



LEADERSHIP December 22, 2009, 1:31PM EST

You Can Lead. But Can You Inspire?

Ten attributes senior managers need to lead organizations through the recession and its demoralizing consequences on their workforce

By [Alaina Love](#)

Pick up any business publication, and you'll see a plethora of stories on individual leaders and how they cut costs in a down economy. Their efforts have frequently included slashing jobs and overhead to improve the bottom line. What we hear too little about is the mammoth undertaking of remotivating the workforce left behind, one grappling with pain and uncertainty and often understaffed to accomplish the organization's goals. The ability to manage well amid these challenging circumstances distinguishes the average business head from the truly inspirational leader.

From my own experience, I've learned there's no magic in the way inspirational leaders operate. They understand the business and its metrics for success as well as anyone else on the team. But they do one thing particularly well: They give employees roles consistent with their unique skills, core values, and primary passions. Inspirational leaders focus unrelentingly on tapping the right people for each job and helping others determine where they can be their best; then they create that opportunity inside the organization. Given the economy-driven seismic shift that has occurred in most companies, leaders who can inspire others to achieve more than they believed possible have never been as essential for survival as they are today.

In reality, many business heads fail to merit the label "inspirational." Instead, they fall on a continuum somewhere between cynical and inspirational. The following Inspiration Continuum lists 10 characteristic signs of an inspirational leader, the very traits and behaviors that will prove critical in the months ahead as organizations seek to motivate a pared-down and scarred workforce. Take a moment to rate your own leadership over the past year on a scale of 1 to 10 (with 10 being the best) for each of the following characteristics.

- 1. Authentic rather than phony.** The words, actions, and beliefs of inspirational leaders are consistent. These leaders are not phony or pretending to be someone they're not.
- 2. Reliable rather than erratic.** Employees know they can count on inspirational leaders to guide the organization to clearly defined goals on a well-thought-out course. They do not confuse an already struggling workforce with erratic behavior and constantly shifting priorities.
- 3. Anchored rather than disconnected.** These leaders are well-positioned in the flow of the business and the organization's culture. They are clued in to contemporary trends and issues rather than disconnected from current realities.
- 4. Optimistic rather than pessimistic.** Inspirational leaders demonstrate a world view of possibility and abundance. They are not unaware of the challenges and difficulties the organization may be facing, but they choose instead to focus on both how and why the organization will be successful.
- 5. Self-aware rather than unconscious.** They understand their strengths and passions as well as their vulnerabilities and blind spots, and they work diligently to leverage the former and minimize the latter.
- 6. Driven by purpose and passion rather than power and fear.** Inspirational leaders understand the tremendous power of a well-articulated purpose and a passionate workforce that embraces it. They get results not through wielding power and inculcating fear but rather by creating a vision in which others can become engaged.
- 7. Inclusive rather than divisive.** These leaders value the input of others and seek out opinions from a widely diverse base. They recognize that divisiveness and exclusion do not lead to quality results or strengthen teamwork.
- 8. Focused on others rather than self-focused.** Inspirational leaders focus first on creating a positive environment for others and leaving a valued business legacy, and only secondarily on their own needs. They will make tough choices that benefit the business over the long term rather than trade the future for a short-term gain.
- 9. Respectful rather than manipulative.** As the economic dust begins to settle and organizations reinvent themselves, inspirational leaders recognize that the business environment is dynamic and may require even more changes that affect jobs. They appreciate the importance of treating employees at all levels with respect and insist that any implemented programs or processes are consistent with this core value.

10. Able to foster other leaders rather than demanding followers. Inspirational leaders spend a significant chunk of time identifying and grooming leaders throughout the organization. They are fully aware that the future of the business is directly related to developing individuals who are even better leaders than themselves and recognize that a business dependent on any one leader for its success puts itself in a vulnerable and tenuous position.

If you scored at 85 or above, you are practicing inspirational leadership. Asking members of your team to evaluate you using the Inspiration Continuum would provide even greater validation.

As we enter into the New Year, the most important goal of inspirational leaders is to provide employees with the license to thrive. Great leaders connect others' work to a larger purpose and harness the energy of the organization to achieve results. If you're not pleased with how you've scored on the Inspiration Continuum, perhaps it is time to conduct an evaluation of your overall leadership style and plan for a stronger and more inspiring performance next year. Your employees, your business, and indeed our economy will benefit.

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