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## The Extraordinary Leader

### Turning Good Managers Into Great Leaders

#### THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

For too long, the subject of effective leadership has been shrouded in fog and ambiguity. This summary removes the shroud to reveal leadership as a skill, one that can be consciously learned and developed by anyone. It identifies the competencies necessary for effective leadership by analyzing the responses of tens of thousands of work force members as they describe, in effect, “What makes a great leader?”

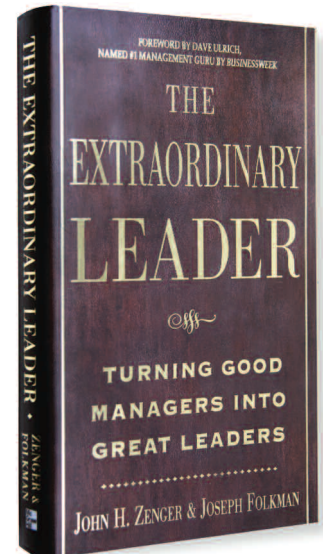
Two of today’s pre-eminent leadership experts analyze the answers and provide a broad and universal model for achieving exceptional results.

A major weakness in most leadership development programs has been the tendency to aim low and strive for incremental improvements in individual areas of weakness. When the results inevitably fail to impact the bottom line, organizations abandon programs as unsuccessful — and again resume their misguided focus on uncovering and eliminating leadership weaknesses instead of identifying and developing leadership strengths.

This summary instead focuses on the ability — in fact the necessity — for individuals to hone their leadership competencies in multiple areas, and organizations to develop great leaders in as many areas as possible. It provides research-based strategies for strengthening leadership both in individuals and in organizations.

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

- Methods that top organizations use to develop leaders from within their own ranks.
- Key competencies that leaders must have — and techniques for mastering them.
- Practical steps for developing your own leadership skills.
- A solid yet flexible leadership development program that will provide long-term value to virtually any organization.



by John H. Zenger and  
Joseph Folkman

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# THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: THE EXTRAORDINARY LEADER

by John H. Zenger and Joseph Folkman

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## Demystifying Leadership

Analysis of huge amounts of data collected on leaders' competencies reveals that all vital and differentiating leadership competencies can be grouped into five clusters that can be compared to the poles in a tent:

- **Character.** Personal character is the core of all leadership effectiveness. The ethical standards, integrity and authenticity of the leader are extremely important. With a strong personal character the leader is never afraid to be open and transparent. In fact, the more people can see inside, the more highly regarded the leader will be. Without that personal character, on the other hand, leaders are forever in danger of being discovered.
- **Personal Capability.** This is the intellectual, emotional and skill makeup of the individual. It includes analytical and problem-solving capabilities, along with the technical competence the person possesses.
- **Focus on Results.** This describes the ability to have an impact on the organization. It means being capable of getting things accomplished.
- **Interpersonal Skills.** There is an enormous body of evidence that says leadership is expressed through the communication process and is the impact that one person (the leader) has on a group of other people.
- **Leading Organizational Change.** Another expression of leadership comes in the ability to produce change within an organization. The highest expression of leadership involves change. Caretaker managers can keep things going on a steady path, but leaders are demanded if the organization is to pursue a new path or rise to a significantly higher level of performance.

A key point here is that for many leadership roles, the first four elements may be all that is needed. It is not until a person gets into leading broad, strategic change that the final tent pole is required. ●

## Great Leaders Make a Great Difference

An effective leader produces high productivity, low turnover, high customer satisfaction, high profitability, innovation and positive relationships with suppliers. Effective leadership is best defined and measured by the results produced.

### The Organization's Objective

The more "great" leaders an organization can develop, the stronger it will be. This is true for multiple reasons, among them are the following:

- The contribution these leaders make to the units they manage.
- The example they set or role model they provide for the entire organization.
- The cumulative impact their performance has in creating an entirely new culture for the organization.
- The elevated standard of performance that is set within the organization.

Individuals must focus on their strengths. By doing that, they greatly increase the likelihood of being perceived as great leaders. That same principle applies to the organization. It is always tempting to attempt to fix the low-performing leaders, but the greatest gain appears to come by helping more leaders become truly excellent.



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The only downside of any organization doing that is the target they become for headhunters. Just as GE has become the spawning ground for corporate CEOs, so will any company that produces great leaders. However, that is a relatively small price to pay for the enormous gains to be achieved by successfully developing great leaders for the firm.

## Good Versus Bad Thinking

It is helpful to expand your thinking from “Leaders are either good or bad” to “Leaders are bad, good and great.” This is a small change from what many currently believe, but this small philosophical difference can have a huge impact on the success of both individuals and organizations.

For individuals this philosophy should help good leaders understand that good is not great. It never was and never will be. Good is good, but the ultimate target is extraordinary leadership. Don’t be satisfied with good performance. ●

## Simplifying Leadership

Much of past thinking about leadership has involved the quest to find out, “Is the key to leadership having high integrity, or is it ambition? Is it developing trust in people, or is it being a good problem solver?” It is important to disabuse yourself of this thinking and cease to view leadership in “or” terms, but instead think about it in “and” terms. The elements of leadership logically go together, and development efforts in one area are like flooding the pond and lifting all boats at the same time.

## Character

Everything radiates out from Character. Character ties strongly to Interpersonal Skills. A person whose character is perceived to be questionable will be less effective interpersonally. We recoil from phonies. We do not enjoy being with toadies who butter up people in authority and abuse everyone else. Most people avoid those who are arrogant or condescending. Relationships with such people are distant and strained.

## Personal Capability and Interpersonal Skills

Personal Capability links to Interpersonal Skills. The respect and esteem with which anyone in the organization is viewed begins with his or her Personal Capability. It is at the stage of “contributing independently” that people develop a wide range of personal relationships. The time when people are developing their professional and technical skills is the time when they should also be developing skills that will enable

## Four Stages of Career Growth

The four stages of career growth are:

Stage I: depending on others

Stage II: contributing independently

Stage III: contributing through others

Stage IV: leading through vision

In many cases people become locked into one stage because they do not possess the necessary skills and behavior to move forward. In other cases people stay at a particular stage because it fits their needs and aptitudes.

them to work effectively with others. Technical and professional expertise is tightly linked to developing others and building relationships.

Personal Capability links to Focus on Results. One of the key roles any leader plays is that of role model. When the leader is personally effective and highly productive, that example is viewed by everyone involved. Leaders cannot ask others to do what they are not doing.

## Focus on Results and Leading Organizational Change

**Focus on Results is linked to Interpersonal Skills.**

Many leaders think that the linkage between Focus on Results and Interpersonal Skills is an *or* rather than an *and*. They believe they can be one or the other but not both. While each is highly desirable by itself, they are like a voice being amplified by a great sound system when they are combined. The combination of the two ignites a power that catapults a person into the highest realms of effective leadership.

**Character links to Leading Organizational Change.** Organizations follow a leader who is perceived as being of high character. The greater the “connection” that is felt with the leader, the more likely the organization is to support the change being proposed. That support is tied to perceptions of the genuineness, caring and integrity of the leader.

**Focus on Results links to Leading Organizational Change.** Leading Organizational Change is most often a long-term objective, and effective leaders are always balancing short-term and long-term objectives. A focus on results is a necessary balance to the longer-term emphasis on strategic change.

**Interpersonal Skills links to Leading Organizational Change.** Nowhere is there a greater requirement for consummate interpersonal skills than in

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the introduction of strategic change within the organization. Whether it is an attempt to change the culture or to implement a major new initiative, trust from others and the communication skills of the leader are absolute requirements for success. ●

### The Competency Quest

The most prevalent approach to leadership development in recent years has been the competency movement. The fundamental premise is simple. Identify and define the competencies of effective leaders in a specific organization. (Competencies are the combination of knowledge, skills, traits and attributes that collectively enable someone to perform a given job.) Then, when selecting leaders, choose people who possess those competencies because they will have a much higher likelihood of success. If you want to develop leaders in the organization, design activities that directly expand or strengthen those competencies for the leaders in the organization.

For the past two decades, companies have focused their people-development efforts around these defined competencies. In sum, the approach has impeccable logic to it.

#### Why Hasn't It Worked?

The competency movement had several major flaws:

1. It was too complex.
2. It was based on some faulty assumptions.
3. It produced several unintended consequences.
4. It suffered from poor execution.

#### Correcting the Assumptions

Unfortunately, it now appears that most common assumptions underlying the focus on competencies do not coincide with the current reality, nor are they reinforced by current research. For example:

**Assumption 1.** Competencies are unique to each organization.

**Fact:** Despite the efforts to create distinctive lists of competencies, there is a remarkable sameness about them from one company to another. It is probable that there are a handful of factors that will always account for overall leadership effectiveness.

**Assumption 2.** Competencies are unique and distinctive traits or qualities possessed by an individual.

**Fact:** One of the most dramatic discoveries of research is the massive linkage between competencies. The linkage does not consist of a handful of competencies that are slightly linked to each other. Instead, nearly

every competency studied was highly correlated with many others.

**Assumption 3.** The more congruence there is between the organization's defined competencies and the individual's, the greater is the likelihood of success.

**Fact:** This is the only one of the assumptions that the study's data does not challenge. However, the validity of the assumption hinges on whether the organization has empirically derived its own list of competencies and whether there are good ways to measure an individual's competencies.

**Assumption 4.** All competencies have roughly the same importance.

**Fact:** There are huge differences between competencies' importance. If you want to work on improving your leadership capabilities, focus on behaviors that truly make a difference.

**Assumption 5.** Competencies are best developed by a direct focus on that specific competency.

**Fact:** Research suggests that one competency is developed in the process of developing another. They appear to be, in many cases, byproducts of one another. That means that the direct linear method is not the only way to develop or strengthen a competency. ●

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### Leaders Must Fit Their Organization

After analyzing the results from 22 different organizations, there are some common organizational profiles. These profiles highlight the things that organizations emphasize as strengths. Frequently, an organization might have several of the strengths listed below bundled together.

#### Organizational Profiles of Prized Competencies

To help you assess what your organization values, here are four of the more pronounced organizational characteristics. The opportunity here is to judge the "goodness of fit" between what your organization truly values and your own pattern of competencies.

• **Technology Emphasis.** In the technology organization, leaders need to be highly knowledgeable and viewed as having technical expertise in the core activity of the firm.

*Advantages.* This organization runs on cutting-edge technology.

*Disadvantages.* In this organization the inherent belief is that you can solve any problem with technology. Here linear thinking can be carried to an extreme.

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- **Excellent Execution.** In this organization there is a substantial need to drive forward and achieve results, to get things done on time, to stay in budget and to always make your numbers.

*Advantages.* This organization moves fast, and change happens quickly. If people enjoy challenges and like to stretch themselves, this organization will fit them well.

*Disadvantages.* As with any great conquest, there are typically many dead and wounded. The reality is that if you don't keep up, you're out.

- **Avoiding Mistakes.** In this organization there is a critical need to do things right. Excellence, quality and conformance to standards are the organizational bylines. However, the reward for taking on a new project or taking some initiative is not as great as the punishment for making a mistake.

*Advantages.* Leaders take pride in order, deeply analyze every aspect of a project and do high-quality work.

*Disadvantages.* Frequently the organization is slowed down by bureaucracy and excessive details, and is often risk-averse.

- **Customer Emphasis.** Leaders are totally focused on satisfying customer needs and responding to their requests.

*Advantages.* This company enjoys absolute clarity about what customers currently want and need.

*Disadvantages.* Leaders are so focused on pleasing the customer that they lose sight of internal operational issues and long-term direction.

### Implications

It is critical for leaders to understand their individual areas of competency, the things that bring them passion and the needs of their organization. The “leadership sweet spot” that is the intersection of these three elements holds great promise for both individual and organizational success. It is rare to find a perfect match between individual competence and passion and organizational needs. Individuals can develop new competencies to fit the needs of an organization. Organizations can change their culture, which requires leaders with different leadership competencies.

A key to success for leaders is to find their own personal “sweet spot.” For each person there is something that he or she can do extremely well. There is a competency with which he or she can make an enormous contribution.

When an individual can provide an extraordinary competency that an organization needs, the only other component that is required is passion. This is the ele-

ment that is most underrated and yet potentially the most critical part of the model. Love, desire, motivation, inspiration and passion are, in the final analysis, the greatest differences between good leaders and great leaders. ●

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## Great Leaders Possess Multiple Strengths

Building some strengths requires balancing some competencies against others. It is not strengths that hurt a person's effectiveness, but strengths standing alone without counterbalance.

The secret to building success as a leader is to be excellent at powerful combinations. The more differentiated the combination, the more potentially powerful the combination.

### Powerful Combinations

The first powerful combination is giving others performance feedback and building trust. Having the ability to give straightforward and candid feedback is a wonderful skill. Feedback, however is not always accepted. A powerful combination is having the ability to provide feedback and also being trusted by others. If others have trust, then their assumption is typically that the feedback is given to help them. Without trust, feedback is often perceived as self-serving on the part of the giver of the feedback.

A second example is a combination of the competencies of interpersonal skills and listening. Research on behaviors that differentiated high- and low-performing leaders found that listening was not a behavior that was an effective differentiator. High performers were not much better at listening than poor performers. Listening, however, can be a very beneficial skill when combined with other interpersonal skills. Studies found a powerful combination between a person's listening behavior and the perception by others that the leader had good interpersonal skills.

### The Halo Effect

A halo effect occurs when our perceptions of others are distorted either positively or negatively. After studying results from thousands of leaders, it became evident that strong positive and negative halo effects occur. When leaders perform extraordinarily well on a few behaviors, they begin to be viewed in a very positive light, and others' impressions of them on other competencies tend to be distorted in a positive direction. The opposite effect seems to occur for those with a few profound weaknesses.

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The halo effect is very real, and everyone has experienced its impact. The important issue for leaders is to get this effect to work for you rather than against you. The key to getting the halo effect to work for you is to build up a few profound strengths. ●

### Fatal Flaws Must Be Fixed

Five patterns of behavior consistently lead to failure in leadership. Possessing one or more of these makes it virtually impossible for a person to be perceived as an effective leader.

Here are five fatal flaws that consistently lead to failure in leadership:

1. Inability to learn from mistakes.
2. Lack of core interpersonal skills and competencies.
3. Lack of openness to new or different ideas.
4. Lack of accountability.
5. Lack of initiative.

Everyone close to these leadership behaviors feels their impact (or in this case, their lack of impact). No one is immune. They have a huge influence on the organization, because the leader has an enormous “ripple” effect in the organization.

If a leader possesses one or more of these characteristics, action should obviously be taken to remedy that deficiency, make that weakness irrelevant or move that person back into a role of being an individual contributor where that behavior is less necessary.

People can overcome these characteristics. The organization can ensure that the person knows he possesses one of these “fatal flaws” and the serious consequences this will have on his career. If the person is willing to change, he can often make significant contributions to the organization.

First, examine the nature of the individual and whether positive or negative feedback will be of most value. Second, whatever the person is like, keep feedback focused on the behavior or process the person is using, and not on him or her as a person. These two powerful ideas greatly enhance our understanding of the feedback process and how it can help leaders overcome fatal flaws.

Those whose careers continued to soar did exactly the opposite. They readily acknowledged what happened to those about them, alerted colleagues to the potential consequences, did their best to fix it and then proceeded to forget about it and move on in their careers. ●

### Derailed Executives

Researchers Morgan McCall, Jr. and Michael Lombardo compared executives who were derailed to those whose careers took them to senior positions in their firms. Derailed executives made about the same number of mistakes as those whose careers continued onward and upward, but derailed executives did not use setbacks or failure in an assignment as a learning experience. They hid their mistakes from others, not alerting colleagues to the consequences of how their mistakes would affect the colleagues’ activities. They did not take immediate steps to rectify what they had done. Finally, they tended to brood about their mistakes, constantly reliving them for years afterward.

### New Insights Into Leadership Development

Since almost all development plans are linear, researchers looked for a technique to help people understand alternative development paths. In their approach, they took 16 differentiating behaviors and analyzed the relationship between that specific behavior and the other 15, plus a number of other behaviors. When an individual showed a high level of competence on a specific behavior, researchers looked at other behaviors that were also highly rated. Then they analyzed leaders who were rated poorly on that differentiating behavior and observed that the same companion behaviors were also rated poorly.

The researchers call these related behaviors “competency companions.” They are companions because they seem to be permanently glued together. These competency companions provide excellent clues about an alternative way to develop important leadership skills — and to improve the likelihood that you will be perceived by those around you as possessing an important, differentiating competency.

For example, leaders perceived as having the best technical expertise were also perceived as having high competence in interpersonal skills and standards of excellence. Also, those perceived as having the worst technical expertise typically had poor interpersonal skills and low standards of excellence.

### The Link Between Interpersonal Relationships and Technical Competence

Research by Robert Kelley at Bell Labs looked at the productivity of scientists. The researchers found that the engineers who were most successful were not those with the highest IQs or those who were the most knowledgeable. What they found was that these stars per-

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formed their work differently. They developed strong networks within the organization and worked with others in a totally different manner than the “non-stars.”

To be perceived as being highly technically competent demands a person who can communicate effectively about their discipline to many groups.

### Mechanisms of Competency Companions

There are a variety of reasons for the impact that is evident when both the competency and the competency companion are rated positively. There are different mechanisms creating the impact. The following is a list of six mechanisms that best explain the competency companion phenomena:

1. The competency and the competency companion fit together in people’s perceptual systems.
2. Competency companions facilitate the expression of another competency.
3. Achieving a high level of skill in one behavior helps develop a related behavior.
4. One competency is a building block or a core element of the other competency.
5. Competency companions change the context in which we operate.
6. Developing a competency companion changes the person.

### A New Approach to Development

Competency companion research provides leaders with a new map on how to reach their ultimate destination. This map provides alternate routes, which, for the most part, are unintuitive.

Typically, leaders will find one or two of the companion behaviors in which their effectiveness is inadequate. One leader commented: “The companion behaviors I needed to work on stood out like a sore thumb. It was so obvious what was holding me back.” Leaders can usually arrive at their own rationale for why performing poorly on the companion behavior impacts the competency on which they are working to develop exceptional strength. The added insight provided by the competency companions is very powerful.

Leaders who have experienced this approach have found it to be a valuable tool in their efforts to make the transition from good managers to great leaders. ●

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## A Case Study in Leadership Development

The U.S. Marine Corps has come to utilize some extremely powerful leadership development practices.

They arrived at this through their long experience and seeing what worked, rather than coming at it primarily from any scientific research study.

Here are four lessons from the Marines’ approach:

• **Development begins with understanding the unique leadership tasks required.** Leadership is a team effort rather than a solo performance. The Marines’ emphasis on teams cascades through their leadership development. They pair a highly seasoned noncommissioned officer with a newly appointed lieutenant and allow the two of them to work together for several months. This eliminates many mistakes. The new officer has a sounding board with whom to think about strategies and tactics.

• **Everyone is on the team.** Daniel Freedman described the Marines’ culture in these terms, as he told of a complex mission planned by a Col. Moore: “Moore will make the final decision among the three [alternatives being proposed], though he not only allows disagreement but practically demands it. This is standard Marine thinking; enlisted men and women and officers alike are expected to express concern about questionable decisions and orders, and one of the biggest mistakes an officer can make is to ignore or squelch such questioning.”

• **Leaders must be able to cope with rapidly changing leadership patterns.** The Marines understand the difference between a situation that calls for a highly collaborative, team-based approach and one that calls for a strong, single leader. Effective leaders must be able to recognize the difference and to function comfortably in either situation.

• **Leadership requires the use of peer discipline and pressure.** The high level of commitment and loyalty in the Marines comes from not wanting to let your peers down, as much as or more than from the pressure of not disappointing an officer. In private-sector corporations the emphasis is more often on pleasing the boss. The Marines, in contrast, emphasize group discipline. It has long been recognized that their primary motivation is to protect their comrades. Discipline ensures a deep commitment to the organization, to the unit and to comrades. Thus, the strongest motivational forces come from within each person, and from colleagues.

While it may be premature to advise anyone to adopt their ways “lock, stock and barrel,” it appears that any organization that is serious about developing people can learn a great deal from the U.S. Marines. They prove that leaders can be developed. ●

### What Individuals Do to Become Great Leaders

Following are five suggestions for ways in which leaders can improve the attributes or behavior that are vital to producing extraordinary results.

1. **Decide to become a great leader.** To become a highly effective leader requires a real dedication to that task and a willingness to act with the intensity and focus that characterizes great athletes.
2. **Develop and display high personal character.** First, the leader must be willing to take the role of leader. That means calling the meeting to order, pushing the agenda along, drawing some people out and toning others down. It means saying “no” to a budget request that can’t be funded. It also means having to terminate a longtime friend who is not performing effectively.
3. **Develop new skills.** Enroll in developmental experiences. Attend any development program your organization provides or those offered by local universities and private organizations.
4. **Find a coach.** Many organizations hire professional coaches to work with their key executives. They find the investment in someone who is capable of providing objective, constructive feedback to be well worth the expense.
5. **Identify your strengths.** Management guru Peter Drucker argues, “Self-development is making oneself better at what one is already good at. It also means not worrying about the things one cannot be good at.”

It is clear that leaders can make huge strides by taking responsibility for their own development. They should not count on the organization to do that for them. ●

### The Organization’s Role in Developing Leaders

Research reveals that the leadership skills possessed by the most senior people in an organization become the leadership ceiling. That is, it is extremely rare to find anyone whose leadership skills exceed those of the people at the top.

#### Create a Culture of Feedback

Leadership development is significantly enhanced in a culture in which continual feedback is common. A variety of mechanisms exists to help make this happen. Some of those are 360-degree feedback procedures,

frequent performance discussions between bosses and subordinates, team-building sessions, coaching relationships and skip-level meetings.

Success hinges on the bone-deep beliefs of the senior leaders of the organization. Do they really believe that their people can become great leaders? Are they willing to invest their time in providing leadership to this leadership development effort?

Are the senior leaders willing to set the expectations at a very high level and insist that everyone strive to be an excellent leader? For the organizations that make this commitment, the rewards are extremely high. For those who choose not to, the future is highly questionable.

#### Greater Success

Why does this approach promise greater success in developing leaders?

First, a focus on developing great leaders rather than merely on “leadership development” gives a new perspective to what we do. It raises our sights and creates a somewhat different mindset for measuring success.

Second, an emphasis on strengths is more palatable than looking for blemishes and weaknesses. Most of us enjoy doing things we are good at. It is much easier for a leader to find ways to magnify strengths than it is to overcome weaknesses. It comes more naturally.

Third, people are more willing to practice skills they are good at. Recent research on “expert performers” attributes extraordinary performance to diligent practice, not to some unique quality bestowed by deity. To get really good at anything requires practice. Leadership is no exception.

Fourth, by measuring the perceptions of subordinates and peers, we have a tool for the immediate and objective measurement of leadership. Frequent and precise measurements are possible and relatively economical.

Fifth, change need not take forever. Leadership is all about change, so if the leadership development process is not producing change, then it probably is not working. ●

#### RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *The Extraordinary Leader*, you’ll also like:

1. **Leaders at All Levels** by Ram Charan. Charan offers a solution that outlines a new model for succession and leadership development.
2. **A Leader’s Legacy** by James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner. This book compiles powerful essays that explore the question of leadership and legacy.
3. **Leadership Gold** by John C. Maxwell. Noted leadership expert Maxwell shares a lifetime of truths that can guide anyone who currently leads or aspires to lead.