



## Unusually Excellent

### The *Necessary Nine* Skills Required for the Practice of Great Leadership

#### THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Often, when leaders experience trouble, they look to blame an outside source or expect a small tweak to right their ship. But many times they have actually lost their grip on the basic foundation of their own leadership.

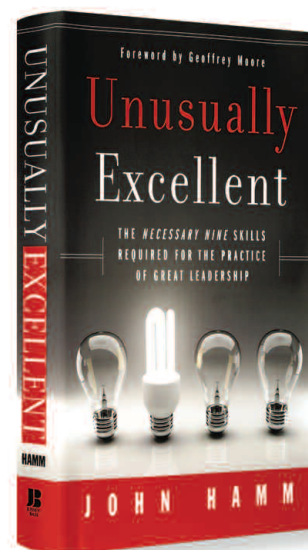
*Unusually Excellent* offers both seasoned and aspiring leaders a framework for understanding and a guide for applying the fundamentals of leadership at every stage in their careers. The business environment may change, but no management trend can displace the core laws, proven over centuries, of excellent leadership.

Leadership expert John Hamm explains why leadership can't be mastered as a single concept or tool that can be pulled out of a hat when needed. Excellent leadership is composed of actions, ideas, emotions, cultural forces, history and expectations that work together in an interconnected system. This system forms the core of the winning combination of superb Character, skill-based Competence and professional Reputation. Hamm demonstrates that any leader can excel by consistently putting into action the Necessary Nine skills: being authentic, trustworthy and compelling; leading people, strategy and execution; communicating, making decisions and making an impact.

*Unusually Excellent* offers powerful, unforgettable leadership lessons, reinforced empirical evidence and logical analysis that will prepare you for the ongoing journey toward exceptional leadership.

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

- How to put yourself in service to whatever you value most deeply.
- How to develop and renew your leadership skills.
- How to master the fundamentals of leadership at every stage in your career.
- How nine essential skills can help you practice great leadership.



by John Hamm

#### CONTENTS

**Part One: Credibility**  
Page 2

**Being Trustworthy**  
Page 3

**Part Two: Competence**  
Page 4

**Leading Strategy: Ideas to Plans**  
Page 5

**Part Three: Consequence**  
Page 6

**A Leader's Impact**  
Page 7

**Afterward**  
Page 8

# THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: UNUSUALLY EXCELLENT

by John Hamm

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## Introduction

*Credibility* is a matter of character and earns the right to lead. *Competence* is a matter of skill and earns respect. And *consequence* is a matter of values and earns reputation. These are the three overarching categories for the nine essentials of leadership. Within each category lie three essential precepts, each linked conceptually to the other two.

### Unusually Excellent: The Essential Skills

- **Credibility: A Matter of Character.**  
Authentic, trustworthy and compelling.
- **Competence: A Matter of Skill.**  
People, strategy and execution.
- **Consequence: A Matter of Values.**  
Communication, decision making and impact.

Probably at some time in your education or career you have seen every one of these essentials. But you’ve probably never seen them arrayed like this — or realized how all of them interact to create a powerful synthesis that is greater than the sum of all of them.

It is this higher plane of leadership — the one that emerges from the virtuous cycle of all of these essentials *working together* in a consistent manner over the course of a career that creates “unusually excellent” leadership.

Unusually excellent leaders are rare — perhaps one or two in 100. But that doesn’t mean you can’t be one of them. Talent and aptitude matter, of course. So do timing and opportunity. But what keeps good leaders from becoming great ones is often just a matter of either not appreciating the need for *all* of these essentials to be in place and showing up in their day-to-day leadership

behaviors — or, more tragically, realizing it too late. To learn, we must realize and accept what we don’t know and begin to seek that knowledge at that moment.

How many talented leaders have lost their credibility early in their careers and borne that stigma ever after? How many executives have proven themselves gifted at execution but not at strategy, and have pulled their organizations down for lack of a plan? And how many otherwise capable leaders have failed to get their organizations to follow because they were unable to communicate well enough to enlist them?

You don’t have to share that fate. You can be that one in 100, that unusually excellent leader. Look again at the leadership essentials. They may be difficult, but they aren’t complicated — and there are only nine of them.

As a leader, every day you waste not perfecting these nine essentials only makes their accomplishment that much more difficult. So there’s no better time to begin than now. ●

## PART ONE — CREDIBILITY: EARNING THE RIGHT TO LEAD THROUGH CHARACTER

Being authentic — knowing who you really are and holding true to yourself in the most difficult moments — is “ground zero” of leadership credibility. It all starts here, like taking your grip on a golf club or tennis racket — you must get the first step right to ensure your chances of success. To create the trusted connections you need in order to lead with real influence, you must first pass the authenticity test of your followers.



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### ‘When Am I the Most Authentic?’

Ask yourself: “When am I the most authentic?” The likely answer is when you are with family and close friends — the people with whom you can let down your guard and allow your true self to emerge.

What do those “authentic” moments have in common? *There is nothing at stake.* Your friends and family already know who you are, so being yourself with them has no unforeseen consequences. They know you aren’t perfect, so you aren’t obliged to be. They like you as you are and they wouldn’t want you any other way. When you are with these people in your life, you believe you are already inherently “good enough” to hold your place in that family or that friendship. You aren’t “trying out” anymore — you made the team and you act like you know that. You trust yourself completely. There is no doubt in your mind that you are wholly and completely qualified.

These examples from the comfort of our lives with friends or family also illustrate the quality of the connection and ease of dialogue with others that we feel when there is no temptation to be someone we are not.

### When Something Is at Stake

Although being ourselves authentically comes easily in most personal life settings, it is at times difficult as a leader on the other side of the same reason: When you are leading an organization, in the situations that test you the most, *there is usually something at stake* — for others and for you. The outcome of most leadership interactions has a consequence to everyone involved, and it is in your hands. These are the stressful times when you must have the courage of your convictions and be true to yourself in every way. These are the circumstances that challenge us to do the right thing even if it feels difficult, risky or uncomfortable and, in the same moment, tempt us to say something that just seems easier at the time.

Knowing who we are at the core is a project of awareness, courageous introspection and thoughtful reflection. The inquiry we must embrace is: *What informs and creates our capacity to lead with real influence?* Surveys tell us we are informed by our own personal reflection — and it takes real courage to own the unvarnished truth about our lives and our past. We are also informed, in a profound way, by understanding how others perceive our leadership behavior. This requires a tolerance for unfiltered feedback that few leaders have. ●

### Being Trustworthy: The Consistency of Integrity

There is absolutely nothing more important than a leader’s trustworthiness. As anachronistic as it may sound in the 21st century, men and women whose word is their honor, and who can be absolutely trusted to be fair, honest and forthright, are more likely to command the respect of others than any other type of person.

### Safely Successful

Trust is arguably the most important element of organizational effectiveness. To attempt to achieve the goals most organizations strive for without a culture of trust is not impossible, but it is immeasurably more difficult and it only adds to the formidable challenges inherent in the market. Leaders must initiate the trust-building process with their own commitment to trustworthy behavior. The two main points of this topic are: What is the fundamental purpose of trust and how do leaders build trust in organizations?

What is the essence of trust? Trust is about safety. The presence of trust, in organizations, creates the feeling of confidence — a secure knowledge that our behavior, our work and our performance will be evaluated in an objective, rational and consistent way. It means we need not fear a subjective, arbitrary or personal attack that would threaten our reputation or stability within the organization — or worse, our self-esteem. We can then manage ourselves accordingly. It is the comfort of knowing we’ll be treated fairly if we simply do the right thing. What solidifies this feeling of safety is experiencing it consistently, to the point where it is *predictable*. We can count on it. Then, and only then, are we freed up and fired up to do our best work.

There is a primal, biological need in all of us to feel safe — physically, emotionally and professionally. When we don’t feel safe, our natural response is to focus energy toward a showdown with the perceived threat — and our attention on whatever scares us will increase until we either fight or run in the other direction, or the threat diminishes on its own. It will certainly distract us from what we cared about before we got scared.

*How do we build a trustful place for our followers?* Most important, as Barry Posner writes in *Leadership Challenge*, as a leader, when it comes to building trust you must “go first” — you must *model the way*. Being trustworthy creates trust. Don’t wait for others to demonstrate their trustworthiness for you to trust them. That is a silly game of cat-and-mouse that can go on indefinitely with both parties waiting for the other to earn their trust. It is

## Summary: UNUSUALLY EXCELLENT

the leader's job to step up and start the process by granting trust up front and allowing others to earn that trust later through their behavior. Leaders take the risk. That is why they are leaders. ●

### Being Compelling: The Commitment to Winning

Authenticity and trustworthiness create the basis for productive and committed relationships. These first two virtues are necessary but insufficient to create committed followership. Above all else, the thing that defines leaders is that they have not just friends or admirers — they have followers.

To be willing to act of our own free will and choose to follow someone, we must experience something distinctly different, something more than the feeling of being “inspired” or “safe.” We must feel *compelled*. Almost any version of success requires committed *action* toward goals. And action requires teams of people assembled around leaders aligned with a shared, bold vision. Compelling leaders create a following that is different from one of “believers” (those are for gospel preachers and spiritual teachers); leaders find and inspire followers who commit not just with their mind or hearts, but also with their time and energy.

*We followers are compelled by a cause.* This starts with a vision that expresses a substantial commitment in tangible ways. Leaders must paint a picture for those they wish to enroll — a vision of what winners will look like and how participants can contribute their talents in the pursuit of that vision and share in the ultimate success. From the perspective of those who follow, the message is “This vision has a place for you and I want you involved in this project.”

If you ever doubt the power of a cause — consider Lance Armstrong's massive success with Livestrong. There are dozens of worthy and compelling campaigns and programs to raise money for cancer research — great organizations like the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure, the V Foundation and others. But there is nothing to equal Livestrong for bringing ordinary people together around the *cause* with the *yellow rubber bracelet*. To wear one says to everyone that you have joined the club, for \$2 or \$2 million, or for nothing except your emotional and public commitment to the vision Armstrong has communicated for ending cancer, having gone through the experience of having cancer himself. The brilliance in the symbolism of the wristbands is well known and has been copied by hundreds of other causes as a surefire way to publicly show who has signed up for

### Great Leaders Hire People Who Are Smarter Than They Are

Great leaders earn that title by having the self-assurance to *always* do their very best to hire people who are smarter than they are — for real. They are secure in their role and their leadership equity, and are genuinely not threatened by talent. On the contrary, they crave having world-class people, knowing that the bar goes up each time a super-talented person joins the team.

each campaign — and these bracelets, of all colors and styles now, serve as great conversation starters. They allow people to feel the pride of having signed on to a team that others respect.

*We are compelled by leaders.* By the same token, no one will sacrifice for a project, no matter how exciting, if the leader hasn't made a full and clear — and public — commitment. That commitment must inspire others to make their own choice to join and dedicate themselves to the mission at hand. ●

### PART TWO — COMPETENCE: LEADING ON THE FIELD WITH SKILL

Every business is a “people” business, because every business — indeed, every meaningful endeavor — is composed of human beings taking action in an organized manner to accomplish the mission in front of them. *There is no substitute for talent.* To be even more accurate — there is no substitute for the best talent you can find and hire. It may seem obvious, but let's review this idea. Why do we want the best talent?

For starters, we know that most organizations are limited by — or propelled to success primarily by — the quality of the people on the team. From an NFL football franchise to a business of any size, shape or flavor to a nonprofit or community organization, the best teams separate themselves from the pack primarily by having more capable, talented and committed people.

#### Seating Chart

Nothing changes the results in a functional role faster or more dramatically than getting the right person doing the work. A job turns from a liability to an asset as soon as the right person takes over. As the great business writer Jim Collins reminds us in *Good to Great*, we have to “get the right people in the right seats on the bus.”

What distinguishes the kind of talent that can move the needle in a different way than most other people can? Talent follows the normal Pareto 80/20 principle

## Summary: UNUSUALLY EXCELLENT

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— 20 percent of your team produces 80 percent of the organization's value and ability to execute competitively. The shorthand for this group of people is “value creators” or the “best and brightest.” Don't wait for an opening to bring this kind of talent on board. Find the people and make a spot for them. You'll never regret hiring the best people you can find.

### The Leader's Agenda Regarding People

What is the rest of the leader's agenda regarding people?

- Hire the best.
- Focus on “fit.”
- Make a team.
- Lead that team to victory.

Unusually excellent leaders take hiring seriously and personally. They are involved in the *design* of the hiring process, including the interviewing process (which most people have never been trained to do properly), and they pride themselves on personally meeting every candidate headed for an offer, if it is humanly possible to do so. They are on the hunt, constantly and relentlessly, for talented people — using every resource available to (1) identify the people they should know and (2) get to know them. They are always networking and always selling their company — meeting people who could lead them to the superstars, whether they are active in the market or not. ●

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### Leading Strategy: Ideas to Plans

In the real world, under the pressure of command, leaders regularly confuse or collapse the distinctions among leading people, strategy and execution. They sometimes assume that because they have the right people and a distinct goal that they can simply “flood the zone” and find success. Or they believe that a single-minded focus on day-to-day tactics, yet another “two yards and a cloud of dust,” will eventually deliver them to their destination.

But *strategy* is one essential leg of the three-legged stool that is *competence*, and it is equally as important as the other two disciplines. A successful performance is not just the musicians, nor the playing of the music; it is also the sheet music on the stand — the *plan* for the notes and chords that allows talented people to make it sound so good.

### Process to Plans

Unusually excellent leaders appreciate the power of a plan. They realize that even the best athletes need a playbook, a game plan or a pre-shot routine to ensure

that their talent shows up on the field. Surgeons, pilots, lawyers and practitioners of any profession where the work is complex always have a plan — even if the task is something they've done hundreds of times before. They also know that great plans are created from accurate and complete data gathering, a rigorous analytical process and the collaborative efforts of experienced and wise people. And the most important thing they know is that although the *content* of brilliant plans is the domain of sophisticated data and creative thinking, *the art of leading strategy* is a *process competency* — a skill that great leaders continuously sharpen. They realize that great plans develop from vigorous conversations, among the best people they can gather, and are then endorsed and driven from the top. They know that a good plan must capture the best ideas of the organization in innovative and bold ways, mostly from the bottom up. Most of all, they understand that without a plan to win, they are left with only a plan to lose.

That said, a plan — no matter how brilliant — is not a strategy. A strategy is bigger than a plan. A plan is an intellectual construction that combines the best information that can be gathered about what is so now, thoughtful predictions about what will happen in the future and a model for how to succeed in light of those conditions. A strategy includes this plan but also accounts for *how* we do things, not just *what* we'll do — and it accounts for what happens when that plan collides with reality. ●

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### Leading Execution: Action to Results

Execution is about results. At the end of the day, leaders are held accountable; they get paid to produce the agreed-upon results.

Execution is where the rubber meets the road, the snap is taken, the play is run and the shot is hit. There is no score until the game starts. At that moment, preparation yields to the event itself, and winners and losers are determined. There is no place to hide.

That isn't to say that execution stands entirely alone (this fact is forgotten by many leaders). In most organizations, every day is a game day; in fact, most days are — from the staging of the next action to the ongoing recruiting of the right talent to the hurried training that takes place on the sidelines based on new moves by the competition that have just been spotted.

Most of all, the strategy process is still active long after execution has been initiated — in fact, it can't even

## Summary: UNUSUALLY EXCELLENT

truly begin until that moment, when the *plan* is at last tested by the reality of the field of play.

### Measurement and Feedback

The first two factors that make execution distinct from the domains of people and strategy are *measurement* and *feedback*. Planning is the province of statistics and probabilities: What is our market size? How well does this player hit against lefties? What are the chances that this plan will work? In contrast, as we put the game into play, we start to get feedback from the actions we take and we begin to get some measurement of progress. Execution, however, lives on the actual performance data coming in: What's the score? How are we doing in the Japanese market? How do bookings compare to billings?

The other significant feature that distinguishes execution from the other steps is the presence of time — the game *clock*. There are the performance and production time frames built into the calendar — the week, the month, the quarter and the fiscal year. Other leadership processes have their own internal clocks, but none are so driven by external deadlines as execution.

Planning, of course, has its own deadlines, but they are rarely precise and the consequences are usually not fatal. By comparison, miss a product introduction date — as Microsoft did (by nearly two years!) with its Vista operating system — and the entire enterprise (or in the case of Vista, the personal computer industry) can be nearly wrecked. ●

## PART THREE — CONSEQUENCE: CREATING A CULTURE, LEAVING A LEGACY OF VALUES

The ability of leaders to communicate effectively is perhaps the highest leverage activity in their set of responsibilities. When they do it well, things work smoothly and effectively. When it is done poorly, countless problems come out of the woodwork, all in response to the lack of good information available. Leaders must embrace this work and commit themselves to a high level of proficiency over the length of their careers as professionals. Communication is *essential* to leadership effectiveness.

### Talking Trust

Leaders always struggle in large group settings to get really difficult issues out on the table and to establish an environment of truly open and honest communications. And we've all seen what usually happens: the leader asks,

“Are there any questions?” and is met by dead silence. This is exactly the opposite of what most leaders want.

One of the best solutions I've seen was devised by David Pottruck, former CEO of Charles Schwab. He appreciated that whenever there's power in the room there is also a great reluctance to ask questions. So, he decided, the only solution to get things flowing was to ask the tough questions himself.

And that's what he did. Standing in front of a large company meeting, he dramatically jumped off the stage and ran into the audience. There, he asked the empty stage the one question that they all wanted to ask but were afraid to: “Why aren't we getting bonuses this year?” Then he ran back up on stage and gave a thoughtful, honest, complete answer — proving that he was indeed willing to discuss the tough issues with everyone in the room — and, in fact, wanted to.

That broke the ice. Questions began to emerge — first the safe ones, and then some tougher ones as the team warmed up and realized this was a safe place. Then, when one audience member asked a truly brave question, another one that everyone else was reluctant to ask, Pottruck thanked the employee and then asked the audience to give the man a standing ovation — thus stripping away much of their fear of speaking up.

It is Pottruck's experience and belief that the content of what he says as a leader is rarely remembered; what is remembered is how his words made listeners *feel*. In other words, although leaders usually focus on the information content of their communications, often what matters much more is the emotional content of that message and the connection — the leader's empathy with the audience. ●

## A Leader's Decision Making: Values-Based Choices

The final judgment of our leadership expertise will depend, more than anything else, on the quality of the decisions we have made, in aggregate, over the course of our careers as leaders. Leading decision making is, in essence, leading the conversation that improves the quality of those decisions.

Your primary job as a leader is not to make most of the decisions that arise every day, but to lead in such a way that the people who *do* make them make better decisions than they would alone.

That much should be obvious to the reader. After all, if strategy is the adaptation of planning to the real

## Summary: UNUSUALLY EXCELLENT

world of competition and conflict, then decision making is the real-time response of leadership to the twists and turns and unexpected challenges of execution. Sure, leaders also make decisions during the planning process, and sometimes those decisions can be decisive, but it is the series of decisions made under pressure, in the heat of battle, that makes careers and sets legacies.

When you look at the lives of great leaders you admire, aren't those game-time decisions the ones you most admire and remember — and isn't that the very definition of legacy?

If we examine decision making — both the art and the science — there is a structure to consider and a number of powerful and useful principles to keep in mind.

### Decision Structure

The structure of leading decision making appears simple on the surface but, as with many things, the devil is in the details. The following are the categories and the *sequence* of thinking to consider as you approach this extremely important competency:

*What?* What exactly are we deciding?

*When?* When should, or must, this decision be made?

*Who?* Who decides?

*How?* How will the decision be made?

It is obvious that “what” is the starting point — we need to know what, precisely, we are deciding. However, you may wonder why I positioned “when” ahead of “who” or “how.” Quite simply, the perceived urgency of a decision often determines both the choice of who makes it and, accordingly, how it is made. And we usually know the “when” as one of the first aspects of the decision at hand. If something is truly urgent, and there is someone nearby and available who is appropriately qualified to make the decision, it probably makes sense to let that person decide, even if he or she is not the absolute best person if the urgency was not high. If there were more time, it might be possible to route that decision to someone even more qualified to decide.

The urgency of a decision can certainly be dramatized or overblown, and there are certainly more false alarms than legitimate emergencies. Nonetheless, knowing the true time frame in which something should or must be decided will certainly shape the choice of who decides and how the decision gets made. ●

## A Leader's Impact: The Transfer of Influence from Leader to Follower

Of all of the issues of leadership and legacy, none is more complex, elusive and unpredictable than your work with people — the relationships, transactions, conversations, interactions, conflicts, shared victories and all the rest. These are the memories that have the most juice for most leaders and most followers.

*Even though you can't fully know the ultimate impact of your leadership, you can learn to imagine or even predict that your legacy will be based on how you are leading today.*

Your influence as a leader is a function of leading authentically, present to the moment, doing your very best with the challenges in front of you and paying no particular attention to your imagined assessment of your behaviors at some point in the future.

### Whisper Campaign

The two most obvious ways that leaders have an impact, and ultimately create a legacy, are through their *decisions* and *successes*.

The third, less obvious factor that will affect a legacy is *reputation*. This is what people think and will say about you — and there is almost nothing you can do about it. You may flatter, buy or intimidate people into a polite silence for a while — but eventually, especially after you are gone, nothing will constrain them from expressing their true feelings about you. And when that historian, doctoral candidate or biographer comes around, you will pay for every moment of cruelty, indifference or lack of empathy you had as a leader.

### What to Do

So, what can you, as a leader, do *while* you are leading, real-time, to create the look-back talk that you'll be proud of?

- 1. Live the Nine Essential Skills.** If you concentrate on those things, with one eye cocked toward the ongoing state of your reputation, you can be pretty sure that your legacy will be a good one — even if you ultimately fail to reach your goals.
- 2. Pay Attention to Change.** Change requires, at a minimum, a little empathy and a lot of patience. Don't attempt to deny or resist change — just help people get through it better than they could if left to their own devices.
- 3. Get More Curious, and Smarter, About Human Nature.** If you can keep in mind that most basic states of emotion are simply a function of one's relationship with “what you want,” then

## Summary: UNUSUALLY EXCELLENT

the first great question you need to ask your subordinates as a leader is: *What do you want?*

- 4. Give Feedback.** It is the best tool you have to connect, add value and create relationships different from the usual arm's-length management relationship.
- 5. Celebrate Success.** Take the time — officially endorsed and led by you — to celebrate your team's accomplishments and victories.
- 6. Respect Life Outside of Work.** What is important for you to remember as a leader is that your people do have private lives outside of work, that those lives are important to them and that, as a matter of principle, you must respect those lives. ●

### Afterward

Leadership is a *mentality*. To lead others with influence and impact, you must *think* through as many issues as you can, from this point of view: as a *leader of people*. There is always a business or strategic view of a situation, and that is a useful perspective. But most of what we decide or communicate as leaders has a specific leadership consequence somewhere, at some time. Holding the *mindset of leadership* as your perspective, when you are pressed into service as a strategist, battlefield commander, negotiator or any other role that demands your attention on a given day — will improve the quality of your choices as assessed by those you lead. Double check to make sure you've considered every situation from the context of leadership before you finalize any decision.

Leadership is a *practice of behaviors*. The crux of leading is doing the right things, doing them well and doing them consistently. Behavior is the basis for both culture and reputation, and is a direct reflection of our personal values, revealed over time in small acts. So, while you can learn all the complicated or esoteric theories or concepts of leadership, your impact ultimately rests on your willingness and ability to do what needs to be done, do it with skill and professionalism and, of primary importance, do those things consistently over time, in both easy and difficult circumstances, even when you don't feel like it. You will be judged, in the end, by your actions.

### Leadership Is a Noble Profession

Leadership is a *noble profession*. It is a mission of service to others and of achieving, through people, those things that move the world forward. To the untrained eye, leading may appear tremendously egocentric, but it is

### Leadership Occurs in a Conversation

Much of what we experience as leadership actually occurs in a *conversation*. Conversations help ideas come to life and enable visions of the future to take shape and form. Conversations create meaning and context — they explain the things that confuse people. Perhaps most important, conversations make things happen — they help create direction and provide the inspiration for commitment and action. When something is not as you want it to be, chances are good that there is a conversation you need to have to fix it. The bottom line is that we expect and need our leaders to be superb communicators. This means we need them to craft the right messages, deliver them skillfully and effectively, and listen with engagement and empathy.

really so much more about those who have trusted you to lead them. Leaders who realize this fact early on are set up to win in a very different way than leaders who live in the illusion that it is all about them. It is a journey of learning that begins with self-awareness and continues throughout a career of discovering what it is about you that others see as authentic, trustworthy and compelling.

Finally, leadership is a *passion*. It is not a “job” and it is not a career for everyone. There is no shame in declining to lead if it is not for you. Leadership is a choice. It is a deep, burning desire to engage with people and rally a community to achieve greatness. That passion is both an attribute and an asset of leaders, as it creates a virtuous cycle of hope and belief, and results that benefit everyone involved. Leadership can be difficult, thankless, frustrating, maddening work at times. It is only the passion of leading on the field — the thrill of looking other human beings in the eyes and seeing their energy, willingness, trust and commitment — that makes it all worthwhile, in a very quiet, private way. ●

### RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *Unusually Excellent*, you'll also like:

- 1. *Clutch* by Paul Sullivan.** Do you choke under pressure, or are you “clutch”? Learn how to successfully perform under extraordinary pressure.
- 2. *What's Holding You Back* by Robert J. Herbold.** Herbold explores exactly why managers often hesitate to confront difficult issues and reveals the 10 core principles of confident leadership.
- 3. *The Truth About Leadership* by James Kouzes and Barry Posner.** The authors share 10 time-tested fundamental truths about leadership and becoming an effective leader.