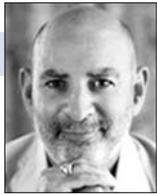


# High-Performance Leader

*Assess whether or not you are one.*



**Howard M. Guttman**

**H**IGH-PERFORMANCE leaders (HPLs) are a breed apart. They are distinguished from traditional, hierarchical leaders by five traits:

**1. They are visionaries and architects.** Many business leaders are *visionaries*. But a HPL holds out a *unique vision*. To overcome immediate challenges and those that lie ahead, HPLs have scuttled the traditional *hierarchy model* and replaced it with a flat, horizontal one. Cathy Burzik, CEO of Kinetic Concepts, notes, “Most organizations function on a hub-and-spoke model, with decisions radiating from a central base of power, not built for *high performance* and *speed*.”

But a leader needs to be more than a visionary. The question is: Can you lead your team and organization down from the mountaintop? Given the *demands* placed on leaders today, visions need to be *operationalized*, which is a unique strength of HPLs. They have an architect’s flair to see the *whole game*—the blueprint, not just the vision—for creating a great organization. And they know how to inspire in others the desire to make that blueprint a reality.

**2. They know they can’t do it alone.** HPLs are not necessarily *charismatic* or *heroic*, though it takes guts and grit to be one. They are team players. Their notion of *teamwork* isn’t driven by ideological notions of *shared decision making* or *engagement*, but by utilitarian considerations. HPLs believe they are more powerful and effective—and their organizations create greater value—in the presence of high-performing teams that function horizontally.

Over the last 10 years, Burzik has learned the *only way to accelerate performance is by going horizontal*: empowering teams to make the decisions formerly made at the top. In her words, “It enables you to multiply yourself.”

Like great architects, HPLs surround themselves with people who can bring their blueprint to life. They don’t hammer the wood, but they hire people who can. They answer such questions as: Who are the players? What *competencies* must we develop or acquire to create a *high-performance organization*? What role

do I play in bringing this about?

**3. They build authentic relationships.**

To great leaders, *authenticity* has a special meaning: *holding up a mirror to players to reflect, in real time, how well they measure up to the requirements of a high-performance environment*. And being a *relationship builder* doesn’t involve being a *people person* with *natural interpersonal skills*. Rather, it’s about *building trust* so that the team can openly discuss, assess, and confront one another on *actual performance* in order to raise the bar. This *relationship-building process* begins with the leader posing *five tough questions*:

- What’s the business strategy, and how committed are we to achieving it?
- What key operational goals flow from the strategy, and how do we make sure that these goals drive decision making?
- Are we *clear* on *roles* and *accountabilities*?
- What ground rules will we play by?
- Will our business relationships be

built on honesty and transparency?

In raising these questions with team members and in searching for answers, effective leaders lay the groundwork for a solid, performance-oriented set of relationships. What emerges is a *fully aligned and engaged team of players* who think and act like a *mini board of directors*.

**They model the behaviors that they expect from their team.** Leaders’ behavior sets the performance standard for others. It can spawn an *army of imitators*.

One CEO posted a sign outside his office: “I practice HPTs (*high-performing teams*).” It reminded visitors that they were about to enter a *high-performance zone*, and reminded the CEO to practice what he preached: *authenticity*, *transparency*, *receiving and delivering candid feedback*, *holding himself and others accountable*, and *focusing on results*.

**They change mind-sets.** HPLs tend not to focus on *re-structuring*, *reorganizing*, or *reengineering* as a going-in priori-

ty for changing how they get results. Their *first task* is to *change mindsets*, starting with their own. They command without commanding. They put aside ego and encourage team members to make decisions and produce results—and *hold them accountable* for doing so.

In redefining their role, HPLs see the net advantage of *letting go*, which frees them from many onerous aspects of the traditional leadership, ranging from playing Solomon to acting as enforcer.

With the traits in mind, *candidly answer these 10 questions*:

1. Have you led an alignment effort to ensure that everyone on your team is clear and committed to a common strategy and set of operational goals, to clear roles and accountabilities, to ground rules for decision making, and to transparent business relationships?

2. Do you require that your team act as a *mini board of directors*, where each team member puts aside functional self-interest and *owns* team results?

3. To what extent do you encourage your team members to hold one another accountable for business success?

And hold *you* accountable—and say so?

4. How attuned are you to the leader-player dynamic of each team member? Do you adjust your behaviors—directing, coaching, collaborating, delegating—to player and situational needs?

5. Do you cling to the old story, “As a leader, *I get paid to make the decisions*?”

6. Do team members view you as answer man, night watchman, referee, an enabler—or as a questioner/coach with a maestro’s baton?

7. Do you role-model effective leadership behavior in leading your team—and in how you manage upward: say, to your board of directors?

8. When a team member disagrees with you, do you: a) say *thank you* and assess the contrarian position; b) use sarcasm, avoidance behavior, or seek rescuers from your team; c) become unglued; or d) press the *eject* button?

9. When did you last ask your team if you contribute to their ability to reach *high-performance goals* and expectations?

10. When you look behind you, do you see a team of leaders—or followers?

There is, of course, one HPL question that’s missing: *What results have you and those you are leading achieved*? Results tend to be derivative. If your answers reveal that you are a HPL, then *high-performance results* have likely followed. **LE**

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**ACTION:** Be a high performance leader.