some fairly obvious, straightforward remedies, he decided to plow on to the next section.

As Dave examined the research on companion competencies for technical and professional expertise in his organization, his eye was drawn to three of the most statistically linked companion competencies:

- Solving problems
- Relationship building and networking
- Communication and influence skills

Even though Dave sees the need for improving his communication skills, there is the possibility that he may lack the desire and passion to improve. And without the passion to improve, the result might not change much. He may find he has more passion and energy for problem solving as another way to demonstrate his expertise.

One of the best ways to show others the depth of your expertise is to solve a difficult problem or come up with a new solution. Using a companion competency can provide a variety of options for every person to build his or her strengths. ●

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### Benefits From Developing Strengths

There is a significant motivational difference between people who work on strengths and those who work to fix weaknesses. This motivational difference, in turn, has a substantial impact on their levels of success. We know that leaders who attempt to improve their weaknesses can make significant progress. Leaders who focus on strengths invariably show more substantial gains.

Our studies have confirmed over and over the relationship between the effectiveness of leaders and the engagement, satisfaction and commitment of their direct reports. Whatever the starting point, improving leadership behavior leads to improved results.

There are a variety of benefits that come from building strengths:

1. People are more motivated when they work on their strengths. When people work on something they enjoy, they are more willing to invest time and effort into improvement.
2. Those who worked on their strengths were more successful in their change efforts, and that substantially increased their overall leadership effectiveness.
3. Change in outcomes — such as employee commitment, intention to stay, highly committed employees,

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total sales and performance ratings — followed improvement in leadership effectiveness.

4. Such improvement provides incentive and motivation for further development. ●

### PART 2: HOW EXCEPTIONAL STRENGTHS ARE DEVELOPED

## Where to Start

We propose a model with three important filters for identifying a behavior that could be expanded into a strength. We label this the CPO model, where C stands for “competence,” P for “passion” and O for “organization need.” The basic premise of the CPO model is to consider each of its three key filters when selecting a competency for development into a strength:

**1. Competence.** The first consideration is to measure the level of competence. Is this competency a strength in embryo? What are your current inclinations and abilities? What are you already reasonably effective at doing?

**2. Passion.** What charges your batteries? It is one thing to be reasonably effective at some leadership competency that is compatible with what the organization needs, but it takes on a different cast if it is something for which you have little or no enthusiasm.

**3. Organization need.** What does your organization need from you right now in your current position? Regardless of what you are currently effective at doing, the value of developing strengths that will enhance your career and help you become a more competent leader is obviously specific to the organization in which you work and the current position you hold.

The ideal situation occurs when these three CPO elements come together. It is perfect when the individual can be working on a competency that he or she is already reasonably good at doing, when that competency is something that the organization highly values, and when the individual has an intense interest in and passion for building the competency. ●

## Transitioning From Poor Performance to Good

We learned most of our skills by watching others perform them. Young employees in an organization watch how the boss conducts a meeting. They watch how the boss delegates an assignment.

Others learn, however, when leaders share their thought processes, assumptions and experience. That is one of the great virtues of having senior executives come in to teach in leadership development programs.

Added to this is the role of formal development that the organization or some outside source provides. In some skill areas, such as learning how to use various software applications for the computer, formal classes can provide extremely helpful information and jump-start a person’s progress.

Another extremely important source of development comes from the formal and informal coaching received from one’s boss, peers or external coach.

We have found that the most frequent outcomes of training people to be better coaches are that they resolve to talk less, not more than 20 percent of the conversation; ask more questions; listen more intently; refrain from giving advice; and plan the interview more thoroughly.

Real coaching is rare, but when the skill is mastered, it can have a substantial impact on the learning of others. ●

## The Role of Feedback in Developing Leadership Strengths

People can benefit from feedback only if they believe and accept the feedback they’ve been given. Accepting feedback is a function of four broad sets of skills. *First and foremost fundamental is the ability to be humble and reflective.* Humility comes when people start to understand that it is the reactions of others that really matter in terms of their leadership effectiveness. Their effectiveness as a leader is determined by others.

*The second factor is personal honesty and integrity.* People who are more honest and straightforward with others tend to be honest and straightforward with themselves. The higher the level of perceived honesty and integrity, the higher the level of openness to receiving feedback from those around you.

*The third factor is engaging in the development of others.* Our research indicated that those who were better at accepting feedback also tended to be more effective at developing others. Development is contagious. One of the powerful tools to develop others is to provide them with useful feedback. That works best, however, when the leader has set the example by seeking feedback from the subordinate, welcoming any and all messages that would help the leader be even more effective.

*The final factor is taking action and initiative to move forward and respond to the feedback.* Passive acceptance is a

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helpful start, but without action, nothing changes. Those who accept feedback and move forward start to respond with energy and enthusiasm about improving their performance. They provide others with a clear vision and goal about what they are going to change and how they will do it. Finally, after they start, they follow through on their commitment to execute the change. ●

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### Building Strengths at Work

An element that has possibly the highest potential to escalate a leader's strengths in the near term is the basic idea that valuable development can take place on the job and that work itself is a huge developmental opportunity if managed properly.

It has been known for decades that altering the nature and content of a job could increase the satisfaction and overall motivation of the people performing it. Job enrichment and job enlargement have been shown to improve the productivity of front-line workers. In addition, these practices enhanced overall employee satisfaction, and that in turn led to higher employee retention.

These ideas have been extended and given a modern twist at the University of Michigan, where the term *job crafting* is used. The basic idea is to focus on how workers at all levels can shape their jobs to add meaning and fulfillment. Job redesign can also be used as a leadership development tool by helping any workers, along with their managers, identify opportunities for developmental activities that can be integrated into their current positions.

That work assignments play an important role in development is beyond debate. Over the years, many organizations have had great success in developing future executives by giving them demanding assignments. A developmental assignment might be the responsibility of opening a new plant, with all the complexity it presents.

Leaders and managers have a certain degree of latitude regarding how they define and execute their jobs. The leader can add some activities, take away other activities and allocate time to those activities that would help in his or her ongoing development.

Next we suggest some activities that are specifically designed to bring learning into the job in a more formal way. The first has broadly been labeled *action learning*. This approach was originally pioneered by Reginald Revans, a professor at the University of Manchester in England. The essence of the action learning concept is that we all learn by doing and that business leaders are no different.

Revans' university had sponsored a variety of programs for executives, and he observed the impact the programs were having on participants. To his dismay, Revans became convinced that the programs were having little or no impact. It became clear to him that the conventional methods of teaching hardly made a dent in the way leaders behaved. Knowledge and information did not change behavior. Increasingly he came to believe that rather than have leaders study the usual abstractions about management (such as planning, organizing, control or strategy), it was best to have them study their own actions at work, along with how they were experiencing their work. He was convinced that the best course content was the actual work they were performing.

Another method for building learning into work is a technique pioneered by the military. At the conclusion of every mission, the group who participated would be assembled for an after-action review. The objective was to identify what went well and to ensure that those actions would be repeated in the future. The key question was to keep focusing on what you might do differently next time as a way of learning from every mission.

Building developmental opportunities into your job starts with selecting a competency to develop that is aligned with what your organization and team needs and for which you have energy and enthusiasm. Development activities that directly support performance goals tend to receive the most time and attention.

It's also often possible to modify the collection of organizational tasks that make up your current job in a way that still meets organization and team needs and at the same time provides additional opportunities for development of your chosen competency.

If you want to learn a skill, then build that skill into your job. Find opportunities to practice the skill in your job. Ask for feedback on what went well and what you could do better. ●

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### Sustaining Strengths

Another key to success in developing a strength is extensive follow-through. People don't win the 100-yard dash by running extremely well for 50 yards and then coasting.

Two elements are important. First, you must obviously be motivated if there is to be a sustained effort to develop a strength. Determination and stick-to-itiveness are essential. Second, linking your efforts to the genuine elements of motivation will escalate success. If the skill

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you've chosen gives you greater autonomy in your work, a higher sense of mastery in what you are doing and the sense that you are working toward a higher cause or purpose, this will clearly expand your motivation.

Persistence in developing a strength hinges on knowing how you will use it and what specific steps are required to put this strength into place. Practice that leads to better performance calls for a person to do something new and challenging with an improvement goal in mind.

The environment that surrounds a leader is complex. It starts with the culture of the organization. It includes the roles of the immediate manager, the peers and the subordinates of the leader involved.

Craig is the manager of a large department. The organization sees real potential in him and tells him that he has a bright future if he will continue to develop himself. So who is responsible for Craig's efforts to develop his strengths? Is it the HR executive? Is it Craig's manager? Or is it Craig?

The participant muses, "Well, I know that this is about me, and I obviously am responsible for my development to a large degree, but my manager doesn't seem to notice if I improve the way I lead. The manager only cares about the numbers. There's never any discussion about the progress I'm making on my development. Also, I have no way of knowing if I'm getting better. I get no feedback."

Yes, we believe it is primarily Craig's responsibility. However, the others, especially the manager, have very strong roles to play in Craig's success in developing his strengths. The manager's ongoing coaching can have a major impact. HR can provide processes (repeated 360-degree feedback) and other channels (coaching) to help the leader have ample feedback. For real sustainability to occur, all the components of the environment — boss, peers, subordinates and HR— need to work together to support Craig's development. ●

### PART 3: SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

## Individual Contributors

It's often assumed that leadership is an assignment strictly for supervisors, managers and executives. The rest of the workforce, consisting of nonmanagerial workers and staff personnel, also known as individual contributors, are supposed to be followers, not leaders.

We assert that individual contributors can potentially be leaders and have the opportunity to use their influence to make a difference within an organization. Not only that, our productivity research shows that organizations today, more than ever, need these individuals to help lead those organizations so that key targets and results can be attained.

There have been many examples of great leaders who were not in formal positions of power in their organizations. These individuals didn't control huge financial budgets, manage and direct the work of large teams, or determine strategy. Yet as individual contributors their actions made a big difference. Similar to leaders with positional authority, individual contributors have the ability to see opportunities or potential problems, show initiative when needed, and lead others in the accomplishment of important objectives. Despite the numerous examples of the differences these folks make, their leadership contributions aren't always apparent. Sometimes this is due to the accomplishment of their work product being attributed to the "boss." Or the work is seen as a team effort and the magnitude of the individual contributor's work isn't completely understood. Yet it is the leadership efforts shown by these individuals that produce successful outcomes.

As with managers who are in formal leadership roles, extraordinary individual contributors are differentiated by the existence of a few profound strengths, not the absence of weaknesses. They, too, should implement their development efforts using the same approach of building strengths rather than fixing weaknesses.

Organizations that have begun providing 180 feedback and leadership development opportunities early in the careers of individual contributors have found not only that they prepare these people to become excellent managers in the future, but that their current effectiveness as individual contributors is greatly enhanced. ●

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## Getting Out of the Pit

An important element of a fatal flaw is that it is a behavior that is viewed as being very important in the person's current job or in the culture of the organization. In a professional services firm, technical expertise is so highly valued that all the professional staff members need to be technically competent in order to keep their jobs.

One way to measure if a weakness is fatal is to note whether it is the first trait people think about when a person's name is mentioned. It becomes the filter through which all other traits are viewed. This filter col-

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ors all other characteristics. In many cases, people refuse to attribute any positive characteristics to a person because the fatal flaw has such a negative impact.

Our advice for people with fatal flaws is to immediately take steps to fix them. The really good news is that addressing a fatal flaw can have a substantial positive impact on how these people are perceived. In studying the impact of fixing fatal flaws, we found that 11 of the 15 leaders with fatal flaws made significant positive progress by focusing on fixing their fatal flaws.

Frequently, leaders get moved or promoted into new jobs where a competency that was not critical in the past becomes essential in their new positions. When a competency is mission-critical, average performance is never good enough. Most people can think of a person who performed well at some point in his or her career only to be promoted to a position where the performance was considered inadequate. This phenomenon has been labeled the *Peter principle*. The principle states that people are promoted until they finally get elevated to a position in which they are fundamentally incompetent. This explains why fatal flaws often appear later in people's careers as they are promoted to more senior positions.

Fatal flaws are not easy to change, but improvement is possible. The first and most necessary step is for people to accept the fact that they have a fatal flaw and that this flaw will eventually be fatal to their careers.

In order for people to change, they need to identify the problem behavior and then study the triggers that cause it to occur. The next step is to formulate a plan for change. People may need to ask for the forgiveness of others in order for other people to accept that the change is occurring. Enlist the assistance of others. And lastly, find a way to reward yourself for progress and the achievement of a goal. ●

### Can Strengths Be Taken Too Far?

Is there such a thing as a behavior practiced to excess? Yes, we think so. Chances are we can all think of some behaviors that when done in moderation are positive, but when done to excess cease to be helpful. A commonly held belief is that strengths taken too far cease to be strengths and become liabilities or weaknesses.

We think it is terribly confusing to tell people to work on a strength but to always be monitoring themselves to determine when they become too effective or use the strength too much. We identified 16 competencies that described the most effective leaders and distinguished them from average and poor leaders. These strengths include qualities, such as character and integrity, prob-

lem-solving skills, technical competence, innovation, initiative, communication and strategic thinking.

We cannot envision many situations where doing less of any one of them would be better than doing more. Can someone be too honest? Too skilled at solving problems? Too technically competent or innovative? ●

### Building Strengths With Multi-Rater Feedback

We think that the multi-rater, or 360-degree, feedback process is unparalleled in its ability to provide a comprehensive and yet granular way to help in the development process.

Inspiring leaders don't stand before the assembled troops and declare, "I want you to be just a little above average." The better message to participants is that the organization needs them to be performing like the very best. So rather than reporting data to managers that show how they compare with the mean average, why not show them how they compare with the best?

Because the 360 is administered to the subordinates or direct reports, it is possible to incorporate a mini employee survey right into the 360-degree feedback instrument. The 360-degree process affords the opportunity to ask the manager, peers, direct reports and others about their perception of what a person in a specific job or position should be focused on achieving.

Make the process a positive, not a negative one. The great joy for most participants can be the opportunity to identify and celebrate strengths.

Ensure that the survey process is not laborious. The objective is to acquire sufficient assessment information from each rater to provide validated survey results, but do it in the minimum amount of time. This requires a survey and software design that is well conceived and structured.

The 360-degree feedback process is not perfect, it just happens to be much better than any other technique that has been developed to help leaders grow. ●

#### RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *How to Be Exceptional*, you'll also like:

1. ***The Inspiring Leader* by Scott Edinger, John H. Zenger, Joseph R. Folkman.** The authors share their findings on how top leaders inspire teams to greatness and the behaviors exhibited by the most successful leaders.
2. ***The Extraordinary Leader* by Joseph R. Folkman, John H. Zenger.** Leadership is revealed as a skill, one that can be consciously learned and developed by anyone. Folkman and Zenger identify the competencies necessary for effective leadership.
3. ***The Extraordinary Coach* by John H. Zenger, Kathleen Stinnett.** The authors offer advice on how to deliver feedback, reinforce it, and redirect colleagues to better behaviors and habits.