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Idea Agent

Leadership That Liberates Creativity and Accelerates Innovation

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

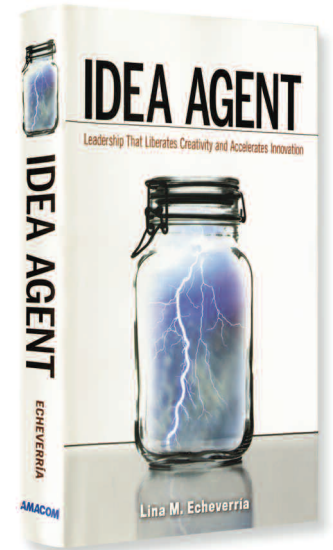
Is it possible to manage the creative professionals within your organization without stifling them? That's the million-dollar question for those trying to help their companies develop the kind of breakthrough innovations that result in unique products, improved processes and creative advantages that competitors can't copy. The challenge lies in striking the right balance between unleashing your creative people's energy and channeling it into tangible business results.

Drawing on Lina M. Echeverría's considerable experience assembling and nurturing cutting-edge teams at Corning Inc., one of America's leading technology companies, *Idea Agent* shows you how to become an Idea Agent — a catalyst for releasing your people's creativity, their advocate within the company, and also the person who keeps them focused and productive.

Containing practical methods for pulling strong-minded, visionary individuals together to solve incredibly complex problems, *Idea Agent* reveals seven proven principles to help you nurture — and follow through on — innovation.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- How to confront creative conflict.
- How to preserve space for discovery and invention.
- How to demand excellence and enrich lives.
- How to live values that liberate creativity.
- How to create a culture of creative engagement.



by Lina M. Echeverría

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THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: IDEA AGENT

by Lina M. Echeverría

The author: Lina M. Echeverría is an innovation leadership consultant with 25 years of experience in science and technology. At Corning Inc., Echeverría created an environment where scientists were both creative and productive, and where teams balanced the ability to explore the edges of possibility while delivering critical new technology on time and on budget. From scientist to vice president, she helped drive new products that now underpin our technology-based economy.

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Prologue

An impassioned culture of innovation thrives when guided by leaders who can resonate with team members — leaders capable of managing with passion and creating energized organizations while staying true to themselves and making their own work meaningful. Innovation thrives under a leader who internalizes and lives by the belief that to excel you must start with a group; to excel you must create a culture; and to excel you must manage one by one — one person at a time, one situation at a time, one project at a time, one group at a time — by staying in the present, undistracted.

In my experience in technology innovation, management and delivery, I have found seven essential elements that provide both the vibrancy and the rigor essential to create the culture of success in a team chartered with delivering innovation. I refer to these as Seven Passions of Innovation:

1. Looking creative conflict in the eye and flexing for resolution.
2. Bringing together teams of diverse, highly intelligent people freely in a way that engages their deepest personal motivations.
3. Living values that set creativity free.
4. Insisting on excellence and results.
5. Cultivating a culture that honors time for intuitive flow.
6. Defining an organizational structure that guides, but allows solutions to come from many permutations of talent and function.

7. Providing authentic leadership with the will to manage, the guts to decide, the wisdom to guide and the passion to make innovation happen.

These seven elements are not unarticulated components; rather they come together to make up a living system whose energy radiates from a leader at the core, its heart center. ●

Passion 1: Into the Ring of Fire

As anyone who has been surrounded by creative artists, writers or musicians knows, creativity often comes along with strong — even conflicted — personalities who will not stop in the face of obstacles along their way. The drive to materialize their vision is stronger than themselves.

Creativity can be a hot fire and you have to love it to gain from it. Fear of managing the passions of creative scientists will only lead to missed opportunities. Not being afraid of moving to free up and channel the energy and the creativity, on the other hand, can open worlds of opportunities.

It cannot be stressed enough: it is about understanding each one of the players for who they are, where they come from, what drives them and what they can bring to the solutions. And from this understanding, leadership that liberates creativity is about managing conflict — not preventing conflict from arising, but stepping into the ring of fire and managing all its actors and stages.

Leading a creative team means harnessing this conflict and managing it to benefit, not detract from, the work.

You will have divergences, clashes and tension.



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service@summary.com

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Rebecca S. Clement, Publisher; Sarah T. Dayton, Editor in Chief; Andrew Clancy, Senior Editor; Amanda Langen, Graphic Designer; Jeannette Scott, Contributing Editor

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Perhaps the level of control in your organization is high enough that the dissent is being discouraged. But then so are the good ideas, the ones that come at a 90-degree angle from your planned path.

An understanding of each human being and the way he or she relates to others needs to be your guide. As a leader, it starts with you knowing your people, their reactions and expectations, their roles in the team. It continues with being comfortable with conflict and with understanding that arguments and discussion are as essential to science as experimentation itself. And it moves on with playing an active role in managing conflict, literally sitting at the negotiating table, rather than shying away from it.

Find Your Courage

Managing personalities and tempers is not fun. It takes courage, serenity, flexibility and tact. Courage to understand that managing tempers does not mean compromising and that creating untouchable personalities means eroding the culture you are trying to create: the culture of respect, accountability and trust that drives the group. Serenity to stay detached during your exchanges. Flexibility to treat each personality in the unique way that is fruitful for each person involved. And tact to find the way to deliver a message in a way that does not flare tempers but yields results. ●

Passion 2: Let the Best Take Flight

The first step in building a high-performance team is to get passionate, brilliant and creative people in the room. Beyond stellar academic or work credentials, it is essential to get a sense of the candidate's fit with your organization by looking for the person — his or her upbringing and personality, ability to see wide-open spaces balanced by the need to remain highly focused, life at home and in the community, and reaction to those circumstances. Just as crucial is the need to look outside the person's work life for expressions of creativity, such as hobbies, activities and a zest for life.

Spotting Creatives

Some of the most successfully creative technical people I have led and worked with are musically talented and accomplished. I can think of talented classical piano players such as Peter Murray, a geologist turned glass scientist, who sings with a tenor voice and also enjoys cooking ethnic foods. And Joe Fishlinger, a polymer scientist with an understanding of chemistry and rheology

of organic materials, who turned his knowledge into high-quality truffle-making that rivaled the most prestigious European chocolatiers.

Real creativity is productive and its expression yields a constant stream of output: a canoe for the family one month, an improved telescope system the next; a butterfly collection that keeps on growing; a new garment of wearable art every season. These are some of the signs to seek as output for social or family activities and they are a good predictor of professional output. They are the materialization of a creative flow that is ongoing. So it is important that the hiring process be rich enough to allow you to unearth, explore and walk around these passions to inform your decisions.

Players as Coaches

The opportunities to learn from your people are boundless. About their activities external to work, for sure, but also about the depths and reaches of their understanding. As a leader, whether in technology, architecture or medicine, you are expected to understand your field, to know where it is headed and to translate this knowledge into the strategic direction that keeps you ahead of the field. But you will be fooled, and your group and goals poorly served, if you as a leader do not have experts in your group whose knowledge and understanding far exceed your own.

Learning from your experts is not only an enriching experience for you as a leader, but it is one of the first elements of sharing knowledge, an important element in creating a persevering culture where creativity thrives and innovation delivers.

Make Room for Intuition

Creative people are driven to make real their dreams, hunches and drives a material reality. If given the freedom to be, the creatives themselves will guide you in how leadership can best help them — and the organization — to deliver. If you create an environment of trust and spend your time listening, you will understand the needs and the frustrations you hear.

The role of the leader is to act as shock absorber for the organization, to understand the needs of the commercial group on one hand and, with the knowledge of what it takes to preserve the space needed for invention on the other, to define goals that can benefit both sides.

In creating a culture of expansion, respect and freedom — to create, to deliver, to be — it is important to understand that the ultimate expression of freedom is the ability to follow your dreams. If an organization does not have the space for your more daring members to

spread their wings, their flight will take them away from you. Maintaining an inspired and motivated state for highly creative, talented individuals is the challenge of leadership. As leaders, we need to create cultures that grant our people the freedom to stay — cultures where leaders exhibit flexibility in responding to needs and identifying opportunities, in creating unorthodox career paths and letting people move outside their groups, in following their people's leads and opening spaces that create opportunities. ●

Passion 3: Live Values That Liberate Creativity

Our values — the principles we deeply believe in, the issues that are important for us to stand for — do not necessarily remain constant throughout life. Some may evolve; others may be added; others still may be dropped. There are those, though, that do remain unchanged. Those are the ones that will be more meaningful to you as a leader and therefore more powerful in creating culture, the ones you need to establish in guiding your organization.

Respect

Respect for ideas, for needs, for the whole self, is where it all starts. For the human being, the productive artist, the jazz singer, the heart surgeon, the architect, or the creative scientist, respect is what creates the space that allows conception and invention to flow.

Respect for this crucial side of their nature — the need to feel untethered, the need to safeguard their autonomy — takes the form not only of understanding that this is not a personal rebellion against you as a leader, or a deficiency in adjusting to a group setting on their part, but rather that it expresses a need to achieve that sense of empowerment that constitutes an important driving force for creatives.

Freedom

Freedom is the maximum reward; it empowers, it respects, it recognizes. Freedom starts with forms as basic as freedom of style. Not all your team members will have the same need for freedom, and only your deep knowledge of them as human beings and of their track record will inform you on the size of the performing ring each needs.

Flexibility

Respect and freedom open the way for flexibility: flexibility to embrace new ideas, to accommodate life-

Advise and Guide Without Imposing Your View

Throughout the years, I have served numerous people as mentor and coach. The situations have been all different, the personalities even more diverse. The request for advice, however, often comes in the same form: "What should I do? What would you do?" My answer would be consistent: "What I would do is not important. What matters is how you feel about it. What would you love to do now?" For therein lies the truth to our search. Find what you would love to do right now; let that intuitive feeling guide your decision; and, one step at a time, tread the path of your passion and your life.

needs, to change direction, to change your true-and-true ways. Flexibility is the way of life in research, so leading your group to adopt it as a way of life *in life* will bring vitality and a "can do" and "why not?" attitude to your group. It is an important culture-creating value as it shifts the focus from the "what" to the "how." And, just as importantly, it touches lives in all dimensions, from trivial to crucial.

Fun and Play

There is an air of lightness that the creative mind craves. Walk into a roomful of inspired artists and you will sense it. It is an energy that allows the creative spirit to free itself from limitations, that enables it to envision the changing of context and conditions that is a prerequisite to invention. Fun and play, in bringing that nimbleness, that buoyancy, help to maintain the spirit that invites novelty to emerge.

Interdependence

The principle of interdependence can be as simple as the recognition by individual members that in the workplace their survival, success and well-being depend on the mutual reliance of a collaborative group.

Honoring interdependence does not negate the ability to act with autonomy — that is, to be independent — but instead brings in the additional dimension of awareness of the impact of your actions on the well-being of the group.

Transparency

As a leader you owe it to your people to be transparent about your intentions, your plans and your concerns, in the same way you owe them your expression of your active interest in them, their results and careers, in the

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form of direct feedback, dialogue and give-and-take. And though these give-and-take sessions can at times lead to difficult discussions, they are the first steps in creating a culture of open, honest communication.

Integrity

To live the value of integrity — the willingness to give and keep your word, to walk your talk, to fulfill your promises and agreements — is in essence to live in your commitment. And, as a leader, this is your aim for yourself and your people. Integrity is an unforgiving value, one that may exact unyielding pain if not pursued relentlessly, as the smallest of exceptions may give rise to damaging effects and consequences.

Passion

As a leader you are in an enviable position to help people unite their avocation and their vocation, and by so doing make work become play. It starts by using your intuition to become aware of the unseen potential in others and to support them to see and realize it. This is not about influencing their consciousness with what would be your personal choices, but about opening them up to their own. As leaders, our role in each case is to actively mentor and guide them into the personal path of their own discovery and, inasmuch as they are driven, their own awareness.

Trust

Trust is that fragile and vital value that must underlie every activity but that cannot be tangibly created. Trust is also essential to high performance. Expressions of trust are recognized by everyone's willingness for open, honest communication, dialogue and feedback. They are at the core of the courage of taking intelligent risk and they underlie a sentiment of mutual respect. The utmost expression of trust is the willingness to place our future in somebody else's hands, to follow his or her guidance into unknown territory, to pursue a trail that we had not charted or even envisioned ourselves.

Rigor

As the fundamental quality of good scientific work — and good work in any field — rigor is not only a necessity but an ultimate element of culture. By insisting on it, rigor permeates the thinking of a group and comes to represent an important underlying principle of every activity.

Rigor translates into being clear in communicating the difference between dreams, hypotheses, theories and results. Rigor produces fully developed scientific theo-

ries, discussion of results and publications. The net result is credibility, a culture that can be trusted and results that can be relied on.

Results

For any team chartered with delivering innovation, whether in high technology, medicine or cinematography, the *raison d'être* is bringing forth results. There is a delicate balance — the “creative tension” — between unleashing creative researchers and harnessing their work to deliver actual products and revenues.

Two elements are important in cultivating a culture of results. First, there needs to be breadth in the definition of “results,” and this does not mean a diluting effect but a definition based on the true understanding of your mission and the means of achieving it, and then there is a need for identification of the whole spectrum of desirable results. Tangible results, those that customers will pay for and use and the processes to make them — such as the optical fiber they rely on to bring information to their home, the new cardiac surgery technique that can save lives or the new building design — are easy to classify as results.

Standing firm on these values is the cornerstone of building a creative culture in which your teams can thrive. ●

Passion 4: Demand Excellence and Enrich Lives

As with living your values and with everything you do, in inspiring a spirit of high performance and demanding excellence, as a leader you need to guide, direct, coax, detour and show the way. And to do so, you need to lead by example.

There are two critical elements for success in bringing out the spirit of high performance in your group. First, expectations must be clearly spelled out, not just on your first day as a leader but for every single assignment, project and suggestion. The second element is, naturally, consistency — though not rigidity — in upholding your expectations. Your expectations may be nuanced by the people, the circumstances and the activities they perform, but your expectations, like your values, should not be accommodating of personalities — true for some but not for others.

At the core, the leader needs to offer unconditional support and deep interest in the careers of practitioners in such a genuine way that it underlies and permeates each action and is deeply felt by everybody.

Expectations of a Leader

At my first communications meeting with my groups, they consistently heard me articulate what I expected of each one of them:

- **To use their skills and follow their hearts.**

There is an inescapable connection between honoring your being and doing good work. It is only by playing in the field where your skills are found that work can become play and you find yourself giving your best performance.

- **To be flexible and adapt.** In the social process that is innovation there is little value in being set in your ways, unable to look at things in a new way, unwilling to listen to an alternate viewpoint or to take a new path, or unwilling to take an unusual assignment.

- **To achieve mastery.** My groups have heard me exhort them many times: “Become an expert and let the world know about it.” Assembling the best and the brightest in the world is the first step. Putting together all the elements for them to free up their potential is a good second step. But it will only go so far if they do not do the rest: become the best they can ever be.

- **To benefit from argument.** I do not advocate argumentation for the sake of fun or as a way of exerting control. What I expect is to have the clarity of thought, the courage of spirit and the ability to articulate a different viewpoint, to do so with an engaging dialogue and to express it with a constructive tone of voice. Yes, there are those whose ability for debate placed them on their college teams and whose voice can carry a stadium. I expect from them to tone it down into a constructive dialogue. And I expect the rest to stand up and not shy away in discomfort.

Commitments From a Leader

As leaders it is our responsibility to be accountable to each member of our groups and to let them know what they can expect of us. In my case, in addition to carrying on the responsibilities of managing the group, I shared what they should expect of me:

- **To continuously raise the bar as high for myself as for them.** I pledge to know each of them, what they can bring and what their very best effort is, and to drive them to achieve it; to guide them toward achieving mastery and self-awareness, without forcing them; and to demand the same of myself.

- **To take a deep interest in their careers.** The commitment needs to be to take a deep interest in their careers, in their development as human beings and in

the whole of their life experience — and to participate by moving them along; to connect with their personal passions and resonate with them.

- **To design teams that work.** Few things are as important in assembling winning teams as understanding team dynamics and putting the right person in the right role.

- **To give them unconditional support.** Most important, it is about supporting them in the process of growing and reaching their potential. ●

Passion 5: Create a Culture

To excel in breakthrough innovation, it is not enough to manage a group of talented individuals. It starts with survival of the culture, and to survive a leader must create a culture defined by beliefs, attitudes, energy, interaction style and practices — and rituals. But to excel, the leader must ensure that the culture be one of creative engagement and liberating values. If it is clearly defined and rests on lived values, the group culture will flood the larger organization and, in so doing, create the network that is vital for innovation to take place.

Create Settings That Nurture Knowledge Sharing

The ability to collaborate and get along with others is paramount in enabling people to quickly share knowledge, either formally within a team or informally beyond the team. To foster informal knowledge transfer, teams need an environment that stimulates the senses and the emotions, one that fosters free association of ideas. An impassioned leader uses every lever, including workspaces and furnishings, to support the team culture. One effective way of promoting cross-pollination of ideas, actively coaching incoming talent and keeping team members up-to-date is to establish “creativity rooms” — nicely decorated and furnished rooms that look more like living rooms where teams can drop in and use the space informally as needed. They are true “living” rooms, for it is here that the culture is lived.

Only one rule should apply to a creativity room: It cannot be reserved for meetings, or it will become just one more conference room. It is to be used as the group sees fit: for one-on-one discussions, which might be joined by anybody else interested in the subject; to read an article, have lunch or simply decompress; for coffee breaks and celebrations; and to brainstorm around a tough problem. It belongs to the group in which — it cannot be forgotten — you as a leader also

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participate. So it is important that you partake in the life that teems in the creativity room.

Encourage Forums That Advance Knowledge Sharing

For leaders, it is immeasurably valuable to learn to feel at ease with the concept that less is more, with the idea that there are times when managers are not needed. So encourage groups to meet on their own without leaders or managers present on a regular basis. Furthermore, create the culture that gives groups the space to emerge on their own. Resist the urge to continually analyze and schedule, but be prepared to respond when you identify a need. And you will be surprised as you see a sense of empowerment arising that liberates creativity and persists over time.

Significance in Recognition

To be coherent and lasting, a culture relies on open communication and recognition to build the trust that delivers high performance. There is a certain Darwinian principle that applies to the power of recognition in maintaining a culture: Appreciating, recognizing and rewarding each other's contributions are ways of pointing out desirable behaviors, those selected for emulation.

Unfortunately, in an understandable desire to protect privacy and discourage dissent and jealousy, most forms of “big” rewards — cash awards, merit increases, bonuses, stock options — need to be kept private, and so their value in promoting desirable behavior and performance is lost to the group. With their outstanding potential for motivation, they are nevertheless important forms of recognition, one that leaders should make every effort to use as frequently and generously as possible.

Promotions: Something to Take Dead Seriously

On the other end of the spectrum lies the promotion, the public nature of which represents an important force in motivation and culture creation. A significant part of the impact of promotions on culture comes from the fact that promotions are the return on accountability — the reward for the accountability trusted upon the receiver — informing the group what contributions and behaviors are of pre-eminent importance. But in order for them to be a creative rather than a destructive force, promotions need to be judged and awarded with the greatest sense of fairness. Promote for the right reasons and you have the wind behind you. Promote for misguided reasons — the pressure to retain a star, an effort to support diversity or a well-intentioned attempt at leveling the playing

field — and you run into gale winds of resistance and backlash.

In a Class by Itself: Recognize Mastery

Then there is a form of recognition that is subtle and has a pervasive and lasting effect on culture: the recognition of mastery — the daily recognition of mastery. The leader who expects the members of his or her group to become the best they can be will be wise to recognize their steps in getting there and, by so doing, help the group move toward achieving mastery, the merging of professional excellence and personal fulfillment.

Recognition of mastery has many faces and presents many opportunities on a daily basis, most of them taking place in the intimacy of the group. On these two qualities, intimacy and constancy, rests the all-encompassing impact that recognition of mastery delivers, a sustained effect in shaping culture through honest, reiterated communication and celebration.

When carried out in a timely fashion and delivered with sincerity and a personal message, small actions of recognition are the daily nourishment that recognizes influence and impact and helps those being recognized feel established as practitioners. Opportunities that have impact are easy to find, such as:

- Bringing by a relevant high-level executive to an office or lab for an unexpected private pat on the back.
- Making a mention at your group meeting of a recent external honor awarded to one of them.
- Asking seasoned scientists to mentor younger ones.
- Assigning resources to parlay the outcome of one project into a broader impact.
- Inviting expressions of appreciation and reward by team members for one another's contributions. ●

Passion 6: Structure a Clear Organization

By defining a clear organization, the stumbling blocks — second-guessing, the fear that “it can't be done,” risk-averse knee-jerk reactions, circuitous approval paths and many other pitfalls — are eliminated and replaced by a streamlined delivery process. The time invested in defining a structure, with roles, links and responsibilities clearly understood by all, is time well spent. The need to focus on clear organizational structure in no way demands a turning-away from maintaining the vibrancy of an organization, of establishing values, demanding excellence and creating a culture by taking care of your team members

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one at a time. Just the opposite: Both need to coexist with equal intensity, enthusiasm and rigor.

A structure, however, needs to strike a balance between two organizational extremes. On one hand, authoritarian hierarchies impose great clarity on an organization or team, but they can also stifle creativity and passionate exploration. Free-form organizations, on the other hand, provide no boundaries or guidance for unconventional spirits, who often flounder without the structure imposed by a more traditional organization. The need, then, is for a clearly defined impassioned organization where everybody's role and everybody's responsibility is clear to all and where every exchange reinforces the role of each component.

The more comfortable every member is in understanding his or her role, the less he or she will feel driven to engage defense mechanisms to defend his or her turf. It is this absence of destructive conflict that creates space and liberates passions.

Who Has the Skills to Do What and With Whom?

From the perspective of the individual, there are two basic questions, the answers to which streamline work and facilitate delivery: "Who takes care of my personal needs?" and "Who takes care of my project needs?" The answer, of course, defines a basic and fundamental distinction in roles and responsibilities, one that is not always identified or addressed by organizations, creating unnecessary confusion and holding back progress. And the answer is as simple as defining and differentiating two roles: functional and project management.

Taking care of defining assignments, of developing careers, and maintaining motivation and challenge is the purview of functional managers. These are the people to whom practitioners turn for direction, arbitration and support.

In a complementary role, taking responsibility for enlisting the best resources for a project, defining the timelines, and driving team members to deliver on goals and schedules is the domain of project managers. Practitioners turn to them for clarity in project objectives, access to resources and timeline definition. ●

Passion 7: Provide Authentic Leadership

To guide intense, high-energy teams, a leader needs to be passionate; impassioned practitioners are naturally at odds with apathetic leadership and the ambiguous results it elicits. But a leader's passion must be authentic; it can-

not be put on or imposed from outside. Leaders need to be true to themselves while carrying out their roles. Following a recipe and going through the mechanics, even if the symbols are there, will neither create a culture nor motivate teams.

Ultimately, for leaders to be able to successfully maintain the peak performance that the role demands, they need to run both hot and cold at the same time: impassioned and detached. The passionate, energizing aspect is key to the motivational and inspirational facet of the leader. But it is detachment that enables the leader to guide the raft through whitewater. Detachment arises from awareness of what is really happening, from the understanding that your participation is required, but your control is not. A detached leader can afford to put his or her energy into nurturing, not controlling.

At the core of genuine leadership is a clear sense of self-acceptance by the leader, which comes from strong and unrelenting work leading to self-awareness. These two qualities, self-acceptance and self-awareness, are the foundation of leadership as service that is expressed through courage, integrity and empathy toward others, allowing a culture of empowerment to emerge.

Self-awareness is an imperative for leadership. You need to discover who you are before you can lead others, before you can help them and before they will trust you. Conversely, the many dimensions and facets of leadership, the many different situations and challenges awakening unconscious conditioning and eliciting emotional responses in you, create an unparalleled opportunity for self-discovery, inner growth and fulfillment.

Leadership as service can only come through nonjudgmental acceptance of your whole being, regardless of your behavior and perceived lacks. Self-acceptance brings humility, which in turn frees us from arrogance and the drive to inflate ourselves. Leadership as service flourishes when there is no personal agenda of acquisition, when the leader is free to serve and to lead with the best interests of others at heart, while releasing the need to prove himself or herself to be above or below others. ●

RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *Idea Agent*, you'll also like:

1. ***Disciplined Dreaming* by Josh Linkner.** Linkner shows how to create profitable new ideas, empower all your employees to be creative and sustain your competitive advantage over the long term.
2. ***The Levity Effect* by Adrian Gostick and Scott Christopher.** The authors reveal how humor in the workplace will help you communicate messages, build camaraderie and encourage creativity for better outcomes.
3. ***The Wizard and the Warrior* by Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal.** The authors give leaders the insight and courage they need to take risks on behalf of values they cherish and the people they guide.