



**DEFINING MODERN LEADERSHIP:
THE PATH FROM GOOD TO EXCEPTIONAL**
David Grossman

Leaders today are facing a perfect storm.

Demands on their time, their teams, and their own capacity seem to grow exponentially, while the pressure to deliver results has never been greater. No doubt, we're living in an era of unprecedented change and complexity.

A number of forces have accelerated the need for Modern Leadership. What defines Modern Leadership? Research conducted by The Grossman Group with The Harris Poll identified six key leadership differentiators that reflect the character traits and habits employees most admire in modern leaders.

THE 6 DIFFERENTIATORS OF EXCEPTIONAL LEADERS

1. Lead with gratitude
2. Listen and empathize
3. Foster an inclusive culture
4. Communicate with context
5. Connect strategy to employee growth
6. Enable employees to meet the moment

I wrote a book called *Heart First*, but even I don't believe that leading with your heart means abandoning your head, or the logical, technical, and measurable skills leadership requires. Like most things that matter in leadership, the best leaders figure out how to do both very well while never neglecting either side of the equation. That's the kind of winning mindset that leaders need to strive for today.

Another way to think about Modern Leadership is to lead with your heart IN your head. Integrate emotional intelligence with strategic thinking. This requires both compassion and calculation, empathy and analysis. In practice, effective leaders blend both heart and head leadership:

- Making decisions that consider both the human impact and business objectives
- Seeing emotional intelligence as an essential skill (no longer a soft skill) and also as a strategic tool
- Approaching challenges with both analytical rigor and empathetic understanding
- Recognizing that care for people and organizational success are interdependent

Modern leaders also know when to emphasize one style over the other, adapting their approach based on the needs of their team, and the demands of the situation and the business.

As noted earlier, there are a number of forces that have accelerated the need for Modern Leadership—six of them to be exact.

The Six Forces Driving Change

1. WORKPLACE TRANSFORMATION

The workplace upheaval of 2020-2023 revealed a profound shift in what employees seek from their leaders and organizations. When traditional playbooks fell short during the pandemic, successful leaders discovered the power of authenticity and empathy. One executive shared with me, “We had no roadmap—we simply had to be human.” This insight became a guiding principle for leadership moving forward.

Today’s employees seek more than competitive compensation or traditional benefits. They want leaders who demonstrate genuine understanding of their challenges, celebrate their contributions, and create opportunities for growth. This means providing meaningful flexibility in how work happens, showing clear connections between daily tasks and organizational purpose, and fostering environments where career development is prioritized.

The most successful leaders balance empathy with execution, blending Heart First Leadership with clear business focus.

As leaders, we must recognize this isn't a temporary adjustment but a fundamental transformation in how we engage and retain talent. Our role is to create cultures where team members feel truly valued, empowered to contribute meaningfully, and supported in their professional journey. The most successful leaders balance empathy with execution, blending Heart First Leadership with clear business focus. When we lead this way, we build the trust and engagement needed for sustainable success.

2. MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS AND WORKPLACE WELLNESS

The pandemic highlighted the critical importance of supporting employee well-being. Remote work has blurred traditional boundaries, while ongoing uncertainty contributes to stress and burnout. Forward-thinking leaders recognize that creating psychologically safe environments where teams can openly discuss challenges isn't just compassionate—it's essential for sustainable performance. And check-ins aren't just about work; they also focus—in part or exclusively at times—on how the employee is managing their mental health and well-being.

3. GENERATIONAL EXPECTATIONS

Millennials and Gen Zers, who now make up the majority of our workforce, are fundamentally reshaping leadership expectations. These generations seek more than just career advancement—they want work that aligns with their personal values and contributes to a better world. These team members value continuous feedback and growth opportunities, preferring regular coaching conversations over annual reviews.

They expect leaders to share the context behind decisions and welcome their input on issues affecting their work. Most importantly, they seek leaders who demonstrate self-awareness, acknowledge their own growth areas, and create psychologically safe environments where authentic dialogue thrives.

For leaders, this means moving beyond traditional hierarchical relationships to become more accessible mentors and coaches. We must invest time in understanding individual aspirations, provide meaningful growth opportunities, and create clear connections between daily work and the larger organizational purpose.

4. SOCIAL JUSTICE AWARENESS

The global focus on equity has fundamentally changed what employees expect. Our teams want to see meaningful action behind organizational statements and that they're tied to the organization's purpose and values.

They also look for leaders who actively seek out diverse perspectives, address unconscious bias, and create environments where everyone can bring their evolved selves to work.

This requires leaders to examine their own assumptions and blind spots while building cultural competence. Modern leaders create forums for honest dialogue about challenging topics, ensuring all voices are heard and valued.

Effective leaders recognize that inclusion isn't a program—it's a mindset that shapes every decision, from hiring and development to how we run meetings and recognize contributions.

5. ECONOMIC UNCERTAINTY

Market volatility and economic pressures create layers of stress for our teams that extend far beyond the workplace. Employees worry about job security, retirement savings, and providing for their families. Many face complex financial pressures, supporting adult children or aging parents while managing their own financial well-being.

The need then is regular, transparent updates about business performance and organizational health, while creating opportunities for open dialogue about economic concerns. Modern leaders ensure teams know about available financial wellness resources and benefits, while maintaining focus on career development to enhance job security. Most importantly, they recognize and reward contributions consistently, showing employees they're valued even in challenging times.

6. AI AND AUTOMATION ANXIETY

The acceleration of artificial intelligence and automation creates natural concerns about job security and workplace transformation. Employees question their future roles, wonder which skills they'll need, and seek clarity about how their work will evolve. As leaders, we must help our teams navigate this transition thoughtfully through transparent communication about technological changes and their timeline. This means working with each team member to create development plans that focus on future-ready skills, while showing how AI and automation can enhance rather than replace human work. Most importantly, we must continually reinforce the enduring value of uniquely human skills like creativity, emotional intelligence, and complex problem-solving.

The Seven Elements of Transformation

What's most encouraging about these leadership differentiators is how specific—and doable—they are in practice. Striving to implement these approaches is well worth the effort. Our research shows that making the shift from good to exceptional creates measurable improvements in employee engagement, reduces burnout, and drives organizational success.

Leadership isn't about perfection—it's about continuous growth, intentional practice, and a commitment to bringing out the best in yourself and those you lead. Our research also identified seven fundamental elements that transform how we connect, inspire, and drive organizational success.

These seven elements aren't checkboxes to complete—they're principles to internalize and practices to embed into the very fabric of your leadership approach.

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Let's explore how you can elevate your leadership from good to exceptional...

GRATITUDE: THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF GENUINE APPRECIATION

Exceptional leaders understand that gratitude isn't a nice-to-have—it's a strategic imperative. It's about seeing and acknowledging the unique contributions that often go unnoticed. Appreciation isn't just saying "thank you"; it's creating moments that help people understand their true value and impact.

The power of gratitude extends far beyond momentary recognition. When leaders consistently and specifically appreciate their team's efforts, they create a ripple effect of motivation, engagement, and commitment. It transforms workplace dynamics from transactional interactions to meaningful connections where employees feel genuinely seen and valued. This isn't about empty praise, but about creating a culture of authentic recognition that aligns individual contributions with organizational success.

REFLECTION EXERCISE:

- Identify one team member whose consistent contributions you've overlooked
- Write a specific note detailing exactly what they do that makes a difference
- Share how their work connects to the broader organizational goals

CULTURE: BUILDING AN ENVIRONMENT WHERE PEOPLE THRIVE

Your culture is the invisible force that either propels your organization forward or holds it back. Exceptional leaders create “moments of belonging” where every team member knows they’re part of something bigger than themselves. It’s not about mission statements on walls—it’s about how you show up every single day.

Culture isn’t a static concept but a living, breathing ecosystem that requires constant nurturing. The most exceptional leaders understand that culture is built in small, consistent moments—how teams respond to challenges, support each other, and celebrate collective achievements. It’s about creating an environment where innovation flourishes, where people feel psychologically safe to share ideas, and where the organization’s values are not simply spoken, but lived authentically by every team member.

QUICK CULTURE ASSESSMENT:

- How do team members respond when:
 - Someone is struggling
 - A mistake is made
 - A new idea is presented
- What do these responses reveal about your current culture?

FIT: CONNECTING INDIVIDUAL POTENTIAL TO ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGY

The most engaged employees aren't doing a job—they understand how their growth aligns with the organization's future. Exceptional leaders help team members see their unique place in the company's long-term talent strategy, transforming uncertainty into excitement and commitment.

Beyond simply matching skills to roles, true organizational fit is about creating a dynamic pathway of growth that benefits both the individual and the organization. It requires deep, ongoing conversations that go beyond annual performance reviews. Exceptional leaders become architects of potential, helping team members understand not only their current role, but the broader landscape of opportunities, skills they need to develop, and how their personal aspirations intersect with the organization's strategic direction.

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT PROMPT:

- Map out potential career paths for key team members
- Identify the skills they need to develop
- Schedule conversations to discuss their aspirations and organizational opportunities

LISTENING: THE FOUNDATIONAL SKILL OF EXCEPTIONAL LEADERSHIP

True listening goes beyond hearing words—it's about creating a space of genuine understanding. Exceptional leaders don't solely wait to speak; they approach every conversation with radical curiosity, seeking to understand the human experience behind the words.

Listening is a complex skill that requires ongoing practice and intentionality. It's not about being quiet or allowing others to speak, but about creating psychological safety where people feel genuinely heard. The most exceptional leaders understand that listening is a strategic tool—it uncovers hidden insights, builds trust, and creates an environment where diverse perspectives can flourish. By listening, leaders transform communication from a one-way transmission to a collaborative dialogue that drives innovation and collective understanding.

LISTENING CHALLENGE:

- In your next three meetings, follow the 80/20 rule (listen 80% of the time, speak 20%)
- Ask clarifying question
- Reflect back what you've heard before responding

True listening is about creating a space of genuine understanding.

EMPATHY: CREATING PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Empathy isn't about agreeing with everything—it's about creating an environment where people feel genuinely seen and understood. Exceptional leaders recognize that empathy is a strategic skill that builds trust, drives innovation, and accelerates performance.

The most powerful form of empathy goes beyond emotional understanding—it's about creating tangible support that demonstrates genuine care. Exceptional leaders use empathy as a strategic tool, recognizing that when people feel understood, they become more resilient, more innovative, and more committed to collective success. This means creating systems and practices that show empathy isn't an individual skill, but an organizational commitment to supporting the whole person—their challenges, aspirations, and potential.

EMPATHY PRACTICE:

- Choose one team member facing a challenge
- Use the validation framework:
 - Acknowledge their experience
 - Ask what support looks like for them
 - Follow up with specific assistance

ACCOUNTABILITY: LEADING BY EXAMPLE

Exceptional leaders hold themselves to the highest standards.

Accountability isn't about punishment—it's about creating a culture of transparency, learning, and continuous improvement. When leaders model accountability, it becomes the norm, not the exception.

True accountability is a transformative leadership practice that goes beyond individual actions. It's about creating a culture where taking responsibility is seen as a strength, not a weakness. Exceptional leaders demonstrate this by openly sharing their own learning experiences, showing vulnerability, and creating systems that encourage honest reflection and growth. They understand that accountability is not about perfection, but about commitment to continuous improvement, learning from mistakes, and supporting team members in their own growth journeys.

ACCOUNTABILITY REFLECTION:

- Share a recent mistake with your team
- Explain what you learned
- Outline the steps you're taking to improve
- Invite feedback and input

WELL-BEING: CHAMPIONING HOLISTIC SUCCESS

Well-being is more than wellness programs—it's a comprehensive approach to supporting human potential. Exceptional leaders understand that peak performance comes from supporting the whole person, not the worker.

Holistic well-being requires a fundamental reimagining of how organizations support their people. It's not about isolated initiatives, but about creating an integrated approach that recognizes the interconnection between professional growth, mental health, personal development, and organizational success. Exceptional leaders view well-being as a strategic imperative—understanding that when people are supported in all dimensions of their lives, they bring their most innovative, committed, and authentic selves to work.

WELL-BEING AUDIT:

- Review your current support systems
- Identify gaps between organizational rhetoric and actual support
- Create a holistic well-being strategy that addresses:
 - Mental health
 - Professional development
 - Work-life integration
 - Personal growth opportunities

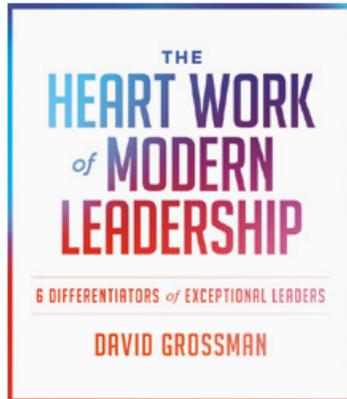
Moving from good to exceptional isn't about achieving perfection. It's about consistent, intentional practice. Choose one element to focus on this quarter. Not all seven—just one. Dive deep. Make it a habit. Then, move to the next.

Leadership is a journey of continuous learning. The most exceptional leaders are those who remain curious, humble, and committed to growth—not solely for their organizations, but for themselves.

Our employees are asking for better from modern leaders. Now's the time for all of us to meet the moment. 📌



Info



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David Grossman is the Founder and CEO of [The Grossman Group](#), whose client roster includes Abbott, Amsted, DHL, General Mills, Grubhub, Kimberly-Clark, Lockheed Martin, Novartis, and Stanley Black & Decker, among others. David is an award-winning, six-time author. His leadercommunicator™ blog has been ranked the number one blog on communication by Feedspot 10 years in a row. David is often quoted in media, and has been featured on “NBC Nightly News,” in *CBS MoneyWatch*, the *Chicago Tribune*, *Directors & Boards*, *Forbes*, *Great Place to Work*, the *LA Times*, *Newsweek*, and the *World Economic Forum*. David is a member of the Forbes Communication Council, Page Society, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), and is a Trustee to the Board of the Institute for Public Relations (IPR). He is also the Founding Sponsor & Board Member of Communication Leaders of Chicago, and taught graduate-level internal communications and authentic leadership at Columbia University.

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