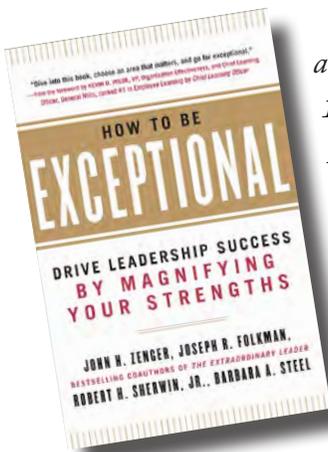




INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTORS: BUILDING ON STRENGTHS IS THE FOUNDATION OF SUCCESS AT EVERY LEVEL

by Jack Zenger, Joe Folkman, Bob Sherwin and Barbara Steel



an excerpt from Chapter 11 of the book, How to Be Exceptional—Drive Leadership Success by Magnifying Your Strengths, McGraw-Hill, 2012

We often use the term leadership as a descriptor for supervisors, managers, and executives. These are people who have been placed into formal positions of power and designated to provide leadership for the organization. They presumably are seen as the ones who have the foresight needed to identify and drive new initiatives, the authority to make decisions, and the trappings of power needed to get people to follow their lead. The rest of the workforce consisting of nonmanagerial workers and staff personnel, also known as individual contributors, are sometimes assumed to be followers, not leaders.

We suggest an alternative perspective on the definition of leadership, who demonstrates it, and how it is executed within an organization. We assert that many individual contributors provide an important element of leadership

for the organization and often make huge differences in the organization.) Not only that, our productivity research shows that organizations today, more than ever, need these individuals to help lead those organizations so that key targets and results can be attained. We also submit the same methods used to develop leaders who are in formal positions of responsibility and authority, and who have designated subordinates, are equally as applicable to the individual contributors. Specifically, we conclude that a “building-on-strengths” approach to development is essential to the ongoing success of individual contributors.

Anyone who has worked inside an organization for a few months can probably think of individuals who were not in formal positions of power in their organizations and yet who wielded great influence. These individuals didn’t control huge financial budgets, manage and direct the work of large teams or determine strategy. Yet, as individual contributors, their actions made a big difference. Similar to leaders with positional authority, individual contributors have the ability to see opportunities or potential problems, show initiative when needed, and lead others in the accomplishment of important objectives.

Despite the numerous examples of the difference these folks make, their leadership contributions aren’t always apparent. Sometimes this is due to the accomplishment of their work product being attributed to the “boss.” Or, the work is seen as a team effort, and the magnitude of the individual contributor’s work isn’t completely understood. Yet, it is the leadership efforts shown by these individuals that produce successful outcomes.

When it comes to the concept of individual contributors as leaders and the consideration of their achievements, these facts are easily observed: 1) high performers are willing to make unique differences to their organizations, and 2) they don't meet the traditional definition of organizational leaders having great "positional or role power."

Individual contributors make important contributions, yet they do it without carrying management titles that suggest high organizational rank, authority, or prestige. They influence and inspire others without being in roles of assigned leadership. For individual contributors working in organizations today and for those responsible to develop them professionally, this raises some important questions. Let's look at two of them:

1. Can individual contributors be leaders?
2. In an organization, is the process for developing individual contributors different from that for developing traditional leaders?

QUESTION 1. CAN INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTORS REALLY BE EXPECTED TO LEAD OTHERS?

The terms "*individual contributor*" and "*leadership*" together sound like an oxymoron. By definition, it might appear that a precondition to being a leader is the need to have others to lead. So to what degree can individual contributors without direct reports be considered leaders?

The argument against individual contributors being considered leaders would be that they lack rank or power that confers authority to make decisions and commit an organization. They don't control budget resources to fund organizational activities, and—most noticeably—they aren't responsible for leading a team. The argument would be that such individuals may be contributing good things but still aren't leaders if their roles haven't been formally sanctioned by the organization.

The opposite argument, and one we believe to be true, is that individual contributors can be leaders and demonstrate their leadership capability on behalf of the organization when needed. We would argue that a leader isn't limited to those with positional authority. Leadership instead would be defined alternatively as someone who influences others to achieve a common goal.

When Individual Contributors Become Leaders

With an expanded definition of leadership, it's easier to identify the countless people who perform in this manner, that is, lead others without titles, positions, or organizational status. Such individuals are often great sources of wisdom and knowledge. New people go to them for advice and direction. They often formally train newcomers. Their experience enables them to shape the development of new products and services and to connect to important customers. Their contributions in staff meetings often capture everyone's attention, just as much as someone with the title "manager" or "director" might have.

Since their contributions mirror that of traditional leaders, we think they should be considered leaders. Their function in the organization of providing guidance and influence is far more important than their title or position.

Based on research we conducted, we determined every organization needs people to assume leadership roles when opportunities arise. We will provide evidence of the tremendous impact individuals can have on organizational results when they exercise their leadership ability.

QUESTION 2. IN AN ORGANIZATION, IS THE PROCESS FOR DEVELOPING INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTORS DIFFERENT FROM THAT FOR DEVELOPING TRADITIONAL MANAGERS OR LEADERS?

The short answer is no. Individual contributors wanting to become better leaders will benefit from the same strengths-based approach to development as those leaders who are in more formal managerial roles. The approach involves:

- Assessing the individual's competencies to identify their strengths and potential fatal flaws
- Identifying high-impact strengths to build (or fatal flaws to first fix)
- Using a traditional linear approach to fixing any fatal flaws
- Using a nonlinear approach to building the selected strengths

In our research work, we've contrasted assessment data from the most successful and the least successful

individual contributors. The results of this analysis revealed the following 16 competencies that best differentiate the most effective individual contributors from the rest:

Character

- Displays high integrity and honesty

Personal Capability

- Has technical or professional expertise
- Solves problems and analyzes issues
- Innovates
- Practices self-development

Focus on Results

- Drives for results
- Establishes stretch goals
- Takes initiative

Interpersonal Skills

- Communicates powerfully and prolifically
- Sets an example of high performance
- Builds relationships
- Develops others
- Engages in collaboration and teamwork

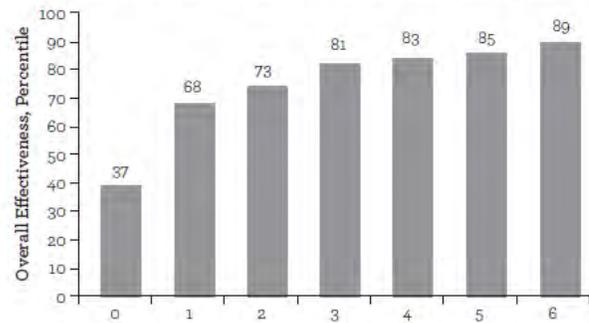
Leading Change

- Has broad perspectives
- Champions change
- Connects the group to the outside world—networking

Those familiar with our leadership model will notice that these differentiating competencies for individual contributors are practically identical to those differentiating competencies for more traditional leaders. Although the competency descriptions are similar, many of the specific behaviors have been adjusted to accommodate the differences in roles and responsibilities between formal managers and individual contributors.

As with managers who are in formal leadership roles, extraordinary individual contributors are differentiated by the existence of a few profound strengths, not the absence of weaknesses. They, too, should implement their development efforts using the same approach of building strengths rather than fixing weaknesses. Our point of view comes from the data in Figure 11.4.

Figure 11.4 Overall Effectiveness Versus Strengths



The data show that the overall effectiveness of an individual with three profound strengths is generally perceived as being in the 80th or higher percentile.

The same approach of utilizing nonlinear development to develop a strength, works just as effectively with individual contributors as it does with managers and executives. Organizations that have begun providing 180 feedback and leadership development opportunities early in the careers of individual contributors have found not only that they prepare these people to become excellent managers in the future, but that their current effectiveness as individual contributors is greatly enhanced.

These conclusions led us to develop a workshop that is specifically targeted to individual contributors. *The Extraordinary Performer Workshop™* is a one-day, instructor led experience targeted for that valuable group of professionals in the organization who have no one formally reporting to them, but who wield a great deal of influence. Large clients of ours have recognized that this group needs and deserves development for several reasons. First, they are the pool from which the formal leaders will be drawn. So, better to start early and young in honing important leadership skills. Second, with development, their influence in the organization can be raised to an even higher level. They can be even better role models. They can shape the “newbies” in even better ways. They can inculcate the important organization values and help others to absorb the culture of the organization. Third, when the organization invests time and money in their development, these individuals viscerally feel that the organization cares about them. They stay with the company and the improved retention often pays for the investment in development. Part of *The Extraordinary Performer Workshop* provides helpful information about how to manage your career, regardless of whether you stay an individual contributor or move on to positions of formal authority and responsibility.

ZENGER | FOLKMAN

Elevating Leadership Strengths

We employ evidence-based methods that improve organizations and the people within them. We look first to leverage existing strengths. Our comprehensive solutions include assessment instruments, development programs, certification services and practical follow-up tools that dramatically improve bottom-line results.

John H. “Jack” Zenger, D.B.A., is the co-founder and CEO of Zenger Folkman, and is considered a world expert in the field of leadership development. A highly respected and sought after speaker, consultant and executive coach, Jack was honored in 2011 with the American Society of Training and Development’s Lifetime Achievement Award in Workplace Learning and Performance. He is the co-author of twelve books on leadership and teams, including the best seller: *The Extraordinary Leader: Turning Good Managers into Great Leaders* (McGraw-Hill, 2009).

Joe Folkman, Ph.D., is a frequent keynote speaker and conference presenter, a consultant to some of the world’s most successful organizations, and the author or co-author of eight books. His research has been published in The Harvard Business Review, Forbes, CIO, Business Week, Fast Company, Wall Street Journal’s National Business Employment Weekly, Training and Development, and Executive Excellence.

Bob Sherwin is the Chief Operating Officer of Zenger Folkman. He joined the company in 2004 and has responsibility for all company operations. He has spent more than 20 years as an executive in some of the world’s leading training and development companies.

Barbara Steel is Senior Vice President of Leadership Effectiveness for Zenger Folkman. Barbara manages the facilitator network and certification process for the company. Known for her engaging style, she is also a sought after speaker, workshop facilitator and executive coach.

The CLEMMER Group

Stronger People. Stronger Organizations.

The CLEMMER Group is Zenger Folkman’s Canadian Strategic Partner. Jim Clemmer was co-founder of The Achieve Group (which became Canada’s largest leadership training firm) when they worked with Jack Zenger’s previous company, Zenger Miller.

CONTACT US **phone** 519.748.1044 **email** service@clemmergroup.com **internet** www.clemmergroup.com