

Leading the Unleadable

How to Manage Mavericks, Cynics,
Divas, and Other Difficult People

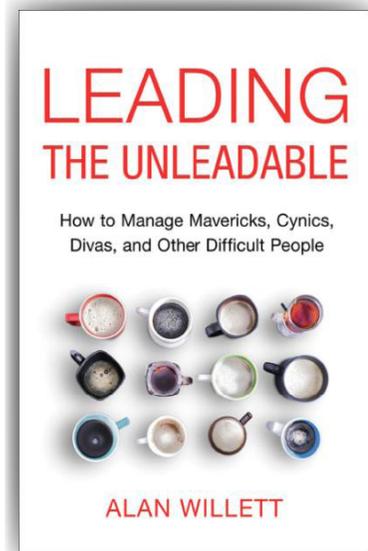
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KEY CONCEPTS

Exceptional leaders deal with troublesome people and situations by:

- Setting expectations of excellence from the beginning.
- Realizing that most people have good intentions.
- Understanding, and then cultivating, the power of teamwork.
- Developing a radar for trouble.
- Being willing to remove difficult people from projects, teams, or organizations when they are unwilling or unable to change.
- Choosing good mentors and helping to coach others.

INTRODUCTION

Leaders are responsible for maintaining order and civility among their ranks. While some choose the perfunctory role of holding the line and causing no harm, others forge ahead by leading energetic, well-provisioned teams. For this second group of leaders, Alan Willett has written **Leading the Unleadable** to help them identify and eliminate the roadblocks on their route to becoming exceptional.

PART 1: THE CALL TO EXCEPTIONAL LEADERSHIP

THE LEADERSHIP CRISIS POINT

Whether they are leading teams, projects, groups of other leaders, whole organizations, or social causes, leaders must deal with all kinds of people and circumstances. They must not only do their own work, but also lead

others to cooperate and accomplish great work efficiently and on time. There are many different types of problematic individuals and groups that leaders may encounter, and they generally fall into four groups:

1. *Troublesome project teams:*

- *Teams that are late and have quality issues.* This often occurs when teams say they are “almost done,” but then ask for a lengthy extension.
- *Teams that are always “fighting projects.”* These are teams that spend too much time fixing their mistakes and not enough time developing new services or features.
- *Divided teams.* These teams are often stressed and combative, and they have a hard time coming to consensus.

2. *Troublesome individuals:*

- *Cynics.* Individuals who are sarcastic, pessimistic, whiny, and negative. Although they can provide relief during tense situations, their attitudes are often detrimental to their teams.
- *Slackers.* Individuals who do not live up to their teams’ standards. They do not contribute sufficient value and often either have a competence problem, an attitude problem, or they are poorly fit to their roles.
- *Divas.* Individuals who are narcissistic, self-involved, and always the center of attention. Divas pose serious leadership challenges because they are often very good at their jobs.
- *Pebbles in the shoe.* Individuals who are persistently annoying to their fellow teammates.

3. *Troublesome leaders:*

- *Clash of the titans.* Leaders who are actively trying to make one another fail.
- *Mavericks.* Leaders who are trying to push themselves and their organizations to the next level, often at the expense of the status quo.
- *Leaders facing their own leadership crises.* Leaders at all levels face burdens of responsibility, and they must take into consideration the challenges their teams of leaders might also be facing.

4. *Troublesome stakeholders:*

- *Too many bosses with conflicting priorities.* All stakeholders have different top priorities, and leaders must handle conflicting directions and discern which priorities must come first.
- *The wrong level of involvement from stakeholders.* Leaders must be able to artfully manage both micro-managing stakeholders and invisible stakeholders.
- *Irrational pressure from above.* Leaders must not plan significant projects too far in advance or with too much precision. Irrational pressures such as these can result in bad decisions and last-minute surprises.

ACCEPT THE CALL OF EXCEPTIONAL LEADERSHIP

To be exceptional, leaders must work for the successes of their organizations, employees, and, ultimately, themselves. They must continually improve their own skill sets, while spending most of their time working for things that will benefit their businesses and customers—and setting a high bar of excellence for all.

Exceptional leaders know they are on the right track if customers are satisfied, their protégés are excelling, and their teams are having constructive, rather than destructive, conflicts. They need to start investigating if employees who have been identified as top talent begin to leave their organizations, or if trends of troublesome behaviors appear within their teams.

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THE MINDSET TO LEAD THE UNLEADABLE

Most people want to do well and to be helpful at work; however, they may have trouble communicating because of cultural differences, or they may be reacting to miscommunications from their leaders or other team members. Staying calm and trying to get to the roots of problems can help leaders salvage difficult situations and improve how people work together.

To successfully navigate difficult scenarios, leaders must view challenges as valuable learning opportunities. They must be able to communicate clearly with others to get all the necessary information and uncover factors within their businesses that may be contributing to difficulties. Their overall goal is to create gelled teams that are engaged in their work.

PART 2: THE LEADER IN ACTION: SPOTTING TROUBLE, DEALING WITH TROUBLE

Exceptional leaders encourage their people to uncover their own answers to difficult questions, but offer suggestions if they get stumped.

FINE-TUNE YOUR RADAR FOR TROUBLE

Exceptional leaders encourage their people to uncover their own answers to difficult questions, but offer suggestions if they get stumped. They also develop a keen eye for changes to the business landscape. For example, an exemplary employee who starts showing up late, or a stellar contributor who becomes silent during meetings, can both be taken as warning signs that something may be wrong.

Sometimes employees hesitate to talk about others on their teams out of fear of being criticized or associated with bad behaviors. They may even cover up for people they admire. Establishing confidential relationships with direct reports takes time, but is well worth the effort. Asking for their opinions on a regular basis will make it more comfortable for them to share.

TAKE ACTION

The sooner leaders deal with issues that are causing problems, the less impactful they will be on projects and teams. Even so, thought and planning should go into devising all solutions because impulsive actions can often make problems even worse.

FOLLOW THROUGH

Transforming troublesome employees requires monitoring and following up with them to keep progress on track. Leaders must shoulder the responsibility for their teams' success and collaborate with team members to build trusting and supportive environments. This requires helping employees to break poor behavioral habits, guiding groups to establish new positive behaviors, and ensuring that individuals and projects are successful.

Enduring improvement takes time, but Willett urges leaders to set the bar high, not only for themselves, but also for each of their employees. He suggests setting criteria at the beginning of a transformation to identify when it has become successful, and to celebrate as a group when a goal is reached.

DECISION TIME

Transforming troublesome behaviors can consume time and energy. Before deciding to embark on transformations, leaders must weigh the benefits to their employees, teams, and organizations. An important factor to consider is troublesome individuals' attitudes. Have they shown a willingness to work on their problems? Are they good at collaborating with others and helping them accomplish their own goals? Are they well-liked and

respected within their teams and organizations? How well do their skills and experiences fit into their organizations' present and future needs? How hard would it be to replace them?

Other than trying to alter troublesome people's behaviors, leaders can try modifying their current jobs; moving them to different positions or groups; or hiring external experts, mentors, or coaches to help them improve.

PART 3: THE LEADER IN ACTION: PREVENTING TROUBLE

THE NEED FOR MOUNTAINS

Good leaders are proactive about creating healthy and stimulating work environments. Even former success can become a deterrent to a motivated workforce, as the author discovered when he was brought into a company by its CEO to uncover why his leaders were constantly arguing with one another. This company had survived as a startup through some rocky, lean years, and had become highly successful due to creative leadership and the employees' ability to overcome obstacles together. Most of the leaders had been with the company since the beginning, but they had begun to sling arrows at one another in the halls and argue throughout every meeting.

Willett discovered that the leaders who had grown the company's success no longer felt challenged. While their goal during the last 10 years was to survive, they had no clear goals for the years ahead. He advised the CEO to create new outrageously difficult and inspiring goals for the next 10 years. Being presented with new, broad-ranging missions excited and invigorated the leadership team members. They built on the CEO's ideas and became reinvested in the company and in one another.

Creating a compelling goal begins with a simple question: Why is this specific goal important to the company, its employees, and its customers or clients? Leaving any of these components out of the equation will weaken the goal. The goal must be difficult enough to create a struggle, and valuable enough to be worth the hardship. Once the goal is verbalized in emotion-provoking language, employees need time to take ownership of it using their own perspectives and relating it to their own individual contributions.

SET EXPECTATIONS OF EXCELLENCE

Exceptional leaders need to be fearless and crystal clear when setting expectations. For example, if a project team is told to produce a product within three weeks, the emphasis is likely going to be placed on the time frame rather than the result. The team may present the product on time, but it may not be useable yet. The better directive is to ask for a prototype within three weeks that is less noisy, more efficient, and costs less to produce than the current model.

EXPECTING EXCELLENCE EVERY DAY

Exceptional leaders lead by example. They set the tempo and the temper for the people who work for them. They praise in public and discuss performance issues privately and without anger. They willingly share their energy, which naturally ignites the energy of others and creates positive work environments.

Sometimes employees are given assignments that they lack the tools and knowledge to accomplish. When this happens, leaders must be accessible to their workers, making it comfortable for them to ask for the training or materials needed to do their jobs. Mentorship programs, on-the-job coaching, and training opportunities are some of the ways that leaders can help their employees grow and freshen their skills.

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EXCEPTIONAL STARTS LEAD TO EXCEPTIONAL RESULTS

Great leadership skills are most evident at the beginning of a project, the results of which will reflect on everyone involved. Exceptional leaders outline their projects in detail and choose the best people to lead based on their skills, experience, social qualities, and temperaments. They should hold introductory meetings to provide details about new projects, stating their purposes and importance in relation to other projects currently in process.

Timing is an important factor for starting projects well. For example, beginning a project right before a holiday or a leader's vacation means it is likely to stall right out of the gate. Launching before a team is clear on expectations, or after there is any possibility of accomplishing the project on time, is another way to court failure.

Projects should start small, in terms of both team members and project goals. Projects will often grow in scope, and new members may be brought in for their expertise. It is better to add new team members and resources gradually than to be forced to jettison people and ideas. If a project is necessary, but it has failed to gain a foothold, careful analysis of the leadership, the steps already taken, and lessons learned will be necessary to forestall a similar result.

PART 4: LEADING LEADERS

LEAD LEADERS

The leader of other leaders is expected to provide inspiration, guidance, training, and opportunities for people to make mistakes or to excel on their own volition. Exceptional leaders begin by making sure all the leaders they are leading know their organizations' purposes and understand their own value.

Preparing other leaders for success includes connecting them with one another. New managers should be tasked with interviewing people in other parts of their organizations and reporting on their thoughts about their strengths and weaknesses.

LEADER, LEAD THYSELF

Try as they might, sometimes leaders feel overwhelmed, shuffling from meeting to meeting, doing more things that they feel obligated to do than those they want to do. Sometimes they get so busy dealing with others that they forget to manage themselves. Willett describes the *sweet spot* of leadership as a place where passion, competence, and the feeling of being valuable to others all come together. To get to this place, it is sometimes necessary for leaders to recharge. They can do this by consciously doing more things that energize them and less things that drain their energy.

Emotionally, they might need to refresh their ability to say "no." It helps if they can reprioritize their weekly routines by cutting out activities that do not contribute to major goals. Prioritizing family time and planning activities that will start their weeks off with quick wins are other ways leaders can take control of their calendars.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alan Willett is president of Oxseeker, a leadership development and organizational culture change consultancy whose clients include Oracle, Microsoft, NASA, Intuit, and others. He lives in Ithaca, New York.

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