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## Executive Book Summaries®

# Leading the Unleadable

## How to Manage Mavericks, Cynics, Divas and Other Difficult People

### THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

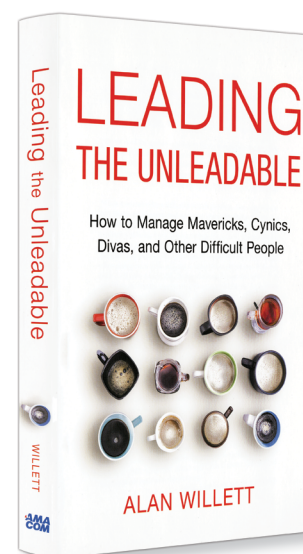
The control-freak, the narcissist, the slacker, the cynic... Difficult people are the worst part of a manager's job. Whether it comes from direct reports or people above, outbursts, irrational demands, griping and other disruptions need to be dealt with — and it's your responsibility to do it. *Leading the Unleadable* turns this dreaded chore into a straightforward process that gently yet effectively improves behaviors. Written by an insider in the tech industry, where personality issues routinely wreck projects, Alan Willett reveals a core truth: Most people actually want to contribute results, not cause headaches.

Once you realize the potential for change, the Willett's simple steps and examples explain how to right even the most hopeless situations. You'll learn how to master the necessary mindset; explain the problem calmly in a short feedback session; get a commitment to change and follow up; coach others to replicate the process; and develop the situational awareness required to spot trouble even earlier in the future.

Every manager has "problem people." What sets great managers apart is how they turn them into productive team players. Prepare to transform the troublesome into the tremendous.

### IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- What it means to accept the call of exceptional leadership.
- How to take action and follow through with troublesome employees.
- Key criteria for deciding whether to remove or improve an employee.
- How to prevent problems by setting the bar high.



by Alan Willett

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# THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: LEADING THE UNLEADABLE

by Alan Willett

**The author:** Alan Willett spent 20 years building and delivering superior integrated software-hardware products to the marketplace. He quickly took on management positions as a result of his strong organizational skills and commitment. He was part of the management team that created Xerox's first digital print production system. As a consultant, he has worked with executives and leading experts from around the world.

*Leading the Unleashable: How to Manage Mavericks, Cynics, Divas and Other Difficult People* by Alan Willett. Copyright © 2016 by Alan Willett. Summarized by permission of the publisher, AMACOM, a division of American Management Association, Int'l. 240 pages, \$17.95, ISBN 978-0-8144-3760-5. To purchase this book, go to [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com). Summary copyright © 2017 by Soundview Executive Book Summaries® [www.summary.com](http://www.summary.com), 1-800-SUMMARY.

## Preface

Exceptional leaders have one obligation above all. Whether they are managing an entire company or a team, a division, a single project or simply a meeting, they must focus on the group, not the individual, and if an individual is hurting the group, that person must be brought back into the fold or cut out altogether. ●

### PART I: THE CALL TO EXCEPTIONAL LEADERSHIP

## The Leadership Crisis Point

The greater the responsibilities of leadership, the greater the amount of trouble you must deal with. Recently, a division manager responsible for \$100 million in revenue and 500 employees distilled the situation perfectly to a roomful of colleagues. He held his hands a few inches apart. "This," he said, "is how much good news I get to share with the upper management of this company." He then stretched his arms the full distance. "This," he said, "is how much bad news I get to share with upper management." The other leaders in the room nodded their heads in agreement.

This is why leaders often reach the point at which they wake up one morning and simply think, "I don't want to do this anymore." They have reached a leadership crisis point. There is a way forward, though.

Leadership isn't just making a series of decisions (choices) on a daily basis. The very essence of being a leader and how you lead is itself a choice.

Choose not just the call to leadership; choose the call to exceptional leadership. This is a call to embrace the tremendous personal growth opportunity in learning about yourself, in growing your own career and in contributing good to the world.

Before we can listen to the call, we first must understand and *accept* the following facts about leadership: the call to leadership is a choice; whatever you lead, leadership is about leading people; leadership comes with a taxonomy of trouble; and the trouble is your fault, even when it is not. When we accept these facts, we are ready to learn how to lead the unleashable, including our own troublesome selves.

Difficult challenges that leaders are likely to encounter include

**Troublesome Project Teams.** The problem occurs when the project's troubles start negatively impacting the whole organization: teams that are always late and have quality issues; teams that are constantly battling fires; the stress on any team striving for excellence that often leads to conflict.

**Troublesome Individuals.** People issues that leaders commonly must address include the cynic, the slacker, the diva and the pebble in the shoe (teammates who provide persistent annoyance to other teammates).

**Troublesome Leaders.** These include a clash of the titans, when a leadership group is composed of people actively trying to make each other fail; the maverick, who is ready to throw away all of the status quo; and leaders who are facing their own leadership crises.

**Troublesome Stakeholders.** These include too many bosses with conflicting priorities, the wrong level of



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involvement from your stakeholders and irrational pressure from above.

Remember that blame has nothing to do with troublesome situations. If you are the leader responsible for making sure the mission is accomplished, if it is not accomplished, it is still your responsibility. ●

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### Accept the Call of Exceptional Leadership

Successful leaders get things done. Their businesses are successful. They deliver. They make a profit. And these leaders do this in spite of all the troubles that plague them. Many managers are successful in this way, but the call to exceptional leadership can take them to a higher level of achievement.

The first difference with exceptional leaders is that they have a very personal, passionate mission that goes beyond those simple (and, yes, important) results. Thus, their measures of success also have a much higher bar.

Exceptional leaders also measure the positive difference for their customers, track the attrition rates of top talent, measure whether constructive conflict occurs much more often than destructive conflict, watch the trend lines of unacceptable behaviors or results and watch their protégés excel.

Accepting the call to exceptional leadership does come with new challenges and new responsibilities. Here are five things to do to help meet the challenges:

- 1. Be fearless.** When you start saying “no” to things you used to say “yes” to, the reactions can vary and even include anger. Nonetheless, saying “no” will often be the right choice. Be fearless and confident in your choice.
- 2. Build your own community of exceptional leaders.** Leaders who choose this path notice that there are not many people who have chosen this path, but they can immediately identify the leaders who have. Talk to them, work with them and learn from them.
- 3. Stop whining.** That is obvious and still worth saying. It is fine to take the occasional whine break, but make it short.
- 4. Learn to love the challenge of transforming the troublesome to the tremendous.** This is the opposite of the whining that perhaps you used

to do! When you have a difficult employee who is challenging you, learn to relish this as an opportunity to grow others and yourself in the process.

- 5. Know that learning will have setbacks.** Taking on brand new learning opens up pathways in your mind and is very exciting. There will be moments, though, where it is a more difficult path than the familiar one. Take your time and learn the new road. It is worth the effort. ●

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### The Mindset to Lead the Unleaddable

When we change our mindsets, that changes how we act in response to the events that occur around us. How we act changes the outcomes. To be able to best manage the mavericks, cynics, divas and other difficult people and situations, we have to first change our frames of reference in how we think about them.

Here are the key elements of the mindset for leading the unleaddable:

**Key 1: Appreciate the diversity of every leaf.**

If you inspect the leaves on a single tree, you will find differences among the leaves. As in nature, the diversity of culture is a rich, textured tapestry of where we have all come from with our unique backgrounds. Exceptional leaders more than understand this diversity; they love it!

Exceptional leaders know that when encountering some behavior or action that appears unacceptable, their first thought should be to wonder what they don't understand about the person and the communication process. Having multiple ways of thinking about things can lead to arguments, but with great leadership this results in great innovation.

**Key 2: Start with the belief that everyone has good intentions.** The exceptional leader believes that when someone is causing problems, it is not the person's intention to cause problems. Almost certainly the troublesome person is trying to do his or her best to further the overall good of the initiative. The calm leader has the mindset that when trouble arises, it is not of evil intent, it is because something is missing.

**Key 3: Accept reality but do not let reality define you.** Exceptional leaders do push to set a high bar and to define what that high bar should be. This takes an important mindset, which is summed up in the threefold relentless pursuit of seeing reality, accepting reality and,

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based on this, dealing with reality in a way that sets a high standard of achievement.

**Key 4: Set the high bar for excellence that people desire.** The leaders of the high-quality results organization know that people crave the high bar of doing excellent work. They also know that in spite of any whining that may occur initially, in the end people are proud of producing great products and great results.

**Key 5: Understand the power of gelled teams.** The exceptional leader is always looking for ways to create teams of people in which the team can figure out how to address the trouble without management involvement. As you grow as a leader, the troubles you and your organization encounter will not diminish, but as your skills grow at creating the desired culture, the number of times you must personally get involved will greatly diminish.

**Key 6: Treat trouble as information-rich data.** If there is trouble occurring in any of the things you lead, it is important information — not just about the actual incident or the actual trouble; it also contains information on the process, the people involved, the culture you are creating through your leadership and you.

**Key 7: Own your leadership power.** The meaning of this is simply that you understand and own all the keys of the mindset of leading the unleadable. It means that when you have setbacks in making those mindsets your first response (and there will be setbacks), you don't let the setback become a norm; you forgive yourself and get back on track. It means that you don't let the trouble you have to deal with define your response; you take ownership of your response. You take ownership of your leadership process and the results. ●

### PART II: THE LEADER IN ACTION SPOTTING TROUBLE, DEALING WITH TROUBLE

## Fine-Tune Your Radar for Trouble

To deal with issues you first must be aware that they exist. And, as in all things, the earlier you are aware of issues emerging the more likely you will prevent damage and achieve the excellence desired.

How good is your radar for trouble? For those who have now objectively determined that their own radars are flawless, scan these areas and see if you find anything new to help make them even better. If you have found that your radar can be improved, consider the following three methods:

**Method 1: Talk to people. More importantly, listen to people.** The most obvious way to be able to spot trouble is to be there when the situation is beginning or at least right when it happens. And since you cannot always be there, the next most obvious way is to hear about troublesome situations soon after they happen. One way to do this is by the classic “management by walking around” or, in this very connected world filled with distributed teams, leadership by calling around and checking in. You have two goals with this. The first goal is to find out if there are any situations that need your help to ensure the achievement of the project goals. The second goal is to build trust in a way that people will come to you without fear about difficult situations.

**Method 2: Pay attention to differences.** Often, the first indicator that something is wrong is a feeling that something is different from previous experiences. The key is to pay attention to that feeling and investigate whether your feeling is meaningful or not. Is there something that needs your attention? Notice the differences. Ask about them. The answers could be very interesting.

**Method 3: Look beyond the first level of data.** People often have a story that goes with data, especially if that data doesn't indicate good news about the project. And although the story gives a great context to the data, the data is still important. It is important to go deeper when the story and the data do not match. When looking at the data, ask, Is the data providing a compelling answer to useful questions? Was the data collected accurately and consistently? Based on the data, what actions can and should be taken based on trigger points? ●

## Take Action: Transforming the Troublesome

Once you spot trouble, how will you deal with it? There is a choice to be made by the leader. If action is not taken, it is possible that things just might get better. However, it is more likely that if action is not taken, things will get worse and often in unpredictable ways.

It is best to take proper action. To take proper action, proper preparation is required. Four steps are needed to prepare for proper action: understand what emotions you are feeling and why; move past negative judgments and assumptions; prepare your clear, short (two minutes or less), judgment-free message; and set aside time with the individual to focus on this one topic.

Follow these steps when taking proper action:

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**Meet in a private space:** This can be via videoconference or telephone, however do not use email or other written correspondence, as the most likely outcome is to make the circumstance worse.

**Deliver your key message.** Do not start with small talk. Deliver your key concern with respect and empathy toward the other person. Do so concisely and without judgment.

**Wait patiently and quietly for a response.** Wait for the individual to talk. If you have to, wait longer; the response is often an unexpected set of events you did not know about.

**Be in the moment.** The best way to prepare for the response is not to anticipate what it will be. Sometimes the response is a complete surprise. Given that you really do not know the response you will get, just be in the moment and listen.

**Listen to understand.** Stay focused on what the speaker is saying and how he is saying it. If there are parts you don't understand, just keep listening until the person is done speaking.

**Reflect.** Tell the person what you heard to make sure you did understand. Reflect both on the facts and the emotions. This is not a place to argue.

**Discuss.** It is fine to ask questions. It is fine to bring up things you are wondering about. The discussion part should not be long. It is just for you to make sure you understand the situation and the other person understands the impact his behavior is having.

**Set expectations.** The meeting must provide clarity on what your expectations are. This is the part of the meeting for the other person to listen and understand.

**Ask for action steps.** It is best if you set up a second meeting for the person to be able to take time to internalize what he heard. He will also have time to build a proper set of actions for moving forward.

**Summarize.** Conclude the meeting with a summary. There are a variety of responses that you would expect when delivering the difficult message that a person is falling short of expectations. You might expect to see anger or rationalizations or many forms of excuses. If you are centered and in the moment, you should focus on listening and also keeping clear in your own mind your expectations of excellence. The concern you started the meeting with was based on those expectations. The meeting should conclude with that clarity. ●

## Follow Through: A Bridge to Enduring Improvement

Leaders must always be prepared for follow through. In many situations, the conversation is the start, and the leader's next step is to help the person to build a bridge to successful improvement. To create a bridge for successful improvement, you must start with the following three clear expectations.

The first expectation is to have the intention for successful improvement through collaboration. The second expectation is that you as the leader are accountable for the success of the initiative you are undertaking. The third critical expectation is that you start with the belief that success is probable.

A plan for follow through should always focus on a clear vision of where you, the individual, the team and the organization want to end up.

Follow-up actions should include periodic check-ins. These do not have to be long. The most important thing to do in these cases is to focus your check-ins on the new behaviors you are expecting to see. Surround people with support, and provide space for learning new behaviors.

Finally, it is important to set the bar of excellence high. It is a leadership mistake to recognize just effort. It is more important to recognize when success is achieved. ●

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## Decision Time: Remove or Improve?

Your leadership obligation is to the group as a whole. The primary purpose that guides your action should have the overall mission of the group in mind.

There are circumstances where it is clear that it will not be possible for an individual to improve to the performance level required in the time required. For example, there are situations where only a scant few weeks remain before the launch of a product. If someone is being especially disruptive, it is unlikely there is time to properly remedy the situation when everyone is already under stress. However, even in this situation, you may think that saving the individual is critical for future organization improvement. Unless the troublesome behavior is outright illegal, these decisions are rarely clear and easy to make. Is it the right time to remove or the right time to improve?

All decisions this important must be made in the context of the situation the leader is facing. A number of factors come into consideration. The following are the most important.

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- Has the individual shown the willingness and ability to take critical input and use it for self-improvement? If the person has issues and always indicates that the problem is not with her but with others, then the leader will have a significant challenge.
- How well liked is the individual by the rest of the organization?
- Is the individual able to raise the ability of others through collaboration? Individuals who can bring together a diverse set of abilities and personalities are important assets to organizations.
- Do the technical skills and experience of the individual fit the needs of the project today? Are those skills exemplary or ordinary? The big question is how much impact the removal of this individual will have on the project.
- Do the skills and experience of the individual fit the needs of future projects? It is important for the exceptional leader to always keep an eye on the horizon.
- How likely will you be able to acquire the skills this individual has from outside the organization in a timely manner? This is a critical factor.

Using these criteria-based questions will help raise the leader above an emotional response to difficult situations, and enable him or her to begin to think clearly about the situation. ●

### PART III: THE LEADER IN ACTION PREVENTING TROUBLE

## The Need for Mountains

In 1914, Sir Ernest Shackleton's Antarctic expedition became shipwrecked. It took 500 days for the commander and his crew to reach safety while living in the harshest conditions our planet has to offer. Years later, though, Shackleton returned to the Antarctic on another expedition, and most of his crew joined him. They went back because they recalled the freezing, starving, dangerous journey as one of the happiest times of their lives. It wasn't just that they relished the challenge, it was that they remembered overcoming the challenge as a team.

There is a need for challenges as high as mountains. There is a need for people to gather together and work toward a great goal. There is a need for quests.

If you see people having the same arguments over and over and again, it is almost always a battle about what the next steps should be or what the overall solution should

be. The root cause of this repetitive argument is *not* about being deadlocked on which solution is superior. If those people battling took time out of the battle to dig deeper, they would often find that the individuals deadlocked have different goals in mind. They are headed to different destinations.

Even organizations in the midst of the survival journey are better off if they set compelling goals.

If your organization is successful and survival is a given, the need for compelling goals is even more critical. But how do you set a compelling goal when the obvious one of survival is no longer there?

**Start with the "big why."** Why is your goal important to you? Even more important, why is it important to your clients? Why is it important to your employees? You can set goals for a period of time, for a project or to set the stage for creating a new organization.

**Make your goals about going somewhere inspiring.** Too often, managers put forth goals about "not doing" something. We are going to "stop providing bad service" is not nearly as compelling as "customers will call other people to tell them about the service we provided them."

**Work on language that will create visceral emotion.** How can you state your goal so that it will evoke an emotion that people understand, care about and will remember?

**Leave room for people to take their own meaning and ownership.** If you provide too much detail, it leaves no room for the imagination to take hold. It doesn't leave room for a dialogue. ●

## Set Expectations of Excellence

Exceptional leaders are fearless in setting their expectations of excellence in clear language before and during a project, as well as in the way they handle deviations from the expectations they have set forth.

Whether you desire to reset expectations or you are forming a new organization or simply a new team, the creation of your expectations of excellence should be done in a thoughtful manner. The following are considerations in forming your expectations of excellence:

**Consider the context of your organization.** What is the organization's vision and mission? Are you leading a group in a risky new enterprise, or is this a critical project building on existing technologies?

**Take a view from the outside looking in.** What attributes would you like your organization to be known for? Consider what it may be known for right now.

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### **Engage key opinion leaders in the conversation.**

Inside your organization, you want to engage in a conversation that helps form and develop your ideas. Also, by engaging in the conversation, you are setting the stage for your key internal opinion leaders to make your expectations of excellence be part of the fabric of how they think as well. Engage in conversations with people external to the organization. How do they view your organization now? Do they see you the way you see yourself?

**Make your expectations concise and memorable, and provide detail.** The slogan “Quality is Job #1” is concise, and in many ways it is memorable. But you must provide examples of what *good* is when you say quality is job #1. Leaders should be ready with examples of what they mean by *quality*, especially for the most important aspects of their organizations. They also should have examples of ways that quality can be measured. ●

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## Expecting Excellence Every Day

What happens in the halls and in meetings and many other interactions in the organization define the true expectations of excellence. If those interactions are not congruent with what is written on the walls, the hallways will win. As a result, people will become cynical, and leaders will have a more difficult time managing trouble. It is much harder to point to what *good* is with inconsistent reinforcement of the organizational expectations of excellence.

When the formal expectations of excellence match the daily interactions, a powerful foundation is formed that enables the whole organization to rise to expectations of excellence. What is happening is that the leaders are not just creating expectations of excellence, they are consciously forming a culture of excellence that makes the desired behaviors of leaders and team members a natural experience of how they do work. This is the key to preventing trouble from occurring in the first place.

Like it or not, meetings set the tone for an organization. If meetings pulse with energy, the potential for greatness grows. Take ownership of the meetings you own or run. Vary the rhythm. Many weekly meetings are the same every week. Rotate agenda items. Consider different styles for the weeks. Find out what people really think. Work to become a master facilitator.

Use skill gaps as opportunities to grow the culture you need. There are times when you put up the high bar of your expectations of excellence, and people simply cannot reach it. The way to keep the bar high is to give people the skills they need to reach it through training, coaching,

mentoring and clear role modeling. Do not reward the sweat. Reward the results. ●

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## Exceptional Starts Lead to Exceptional Results

Starting a project poorly leads to having to do significant rework later and being constantly behind expectations of schedule and quality. In addition to resulting in constant stress for the project team, projects that start poorly very seldom fully “win” by delivering all expectations on time or early and delighting both team members and customers.

How do projects start right? Start by thinking about what you should do:

**Have a clear purpose for the project with clear priorities.** Why is this project important to the organization? Even if the project is an exploration of a possible new marketplace, the project must have a clear purpose defined for the beginning as well as an end result of success in mind.

**Understand how important this new project is in respect to the current portfolio of projects.** Is this a tactical urgent response to a current problem? Is this more or less important than current projects?

**Start with a small team.** Typically, starting a project exceptionally means establishing a strong foundation to add other people to later. Starting with a small team with the attitude to start the project correctly will make the project go faster and faster as the right team members are added.

**Start with the right leadership sweet spot for the type of project.** If your project is exploring brand new technology and marketplaces, you want a leader who is fearless about being wrong and learning quickly from taking those risks. You want a leader who will ensure that the current technologies continue to work well for your customer base. Look for the right type of leader for the project context. ●

## PART IV: LEADING LEADERS

### Lead Leaders: Growing Proven Ability

The most fundamental problem of leading leaders is that they can be unleadable too and in whole new ways. As

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one CEO is quoted as saying, “The higher up a manager is in the organization, the more fog there is around that manager’s performance. It is very hard to judge how well they are doing.” The problem with the fog is it takes longer to see if the leader is the root cause of the problem.

As a leader of leaders,

- There is an increased distance between you and much of the work. Thus, you will often be one or more levels removed from where the trouble is and even distant from the indicators of trouble.
- You do not know the details of how the work should be done.
- Your breadth of responsibility increases, and with great power comes great pressure.
- There is increased need for autonomy among the people whom you are leading. People need the space and capacity to make their own decisions, to make their own mistakes and to complete excellent work.

In the organizations where there is a significant issue in the ranks of leadership, the most common root cause is that the leader of the leaders has not clearly thought about the expectations for how the leaders working for them should lead. The key is to make your expectations of leadership known. This is the most important preventive measure in ensuring that the leaders you lead will more likely be tremendous than trouble.

As a leader of leaders, you must have a longer view than any of the leaders working for you. The CEOs of larger organizations must be focused on creating next year’s business while other leaders focus on delivering today’s products, services and promises. Each leader must be able to articulate the direction the company is going in and how the success of today contributes to longer-term potential.

It is your job to provide each person you lead with inspiration, guidance, discipline, correction, training and, most of all, the opportunity to make mistakes and to excel.

If you are making decisions about direction that others disagree with, expect them to challenge you.

Get things done while growing the talent of teams and collaborating with peers. It is a high bar of excellence. Expect nothing less. ●

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### Leader, Lead Thyself: Exceptional Self-Leadership

If you truly want to be an exceptional leader who can consistently provide great value, to have positive impact

and even to transform troublesome situations to tremendous, then the focus must start with your inner game of leadership.

**Find your leadership sweet spot.** On a tennis racquet there is a miraculous zone known as the sweet spot. It is where multiple forces are designed to come together to create a harmonic response.

The same is true for leadership. When you do work that misses your leadership sweet spot, it is jarring and more quickly drains your energy. When you do work from your sweet spot, it provides more energy to you than you put into it. This is also an intersection of three forces that you can control to come together to create a great harmonic response.

**Passion** is the type of work that energizes you. You like this style of work and like doing the work in this area. This is the work that puts a smile on your face.

**Competence** is simply having the skills needed to make the work successful. When you have passion and competence, the work done will provide you with great pleasure and pride.

To do work that truly energizes you in the long run, the work that intersects with your passion and competence must also be work that provides **value** to others.

Exceptional leaders work to create ways to grow their sweet spots.

As managers, as leaders, your obligation is to the group as a whole. Every time that there is a troublesome person or situation, it is an opportunity to help someone grow — and perhaps even yourselves. It is an opportunity to transform the troublesome to the tremendous. ●

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#### MORE SV CONTENT ON LEADING DIFFICULT PEOPLE

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**Summary: *Enchantment* by Guy Kawasaki.** Enchantment, as defined by best-selling business guru Guy Kawasaki, is not about manipulating people. It transforms situations and relationships, converts hostility into civility and changes skeptics into believers. Kawasaki explains all the tactics you need to prepare and launch an enchantment campaign.

**Webinar: *How to Deal with People Who Drive You Crazy* by Mark Goulston.** Dr. Mark Goulston brings his communication magic to the most difficult group of all: the downright irrational. The key to handling irrational people is to learn to lean into the crazy — to empathize with it.