

How Power Leaders Achieve the Impossible

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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 organization 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 nature under favorable conditions. But in uncertain times, they cannot hide their true colors. 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.

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 organizational consistency and grow their business

Power Leaders	Authority Leaders
Focuses on Change	Focuses on Complexity
Changes the Reality	Clings to Reality
Assesses Risks	Avoids Risks
Pragmatist	Perfectionist
Apple Tree Organizational Structure	Christmas Tree Organizational 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 organization. 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 organization and all of its stakeholders if energy is spent preserving the status quo rather than pursuing change. People realize 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.

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 recognizing market forces, client expectations and competitor moves. Power Leaders synthesize these factors, and it becomes clear the Impossible is actually necessary and mandatory. Within a moment of clarity, the Impossible becomes the reality.

People are noticeably apprehensive during a recession, wondering what the economy means to their careers and their families. 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.

Power Leaders recognize 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. Power Leaders get ahead of the curve by overriding people's short-term fears with long-term stability and profitability.

Organizations 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 organizations. Power Leaders engage their people in a possible future that includes them.

Assess the Risks

Fear and anxiety paralyze 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. Power Leaders, however, move with speed and velocity to take action the moment the reality becomes evident.

Power Leaders use a risk analysis model that is noticeably different from their Authority Leader peers. 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 Power Leaders recognize and accept the risks associated with the future they wish to create. Risk accompanies action. The key for executives is recognizing when probabilities of success outweigh a possibility of failure. Power Leaders are attracted to and pursue probable opportunities rather than spending their energy avoiding possible failure. They know what they want to end up with. They know what they want to change. They're aware of the strengths and limitations of the people who carry out the plan. They're aware of the probable outcomes and consequences of each option considered. They know *who* is going to do *what* and *when* it's going to be done.

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 in decision-making is knowledge, and every interaction is an opportunity to generate information. Organizations that Achieve the Impossible produce new knowledge and then direct that knowledge to the most productive uses. The size of organizations isn't an obstacle—organizations can be big *and* fast.

Power Leaders use emotional awareness as a tool rather than a barrier to organizational 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 or relief lead to theoretical attitudes and beliefs. Power Leaders, conversely, 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 not only to work at a fever pitch but also build on it, Power Leaders 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. Power Leaders stay calm, emphasize 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, realizing that it may contradict their current strategy. For example, Power Leaders focus on two areas of content—markets and customers. They 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 criticize 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 Organization

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're 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 behavior. In essence, we live in a Christmas Tree world. Organizations are traditionally structured as pyramids—they were first used by the church followed by the military and then adopted by every western organization since. Christmas Tree organizations 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 come from the bottom of the Christmas Tree, but it's difficult to perform at a high level when the weight of the organization is on the backs of the producers.

In Apple Tree Organizations, Power Leaders occupy the center of the organization rather than the top with the benefit being that power naturally comes to people who are at the center of relationships. Power Leaders occupy the trunk of the tree where they'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 organizations, Apple Tree organizations are democratic and organic. Power Leaders reach down into the root system for the required resources and then allocate those resources to each middle manager. 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.

Several other differences are evident between Apple Tree organizations and Christmas Tree organizations. 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 organizations enable leadership to flow throughout whereas Christmas Tree organizations have contracted authority at the top. It only takes one or two people to manage a company, but it takes expansive leadership to create organizational change.

Finally, Apple Tree organizations are filled with healthy, productive, relationships whereas Christmas Tree organizations 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

Organizations 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, and Power Leaders realize you don't have to be sick to get better.

The most important priority for Power Leaders is recognizing 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 organizations create changes in processes and systems without instituting an expensive reengineering effort—in effect, the culture of an organization changes without moving a chair. Redefining excellence and striving for the extraordinary doesn't include risking the future of the organization—it only requires a shift in mindset of the leaders.

The time has come for a revolution in leadership. Power Leaders 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 to 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 organization—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.