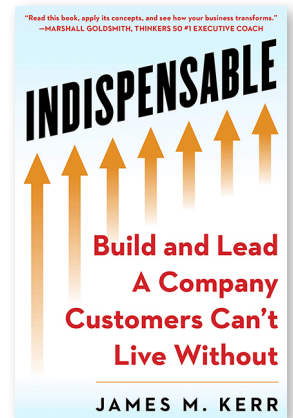


Indispensable

Build and Lead a Company Customers Can't Live Without

by **James M. Kerr**



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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

While the pandemic is still with us, we must find it within ourselves to focus on what we have to do to become the kinds of businesses that our customers can't live without. There are many great companies—only a few are indispensable. The pursuit of greatness is important, but it's not enough. And outstanding leadership is essential to bringing a company from greatness to indispensability.

James M. Kerr wrote *Indispensable* for one type of reader: a business professional who wants to make a difference in their organization. Its intent is to provide you with a framework that you need to help your business become so outstanding that it befits holding indispensable moniker. Leadership is vital to helping businesses become indispensable. Regardless of your rank or position, you must be able to provide a captivating vision, active direction-setting, enlightened coaching, and a collaborative environment to the people you work with and serve. *Indispensable: Build and Lead a Company Customers Can't Live Without* teaches you how to do just that.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- Why your business needs to be indispensable.
- How the character of leaders impacts indispensability.
- The traits that are needed to move towards being indispensable.
- How to effectively manage change of this size and scope in your business.

Your Business Needs to Be Indispensable

Merriam-Webster dictionary defines indispensable as “being absolutely necessary and not subject to being set aside or neglected.” The concepts offered in this book are already being used to make businesses indispensable in the marketplace. Keep in mind, though, only your customers can decide if your business is indispensable. Indeed, what we think of our businesses and their ability to delight our customers is irrelevant. We don’t get to vote on that. However, there are steps that we can take to improve our chances.

Why Indispensable?

The answer is simple: the competition is overwhelming. Please believe that no matter what your company does or how it does it, there’s another firm right behind you ready to take your spot. Moreover, your competition is not just local businesses. It’s global. The internet and related technologies have made the world a whole lot smaller.

Your customers have choices. If you can’t give them what they want in the ways they want it, someone else will. It’s just a point and click away. So you better figure out quickly how to become indispensable, or you just might be replaced. Learn what your customers truly want and exceed those expectations.

You want to be on a constant lookout for ways to unlock your customer’s potential. Paradoxically, the key to unlocking that potential in your customers lies with the leadership and culture of your organization. These are the keys needed to differentiate you from your competitors. These are the things that will enable you to be the provider of choice in the hearts and minds of your customers. Leaders who drive winning organizations through their leadership style and focus on culture can achieve this.

The Right Leadership

Leaders are built on a foundation rich in character, which enables them to inspire others to follow. Exceptional leaders not only possess the requisite honesty and righteousness needed to gain followership, but they emulate the hunger and conviction needed to motivate others to do great things. Leadership is one of those things that you have to get right in order to become an indispensable organization. In fact, indispensability starts with exceptional leadership, and exceptional leadership begins with character.

Leadership Begins with Character

Drawing a connection between leadership and character is not all that profound. Don’t we all want leaders to be of honorable character? The idea seems universal. Here’s why:

- We believe those whom we trust: You’re not going to follow someone who you don’t trust. Sure, you’ll do your job, but that boss won’t get your best effort, especially when things get tough. Leaders who lack character won’t build an indispensable business because the people they lead may not consistently deliver their best effort.
- Consistency inspires confidence: We gain confidence in leaders who are consistently fair, honest, and reliable. While we may not always love every decision made by such leaders, we continue to respect and admire those who are consistent. Indispensability requires consistency among your leaders.
- Conviction draws attention: A leader with conviction generates a kind of allure that is difficult to ignore. Leaders of high character believe in what they’re saying and project the conviction needed to rouse their people into action.
- Passion turns us on: It’s mightily attractive to be in the moment with someone who is passionate about what they’re doing. It inspires your best effort. Leaders who are passionate about making their organizations indispensable tend to create those kinds of moments.
- Indispensability demands courage: It requires tremendous courage to stir up the enthusiasm needed to drive an idea as big and expansive as indispensability. It takes even more courage to make all the hard decisions needed to realize that vision. Leaders must possess the personal character and courage to motivate while staying the course.

In a nutshell, extraordinary leaders possess a certain *je ne sais quoi* that makes them distinctive and impossible to ignore. To gain indispensability, we need leaders who hold the necessary allure to inspire others to follow.

How to Build a Team of Leaders

Building a team of passionate leaders begins with proper preparation. Once your people are properly prepared, they can be put into positions that enable them to make decisions that count. This positions you to enhance trust throughout the enterprise and build commitment to the cause of becoming indispensable in the marketplace.

Guess what, senior leader? Vision starts with you!

Here are some ideas to drive your team of leaders to greater heights of proficiency:

- 1. Teach as you lead.** Don't be afraid to show your team what good looks like. Regularly take the time to gather your team together and share with them some insights about what underpins a few of your recent decisions. You can build higher competence within your team when you teach as you lead, emphasizing the importance of considering alternatives, evaluating risks, and thinking through important implications.
- 2. Join forces on “decision rights.”** Sometimes people are uncertain about what they're responsible for and question if they have the right to make certain business decisions. That said, it is essential that you, together with your team, reach a mutually-agreed upon set of conditions for when team members can act independently and which situations require your involvement or approval.
- 3. Eradicate pocket vetoes.** If the U.S. Congress gives the president a bill and the president doesn't reject it or sign it, it dies on the vine due to inaction. This is a *pocket veto*. Don't do that to your team when they make decisions. Instead, use any subpar decision making as a learning-opportunity for your team.

These kinds of ideas can become the backbone of developing your leadership talent, especially newly minted managers who will undoubtedly play major roles in transitioning your firm to indispensability in the marketplace.

A Note About Dissent

If there was only one operating principle that you and your team should embrace and practice flawlessly from now on, it would be this: *Everyone on the team has an obligation to express their dissent.* The implications for your team in implementing this leadership principle are obvious. Indeed, not only do your people have *permission* to speak up when they don't agree with a new concept or idea—they have a *duty* to express that opposition. In fact, if your people have dissenting opinions and they fail to share them, then they are not fulfilling their responsibilities

and run the risk of losing their spot on the team. If you don't encourage the expression of disagreement and you fail to listen to your team when they do, you will soon be leading a team of people who do not think. Clearly, this is not the kind of leadership needed to become indispensable.

The Right Vision

Indispensability takes vision. Without the right vision, it is difficult to inspire your people to do all the work and make all of the changes that they will need to make to reach the pinnacle of indispensability. Guess what, senior leader? Vision starts with you! It's not unusual to feel a bit apprehensive that you lack the insight and inventiveness needed to fit the bill. Stop feeling that way. It may be true that some seem to be born visionaries. While natural talent helps, it is not a prerequisite for success in crafting a compelling and engaging strategic vision for your business.

Here are five simple things that you can do to begin developing your visionary capabilities.

- 1. Just keep asking, “why not?”** This acts as a forcing function, allowing you to break through common resistances to new ways of thinking and doing and discover groundbreaking solutions to the most complex challenges facing your firm's path to indispensability.
- 2. Flex your imagination muscles.** Visionary thinking happens when re-imagining how the work of your business can be accomplished. Taking time to imagine the possibilities helps reveal the path to great advancement.
- 3. Mix contrasting ideas into your thinking.** The act of connecting disparate thoughts and theories together to produce new and trailblazing perspectives is what vision-setting is all about. The practice feeds innovative thinking.
- 4. Become synergistic.** As the old adage suggests, two brains are better than one! Pull ideas and concepts from like-minded people. Synergistic thinking

will unearth the insights and perspectives needed to round out your vision.

- 5. Develop customer empathy.** Seeing the business from an outsider's point of view is always illuminating. The practice of putting yourself in the customer's shoes and imagining what it must be like to do business with you can help identify opportunities for improvement within your company and discover the best ways to delight your customers.

Writing a Company Vision Story

To be clear, it is not recommended that you invest time in developing the same tired and uninspired vision statements that appear on company websites or are printed on banners strung from company rafters. These kinds of company visions are a dime a dozen. They are nice slogans, but not particularly inspiring. Your vision should be much more than slogans and catchphrases. It should serve to describe what it's like to be part of the organization and distinguish your specific enterprise from its competitors.

You want to construct a vision story so compelling and vivid that the average working professional wants to be a part of it. To accomplish this, the story must have the necessary depth and detail to capture one's imagination. It should include your overarching ideas refined by the thoughts and suggestions gained through the conversations, workshops, and survey information that was gathered from other leaders and personnel. Above all else, it must be enlightening and riveting or your people won't get revved up about achieving it.

The Right Culture

If you want to be indispensable, you need the right culture. Not convinced that culture is important? Unclear if it's with the effort to transform yours? The return on investment now obvious enough for you? No problem. Just answer a few questions.

- 1. What's the value of strategic alignment?** Getting your culture aligned with where you want to take your business is absolutely critical to achieving your vision for the future. After all, you won't realize the vision if your company culture can't support it.
- 2. What's the value of improved teamwork?** Getting your people to work as one is instrumental to business success. Your culture must be set up to do that. If it isn't, your performance will undoubtedly suffer.
- 3. What's the value of a high-trust work setting?** All good things are based on trust. If your culture is built on trust, your business is well-positioned to overcome all of the obstacles that will confront its journey to strategic accomplishment.
- 4. What's the value of improved communication?** Communication is the centerpiece of every business. Outward communication drives prospective customers to your door and supports them once they've made the choice to become actual customers.
- 5. What's the value of improved customer intimacy?** It's tough to stay in business without satisfied customers! Your culture should be built around understanding their needs and wants and then delivering impeccable service so that you become the provider of choice.
- 6. What's the value of high resiliency?** Running a successful business is a rough and tumble undertaking. Your company culture will determine its ability to withstand and overcome adversity.
- 7. What's the value of being a talent magnet?** You want exceptional people? Build a company culture that makes you the employer of choice. Great culture attracts great talent.
- 8. What's the value of greater innovation?** Your products and services better be amazing if you intend to continue to grow your business. Here's where innovation comes in. By creating a culture that continuously innovates, you improve your ability to be amazing.

What's the value of all this to your organization? Investing in cultural transformation is perhaps the best thing that you can do to become an indispensable enterprise. Indeed, company culture is the foundation of every business because it determines how people behave.

If you optimize the culture and ensure its alignment with the achievement of your strategic objectives, your business performance will improve. Place a value on that and compare it to the cost of cultural transformation and you'll have an ROI that makes the case to invest in cultural transformation.

Culture Reset™

The premise of the Culture Reset™ Methodology is simple: top-down decision makers can design their company's culture in a deliberate and rigorous way and craft the

High EQ contributors are priceless to a business and can make a big difference in making your business indispensable in many key ways.

culture that they need to become indispensable. The work is done in a series of phases:

1. Project initiation formally establishes project roles/responsibilities and commences the project.
2. Strategic framework setting develops a set of business principles that state senior leadership's preferences for how it wants to manage the company's cultural evolution.
3. Baseline assessment assesses the current company culture and work setting and characterizes its existing people, processes, and technology from a company culture perspective.
4. Target visioning defines the cultural environment.
5. Gap analysis determines the gaps between baseline and target cultural settings.
6. Implementation planning identifies and prioritizes the work needed to implement the projects and programs identified.
7. Plan administration design recommends a process for managing the execution of all of the strategic initiatives identified in the Culture Transformation Plan.
8. Project completion formally delivers the final plan to the organization.

Interviews, surveys, and workshops are conducted with a good cross section of staff from senior leaders to middle management to frontline workers.

These provide the means for gaining insight and understanding as well as harnessing leadership's and staff's participation and commitment to the culture change effort.

The Right People

We all want to believe that we are exceptional leaders and that our people are eager to do their best every day. But sometimes we can't see the reality of the situation. Our

personal blind spots get in the way.

In fact, sometimes we're not all that engaging and our people aren't as satisfied with their jobs as we like to think.

If you don't have an employee value proposition (EVP), that should change. Your EVP is of vital importance in attracting and retaining the kind of talent you need to be indispensable.

Defining Your EVP

EVP is the value that staffers gain in return for their work—and it's not all about compensation. It should consider your employees' needs that range from elementary to living up to one's potential. EVP should be considered with the following terms:

- **Compensation/benefits:** Compensation addresses meeting your people's basic needs. Think of salary, incentives, wealth-sharing, health, retirement, and personal leave policies.
- **Career path and recognition programs:** This is compulsory in staff retention. Staff feel a stronger connection to your work community through the provision of the "right" kinds of job titles, training, career paths, and employee appreciation efforts.
- **Work elements:** Highlighted by a variety of assignments, autonomy, and the occasion to provide input, this type of environment enables staffers to feel better about themselves when they are given new and varied opportunities to contribute.
- **Pride in affiliation:** By ensuring that your organization is something that your personnel can be proud to be a part of goes a long way in satisfying their need for self-actualization. EVP considerations include such things as company values, brand reputation, and community involvement.

Emotional Intelligence Quotient (EQ)

People with high EQ are great listeners and tend to be strong communicators. They are masters in conflict resolution and can de-escalate situations before they get out of hand.

High EQ contributors are priceless to a business and can make a big difference in making your business indispensable in many key ways.

1. Their consideration for others improves communications.
2. They're great under pressure.
3. They generate trust in the workplace and marketplace through diplomacy.
4. They like to co-create.
5. Their charismatic personality improves team performance.
6. They are natural born leaders.

Fielding an emotionally intelligent team is a key means to winning in the marketplace. Clearly, companies need these kinds of people to lead others to victory. Indeed, they need these kinds of people to set the example and further instill the “right” values and work ethic.

The Right Trust and Empowerment

With the right people in place, one would think that trust and empowerment simply go with the territory. However, with all that has transpired in the business world and society in general of late, it's safe to assume that blind trust in those who lead is dwindling, and staffers don't always feel all that engaged or empowered.

Leaders cannot assume that their people will give them the benefit of the doubt just because they are at the top of the pyramid. Business leaders must begin to recognize the impact that this has on an organization and understand how it limits your company's potential to become indispensable in the marketplace.

The Symptoms That Indicate You May Be Affected

Here are a few characteristics that can indicate that your workforce may be feeling the pain:

1. **General anxiety:** Morale and productivity are impacted when staffers feel anxious about their future.
2. **Despondency:** People disconnect from their commitment to the company when feeling hopeless and suspicious of intent. This can be disastrous to a business.
3. **Self-aggrandizement:** When self-promotion re-

places teamwork, staff can quickly shift to an “every man for himself” attitude, which stifles growth and hampers results.

4. Exaggerated self-importance: People in leadership positions can often develop a false sense of pomposity. This only leads to *no good* as your leaders attempt to gain the privileges that they think they are *owed* by their position.

5. Beleaguered leadership: When company morale is at its lowest, a leader without a clear and consistent message about how the organization will evolve is discounted by the rank and file.

How to Transcend the Fog of a Low-Trust Workplace

We have to give people something to believe in! We do that by cultivating a vision for the business that is centered on trust and doing the work needed to build a high integrity organization that people can depend on both inside and outside of the enterprise.

We've got to enhance the sense of “being in it together” within the business and build a sense of community that can energize your team and help them care about each other. By giving them something bigger than themselves to be a part of at work, we create a safe space for them to be at their best. We need our people to be at their best in order to become indispensable to our customers.

While a feeling of malaise and mistrust may pervade today's society, it doesn't have to be brought to work each day, eroding morale and having a negative impact on performance. Here are some ways to take deliberate action and improve trust within your business:

- Root out and repair trust breakdowns.
- Keep promises.
- Be transparent.
- Embrace the beatitudes of high integrity business behavior.

The Right Change Management Practices

The adoption of the right change management practices is not only necessary for successful implementation of new ideas, but it is an essential element of becoming indispensable.

Organizations have to change to remain vital and big changes require a good deal of time. Consequently, proper preparation is required.

Here are six steps you can take to ensure that your indispensability-driven change framework stands the test of time.

1. **Call it out:** Indispensability efforts deserve a name, so give them one.
2. **Take ownership:** Identify yourself as the sponsor of the change program and levy the political clout needed to garner the right level of participation among stakeholders.
3. **Make it full-time:** Identify a core team that can dedicate a full-time effort to get the job done. It's too important to do part-time.
4. **Engage everyone:** Big change doesn't happen without everyone rowing in the right direction. It requires involvement and participation of all the firm's staff—top to bottom.
5. **Determine the path forward:** Craft a program plan that identifies the projects needed to staff, fund, and execute the vision of indispensability.
6. **Broadcast results:** Create communication and engagement mechanisms to keep all of your people in the loop. Share progress and broadcast results.

It's no easy job to make a customer for life. It requires attention to the details and striving to establish the "right" traits, including:

- Vision
- Leadership
- Culture
- People
- Trust and empowerment
- Change frameworks

The challenge is significant but becoming indispensable is possible. You must never settle for "good enough!" Simply put, "good enough" does not make it "right." In fact, putting the "right" stuff in place is at the heart of becoming indispensable.

To be sure, the leader of an indispensable business knows that their best work is always ahead of them. They're never satisfied with maintaining the status quo. They're always striving for more and expecting great things from themselves and their staffers alike.

This is what an indispensable business is all about—never settling for second best. If you want your business to become indispensable, you have to be ready to set the direction and manage all the changes needed to get there. It is as simple as that!



James M. Kerr is recognized as one of today's foremost authorities on leadership, culture and organizational design. He leads the management consulting and executive coaching firm, Indispensable Consulting, and is a popular speaker, business columnist and author.

Jim specializes in culture design, leadership, business transformation and executive coaching. For nearly 30 years, he has assisted dozens of exceptional organizations, including diverse corporations like General Dynamics, The Home Depot, Mitsui Sumitomo and Accenture, to name a few of his clients.

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