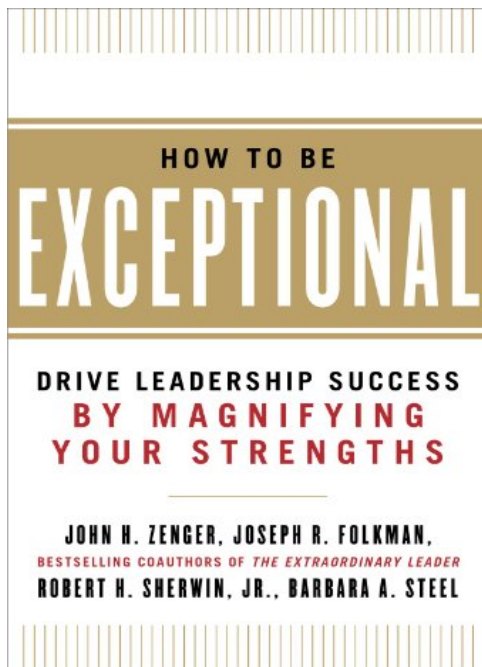


HOW TO BE EXCEPTIONAL

DRIVE LEADERSHIP SUCCESS BY MAGNIFYING YOUR STRENGTHS



AN EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARY

BY CHAD WELLMAN

EADM 8923 UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN

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BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

The authors of this book, after publishing a previous book on Exceptional Leadership, present a data-driven argument for focusing on leadership strengths rather than weaknesses in order to become great. Having completed over 500,000 surveys on several different continents and in many different cultures, they arrive at common competencies that are important for exceptional leaders, what you need to do to improve those competencies, and how to eliminate any fatal flaws that you may have.

As an educator, this book may challenge how you provide both assessment and feedback to students. That is a bold statement, I know, but as I read this book, so many things that they mentioned as things not to do were things I used in my daily practice. This was especially true during report cards in the attitudes shared by teachers, students, and parents alike during the reporting period. The main thing that we focus on is the low grades that were earned, and view those as areas for improvement in the future. This book shifts that focus to making leaders (and in our case students) exceptional at the things that they are already good at so that they become stand outs in something they enjoy.

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Is it better to eliminate your weaknesses or improve your strengths as a leader?

That is the question this book addresses. Common practice is that if someone wants to improve, they find out their areas of weakness and work to improve upon them. The authors claim, however, that working on weaknesses brings someone up to the average, but it doesn't make someone great. In other terms, "Fixing weaknesses never made anyone exceptional" (p. xiv). At first glance, that seems an obvious statement, doesn't it? But do we ever really think about its implications? The authors argue that "although [eliminating weaknesses] gets you to a position where it...no longer detract[s] from your overall performance, it doesn't elevate you much beyond that" (p. 26). When we, as teachers, focus on just improving weaknesses, we don't truly develop our students to their full potential. That is why we need to change and look to encourage, support, and equip students in things that they are already passionate and competent in. It "is that shift in focus-from trying to not be below average on anything to, instead, being outstanding at relatively few behaviors-that makes such a huge impact on others" (p. 27).

The studies in this book found that "what made a great leader was the presence of strengths, not the absence of weaknesses. Great leaders did a few things exceptionally well" (p. 27). Therefore, this book talks about the benefits to working on strengths instead of weaknesses, how to know what things you should work on improving, how to actually improve, and how



What are the benefits to building strengths? (p. 89)

1. **Motivation** – You work on something you actually like doing, rather than a weakness that you don't enjoy
2. **More success** – Since you are more motivated, the likelihood of success increases
3. **Change in outcomes** – Other areas of an organization improve naturally due to a leader with exceptional strengths
4. **Drastic improvement that leads to more development** – When you succeed, it motivates more success, having a compound effect

Three filters for identifying a behavior that could be expanded into a strength (p. 101):

1. **Competence** - Are you good at it already and want to become great at it?
2. **Passion** - Is it something you already enjoy doing? Working on something that you are passionate about helps to keep you motivated.
3. **Organization need** - Will it actually help both you and the organization you work for? Pick something that you will use on a daily basis at work.

The 16 Differentiating Competencies (p. 106)				
(The top 5 competencies are emphasized in blue)				
Focus on Results	Leading Change	Character	Interpersonal Skills	Personal Capability
Drives for results	Develops strategic perspective	Displays integrity and honesty	Communicates powerfully and prolifically	Has technical/professional expertise
Establishes stretch goals	Champions change		Inspires and motivates others to high performance	Solves problems and analyses issues
Takes initiative	Connects the group to the outside world		Builds relationships	Innovative
			Develops others	Practices self-development
			Engages in collaboration and teamwork	

If you have both taken the time to read this book summary already and have bought in to the premise that you should work on improving strength, I would encourage you to print off the above competencies list. It is the most practical portion of the entire book, and the information that I had been waiting to find out the most as I read through it. If you want to be a great leader, this list is a specific and clear tool to remind you of what employees value. The five highlighted competencies were, on average, the most mentioned traits found in the numerous worldwide surveys that the authors conducted.

How to develop your strengths (p. 46):

1. Learn the basics – Most people learn best from observing others, so find someone in your organization that already models the competency you are trying to improve and watch them in action. You can also find digital and written resources that expand upon the basics.
2. Learn through formal professional development - Actively seek out professional development opportunities to improve your craft
3. Build in feedback processes - The willingness of a leader to ask for feedback is directly related to how effective that leader will be (p. 125). You also “can only benefit from feedback if [you] believe and accept the feedback” (p. 126).
4. Do “cross-training” - There are “competency companions” that correlate with each other. The strength of one improves the strength of another. In the same way that athletes train in multiple areas instead of just their specialty in order to improve, leaders can train different areas in order to improve their area of focus. The authors felt that this was their greatest contribution to the field of leadership (p. 62), as it provides the most opportunity for growth. An example of what these competency companions look like is found in the chart on the next page.
5. Learn while working - “If you want to learn a new skill, then build that skill into your job” (p. 149).
6. Create Sustainability - this comes from (p. 56, 150): creating a supportive environment, provide clear outcomes, establish accountability and responsibility, be transparent, and continually follow up.



All of this is not to say that you should never focus on weaknesses, because “if a leader has some trait or competency that is a profound weakness, and this behavior is both important on the job and readily observed by others, this could be considered a fatal flaw” (p. 24). The authors argue that you should only spend time on a weakness if it is a fatal flaw that would immediately make you a bad leader, not if it is something that can be overlooked due to being so strong in many other areas.

How to fix a fatal flaw (p. 180):

1. Accept
2. Understand the behaviour
3. Create a plan for change
4. Apologize and ask for forgiveness
5. Get help from others
6. Reward progress

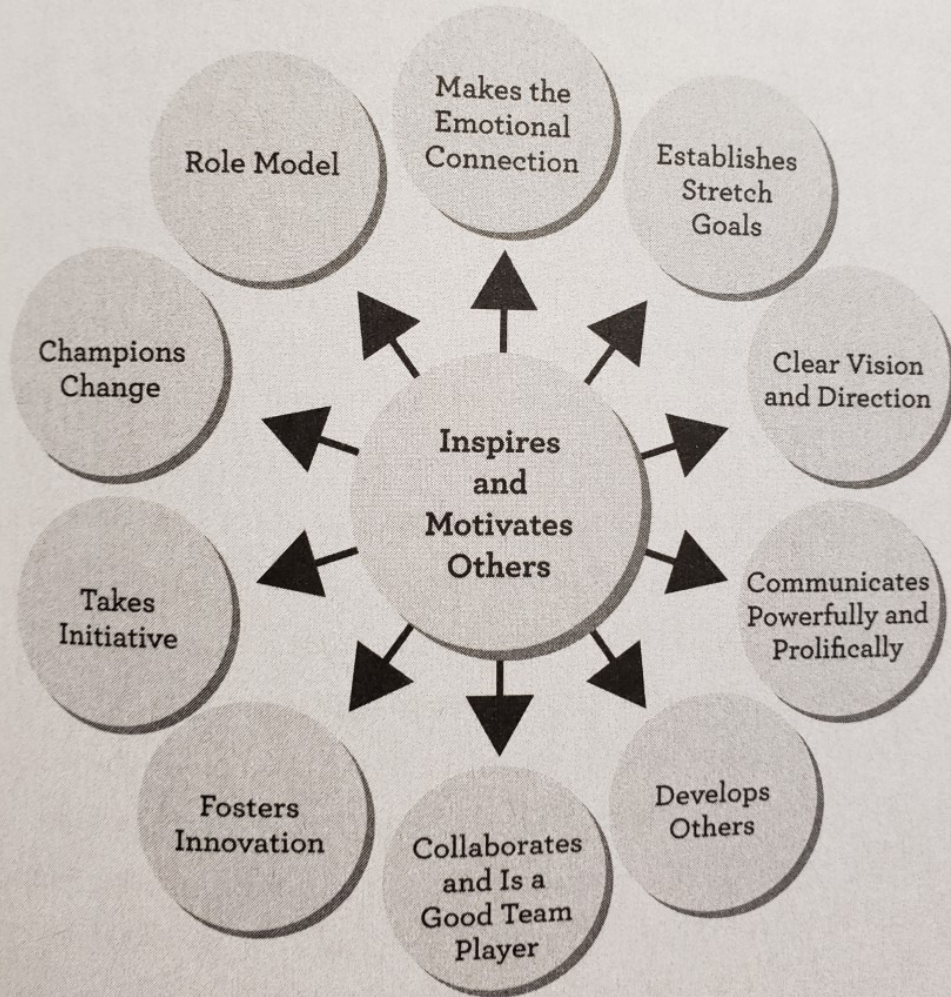
How do you actually sustain this development? Try this formula!

$\text{Sustainability} = \text{motivation} \times \text{clarity of goal} \times \text{support from others} \times \text{opportunities for practice} \times \text{progress tracking}$

If any of those categories are a 0, the equation results in 0 sustainability!

companions for this competency of inspiring and motivating shown in Figure 9.1.

Figure 9.1 Ten Competency Companions That Help Leaders Inspire and Motivate Others



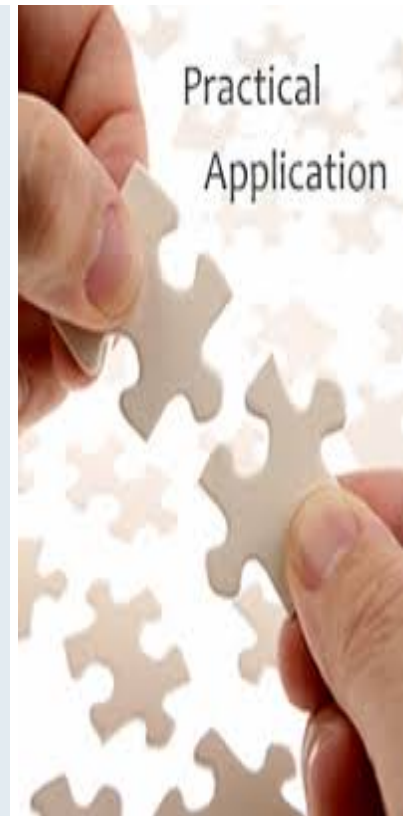
Source: *The Inspiring Leader Workshop* © 2010 Zenger Folkman

Let's assume that Jennifer has decided that she wishes to have 10 companions

Practical Application

The concept that I most draw out of this book is that during personal and professional development time, instead of focusing on fixing weaknesses, time should be spent working toward being great in specific areas. Surround yourself with quality people who are strong in your areas of weakness so that you can complement each other. For example, I currently co-coach my school's basketball team with a fellow colleague, and when we initially sat down to look at what our different roles would be, some important areas were addressed. I am not good at calling/emailing other people to create a schedule. I don't enjoy it, nor would I like to spend my free time organizing it.

She, on the other hand, loves scheduling and organization, so she gladly took on that role. I also realized that I am not very good at motivationally speaking to athletes in order to improve their attitudes and enthusiasm. Therefore, during timeouts and before games, she will often take over the speaking and get everyone ready to play. This has allowed me to focus my time on developing my understanding of the game, learning new and better drills, so that I am great at working on technique and plays with my players. We naturally learn from each other and will get better in our weaker areas, but it allows us to be really good and progress in the area that we most enjoy.



Critique and Limitations of the Book

The case studies presented in this book have very little content, if any, which is drawn from educational sectors. As such, one may hesitate to directly apply much of this information into a classroom setting. From an educational administration standpoint, however, this book would be a great driver for professional development within a staff. It would be amazing if you could cultivate several exceptional leaders within your school, or even have that as an expressed value amongst staff.



The biggest downside of this book is that most of the graphs in this book offer little to no clarity, as they are often poorly worded and labeled. The only value that they contribute is proof that they actually conducted the studies that they say they did, and even then the sheer volume of graphs is cumbersome. If you do decide to read this book, gloss over the graphs, as I have already included the most important charts in this summary.