

THE EXCEPTIONAL DIFFERENCE

# FIELD GUIDE

Software-intensive System Development



## Building a Mindset for **EXCEPTIONAL LEADERSHIP**

Version 3.0

ALAN WILLETT and JULIA MULLANEY

**EX**CEPTIONAL DIFFERENCE<sup>SM</sup>





## Alan Willett

Expert consultant, speaker, and award-winning author of *Lead With Speed* and *Leading the Unleadable: How to Manage Cynics, Divas, and Other Difficult People*. Alan Willett is co-founder of Exceptional Difference. Alan works with clients around the world, solving problems for organizations large and small.



## Julia Mullaney

With a commitment to changing the world of software engineering, Julia Mullaney, co-founder of Exceptional Difference, is an award-winning engineer, instructor, leader, and consultant who has worked with software companies in many industries across the globe.



## Exceptional Difference

Over the past three decades, the Exceptional Difference team has proven that software-intensive system development doesn't have to be a painful process that is full of unknowns. Our unique approach cuts to the core of the problems in a way that traditional training and consulting cannot.

We help organizations to achieve results that they never thought possible. The organizations we work with begin to keep (or beat) every commitment that they make, deliver high-quality products, eliminate costly rework, and more. They see incredible changes in company culture thanks to a new-found trust and harmony between the team and management.



## About the Field Guide Series

The field guide series emulates the tradition where experts share their real-world experience in the form of a book filled with practical wisdom, helping others to survive and thrive in the challenging wildness of the world.

Exceptional Difference field guides provide readers with practical information they can use to solve immediate, real-world problems.

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# Building a Mindset for EXCEPTIONAL LEADERSHIP

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## The Challenge: Think Above the Crowd

We have worked with many good leaders. While they work really hard, they sometimes feel like a vaudeville act, spinning lots of plates on sticks. They rush from plate to plate, keeping some spinning while others crash to the ground. Even though they may be well respected in their organization and industry, they often feel stressed and 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 their work. This book explores the eight primary shifts in mindset that enable exceptional leaders to think above the crowd.

We hope that the content in this guide will help you to cultivate a mindset for exceptional leadership that you can use in every area of your life.





## 1. 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 the world.

Steve Jobs said, “We are here to put a dent in the universe.” When we think about this literally, it makes us grin madly and laugh. But, we 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, we should ask ourselves what the value will be 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.

The pursuit of personal excellence starts with self-knowledge. Exceptional leaders know themselves well. They know their strengths and weaknesses. They are constantly in pursuit of excellence.

#### Contribute to causes you believe in.

We often underestimate the power of philanthropy. We can be overwhelmed with all of the requests we get from good causes. However, exceptional leaders focus on what they believe in. They give both money and the even more precious commodity of time, to make a positive difference in the world.

#### Thank those who inspire you to greater heights.

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

**What’s the key reason each of these five acts makes such a huge difference for exceptional leadership?**

**Each one gives more energy back to you than it took for you to perform!**





## 2. Forge Energizing Partnerships With Leaders

Exceptional leaders form energizing connections with people who will challenge them and their ideas. One executive said that he wanted to talk with us for the simple reason that we challenged him to think in a way that sometimes made him uncomfortable, but always pushed him to higher goals and improved methods. Leverage these connections for your career, not just for a single project.

**The following are four key ways to seek and forge energizing connections, not just for a project but for your whole career**

### Seek out people who energize and challenge you.

Good leaders build teams of people who are similar to themselves. Exceptional leaders build teams of people who have diverse personalities, opinions, and talents. These teams leverage constructive conflicts to build to amazing outcomes.

### Ask for help.

Building long-term valued partnerships starts with simple requests for help from people you respect. Exceptional leaders reach out to experts who help and challenge them to the best outcome. Asking for help not only addresses important near-term goals, it provides the foundation for long-term relationships.



### Help others.

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

### Nurture your energizing connections over the long term.

When you find 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 your investment of time and energy.**

It is essential to have a diverse set of people with whom to engage and exchange great ideas. We find that this brings up energy levels and helps to power up innovation.





### 3. Follow the Red Cross Rule

The instructor stood in front of the class and clutched his throat. He made it clear that 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 distressed person corrects the situation or indicates that help is needed.

**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, you may find yourself responsible for many different projects. The exceptional leader mindset creates an environment where teams have the responsibility for doing great work and freedom for how they achieve it. This also includes the freedom to fail and learn from that failure.

### If a team is failing, the Red Cross rule applies.

A good leader will see when a team is in trouble and will step in to try and fix it. The team will lose its sense of responsibility and the power to fix things themselves.

An exceptional leader will see a team in trouble and ask if they want help. If they say no, exceptional leaders give the team the opportunity to fix it themselves. It is important to be clear that there are situations where failure is not an option. However, these cases are rare and, in those cases, most teams typically ask for the necessary help.

**Exceptional leaders have the patience to allow teams to struggle and to ensure that the team learns from the struggle to become exceptional.**







## 4. 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.

**Create your own leadership sweet spot with the intersection of the following key factors.**

### Passion.

Seek to create and lead projects that you are passionate about. When leading initiatives that you love, the energy that you receive from them will exceed the energy you put in. This will inspire you to arise most mornings with a smile on your face.

### Competence.

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

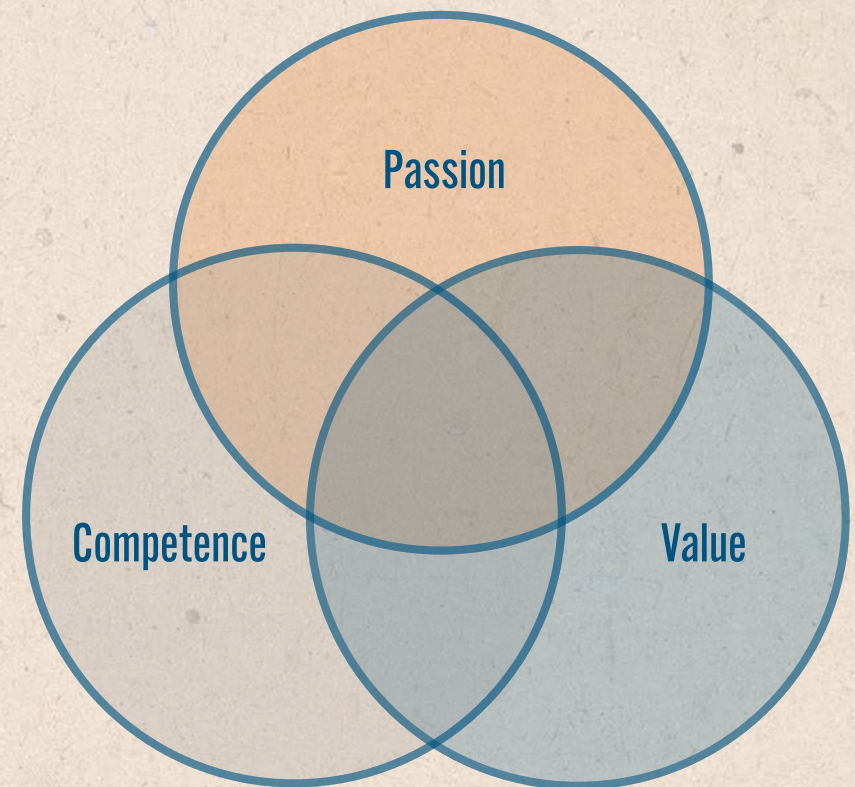


### Value.

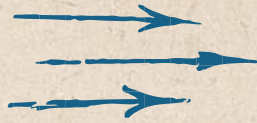
Leadership is not about you alone; the other force necessary to create a powerful sweet spot is to lead initiatives that provide remarkable value to your intended audience.

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

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







## 5. 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**

We encourage you to study the great speeches of history and think about how they frame a context and inspiration for tackling great challenges. Look at Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address,” 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 is, in many ways, about leading positive change to benefit the organization. The need for change can be inspired internally by business drivers. It can also be driven by external factors, such as delighting the customer or responding to external competitive pressures.

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

## Here are six key steps to introduce a significant change:

**With each item, we provide example snippets from talks we’ve helped executives prepare to inspire positive motion.**

### 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.”

### Tell the story of how you reached your current position.

“We face a big problem. In our rush to create this market position, we made short-term compromises for the sake of speed. Each of those compromises led us to build a software system with an underlying architecture and design that is a mess. Because of this, it takes us nine weeks to test one week’s worth of changes. This is why the competition is catching us.”

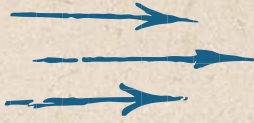
### Clarify the positives of the current position.

“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 an engineering staff that is constantly working to overcome those obstacles. You continuously find a way of creating great value to our customers.”

### Provide a clear vision of where you have to go and why it’s important.

“Management is funding the development of a replacement of the core engine for our software system. When we complete this rewrite, it will enable us to develop new features to the system much faster. We expect to be able to develop new system features much faster”





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

“We must maintain our laser focus on providing great value to our customers. 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.”

### Make it clear that this is a journey.

“This is a journey. The changes that 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 up to our desired state.”

**Although most projects we lead will not have the same impact as the historical speeches mentioned earlier, the 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.

Maya came into our 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 a detailed PowerPoint presentation to show the overall mission executive at a status review in three days. This task overwhelmed her when added to all of the other things she had to do for work as well as a badly neglected personal life.

### We 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 about 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.





The overly-detailed presentation that Maya had in mind was just a symptom of the overall issue this program was facing.

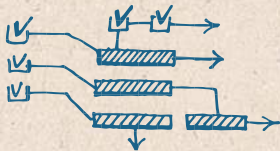
### **We quickly identified two other examples.**

First, her team was in the midst of developing fully-comprehensive tests that would take all of their resources. The task 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 most critical likely risks and prioritize the tests accordingly. In this case, they were doing their best, but far more than was necessary.

The second issue was that 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.

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



We 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 teams, we 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 that needs to be done 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 in the following days with the mission executive and other leaders led to many critical changes to the whole program. They brought in the people with the skills needed for the complex mission maneuver and they reduced the planned comprehensive testing by prioritizing high-impact and likely risk areas.

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

This shift enabled Maya to lead the whole program in changing 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 of the important areas.

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

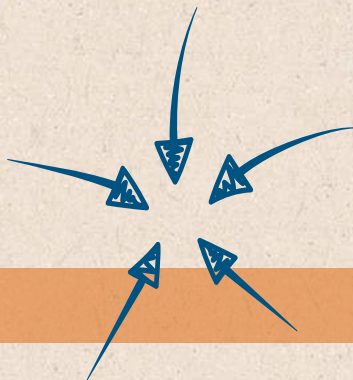
**Following are four key practices that exceptional leaders use to accelerate personal improvement.**

### Empty spaces.

Exceptional leaders keep empty spaces in their schedule for thinking about nothing specific. This can be anything from a fifteen-minute walk to taking a week-long vacation on a beach. This space allows ideas to arise that would not otherwise have the space to emerge.

### Focused reflection and learning.

This can be the habit of daily notations about 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 ongoing 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 who they truly respect who they know will give them the feedback they need. We find that many exceptional leaders have hired different coaches for aspects of both personal and organizational improvement.

## Actively seek feedback from respected peers.

Organizations often put feedback systems into place. These systems help good leaders to 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 the 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 a laser focus on remarkable value.**





## In Conclusion, Lead With Playfulness and Joy

*This mindset story from Alan is a great way to end.*

Perhaps the most important mindset of all is one that 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 farm where I grew up and 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 stories about the various times he had almost died. There was a horrible motorcycle accident, two major heart attacks, and multiple farm accidents.

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

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

It turned out that he had spinal meningitis, at a time when the vast majority of people with it died. He told me about one night when he had so little life left in him that he was certain he would die that very night.

The next morning, he was startled when he awoke to light streaming through the window. He could pick his head up about a 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 go back to farming.

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

Throughout 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 this talk, that I finally understood what he had spent a lifetime showing me.



**Life is a gift.  
Live it 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?”*



## More from the team at Exceptional Difference



### EXCEPTIONAL ENGINEERING

This fully-immersive experience provides the tools and training to those elite engineers whose talent and drive can change the trajectory of a team or entire organization.



### EXCEPTIONAL EXECUTIVE

This program empowers highly-motivated leaders with the wisdom and tools they need to create high-performance teams, no matter the current state of the business.



### DEEP DIVES

Participants gain a deep understanding of specific subject areas in high-tech systems development and create an action plan to successfully implement lessons for immediate impact.



### COACHING

An outside coach can make a world of difference for engineers and/or managers. With the right balance of hard/tech and soft/people skills, we can help bring out the best in your top people.



### CUSTOM TRAINING

If you can't choose from the menu, no problem. We'll have our chef whip up something special for you and your team. Tell us what's on your mind, what's bugging you, and we'll help you to construct the perfect custom training option.



### CONSULTING

Sometimes you just need to pick the brains of smart people who understand where you are coming from. We can do that too. As an added bonus, we've got enough gray hair to give you credibility in the board room.

**LEARN MORE AT** [EXCEPTIONALDIFFERENCE.COM](https://exceptionaldifference.com)



## WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING...

“The impact on my job was almost immediate and it was pretty substantial... I was able to immediately roll out and start using what I had learned to transform how we operate here at Catchpoint.”

**Dylan Greiner, Chief Product Architect and Team Leader**

“After the experience, my confidence is high, based on the quality of my work and my ability to deliver. When I speak about project risks and the actions needed, it is no longer an argument. People engage.”

**Alex Powell, Software Engineer**

“The Exceptional Difference series is the elite offering I was looking for. It is powering up my leaders and engineers to new heights.”

**Mauricio Hernandez-Distancia, Head of Central Engineering**

“If you want to accelerate the growth of your key engineers and engineering leaders, the Exceptional Difference series is the accelerant you need.”

**Chief Engineer of Major Systems Development Program,  
US Navy**

We'd love to hear from you.

[Info@ExceptionalDifference.com](mailto:Info@ExceptionalDifference.com)

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