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# Unleashing Leadership

Gregg Astoorian



Ergo Communications

[www.ergocommunications.com](http://www.ergocommunications.com)



## I. Opportunities for Leadership

Before people's natural leadership can be brought out, opportunities for leadership must be created. Opportunities for leadership are everywhere when you know how to look, but it takes a special eye to recognize them. There is a story about how the artist Michelangelo was attending a gathering, when the conversation turned to the limitations and failings of other acquaintances. Michelangelo was noticeably quiet during this discussion, so his friends asked him why he was so silent. "I'm thinking of a new painting," Michelangelo explained. At this, his friends became very interested. They knew a painting from Michelangelo would be something extraordinary, and they asked him what it was. The artist offered to paint it for them there and then. He took a white canvas and in the middle painted a small black circle, filling it with black paint. "What do you see?" asked Michelangelo. The friends looked puzzled. "We see a black spot," they replied. Michelangelo paused for a moment. "I thought you would see that," he said. "What I see is a large area of white."

Over the last twenty years, as markets have become increasingly global and competition increasingly intense, broad-based organizational leadership is more and more a determinant of success. Command and control structures, with a small group of senior leaders and a large supporting organization of followers, is less and less sufficient given the complexity, velocity, diversity and scope of the environments in which 21st century organizations must operate. Organizations are not able to sustain success by depending upon a relatively small number of people providing all of the leadership.

As a way of dealing with the unworkable nature of command and control structures in modern business, we saw the rise of "empowerment" as a straightforward reaction to the problem. Empowerment initiatives involved pushing decision-making authority lower in the organization as a way of offloading senior management and improving organizational responsiveness. In many

cases empowerment has had beneficial returns, but as often as not it has created significant problems at the same time.

Most of the problems of “empowerment” arose because organizations viewed it as a way of sharing leadership, not increasing it. Leadership was still being treated as a finite, limited resource rather than as an expandable, unlimited one.

Empowerment has often unintentionally involved a partial abdication of leadership by senior management, or left senior managers poorly trained and equipped to manage an organization consisting entirely of other leaders. Many empowerment initiatives confused “leadership” with “authority”.

As a result, empowerment tended to treat the symptoms but too often did not address the underlying cause: organizations still did not truly demand leadership from their members.

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In both command and control environments and in most “empowered” organizations, individuals were still “small black spots” of function and responsibility, not white canvases on which – in addition to those functions and responsibilities – anything is possible.

## II. Creating Opportunities for Leadership

The first step towards realizing more powerful leadership throughout an organization is to ask the question “what would be possible if all of the leadership potential in our organization were unleashed?” Having a clear appreciation for what is possible is a necessary first step to making these possibilities real. Staring at a blank canvas of “what’s possible” can be intimidating, so let’s look at a simple example. What would be possible in your organization if the majority of the people moved to the highest end of your performance evaluation scale, without compromising the scale?

Current high performers would augment their ability to deliver results with the ability to generate leadership behavior in their teams. Their attention would be freed from managing day to day activities and focus on causing bold, strategic futures, collaborating generously and inspiring and empowering others to achieve similar levels of performance. Currently

underutilized, high potential employees would be empowered and trained in spotting opportunities for results and enrolling others in them. They would be responsible for getting the best out of themselves, and would be committed to an ongoing process of finding and acting on ways of producing better and better results. They would get the coaching and support they need to be successful, and in being successful would accomplish things for the organization, its customers and themselves that outstrip anything they might otherwise have been capable of.

If this sounds impossible, or at least too good to be true, consider Michelangelo's lesson – that whether or not it is possible depends primarily on your perspective.

Here's an example of the seemingly impossible coming true. It was November of 2000, and a political drama was unfolding in the U.S. as Florida officials started recounting votes and news reports on the Bush-Gore debate started to flood the country. On that same Wednesday morning, Pizza Hut executives were reviewing their ad agency's ideas for their most recent product. What followed was a near perfect example of leadership and collaboration in action.

At noon, Pizza Hut's chief marketing officer was on the phone with the ad agency, and by Thursday evening, after 24 hours of intense activity, a 30-second spot started running on national television, featuring a narrator saying "Someday, you can tell your grandkids you were there when Florida decided the next president by voting for Bush – no Gore... no, no Bush ... no Gore." On a color-coded map of the U.S., Florida flashes from blue to red and back again. "Well," the voice continues, "at least you can tell them you tried the Insider pizza."

How was it possible to react with such speed on such a large scale? Obviously this required not just willingness and compliance, but focus, motivation and passion from a large number of people spread across multiple companies, including Pizza Hut, the ad agency, the production company, and so on. It started with one individual recognizing an opportunity, exercising leadership and generating collaboration at a level that allowed a project that normally takes months to be compressed into 24 hours.

Here's another powerful example. In the early 1990's, Jerry Sternin and his wife Monique, staff members of Save the Children, went to Vietnam to establish a new branch of the organization and fight malnutrition in Vietnamese villages. The only catch was that the Vietnamese government gave the Sternins only six months to show results or they would be sent home.

Working from the idea that change cannot be “imported” – that it has to happen from the inside – Sternin’s solution was to start in four villages to identify and enlist those rare families whose children were not malnourished. His approach, based on work done in the late 80’s at Tufts University, was to identify the strategies that made those families successful and help them promote those strategies to others. When he started he didn’t have answers and didn’t presume to know the best course of action. Instead he enrolled the villagers in the idea that malnutrition could be beaten and collaborated with them in finding solutions to make it happen.

Within 10 years, the program had reached 2.2 million Vietnamese in 265 villages, and continued to generate results even after the Sternins left Vietnam. The methodology Sternin developed has been applied in over 20 countries, and has been extended to other social problems like AIDS and ethnic conflict. Starting from an unreasonable task and an impossible time frame, Sternin was wildly successful beyond anyone’s ability to predict. As in the Pizza Hut example, he recognized the opportunity, took the leadership needed to make something out of it, and generated the collaboration needed to succeed until the project took on a life of its own.

The other thing to notice about Sternin’s story is that he started producing results immediately. There was no advance planning, no gathering of resources and no waiting for the right circumstances. He started working with what he had – four villages – and relied on the people in those villages for anything he didn’t have, including knowing what to do next! As Sternin later put it, “It’s easier to act yourself into a new way of thinking than to think yourself into a new way of acting.”

The possibilities leaders can invent are achievable if the current perceptions, patterns of behaviour and limitations all individuals impose on themselves can be identified and altered. Although this may sound as though it is easier said than done, the truth is that the methods and practices for doing it are not complicated or hard to understand. They simply require constant awareness, strong commitment and ongoing support, which we discuss in the next section.

### III. Getting Started and Getting Results

**T**hree simple, basic things are needed for leaders to start the shift from the realities they experience today to the possibilities that they can invent for themselves and their organization.

**Awareness:** The first of these is awareness that significant opportunities exist beyond what is occurring in their organization today. It takes practice to develop the acuity needed to notice these opportunities, or to notice when they are missing. Without this awareness there is no opening to invent powerful and compelling future possibilities and create the environment for taking on the work required to bring these possibilities into existence.

Sometimes, leaders say that they see possibilities beyond what exist today, but that current realities, like a challenging business environment, corporate restructuring, or losses instead of profits, preclude them from considering these possibilities. While these realities are often severe, even to the point of a firm fighting for its very existence, they do not preclude the designing of a compelling future of possibilities. In fact they demand it. When faced with dire circumstances, the need for a powerful and compelling future that calls everyone in the organization to work in a united effort to overcome the current challenges is one of the most important elements senior leaders can provide.

At other times, when there is no immediate crisis, leaders have difficulty enrolling others in new possibilities, because there is no obvious, urgent need for change. It is during times like these that people tend to become complacent and fall into patterns of automatic behaviour that result in lost opportunities and an attitude of settling for the status quo or incremental improvements, rather than the motivated, creative, high energy, high performance environment that gets generated when new possibilities are in the forefront.

**Commitment:** The second element needed to get started is commitment. Once leaders are aware of possibilities and opportunities, a genuine and powerful commitment needs to be made to realize them; otherwise the possibility will die when the first obstacle is encountered and no results will ever be produced. Powerful leaders make commitments on three levels:

- A commitment to be rigorously honest about the current environment, in terms of what is needed to achieve the results and what is currently missing
- A commitment to welcome the contribution of others and collaborate in creating a new possibility, to the point that the team comes ahead of any individual, including the leader
- A commitment to do whatever is necessary to bring these possibilities into existence in the face of whatever circumstances exist now or may get in the way in the future.

Even among accomplished leaders, it is not uncommon to find that they have a sincere desire for a breakthrough in their organization's leadership and performance: they really hope it can be achieved. Unfortunately, desire and hope are insufficient. What is required is committed action. Commitment means being in action now, not planning or preparing to be in action: in fact, if there is little or no action happening, it is a good sign that sufficient commitment is missing. To understand this better, think about physical training. Any professional athlete or coach will tell you: the mind follows the body. The mind only operates well when the body is properly conditioned, so by putting the body into action, the mind has no choice but to get conditioned too. Once something is set in motion, the objections, obstacles and problems you thought were there have a way of getting solved.

Commitment to create leadership shows up when senior leaders take a stand for it. They commit to bring about breakthroughs in the organization's leadership and performance with the same clarity and intensity that they commit to deliver sales results, cost reductions, new products to markets, and any of the other mainstream business commitments they make. They also are willing to make the commitment in the face of uncertainty about exactly how the commitment will be fulfilled, just as they do with other business commitments. As we said earlier, it isn't complex or hard to understand – but it requires determination, boldness and persistence that can be challenging to maintain without support.

**Support:** The third and final element needed for leaders to start achieving results is ongoing support. Like the other two elements, it doesn't precede getting into action: it is driven by the needs generated from being in action, and grows in response to what leaders need to fulfill on their goals. By support we mean two things. First, that there is a real, ongoing demand for leadership from all employees by the organization, and second that there is a structure which supports employees in meeting that demand.

Here is an example of an organization demanding leadership from its employees. At Four Seasons Hotels, all employees carry a card which lists the rules for working at the organization. The card says "Identify It, You Own It". This means that as a condition of employment, employees at all levels are expected to take ownership and action when they recognize a problem or opportunity. In 2003, Four Seasons was ranked first in the prestigious Zagat survey for best hotel chain in North America, and has been widely recognized for its uncompromising standards in delivering its product. This simple structure is one way of continually creating opportunities

for leadership in improving on those standards. Picture what might be going on in your own organization if it demanded and supported the same level of leadership.

Naturally, this one structure is not sufficient in itself at the Four Seasons – it has to be backed up by management and organizational support that encourages and assists employees in following through when opportunities for leadership are created. As a result, employees are able to express their natural leadership, and for the last 6 years straight (1998-2003) Four Seasons has been ranked in Fortune Magazine’s list of best companies to work for. By making a strong demand for leadership, combined with the organizational support to allow and encourage employees to follow through, everyone wins –organization, employees and customers.