

Creating the Energized Workplace You Always Wanted

Five essential skills that make you an inspiring leader



Kristi Hedges — communications expert, speaker, author, and leadership coach.

Kristi's leadership methods have been adopted by CEOs and teams in organizations spanning the Fortune 500, the U.S. government, and more. She is the author of two books and writes about leadership for Forbes, Wall Street Journal, the Financial Times, and more. In addition, Kristi teaches leadership at Georgetown University and runs her own coaching practice, The Hedges Company.

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Think of a leader in your life—somebody who's inspired you.

What were the things that leader did to make you feel inspired?

When I speak on leadership, I've asked the above question countless times, and I've heard hundreds of people describe an inspirational leader in their life — a coach, a teacher, a relative, or a boss.

Over and over again, they don't tell me about the rockstar CEO who roused the crowd with a stunning speech. They tell me about a series of small investments the leader made in them — personal conversations they had that changed how they felt about themselves, their lives, and their attitudes.

And as incredible as these stories were, it's the energy with which they were told that captivated me. When we remember people who have inspired us, the room becomes technicolor — when people told me their stories, they were laughing and smiling, arms waving, full of energy.

Imagine bringing that kind of energy and passion into the workplace. It feels amazing to be engaged in your work and energized about your future possibilities. To belong to an organization where everyone gives their best effort and risk-taking is encouraged. And sadly, most of us are not there. Gallup's annual engagement survey shows that 70% of U.S. workers are not engaged at work — a figure that's held steady for 15 years.

A lot of that we can attribute to this paradox about inspiration: what we think of as inspiration — big speeches, grand visions — is anything but. Inspiration can't be forced, it's something we decide for ourselves. The role of a leader is to lay the breadcrumbs for people to become inspired themselves.

With that in mind, here are five essential skills you can cultivate to practice inspiring leadership at the office every day.

1. Presence

Have you ever seen a speaker who was trying to get you motivated, but just came out flat? When we want to reach people, to impart a feeling of inspiration or energy within them, we need to feel it for ourselves first, and show it in our presence.

It turns out that our body language and the way we present ourselves shows up in our thoughts, which lead back into our presence. So while most leaders are comfortable looking outward at goals and strategies, many don't take the time to look inward and determine the values that they want to put on display.

In times of stress, it can be hard to keep track of your body language and present an inspiring figure to others, but certain skills can help you along. Here's one such exercise:

First, come up with a list of five desired qualities — the ways you want to present yourself as a leader and as a person.

Next, create a sound bite or find a short quote that you can associate with those qualities.

Whenever you're feeling stressed, remember that sound bite to remind yourself of those qualities.

2. Listening

We live in a multitasking environment. Unfortunately that level of distraction never goes away: even when we don't have a phone and an inbox and a slide deck to worry about, we can get distracted by our own thoughts — judgments about the person we're talking to, or worries about what they'll say.

But listening is powerful. Listening feels like care, and attention feels like respect. Of course, we know what the opposite feels like. If someone's distracted, it feels like they don't really care what we have to say.

One way we can get better at listening is to employ a few tools called listening shifts. Next time you start a conversation with an

employee, try not to listen to their words, listen to the person talking to you. Instead of listening for what you want to hear, listen for what the other person needs to say. And instead of listening to judge, listen out of curiosity.

3. Buy-in

A client of mine a few years ago, who was a division head for a large, multinational corporation, was doing a change initiative. He had developed a new corporate strategy and was preparing to travel around the world to meet with in-country presidents to gather buy-in. He made a slick, nailed down PowerPoint detailing his strategy, which I'm sure was brilliant, but things slowly came undone.

What we usually think of as "buy-in" is actually more like "sell-in". We're trained from our earliest days to try to convince people to come to our way of thinking with a fully formed, flawless argument — otherwise, we risk appearing unprepared and untrustworthy. Instead, a piece research out of Harvard from 2014 suggests the opposite: asking for advice makes a speaker seem more credible, not less.

When my client left on his trip, he decided to leave the PowerPoint at home, and present the new strategy as a draft and asking for input. By giving his presidents an opportunity to contribute, not only were they more committed to the strategy, but he was able to improve it based on their advice.

4. Passion

Aristotle considered emotion one of three modes of persuasion, alongside logic and the credibility of the speaker. We're often much more comfortable using the other two modes at work, but the third often gets left out — somehow, we think going to an office requires us to dial everything down to an emotionless, vanilla way of communicating.

In order to show passion for your work, try displaying more emotion. We need emotion from our leaders because that tells us

what emotion we should be experiencing ourselves. A simple way to do that is to use more emotion words, such as proud, grateful, urgent, or furious.

On the other hand, passion is kind of a funny thing. You need to be aware of the level of passion and energy of your audience, otherwise you can come across as off-putting and out of touch. As a leader, you want to be a little ahead of your audience — close enough that they can see you, and follow.

5. Purpose

When people tell me stories about leaders who inspired them, over and over again they talk about purpose. They tell me about leaders who helped them find out what they were good at, or showed them that what they were doing was important.

If I'm writing a memo about a new product and it doesn't mean anything more to me than words on a page, I might not feel a whole lot of purpose in the exercise. But a leader can help me find a larger purpose because she can often see things from her vantage point that I can't see.

A leader can tell me that she wants me to write this memo because she knows I want to get promoted into a senior role, and she wants to help me develop and display my skills. That's an incredibly powerful and inspirational thing to hear. As a leader, you may think this is an obvious connection, but without that influence, we often can't connect those dots for ourselves.

When I look back on my own life and think of every big move I've made, every single one has been preceded by an inspirational conversation. Someone has encouraged me to try something new or do something I didn't think I could do. Those conversations become our talismans — we carry those people's words around and they give us the strength to go and do it.

Inspiration is essential because it lets us feel good about the work we do, and help others do the same. It's a way to create the positive, engaged, purposeful workplace you've always wanted. When we inspire others, we open ourselves up to inspiration as well.



Bring inspiration back

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ShareFile

North America | 1 800 441 3453
Worldwide | +1 919 745 6111

United Kingdom | +44 800 680 0621
Australia | +1 800 089 572

Locations

Corporate Headquarters | 851 Cypress Creek Road Fort Lauderdale, FL 33309, United States
Silicon Valley | 4988 Great America Parkway Santa Clara, CA 95054, United States

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