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## Against All Odds: How Power Leaders Achieve the Impossible

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### Abstract

The practice of power is characterised by the ability to initiate and sustain action and is demonstrated by converting intention into action. Power Leaders commit people to action and convert followers into change agents. This article discusses the differences between Power Leaders and Authority Leaders. Power Leaders demonstrate the ability to get people to accomplish objectives and have them enjoy it whereas Authority Leaders rely on social dominance techniques and strategies such as command-and-control that leave followers relieved rather than confident after achieving success.

The article is based on an empirically proven system of high performance and leadership called Level Six Leadership™. Through Level Six Leadership, individuals, leaders and organisations are better able to fulfil their potential.

Growing a business during a recession is the ultimate test of leadership. Many believe that it's impossible, but consider that while the Dow Jones Index plunged more than 40% between the fourth quarter of 2008 and the first quarter of 2009, these industries experienced significant growth:

- Movies—22% increase
- Personal care—18% increase
- Video games—14% increase

Growth was not limited to these three industries, however. NetFlix experienced a 26% increase, big screen TVs are predicted to increase by 16% in 2009, and smart phones have *doubled* their sales in the past year! History has proven growth occurs during other tough times. Kellogg's, Proctor & Gamble and Chevrolet all grew their businesses during the Great Depression to become their respective market leaders. In addition, General Electric, Disney, Hewlett-Packard and Microsoft were all recession-era start-ups.

The times "they are a changin'" as the song goes. The current recession will form the business climate for the next generation, and executives who harness and convey their power successfully will position their organisation for the near and distant future. Leaders who wish to grow their businesses under the current economic conditions have two requirements: they have to have bold ideas, and they need to act fast. Stakes are higher, and the survivors will get in the game early. Late adaptors will never catch this bus.

Speed and scope are not the only distinguishing leadership factors, however. An essential leadership component is the use of **power** versus **authority**. Distinguishing between Power Leaders and Authority Leaders during a stable economy can be difficult because executives rarely reveal their authentic character under favourable conditions. But in uncertain times, they cannot hide their true colours. Authority Leaders rely on their position to preserve the status quo, whereas Power Leaders demonstrate their ability to communicate with their workforce and engage with their markets to grow their business. They convince their employees they're able to *Achieve the Impossible* and meet market demand even during the most challenging times.

The way in which executives manage their people has a direct impact on how their team performs. Power Leaders create the will to work effectively and collaboratively—not because employees are coerced, but because they are committed. John Kotter, a Professor of Leadership at the Harvard Business School stated in his book, *Power and Influence: Beyond Formal Authority*, “Without the needed awareness and skill, we risk being overwhelmed by the pathological aspects of modern organisations—the bureaucratic infighting, parochial politics, destructive power struggles, and the like which reduce initiative, innovation, morale, and excellence in all kinds of organisations.”<sup>i</sup> The idea isn't new either. Warren Bennis, the Distinguished Professor of Leadership at the University of Southern California significantly contributed to the same discussion 40 years ago in his landmark paper, *Leadership Theory and Administrative Behaviour: The Problem of Authority*.<sup>ii</sup>

Power Leaders distinguish themselves from Authority Leaders by strengthening relationships with their people and most importantly, altering their relationship with the current reality. Bottom line, Power Leaders are better able to lead change, create organisational consistency and grow their business.

<b>Power Leaders</b>	<b>Authority Leaders</b>
Focuses on Change	Focuses on Complexity
Changes the Reality	Clings to Reality
Assesses Risks	Avoids Risks
Pragmatist	Perfectionist
Apple Tree Organisational Structure	Christmas Tree Organisational Structure

### **Focus on Change**

*Achieving the Impossible* is about change—leading it and getting other people to accomplish it. Many executives make the mistake of managing complexity by putting each and every detail in its place and controlling all aspects of a complex organisation. Authority Leaders rely primarily on logic and linear thinking, which leads to reasons *not to do*. Power Leaders, however, think creatively and systemically, thereby generating solutions that lead to *how to do*.

A greater risk exists to an organisation and all of its stakeholders if energy is spent preserving the status quo rather than pursuing change. Power Leaders successfully manage the paradox of change and stability by being aware that people require a balance between the two. In times of uncertainty, though, many executives focus primarily on creating stability for their people, which significantly increases opportunity costs. Power Leaders, however, realise that a continuum exists between change and stability rather than being forced into a binary choice. They recognise which point on the change/stability continuum help their people feel secure while taking advantage of existing opportunities. Power Leaders manage the paradox of change and stability by recognising their organisations are living, dynamic organisms, which are either getting better or getting worse. Effective executives don't polarise on either change or stability—they think of ways how to achieve continuity—the force that bonds people through cooperative acts. By examining the continuum between stability and change, employees realise that they're better off *Achieving the Impossible* than stewing in stagnant anxiety—and they naturally move collectively toward the goal.

Keep the focus on change, not complexity. Set the direction, find the right people, align them appropriately, and then provide them with the reasons why they're able to *Achieve the Impossible*.

- **Set the Direction**—listen to your market and identify their needs
- **Find the Right People**—hire people who are able to work interdependently without constant supervision who share your vision and have the skills to accomplish the mission
- **Align Them Appropriately**—create systems that allow for efficient work flow
- **Provide Them with Reasons**—provide your people with evidence why change is advantageous to stability

### Change the Reality

*Achieving the Impossible* starts with deciding what the Impossible is. The executive constructs and shares a future that's creative yet practical, challenging yet feasible, focused yet flexible. Power Leaders fuse two ends of polar opposites by recognising market forces, client expectations and competitor moves. It becomes clear the Impossible is actually necessary and mandatory by synthesising these factors. Within a moment of clarity, the Impossible becomes the reality.

Power Leaders demonstrate the ability to take complex topics and simplify them into digestible solutions for their people. Business literature is filled with leadership concepts that are presented in a bi-polar fashion: Theory X vs. Theory Y, Management vs. Leadership, Transactional Leadership vs. Transformational Leadership, Right Brain vs. Left Brain and the list goes on and on. Readers may even interpret the concept of Power Leaders vs. Authority Leaders as a contribution to this list. Each concept generates implicit value judgments about which side is right and which side is wrong. Power Leaders rise above these trivial arguments by using the strengths of each side to generate and implement solutions. Authority Leaders,

however, are pulled into the trap of controversy where they fail to see the strengths and the weaknesses associated with both sides. Power Leaders fuse both ends of polar opposites and develop a newly developed construct that is appropriate for the situation.

People are noticeably apprehensive during a recession, wondering what the economy means to their careers and their families. Most employees hold an irrational, subjective reality that's based in fear. It's the responsibility of the leader to redirect the currently held perceptions of the workforce toward a rational, objective reality—which there may be several options. In order to diminish employees' concerns, perceptive persuasion is a more efficient means of communication than top-down authoritarian oppression and control, which only enhances resistance and breeds short-term compliance rather than long-term commitment.

Recognise when people spend their energy protecting their current condition rather than moving purposely toward achievement when change is introduced—resistance is a natural reaction, activating a survival mechanism. Get ahead of the curve by overriding people's short-term fears with long-term stability and profitability.

Organisations employ plenty of intelligent people, but what they lack is a workforce that's able to see the reality. It's vital to ferret out emotionally based perceptions that stifle organisations, therefore engaging people in a future that includes them.

### **Assess the Risks**

Fear and anxiety paralyse Authority Leaders, preventing them from pulling the trigger on even the most obvious opportunities. Executives procrastinate until the decision is made for them by either competitors or the market—or both. The slightest possibility of failure determines that an initiative is not worth the risk. Smart executives, however, move with speed and velocity to take action the moment the reality becomes evident.

Applying a risk analysis model is a fundamental component of leadership. Power Leaders use data to drive decisions, whereas Authority Leaders rely on a distorted view of reality based on stereotypes and false assumptions. Sound, valid information is the foundation for every effective decision. Guarantees don't exist, and effective executives recognise and accept the risks associated with the future they wish to create. Risk accompanies action. The key for executives is recognising when probabilities of success outweigh a possibility of failure. Be attracted to and pursue probable opportunities rather than spending your energy avoiding possible failure. Know what you want to end up with. Know what you want to change. Be aware of the strengths and limitations of the people who carry out the plan. Be aware of the probable outcomes and consequences of each option considered. Know *who* is going to do *what* and *when* it's going to be done.

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## Employ a Pragmatic Approach

Power Leaders don't offer *perfect* solutions—they offer the most appropriate solutions in the required time period. A half-right decision in a timely manner is better than a perfect decision made too late. The driving factor during the decision-making process is knowledge, and every interaction is an opportunity to generate information. Organisations that *Achieve the Impossible* produce new knowledge and then direct that knowledge to the most productive uses. The size of organisations isn't an obstacle—organisations can be big *and* fast.

Power Leaders use emotional awareness as a tool rather than a barrier to organisational performance. Valleys always follow peaks—it's part of the human condition. Authority Leaders are rarely "business-like" in that emotions such as fear, greed and relief lead to theoretical beliefs and unproductive actions. Accept the reality of emotional cycles and create a framework within it to experience long-term consistency. In contrast to the hard driving autocrat who expects employees to not only work at a fever pitch but then build on it, effective executives keep emotional cycles at a consistent level by keeping the focal point on *Achieving the Impossible*. Focus and concentration, not emotion, is the driving force of change. *Achieving the Impossible* doesn't signal the end; rather it's part of a continuum with no end point. Stay calm, emphasise the process of consistent effort and concentrate on the long-term goal. Employees learn not to indulge in short-term triumphs or languish over temporary setbacks. Each is simply on the path toward *Achieving the Impossible*.

Power Leaders look for the truth within their markets, realising that it may contradict their current strategy. For example, focus on two areas of content—markets and customers. Ask, "what do our customers want and at what price will they buy?" Authority Leaders, concerned with survival and acting from theory rather than data, focus on how their goods and services *should* fit into their perceived market strategy, like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. Authority Leaders actually criticise how their customers fail to respond to an academic strategy, whereas Power Leaders do the work to uncover what the market truly wants.

## Build an Apple Tree Organisation

In the past, size has predicated a top-down chain of command, which produces Authority Leaders—no matter how democratic an executive aspires to be. Authority is built into the system creating an imperceptible crutch for the executive. Throughout history, people have been strongly conditioned to expect and accept hierarchies through our schools, churches and families—we've been psychologically, emotionally, culturally and spiritually conditioned. We learn to obey parents, conform to teachers and comply with bosses. We are rewarded if we adhere to the established guidelines and we're punished if we don't. We quickly learn that a hierarchy exists and it dictates our behaviour. In essence, we live in a Christmas Tree world. Organisations are traditionally structured as pyramids—they were first used by the church followed by the military and then adopted by every western organisation since. Christmas Tree organisations are authoritarian in nature and fundamentally inorganic. Life is good at the top, but toxic intra-competition exists in the middle. Productivity is supposed to

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come from the bottom of the Christmas Tree, but it's difficult to perform at a high level when the weight of the organisation is on the backs of the producers.

In Apple Tree Organisations, Power Leaders occupy the centre of the organisation rather than the top with the benefit being that power naturally comes to people who are at the centre of relationships. Occupy the trunk of the tree where you're able to reach up to support the producers and middle managers or dig down into the roots to access the resources needed to *Achieve the Impossible*. As opposed to Christmas Tree organisations, Apple Tree organisations are democratic and organic. Reach down into the root system for the required resources and then allocate those resources to the managers that need them. Middle managers are branches moving the resources from the leaders to the producers, working collaboratively and openly with each branch. The producers are at the top where they get all the resources they need to produce consistent high performance results.

Christmas Tree organisations exhibit a high degree of independence and insularity often results. Departments act as single entities rather than working as a member of a team, without regard to what is going on outside of their walls. Apple Tree organisations, however, work interdependently with each other. Power Leaders set the example of comprehensive communication by talking with the stakeholder of the entire organisation.

Several other differences are evident between Apple Tree organisations and Christmas Tree organisations. First, Power Leaders act as a gateway, or an opening, to change by listening to the workforce. Authority Leaders, on the other hand, have information filtered to them through the many layers of the Christmas Tree. They are isolated from the truth, which significantly limits the pace of change.

Second, Apple Tree organisations enable leadership to flow throughout whereas Christmas Tree organisations have contracted authority at the top. It only takes one or two people to manage a company, but it takes expansive leadership to create organisational change.

Finally, Apple Tree organisations are filled with healthy, productive, relationships whereas Christmas Tree organisations are filled with angry, apathetic and anxious employees. Authority Leaders rely on command and control techniques manipulating people's fears to drive short-term, temporary, erratic results as compared to Power Leaders who apply empathy, intelligence and wisdom to drive long-term, enduring, consistent change.

## Conclusion

Organisations attempting to *Achieve the Impossible* are not doing so as a last ditch effort. *Achieving the Impossible* is not for dysfunctional companies who aspire to mediocrity—it's for strong companies where you don't have to be sick to get better.

The most important priority for Power Leaders is recognising followers won't commit to any initiative through authoritarian means. Executives won't be able to lead change if they apply

the same top-down management style that has inhibited and restricted employees for centuries. Apple Tree organisations create changes in processes and systems without instituting an expensive reengineering effort—in effect, the culture of an organisation changes without moving a chair. Redefining excellence and striving for the extraordinary doesn't include risking the future of the organisation—it only requires a shift in mindset of the leaders.

The time has come for a revolution in leadership. Move fast with big ideas. The time has come to create a culture where people are actively involved in making the impossible happen. Altering relationships with reality and people provides the power for leaders to *Achieve the Impossible*.

People resist being controlled, or at least the appearance of it. People want to accomplish something meaningful, something that satisfies a purpose. People don't want to work for an organisation—they want to accomplish an important mission, something that gives their life meaning. People want to *Achieve the Impossible* and Power Leaders can help them make it happen.

Executives wishing to act like Power Leaders can acquire two sets of skills. First, executives need to master the ability to make sound, rational decisions. A clear indication that an executive has not mastered this skill is when emotions dictate decisions. Fear, anxiety and frustration easily sway decisions, but Power Leaders demonstrate wisdom when they display true confidence and high levels of frustration tolerance. Therefore decisions are more likely to be sound; free from the emotional component of decision making. The second set of skills to be mastered is relationship skills. Effective communication skills are essential to crafting a message employees are able to understand. Recognising personality traits, learning styles and motivational needs of their people enable Power Leaders to develop the communication skills needed to get things done in an efficient and effective manner.

Once an executive has mastered decision-making and relationship management skills, they need to build systems and processes that support and reward these skills. It's not enough for the CEO and the executive team to be Power Leaders—these behaviours must be exhibited throughout the organisation to create cultural change inside and outside the organisation. Communication is enhanced inside the organisation and relationships are strengthened outside the organisation—as a result, productivity and profitability improves.

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## References

<sup>i</sup> Kotter, J (1985), *Power and Influence: Beyond Formal Authority*, Free Press

<sup>ii</sup> Bennis, W (1959), 'Leadership Theory and Administrative Behaviour: The Problem of Authority', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 4 No.1, pp.259-60