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## Why Corporate Success Depends on 'Invincible' Employees

**Nurtured by Strong Leadership, They Can Pull Organizations Through Turbulent Times**

By Jenny Schade

Published: January 26, 2010



Are your employees invincible?

In my interviews with more than 1,000 leaders and their staff while guiding companies through turbulent change, I've noticed an interesting phenomenon: Certain work teams not only survive chaos, they thrive. I call this group "the invincibles."

Invincibles develop the powerful ability to vault over obstacles and bullet-proof their commitment to succeed, despite extreme changes in their organizations. Where their colleagues perceive adversity, they see opportunity. Where others hang back to "see what's going to happen," these employees prepare and take action.

In the current economic climate, invincible employees provide a competitive advantage to lean organizations struggling to achieve business goals with fewer resources. They can do the work of more than one team member and uncover options that bolster the organization's bottom line. Invincibles are not just found, however. Leadership must actively pursue them and nurture their development within the organization.

Indeed, in my experience, invincibles share one overriding similarity: highly effective leaders. They might not always be an employee's direct supervisor, but somewhere up the line there is strong leadership. My research from interviews and focus groups at Fortune 500 companies in various industries going through mergers, layoffs or new corporate procedures found five core leadership qualities that fuel the buoyancy of hardy achievers.

**1. Empower your employees to make a difference.** When you give your team members the ability to take advantage of opportunities and address issues on their own, you send a powerful message: You trust them. They, in turn, will return that trust in spades, serving as top-flight ambassadors to your customers.

Ritz-Carlton President-Chief Operating Officer Simon Cooper has been reported as saying the key to his company's success is training the staff well, then trusting them to do their jobs. Every Ritz employee can spend up to \$2,000 to improve any guest's stay without seeking managerial approval -- whether it's used on Champagne

for a guest's birthday or on carpentry costs to make a place wheelchair accessible.

Employee empowerment doesn't have to be expensive. Actions that allow employees to feel they are making a difference might include permitting them to issue discount cards to disgruntled customers, or encouraging managers to offer spot bonuses for outstanding team performers.

**2. Demonstrate empathy.** Did you happen to catch Lawrence Summers, President Obama's chief economic advisor, on ABC News' "This Week"? Summers said employment figures showed "only 11,000 jobs lost." From his perspective, this was an improvement over 700,000 jobs lost earlier in the year. But from the point of view of those in his audience struggling with unemployment, his words sounded harsh.

Corporate leaders often must talk about numbers in terms of productivity, cost cutting, or staff reductions. In order to connect with employees, it's important to never let numbers take the place of human beings.

**3. Involve employees in a higher purpose.** Employees need to understand what the organization is trying to do and clearly see their role in this objective.

Here's a quick quiz. Which employee would you guess is invincible? Three brick-layers working side by side are asked what they are building. One says he is laying mortar, another says he's building a wall, and the third says, proudly, "I'm building a cathedral."

Workers like the third employee don't just happen. Just like the invincible brick layer, every employee needs to understand the company's mission and where his or her job fits in to accomplish it.

**4. Have the courage to communicate.** The first meeting I ever had with a Fortune 100 CEO was supposed to last 15 minutes. Instead, we spoke for two hours about his career, the difficult choices he had been forced to make and the challenges of communicating those decisions to his staff.

As we talked about how to engage his employees in a new initiative, I was struck by two thoughts: One, while company leadership is certainly exhilarating, it can also be very lonely at the top. Two, it takes courage to communicate the toughest decisions.

Leadership communication is absolutely critical to creating invincible employees. Employees don't want to hear about organizational changes and the direction of the company from colleagues. They want to hear it from leaders.

It's important to communicate about organizational changes on two levels: One, the changes taking place within the company at the macro level, and two, what these changes mean for the employees. This combination of communications from company leadership goes a long way to soothing uncertainty and fueling productivity.

**5. Get out of your office.** Within the confines of the executive suite, it can be easy to lose perspective and unintentionally alienate the very people you need for success. (Remember the auto executives who took corporate jets to Washington to ask for funding?)

Circulate and spend time talking with rank-and-file staff, and read (and respond to!) employee forums on the intranet. In short, get input from the people you lead so that you can inspire them to deliver on your promises. If you do this regularly, your team members won't let you down. In fact, they will become invincible.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Jenny Schade** is president of JRS Consulting, a firm that helps organizations build leading brands and efficiently attract and motivate employees and customers.

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