

Inspiring Leadership

Experience has shown that real and lasting inspiration can set the stage for actual ongoing action and sustaining results.

By [Robert Pater](#) | Feb 01, 2015

Don't we all need more true inspiration? In essence, "inspiring" means sparking and energizing to promote new growth and then sustain it. This process may involve helping people observe with fresh eyes, actually change what they identify, differently consider what's important or possible, and develop new approaches. And, ultimately, take action--whether starting new things, continuing what's already been set in motion, or engaging in previously unthought-of strategies. Perhaps a lesser highlighted but equally important aspect of *inspiring* is reminding people to not give up when results seem disappointing, to pursue an implementation even when surrounded by naysayers (or when initial Safety program results are mediocre). Not giving up's critical; as the saying goes, "Success doesn't just come from knowing what to do, it's as much remembering to do what you already know." I frequently have to remind myself of this.

Inspiration's draw is strong. It seems there are but two types of people: those who want to feel inspired and those who want to inspire others. *Inspiration* is also the physiological term for inhaling/breathing in oxygen--and some say other subtle substances--to energize both body and brain. After all, the first part of the body that reacts to even slight changes in oxygen level is the brain (which is the ultimate "Perception"/"Decisionmaking"/"Safety" organ.) And every body cell relies on an oxidative process to thrive, repair, or duplicate; this requires, you guessed it, oxygen, similar to less-controlled chemical reactions that enable a flame to catch and burn. Inspiration is the breath of spirit; note that you best help a tentative flame take hold by fanning it from its bottom (not top-down.) Just like in Safety.

Effective leaders have to take the lead. In "High Output Management," Andrew Grove wrote that a leader's own intent and inner state radiates out to all. If inspiring

ultimately means filling someone--with "breath"/energy, vision, hope, possibilities, confidence to change--leaders have to first do this for themselves. "Do as I say, not as I do" just doesn't work. So a go-through-the-motions, hopeless-feeling leader will indeed fill others--but not *positively*. Here's the common problem shared by many would-be inspirational leaders: thinking they can convince people to be more positive or work harder or act safer without practicing what they speech. It's as if they make it their mission to tell and not listen, manipulate and not experience, go through the motions of motivating others while being unchanged themselves, or communicate in a canned/preset manner. Like a slick politician who tries to work up each audience with a carefully crafted stump speech that you just know is empty of real feeling, other than "like me." I'll bet you can readily think of parallels in go-through-the-motions Safety speeches. While templated presentations may reach some of the people some of the time, I've found these rarely result in significant long-term improvements; it's like the proverbial meal where one feels full when done but is hungry shortly after. Bloated doesn't equal nourished.

On the other hand, experience has shown that real and lasting inspiration can set the stage for actual ongoing action and sustaining results. True inspirational leadership has five select hallmarks:

- *Personal and real, not canned.* This doesn't mean that a presentation has to be fully off the cuff, just that when pretty much the exact same words are employed with different groups over time, they lose true connection to emotional energy, and therefore are less powerful. Best presenters I know put aside those stories and phrases they've "always" used--especially the ones that seemed to get strong reactions--because they know that if they're just going through the motions themselves, their communications will not likely move others.
- *Humble, not humiliating.* Inspirational messages remind us we all make mistakes, can get embarrassed or fail, but offer hope for improvement by not putting anyone down as doomed to be inept, stupid, or incompetent.
- *Focused on the future, not predominantly the past.* Best inspiration often emphasizes lessons learned with an eye toward how to next improve, no matter how bleak things may appear. Remind others of what they've previously accomplished and are capable of doing, of how they've already elevated themselves by going through difficult times. Most important, support them to go beyond what they've done.
- *Accomplishable, rather than overwhelming or pie-in-the-sky.* The best inspiration goes beyond just nice words; it's grounded in transferring practical methods, providing needed resources, and structuring in ongoing application. The key is to emphasize small actionable steps to move even a little closer toward the larger desired destination, rather than just hype or aphorisms. Some of the best communications are reminders akin to the employee/peer Safety leader who, closing out a training, asked, "How many of you have been able to do something today that you never thought you could?" And after a large show of hands, "What else might you be able to do that you don't now think you can?"
- *Leveraged.* Master CEO Anil Mathur (head of Alaska Tanker Company, the safest oil tanker company in

the world) contends the mission of leadership is to create other powerful leaders, rather than followers. Further, "the goal of inspiring leadership is to install the same engine that inspires people into the hearts of others in the team."

We all need inspiration and reminding--even the most cutting-edge leaders. Remind yourself and others what you've/they've learned, how you've/they've survived difficult situations and times, even if things didn't work out perfectly. How we've all become stronger, more tempered from what we've been through. And backed by practical skillsets and toolsets, remind them what more they might be able to do next.

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