

THE EXCEPTIONAL EXECUTIVE'S

FIELD GUIDE

Exceptional Leadership ★ Series



BUILDING *a* **MINDSET**

----- *for* -----
Exceptional
LEADERSHIP



ALAN WILLETT

oxseeker | ăks'sēk'ər | (*noun*)

1. A person dedicated to the calm pursuit of excellence.
2. A person who consistently inspires the best in others.

Origin: Ancient.

In Zen poetry the ox was the symbol of enlightenment. A famous series of “ox-herding” pictures demonstrated the path to enlightenment.



About the Field Guide Series

Field Guides are books written by experts who have significant experience in the field. The expert shares his/her pragmatic reality-based experience to help others not just survive in the field but to enjoy the experience and chaos of living and working in the wild.

I find businesses based highly on evolving technologies to be extremely wild and chaotic.
I wrote this field guide for the leaders who want to not just survive in this environment, but to thrive.

ALAN WILLETT

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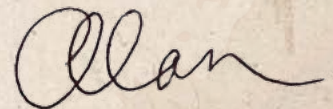
The Challenge: Think Above the Crowd

I have worked with many good leaders. Most work very hard, but sometimes it seems like they are in a vaudeville act spinning lots of plates on sticks. They rush from plate to plate keeping some spinning while others come crashing to the ground. They may be well respected in their organization or industry, but they feel stressed and are often overwhelmed.

Exceptional leaders stand out from their plate spinning peers. They have more impact with much less visible effort. They tend to lead highly energetic and talented organizations.

What's different? Exceptional leaders have cultivated a fundamentally different mindset that changes their whole approach to work. This book explores eight of the primary shifts in mindset that enable exceptional leaders to think above the crowd.

Yours in the calm pursuit of excellence,



ALAN WILLETT



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Put a Dent in Your Universe

Exceptional leaders truly differentiate themselves from the rest because they have a personal burning mission to make a positive, remarkable difference in their part of the world.

Steve Jobs said, “We are here to put a dent in the universe.” When I think about this literally, it makes me grin madly and laugh. But, I really do appreciate the metaphor. The mindset of exceptional leadership starts with the idea that we are here to make a positive difference where we can in our world, in our view of the universe.

The following are five keys for creating the “make a dent” mindset.

Focus on value.

To make a difference, we must think beyond tools and methodologies. The projects we create must have a positive benefit to our customers and end users. Before we undertake any project, our thinking must begin with “what is the value to others?”

Inspire the best in those around you.

Elite leaders see every project as an opportunity to build the organization’s skills and talents. This is as important as the project itself. Use projects to build the skills of people technically, in leadership, and most of all, to inspire people to be their best selves.



Pursue personal excellence.

Exceptional leaders know themselves well. They know their strengths and weaknesses. They are constantly working to improve in each area to improve their ability to make a positive difference in the world.

Contribute to causes you believe in.

We often underestimate the power of philanthropy. We can be overwhelmed with all the requests for our time and money for a good cause. However, exceptional leaders focus on what they believe in. They provide the money and that more precious commodity, time, to make a positive difference in the world.

Thank those that inspire you to greater heights.

I find that exceptional leaders publicly thank the mentors and many others that have guided and inspired them. I encourage you to thank someone today!

There is a key reason why each of these acts makes a huge difference for exceptional leadership.

Each provides more energy back to you than it takes to perform!



Forge Energizing Partnerships with Leaders

Exceptional leaders are attracted to form energizing connections with people that will challenge their ideas. One executive told me that he wanted to talk with me for the simple reason that I challenged him to think in a way that sometimes made him uncomfortable, but always pushed him to higher goals and improved methods.

The following are key ways to seek and forge energizing connections for a project but to build them to last your whole career.

Seek people who energize and challenge you.

Good leaders build teams of people that are similar to themselves. Exceptional leaders build teams that have diverse personalities, opinions and talents. This results in constructive idea-filled conflicts that build to amazing outcomes.

Ask for help.

Building a long-term valued partnerships starts with simple requests for help from people you respect. The help request focuses on important goals. Exceptional leaders reach out to experts who help and challenge them to the best outcome.





Help others.

This is simply the previous point stood on its head. Exceptional leaders make themselves available to help others achieve missions of importance. Of course leaders should be protective of their time. However, when you are asked for help with something that can make a significance difference, you are helping another person on their journey. This kind of help will also energize you.

Nurture your energizing connections over the long term.

When you find you have partnerships that energize you, seek projects you can work on together. At the very least, find opportunities to take walks, have lunches or just occasional talks.

The energizing value from these relationships has a great return on the investment of time and energy.

I personally have a diverse set of people I talk with for the key reason of exchanging great ideas.

This brings up my energy level and helps put my thinking at more powerful levels.



Follow the Red Cross Rule

The most important rule I learned for helping others as a consultant was when I took the Red Cross course for first aid. The instructor stood in front of the class and clutched his throat. He made it clear he could not breathe. He then stopped the role-play and asked, “What is the first thing you should do?”

We all had technical answers. We were certain we were correct. The instructor said we were all wrong. He explained the first thing we must do is ask, “Do you want help?” If the person says “no,” you should wait until the choking person corrects the situation or asks for help.

There are ample reasons for this, the most important one is that if a person does not want help it is very unlikely that anything you do will be perceived as helpful. It is even less likely that anything you do will actually be helpful.

As a leader in an organization (formal or informal), you may find yourself responsible for many different projects. The exceptional leader mindset is to create the environment where teams

have the responsibility to do great work and the freedom on how to achieve it. This also includes the freedom to fail and from that failure, to learn.



If a team is failing the Red Cross rule applies.

The good leader will see a team in trouble and step in and try to fix it. This often leads to the team's loss of responsibility and power to fix things themselves.

The exceptional leader will see a team in trouble and ask if they want help.

If they say no, exceptional leaders give them the opportunity to fix it themselves. It is important to be clear here that exceptional leaders are very aware of situations where failure is not an option. However, these cases are rare and in those cases, the teams are also very aware and do ask for the help necessary.

I find that exceptional leaders with the most patience have teams that fail, but their leadership ensures that their teams learn from the failure and become exceptional teams themselves.



Lead from Your Sweet Spot

On a tennis racquet, there is a miraculous zone known as the sweet spot. If you connect with a ball on the sweet spot of the racquet, you are almost unaware of the impact and effort involved. You are also likely to hit the place on the court you were aiming for. If you miss the sweet spot, you are more likely to miss your target and the impact to you is jarring. The more you miss your sweet spot, the more jarring it is.

The sweet spot on a tennis racquet is where multiple factors and forces come together to create this harmonic response. The same is true for leadership. Exceptional leaders consistently focus their energies to create initiatives that emerge from their sweet spot.

The following are key factors that will intersect for you in creating your own leadership sweet spot.

Passion.

When leading initiatives that you love, the energy you receive from them can exceed the energy you put in. These types of efforts will inspire you to arise most

mornings with a smile on your face. Seek to create and lead projects that you are passionate about.



Competence.

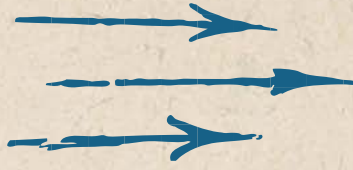
The more skilled you are in the area you are passionate about, the larger your sweet spot of leadership is. The more skilled you are, the less effort it takes to gather the forces to create remarkable initiatives.

Valuable results.

Since leadership is not about you alone, the other force necessary to create a powerful sweet spot is to lead initiatives that provide remarkable value to your intended audience.

These three factors work in harmony creating a personal energizing sweet spot. Do you want to grow your sweet spot?

Create a team around you that shares your passion for the initiative you are leading. In doing so, your sweet spot grows exponentially.



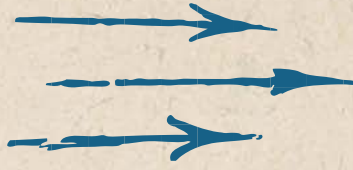
Frame Pictures that Inspire Positive Motion

“I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the Moon and returning him safely to Earth. . . .

New objectives and new money cannot solve this problem. They could, in fact, aggravate them further unless every scientist, every engineer, every serviceman, every technician, contractor, and civil servant involved gives his personal pledge that this nation will move forward, with the full speed of freedom, in the exciting adventure of space.

Excerpts from John F. Kennedy’s 1961 speech to
a special joint session of Congress.

I encourage you to study the great speeches of history and think about them and how they frame a context and inspiration for tackling great challenges. Look at Lincoln’s *“Gettysburg Address,”* or King’s *“I Have a Dream,”* or Kennedy’s *“By the end of this decade we shall put a man on the moon”* speeches.



Leadership in many ways is about leading change for a positive benefit to the organization. The need for change could be inspired internally by a need to be more cost effective. It could be to improve customer delight. It could be to respond to external competitive pressures.

Regardless of the impetus for change, it is up to the leader to frame the change in a way that inspires dramatic, forward motion.

Here are six key items needed to introduce a significant change. With each item, I provide example snippets of a talk I helped an executive prepare to introduce an improvement initiative.

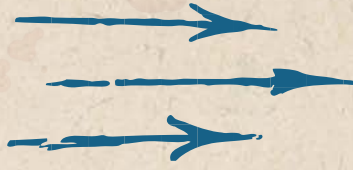
1. Provide a view of the overall context

"We are the product leader in our field. We have a large and growing customer base. However we have a clear problem as our pace of innovation has slowed and our competitors are rapidly catching us."



2. Tell the story of how we reached our current position

"We face a big problem. In our rush to create this market position, we made short-term compromises to speed our way. Each of those compromises led us to build a software system where the underlying architecture and design are a mess. It takes us nine weeks to test one week's worth of changes to the system because of this. This is why the competition is catching us."



3. Clarify the positives of the current position

"In spite of these problems I am very proud of where we are. Here are the facts. We have 70% of the current market share for this product space. In spite of the obstacles created by our management decisions, we have a very competent engineering staff that is constantly working to overcome those obstacles. You continuously find a way of creating great value to our customers."

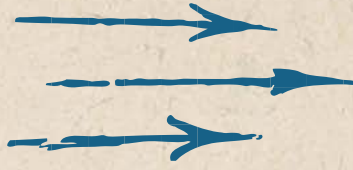
4. Provide a clear vision of where we have to go and why it is important

"Management is funding the development of a replacement of the core engine for our software system. When we complete this rewrite, we expect it will enable us to develop new features to our system much faster. We expect to be able to get new features to our customers four times faster than we do now."



5. Clarify what is the same and what needs to be different

"We must maintain our laser focus on providing our customers great value. This is unchanged. It is clear that we must change the software system. We must also change how we are developing our software system. We have been doing what some of you call 'hack and pray.' Your commitment to quality has been steady. Our ability to achieve quality has so far been hampered by the albatross we all played a part in building. Do not be trapped by our past habits. You are now free to focus on design first."



6. Make it clear that this is a journey and our imperative now is to take the next step to the grander vision

"This is a journey. The changes we need to make will take time. They will take our collective will and intelligence. The first step I am asking you to take is to build a smart, realistic plan that will incrementally build to our desired state."

Although most projects we lead will not have the same impact as the historical speeches I have mentioned, our ability to frame improvement projects properly will do wonders to move people, teams, and organizations to the peaks of your inspiration.



Do Not Do Your Best, Do What is Necessary



It is no use saying, 'We are doing our best.' You have got to succeed in doing what is necessary." Winston Churchill

In the span of a few days, Maya went from being an overwhelmed, hardworking leader to an exceptional leader. It started with a two-hour coaching session I held with her.

Maya came into my office with shoulders slumped, forehead creased with worry lines, and her eyes downcast. She held a key leadership position in the USA space program with the mission to send exploration probes to other planets. Space is dangerous. She was acutely aware that any mistake she and her team made could result in the loss of the whole mission, years of work, and millions of dollars.



The crux of her immediate stress was that she had to prepare an 80-slide Power Point presentation to show the overall mission executive at a status review in three days. This task overwhelmed her when added to all the other things she had to do for work as well as a badly neglected personal life.

I asked her one simple question: What does the mission executive need to know?



After a brief discussion, she was clear that he only needed to know three key risks to the mission that required his immediate attention. She decided to simply write the risks on the white board when she arrived. No slides would be prepared.

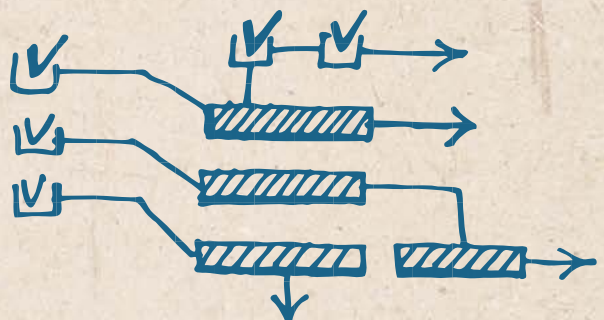
This 80-slide presentation that Maya had in mind was just a symptom of the overall issue this program was facing. We quickly identified two other examples.

First, her team was in the midst of developing fully comprehensive tests that would take all their resources. This was impossible in the time available but she and the team were committed to “doing their best.”

After questioning, it was clear that fully comprehensive testing was not required. They needed to focus on the key likely risks and prioritize the tests accordingly. In this case they were doing their best, but far more than was necessary.

The second example was the mission team did not have the skill set required for programming one of the complex mission maneuvers. Part of the over-engineering of the tests was to compensate for this. In this example, doing their best was well short of what was necessary. They needed to ask for and get the expertise required.

Maya and I continued like this for two hours, coming up with multiple examples of the overall problem with alternative approaches to solve the problems more rationally. She left energized and relaxed.





I have consulted with many organizations that had very similar problems to Maya's. In many of these highly competitive organizations, the leaders focused on providing great urgency and pressure to their organization. In these organizations, I have seen the overemphasis on *"doing your best"* replicated in each of their cultures.

The key takeaways can be summarized as follows

For each activity the organization is undertaking, each person should have a clear answer to these questions:

- Why is this important?
- What is the minimum necessary for us to be truly successful?
- What additional value can be added by doing more?
- Do we have the right skills to accomplish what is necessary?

Maya's meetings the following days with the mission executive and other leaders led to many critical changes to the whole program. They brought in the skills needed for the complex mission maneuver and they reduced the planned comprehensive testing by prioritizing on high impact and likely risk areas.

Maya's change from a hardworking manager to an exceptional leader was a change in mindset.

This enabled Maya to lead the whole program to change its culture at a critical point, which led to a stellar mission success.



Improve the Ability to Improve

Improving your ability to improve leads to making your leadership sweet spot bigger and more powerful. It leads to higher-level partnerships. It leads to improvement in all the important areas.

The exceptional leader looks at all the problems and obstacles they face and they think about the common denominator that all the barriers have. That common denominator is themselves.

Following are four key practices that exceptional leaders use to accelerate personal improvement.

Empty spaces

Exceptional leaders keep empty spaces in their schedule for just thinking about nothing specific. This is from a fifteen minute walk up to taking a one week vacation on a beach. This space allows ideas to arise that would not otherwise emerge.

Focused reflection and learning

This can be the habit of daily writing down the key highlights and low point of the day. This habit enables leaders to look back and see trends, while ignoring single data points. The trends can provide high leverage ideas for improvement.



Find (even hire) personal mentors

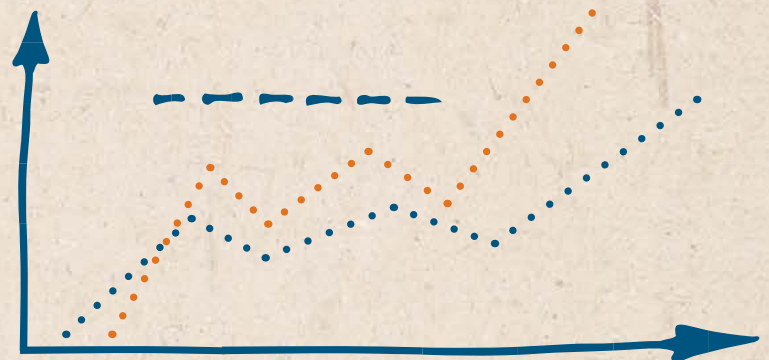
The best athletes have a personal coach. This is also true for the best leaders. They find a person they truly respect that they know will give the feedback they need. I find that many exceptional leaders have hired different coaches for different aspects of both personal and organizational improvement.

Actively seek feedback from respected peers

Organizations often put into place feedback systems. These systems help good leaders maintain their focus and their improvement. Exceptional leaders go beyond existing feedback systems, which are often imposed on them. They seek out people to give them very specific feedback for the areas where they most want to learn and improve.

It is this ability to improve that leads exceptional leaders to step above the flurry of running from spinning plate to spinning plate.

It is this ability that enables the laser focus on remarkable value.





In Conclusion, Lead with Playfulness and Joy

Perhaps the most important mindset of all I learned from my father. He taught it to me my entire life, but it was made clearly evident to me in a talk we had a few months before he died.

I was visiting the home farm where I grew up. I was helping my Dad do some of the farm chores. He knew the end was near for him as his cancer had progressed to a point of no return. He started to tell me the stories of the multiple times that he almost died. There was a horrible motorcycle accident, his two major heart attacks, and multiple farm accidents.

The story that really surprised me was the last one he told me about the first time he almost died.

It happened when he was in his early twenties, before any of his children were born. He found himself unable to get out of bed or even lift his head.

He had spinal meningitis in the age when the vast majority of people with it died. He told me about one night he had so little life left in him that he was certain that

he would die that very night.

He was startled when he awoke to light streaming through the window. He could pick his head up about half an inch. He was in immense pain but very happy. It was at that moment that he decided he would have to get better and get back to farming.



.....

He also said, *"From that point on, I realized that every day, every moment of life was a gift that I would relish no matter how hard the situation."*

Through his life he faced multiple challenges and disasters where he almost lost everything. I had often wondered how he maintained his amazing smile and infectious laughter even during those times.

It was at that moment, during that talk, that I finally understood what he had spent a lifetime showing me.

Life is a gift.

Live with playfulness and joy.

After my Dad finished and we were quiet for a while, I said, "I am glad you lived."

He got a big grin and laughed, *"I guess you wouldn't be here otherwise, would you?"*



About Alan Willett, President of Oxseeker, Inc.

Alan is the paradigm shifter—galvanizing individuals and organizations to new levels of thinking and performance. With a customized and action-oriented approach, he helps organizations around the world build cultures of excellence.

Services:

Dramatically improve the way your organization does business.

Consulting

Move your organization from talking about quality to consistently delivering high-quality products and services to your customers. From executives to individual contributors, transform your organization's process in a measurable way.

Workshops

Cultivate success for yourself, your team, and your entire organization. Customized for each group, Alan Willett's workshops enable participants to develop and practice the mindset and skills required to produce high-impact results. Topics include organizational culture, effective change, team leadership, and software development best practices.

Alan Willett has been building his mastery for 30 years, and it all started on his father's dairy farm.

Learning from his father, whose farm consistently won awards like "best dairy of the year," Alan realized that his father's success all came down to his mindset about the farm, and how he organized his work.

Before his work as a consultant, Alan forged 20 years of deep, diverse experience building and delivering superior integrated software-hardware products

to the marketplace. Originally a software engineer, he quickly took on management positions as a result of his strong organizational skills and commitment. At Xerox, he was part of the management team that created Xerox's first ever digital print production system.

Alan has a Bachelor's Degree in Computer Science and a Master's Degree in the Management of Technology and Organizational Change. He designed his master's degree around the art of culture-change in the fast-paced world of technology. In his career, Alan has worked side by side with executives and leading experts from around the world.

Mentoring

If you are truly committed to raising the bar and taking ownership of your work experience and performance, consider mentoring with Alan.

Oxseeker coaching and mentorship programs serve to accelerate a leader's learning curve while also improving his or her life-balance.

Professional Speaking

Ignite innovation. Jump-start your motivation and that of your team. Gain industry leading insight. And all you have to do is listen. Engage Alan for your next keynote speech, convention breakout, motivational program, presentation, or workshop.

How We Do What We Do

A Focus on Results

Build sustainable change by focusing on the results you need. Typically clients receive a tenfold return on their investment with Oxseeker, or more.

A Fast Pace

Meaningful improvements can be achieved at a faster pace than you might expect. Work with Oxseeker to quickly identify key issues and effective improvement strategies.

A Challenging View

Because the focus is on the results, you will be challenged with at-times differing views on the root causes of problems—even if they are difficult to hear.

Collaboration and Customization

To achieve great results, you need someone who takes a collaborative approach to create solutions that best fit the needs of your unique situation. The goal is to build skills and knowledge within your organization so you can continue to achieve the results you want.

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“Many consultants have helped our organization.
Alan has had a more positive impact than anyone else.

Ed Battle, Division Manager, NAVO N64

“Alan is an incredible leader whose observation skills can move people and help them learn about themselves, their coworkers, their bosses and the total work environment. A caring individual who was sent to guide us on a path to improvement. Intelligent, chopping complexity into small bites in sophisticated ways, and always hopeful,
Alan is the essence of a perfect consultant.

Susan Unger, Xerox

“Alan is world class. He provided great value to the Gorges business immediately. He quickly understood our organization's needs and customized larger-scale techniques to just the right size for our company culture.

John Sammis, CEO, Gorges

“

I came to know Alan and his work quite well and have been particularly impressed with his ability to recognize the essence of complex issues, to define practical solutions, and to convince management and team members to implement these solutions.

Watts Humphrey, 2005 recipient of USA Presidential Award
of the National Medal of Technology

“

Alan Willett is the paradigm shifter! He changed my thinking and my actions to a whole new paradigm which is far more productive.

Barry Dwolatzky, South Africa's IT Personality of the Year



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