

INSPIRATION:

# Give 'Em a Little Elvis!



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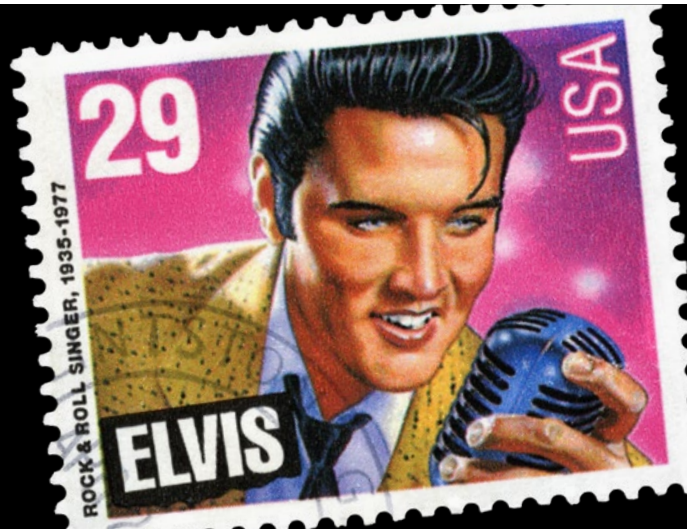
**John O. Burdett**



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“I’m as mad as hell, and I’m not going to take this anymore!”

## A Shift of Power

A hundred years ago, the introduction of oil, electricity, the automobile and the assembly line introduced, what can best be described as, “discontinuous change.” An established way of life abruptly came to an end to be replaced, as if overnight, by something entirely different. We faced a similar period of upheaval in the middle of the century: large numbers of women entering the workforce, the jet engine, television, the power of brand and the beginning of globalisation. The final quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought even more social and economic upheaval: the microchip, the computer and the internet.

Today, we again face discontinuous change. A level of potential turbulence, however, that transcends anything we have known in the past: AI, robotics, quantum computing, breakthrough biotech, new materials, ever-increasing complexity, speed as a competitive advantage, agility as a business imperative and the reinvention of work that “hybrid employment” represents.





We are also witnessing something hitherto unknown in the annals of business – an irresistible shift of power from the enterprise to the employee.

Culture is a system. Change one thing and everything else is impacted. As to the psychology behind employees aggressively<sup>1</sup> staking their claim to a bigger piece of the influence pie, we need look no further than a legendary line from the Academy Award winning movie, *Network* (1976), “I’m as mad as hell, and I’m not going to take this anymore!” Consider the following research from Gallup:<sup>2</sup>

- Nearly seven in ten full-time employees in the US prefer some type of remote work arrangement. Moreover, 40% of employees would change jobs to work full or part time from a remote location.
- In the US, only 32% of employees are engaged. Globally, the number is 21%. Note: organizations that bundle “somewhat engaged” and “highly engaged” together and call it “engaged” are building their people processes on behavioural quicksand.
- Regardless of country, managers make a difference. At least 70% of team engagement – or lack of – is attributable to the team’s manager.
- Fully 59% of the global workforce are “quiet quitting.” The detrimental impact on future customer retention is without precedent.
- Be it the US, Germany, France or the UK, only one in four employees feel strongly that the organization cares about their wellbeing.<sup>3</sup>

If the above issues were captured by an underlying leadership challenge it would be from “Apathy” to “Meaning.” By way of comparison, ushering in the age of the computer represented the move from “Bureaucracy” to “Connectivity.” In the middle of the last century the theme was from “Output” (if we make it they will come) to “the Consumer” (the primacy of marketing). And at the beginning of the last century the inherent change that had to be managed was from “the Farm” to “the Factory.”<sup>4</sup>

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1 Various extended strikes around the world. Contract demands from major unions for work-from-home provisions. And in a move away from traditional pattern bargaining, the UAW taking on the big three Detroit auto manufacturers concurrently. As of November 16, 2023, the UAW’s new agreement with GM grants a 25% increase in base wage through April 2028 and will cumulatively raise the top wage by 33%, compounded with estimated cost-of-living adjustments to over \$42 an hour. Similar deals were reached with the other two employers.

2 Gallup. *Future Shock* 2023.

3 In the current climate it’s essential that there is a regular and meaningful analysis of why the top talent in an organization stays. That way the business can do more of it. Hopefully, a lot more of it!

4 In the US in 1900 up to 40% of the population worked on a farm. Today the number is 1%.



It is not enough that the leader in question has a great plan. Personal commitment, although essential, is not the difference that makes a difference. Change, meaningful change, discontinuous change must recognise three central features. One: beginnings start with endings. We can't force people to let go. We can, nevertheless, inspire them to change the conversation they are having with themselves. Two: *simple learning* (being told and/or shown what to do)<sup>5</sup> has been replaced by *learning how to learn* (challenging the status quo and a climate of innovation supported by self-directed learning). Three: inclusion, personal choice, fairness and matching opportunity with capability are no longer a matter of policy from the top. Collectively, they have become a cultural imperative. No matter what business you are in, it's how you stay in the game. When absent – as organizations around the world are discovering – employees express their dissatisfaction through industrial action, apathy (quiet quitting) or by voting with their feet (actually quitting).<sup>6</sup> Here one should add, get the issues outlined in this paragraph right and you will have a truly, distinct competitive advantage.

Both the research and hands-on experience endorse that moving successfully through periods of discontinuous change rests with the quality of leadership available. Without the right leadership, little is possible; with it, little is impossible. When faced with the necessity of “reinvention,” vision, purpose, shared values, diversity, technology, strategy, structure, sustainability and measurement loom large. Even more important is an issue often missing from the action plan – **Inspiration.**



5 Simple learning is too slow and it stifles organizational agility.

6 Although they have the highest engagement scores globally, 50.6 million Americans quit their job in 2022. That is not far short of 1/3 of the workforce.



## Inspiration vs. Charisma

The dictionary tells us that to inspire is “to suggest, to be a motivating but unnamed power, to stimulate into action, to draw forth, elicit, or arouse.” The Latin root of inspiration is *spiritus*. It means to “breathe life into.” Successful leaders breathe life into the art of the possible every single day. “There is always light. If only we’re brave enough to see it. If only we’re brave enough to be it.” – Amanda Gorman

Inspiration moves us in ways we don’t always recognise at the time. Subtle and difficult to capture, inspiration is an undeniable element in the combustible forces that need to come together to blow up what has been. Inspiration in action is perhaps best captured in a comment made by a US Supreme Court Justice, “I can’t define pornography, but I can sure recognise it when I see it.”

Paradoxically, leaders who leave a legacy rarely build their success on charisma. Inspiration definitely ... charisma not so much. The difference is no small thing. Charisma is found in the leader’s personal magnetism; it’s that special, unique, indefinable inner quality that makes them stand out from the crowd.

Inspiration, on the other hand, is the leader’s, often all-consuming, commitment to a purpose or cause. Humble or shy people can, when the spirit moves them, create extraordinary outcomes. It’s not their undeniable charm, allure and/or personal magnetism that makes them effective. It’s an impossible-to-ignore blend of drive, discipline and dedication. In describing a small and sickly individual whose determination did more than any other to overthrow slavery, James Boswell said of William Wilberforce, “I saw what seemed to be a mere shrimp of a man upon the table; but as I listened, he grew, and grew, until the shrimp became a whale.”<sup>7</sup> Charisma draws us in. Inspiration drives us on.

Winston Churchill exemplifies leadership unhampered by lack of charisma. While other national leaders of his time displayed personal magnetism, Churchill was not especially charismatic. This is not to suggest for a moment that Churchill was, in any way, humble. In fact, he commonly referred to himself in the company of others as being a “great man.” There was also a time when Churchill was accused of enjoying the finer things in life too much. “Not at all,” he replied, “The best is always good enough for me.”

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<sup>7</sup> March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2007. A profile of William Wilberforce by the *Sunday Times* Newspaper (UK).



The difference between charisma and inspiration can be found in the very different profiles of two highly competitive 19<sup>th</sup>-century British parliamentary legends. It was said of William Gladstone that when he walked into a room, it was absolutely clear that *he* was the most important person there. Benjamin Disraeli, on the other hand, upon entering a room, made you feel *you* were the most important person there. Gladstone's ultimate goal was power. His personal charisma was the perfect behavioural accessory. Disraeli clearly understood power, but as an outsider he had to get things done through influence. In the absence of social position, attendance at the right schools and/or great personal wealth, he had little choice but to hone his ability to inspire others to act. Charisma is in the genes. We can learn to inspire. There are those rare occasions, of course, when a leader displays both charisma and inspiration. The late Alexei Navalny comes to mind.

Disraeli would have felt right at home in the modern organization. When the people who report to you are more knowledgeable about the issue at hand, functional power isn't worth much. When employees demand choice, doubling down on past practice isn't very effective. Yesterday's leaders sought to rule the waves; today's leaders work to waive the rules.<sup>8</sup> Comfort with ambiguity? Without it, being the best of the rest is the most that can be expected.



8 This is a great little phrase but, with apologies, I do not know the source.



## To Lead Is To Inspire

Inspiration implies being touched by “the story.” We are destined to remain disinterested bystanders unless the narrative contains something we care about, unless the presumed outcome has personal meaning, unless the hero/heroine is someone we admire. Or, to quote American humourist P. J. O’Rourke, “The Soviet system was brought to its knees because nobody wants to wear Bulgarian shoes.”

Inspiration is a pallet with many colours. Language inspires. A well-crafted story inspires. The right metaphor, at the right time, inspires. A great question inspires. Silence often being the most inspirational question of all. When the team leader chooses to speak last, people are inspired. Best practice, working with market leaders and being mentored by someone whose experience shouts out “mastery” is inspirational. Coaching that moves beyond the immediate problems and seeks to reframe the **context** is inspirational.<sup>9</sup> The ability to create tomorrow in the room today, inspires. Trust is an inspirational vehicle, as is the altruism that lies at the heart of collaboration. An environment where people are encouraged to talk to power inspires. Where challenging the status quo *is* the status quo people are inspired. Stretch, fairness, a sense of belonging, the environment, innovation and personal growth inspire. Least we overlook it, the simple act of listening – really listening – inspires.

We aren’t thinking beings. We are emotional beings that think.<sup>10</sup> Inspiration can often be found in small symbolic acts. Mahatma Gandhi, on one of his frequent railway trips, lost a shoe between the train and the railway track. Unable to reach the shoe, he immediately took off his other shoe and threw it down by the first. When asked for an explanation, he said that it matters little if a poor person finds a lone shoe, but the person who finds two is much enriched.

The right symbolism at the right time can spark an inspirational bushfire. When Rosa Parks decided she had had enough and decided not to move to the back of the bus, she inspired the Montgomery bus boycott. The boycott, in turn, spurred on the civil rights movement. On January 20, 2009, Barack Obama became the first African American President. And although she did far more, it was the small symbolic act of hugging a young child suffering from AIDS that made Princess Diana the “People’s Princess.”

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<sup>9</sup> Especially when working with members of the C-suite.

<sup>10</sup> Antonio Damasio.



As Elton John was to sing at her memorial, she was but a *Candle in the Wind*. That didn't stop her symbolic acts of kindness touching millions.

Inspiration isn't necessarily anchored in success. Napoleon, when told during one major battle that the day was lost, is reputed to have answered, "Possibly so, but there is still enough time to sow the seeds of tomorrow's victory." During the golden era of advertising, Carmichael Lynch was a much-admired Minneapolis advertising and public relations agency. After losing a "shoot out" for the Mitsubishi account, the firm went out and bought a Mitsubishi car. The whole agency then turned up at a local scrapyards to see the vehicle compacted into a block of metal. The resulting mangled cube became the base for a coffee table that graces their Mitsubishi Conference Room. Symbolism not only gets your attention; the right symbolism inspires.

Be it introducing breakthrough AI, cultural transformation and/or making hybrid employment come to life, people look for someone to inspire them, to fan the flames of opportunity. Meanwhile, power moves into a vacuum. Be conscious that if you are not the source of inspiration, someone else will be, possibly someone with an entirely different agenda. To lead, regardless of the level at which you operate, is to inspire.

We need to take a deeper look at this word "inspiration." Inspiration can imply something we do to someone else, an act where we stand on the sidelines. Nothing could be further from the truth. Transformational leaders bring to the challenge a quality that the English language doesn't entirely convey. Those who are familiar with the Spanish folk dance and music called flamenco will have come across the word "*duende*." *Duende* means being more than just involved, or even engaged, by the dance; it means being at one with the movement, the rhythm and the music of the dance. It means becoming the dance.







The great Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca described *duende* in the following terms. “Thus, *duende* is a power and not a behaviour, it is a struggle and not a concept. I have heard an old master guitarist say, ‘*Duende* is not in the throat; *duende* surges up from the soles of the feet.’ Which means it is not a matter of ability, but of life; of blood; of ancient culture; of creative action.”

To understand why some executives excel, while others stumble, we have to move beyond the limits of our language and see inspiration as another way of saying *duende*. *Duende* is found in every soulful sinew of the following story.

## Give ‘Em a Little Elvis

He inspired a generation to rebel, and more than four decades after his “alleged” death from a drug overdose his name still has a ring to it, still sells. A quarter of the way through the 21<sup>st</sup> century and we are still making movies about him! And what a brand “Elvis” has become: film, music, teddy bears, Barbie Loves Elvis dolls, key chains, statuettes, fashion accessories, an Elvis restaurant serving his favourite peanut butter and banana sandwiches, a US 29-cent postage stamp, close to 500 fan clubs, and Elvis toenail clippers (now discontinued as a result of legal pressure from Elvis Presley Enterprises). All these, as well as Graceland, the Memphis home he purchased in 1957 for \$100,000, contribute to what is a \$50,000,000-a-year business today.<sup>11</sup> To show that the fortunes of even the dead can be *all shook up*, it is worth noting that the Elvis Presley estate, at his death, amounted to less than \$5,000,000.

Charismatic, complex, mama’s boy, talented, self-destructive, egocentric, troubled, these are all words used to describe a shy and uniquely introverted man whose music, good looks, sex appeal, and “hip” approach to life have been transformed by his adoring fans – with a little help from Madison Avenue – into nothing short of a global phenomenon. As if that were not accolade enough, for those who see Las Vegas as the latest, albeit plastic, manifestation of the American dream, Elvis shines as no other performer can as its patron saint.

There is, of course, another side to Elvis, a side that the parachuting, rhinestone encrusted, shrill-voiced, lip-synching, primped, tucked, dyed, girdled, sequined, Latino-accented, caped, wedding chapel, would-you-like-fries-with-that Elvis impersonators fail to capture. The young Presley was more than the curled upper lip, the southern

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<sup>11</sup> An 85% share of the Elvis Presley estate was sold in December 2004 to Robert F. X. Sillerman for \$100,000,000 US. Elvis made 33 films and sold more than a billion records. Graceland is visited by 600,000 fans every year.



drawl and the tight-fitting leather outfits. He was more than the visual impression conveyed by sideburns and the “hayer.” He was far more even than his wide-sweeping impact on rock and roll. He was simply a man of and for his time, who changed the world around him. Elvis, in his own way, was a leader and an agent of tremendous social change. He inspired a generation. He made a lasting impact because he had the courage to steer a different course. Anyone who doubts that hasn’t listened to music in the last 50 years.

Born on January 8, 1935, in Tupelo, Mississippi, Elvis entered a divided America. Two decades later, blacks were still defined by their own unique brand of music, restricted to their own part of town, allocated their own drinking fountains, their own schools and hospitals and, as the world was soon to hear, restricted to the back of the bus. Segregation was a way of life and good ol’ boys knew well enough not to mess with the natural order of things. Even the popular Nat King Cole had to close down his nationally broadcast TV show because of lack of sponsorship. And then along came Elvis, a good-looking white boy singing that “godless” Negro music in a way that was for sure gonna send the young people of America to hell in a handcart.

But did he back off? No! Did he apologise or modify his approach? No! Even when the network refused to film him below the belt, Elvis was true to himself. He even refused to toe the line when respected and nationally known church leaders pronounced that he was the devil incarnate and that those Christian families who watched or supported this immoral behaviour had discovered a sure-fire method for bringing wanton depravity into their lives.

Make no mistake, it could not have been easy for a poor white boy from the South to confront and, in his own way, denounce everything that his cultural upbringing held dear. Elvis showed tenacity and leadership in those early years, and those who enjoy





today's freedoms do themselves a disservice when they overlook the contribution made by him, and those like him,<sup>12</sup> willing, at a time of social upheaval, to stand up for something they believed in.

Leadership and change are obverse sides of the same coin. Unfortunately, when many leaders say "change," what they really mean is "**you** have to change!" Such leaders flaunt three immutable laws of human nature. The first: the only person any of us can change is the one we look at every morning in the mirror. The second: what a leader does is far more important than anything they might say. The third: the more we push those we would have act differently, the more they push back.

We can't change people, but we can inspire them. In building a new tomorrow, challenge is the start of it, creative tension is part of it, but inspiration is the heart of it. To work our way through discontinuous change, to move people, to inspire them, give 'em a little Elvis.

**E**xcellence isn't optional. No one is inspired by a meaningless purpose, by the mundane, the ordinary, by goals that assume that meeting established standards is the basis of extraordinary performance. People are inspired when they are challenged to deliver what others say cannot be done. When the leader acts in a way that assumes the seeds of greatness already lie within every member of the team. When the team are asked to soar. We are inspired by a compelling cause, by being the best, by a great product, the act of service and perhaps, above all, by making a difference.

**L**et your behaviour be the team's compass. To inspire is to be an unwavering and passionate advocate, through word and action, of the future you need to create. Once you've charted the path, don't hold back. Assume that given the chance people will get it right. Move fast. And when needed, fail fast. Don't compromise. Take to task those who hide behind the rules and yesterday's outdated procedures. Keep raising the bar. Know that winning isn't everything but wanting to is. People are inspired by those who have the courage to cut a new path, by those who go out of their way to "catch people doing it right." And, to quote Einstein, "Keep it simple but not too simple." Einstein, of course, inspired generations of scientists through the sheer power of his ideas.

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<sup>12</sup> Mohamed Ali comes to mind.



**V**alues provide the context that allows people to act in concert. Be the values. Values aren't rules. They give people permission to act. Confront those that don't live the values. Recognise that leadership is a privilege. Be generous. Know that no one succeeds on their own. Speak softly. Be a team player. Learn to apologise. Be loyal. Take the blame and share the praise. Go to bat for the team. Learn the value of humour. Be open to new ideas. Seek out those who disagree and work to understand their point of view. Reach out to those who have lost their way. Remember the one on your team who speaks the least is the one you need to listen to the most. Nurture the maverick. They are life's natural change agents. Respect the environment. And always keep top of mind, people are inspired by a leader who cares. "From caring comes courage." – Lao Tzu

**I**nvolve the team in not just the "what" but in the "how." In a hybrid work environment set aside time to meet weekly with each member of the team – in person or virtually. People don't resist new ways to be, but they do hold back the best of themselves when they have little opportunity to help shape the context within which they are asked to perform. Extend trust! Ask for input. Be there! Know that it is the leader's capacity to listen, not their assertiveness, that shapes the conversation. People are inspired when they weave their point of view into the warp and weft of future success.

**S**hare yourself. Let others know who you are. Tear away the façade. Write your own music. People are inspired by those who live in truth, by those with the guts to speak out. They follow those who are unwavering in their commitment, who choose the right way and not the easy one, who are willing to stand alone. People are inspired far more by what they can put in than by what they can take out. And remember what Groucho Marx once said, "Authenticity is the one thing you can't fake."





When we have the boldness to dream big dreams, we encourage others to move onto a new path. When we face up to the limitations that lie in our own sense of self, we challenge those around us to examine their own mindset. When we display courage in the face of adversity, we give confidence to those who are held back by a fear of failure. When we refuse to live within boundaries drawn by others, we liberate those who know that there is a better way. And when we ask new questions of ourselves, we are prompting others to explore who they really are. To lead is to inspire.

## We Seek Out Leaders Who Inspire Us

Inspiration is an essential catalyst in working through discontinuous change. That said, all the inspiration in the world will not compensate for a leader who misinterprets the emerging customer needs, for a team that is following the wrong strategy or for a product that is pitched at the wrong market. Inspiration, at its core, recognises and embraces what can be, not *how people would like things to be*. The late Warren Bennis put it this way, “Leaders are dreamers with a deadline.” There is a reason it’s called “leaders**ship**.” Leaders come in many guises, but they all share one common trait. They don’t just talk a good game; they deliver on the promise – they “ship.”

The leader who needs to feel that they are in charge – giving instructions and demanding adherence to the rules – is stranded on an ever-shrinking atoll. The leader who is unwilling to get out of their own way will find it beyond their capability to create an environment where people strive to be the best they can be. And the leader who cannot, or does not, inspire is destined to be constantly playing catch-up with those leaders who do.

Forget the notion that inspirational leaders change in a telephone booth on the way to work, that inspiration is limited to those who turn up on the pages of *Fortune* magazine and/or it is the exclusive prerogative of someone who carries a key to the executive washroom. At the right time, each and any of us has the capacity to inspire.

Inspiration is also a very personal thing. What inspires me may not hold the attention of the person sitting across the aisle. The late Marlon Brando comes to mind. For the acting fraternity, he represented a revered, unique and ground-breaking legacy. Jack Nicholson said of him, “He gave us our freedom.” Most of the film-going public, I suspect, viewed him at the time of his death as little more than a big star (in every way) whose time had long passed.



We are inspired when we choose to be inspired, when the message resonates with the best version of ourselves, when the path taken nourishes our inner self. We are drawn to the leaders who are capable of projecting a compelling story. We choose those who lay out a path that enables us to be more than we would otherwise be. Conversely, we rightly reject those whose actions and language convey an unhealthy ego. “When someone tells me ‘no,’ it doesn’t mean that I can’t do it, it simply means I can’t do it with them.” – Karen E. Quinones Miller

Choice isn’t limited to those inside the organization. The group with the greatest degree of discretion? The customer. The initial challenge in business is to develop a differentiated offering, to tender a product or service that the client/customer cannot easily obtain elsewhere. Unique capability takes the provider to the next level. However, it is only when those who represent the enterprise stir the customer/client to think differently (thought leadership) that being viewed as “an invaluable partner” enters the picture. True mastery in business development is to inspire the customer.





Even the largest organization has relatively few mission-critical roles. In the Bill Gates era, it was suggested that Microsoft was dependant on no more than fifteen key people. In all probability, your own organization has only a handful of key roles by which the organization lives or dies. The challenge? Without the right talent in those pivotal positions your organization will fail. The acid test? Do the individuals who hold down each of those mission-critical roles, beyond doubt, inspire those around them? And while on the topic of talent, if you are a hiring executive and the recommended candidate – mission-critical or otherwise - is sitting across from you, ask yourself, “Would this person inspire **me**?”

Leaders who turn dreams into reality, whose actions protect our way of life, who marshal the resources needed to reinvent what’s possible, build followership that often lasts a lifetime. Those who, in so doing, change society for the better build a legacy that endures through the ages. To lead is to inspire.

Those who inspire discontinuous change don’t stand up in the balcony shouting down instructions. They select the music, they get down on the floor and they dance! Change surges up from the soles of their feet. For it to work, they are, **and they must be, duende!**

Finally, what can be said of Elvis, without contradiction, is that he inspired a generation. And yes, perhaps without our knowing it, he inspires us still. If discontinuous change lies in your future, go ahead, give ‘em a little Elvis. And for that... thank yuh, thank yuh very much.

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we give confidence to those who are held back by a fear of failure.”*



John O. Burdett

*“Charisma  
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Inspiration  
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**JOHN O. BURDETT** has worked in over 40 countries as an executive and as a consultant for businesses that are household names. He continues to work on leadership development and organization culture for some of the world’s largest corporations.

In 2019, his work with ABB’s top 240 executives received a major international award for the most innovative leadership development initiative of that year. His ongoing partnership with TRANSEARCH International means that his proprietary work on talent acquisition, in any one year, successfully supports many hundreds of top leadership appointments on six continents.

He has written extensively on executive coaching and was awarded international coach of the year by the Finnish Institute of International Trade. Business graduates at the University of Texas indicated that his material on coaching was the single most valuable learning source they took away from their undergraduate degree. He has also coached numerous executive teams

around the world in how to coach. He currently coaches a select group of CEOs.

Apart from a range of corporate leadership workshops, he has taught at business schools on both sides of the Atlantic. His work on the MBA program at the University of Toronto received a teaching excellence award. John holds a doctorate in management development and is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

In addition to numerous business articles and twice being awarded article of the year by MCB publications, he has published 16 books on leadership, talent management, coaching and organization culture. A number of them bestsellers. His Leadership Beyond Crisis Series came out in 2021. In 2022, in addition to a number of leading-edge articles, he brought out a fully revised version of his international bestselling book on executive integration: *Without Breaking Stride*.



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