The Four No Fail Traits of Exceptional Bosses

By John E. Michel

Leaders today face increasing pressures as they navigate their organizations through a constant barrage of dynamic business conditions and more demanding stakeholder expectations. As the half-life of technological innovation continues to get shorter and external customers and constituents place increasing demands on company performance, achieving exceptional performance has never been tougher.

I would offer what is needed to consistently drive best in class performance isn’t merely greater investment in structure or process. Rather, today’s fast-paced business environment demands a particular form of leadership that appropriately balances technical and people skills. In other words, it demands an exceptional approach that successfully motivates employees, makes talent development a priority, and creates a company-wide culture of mutual respect, courage, and commitment.

As I reflect on over a quarter-century of military service, I recall the vast majority of my former bosses were good. They worked hard, watched out for the well-being of those around them, and challenged people to be better tomorrow than they were today. The organizations these good bosses led did well, but rarely achieved best-in-class results or inspired others to emulate their example.

Only a very, very small percentage of bosses in my whole career were truly exceptional. You know it when you are, or have been, led by an exceptional leader. You likely loved going to work. You believed what you were doing was important and were convinced you were making a positive difference. And no matter how daunting or even dangerous the effort, you felt so connected and committed to the people around you that you willingly left everything you had on the field of play each and every day.

My recent boss in Afghanistan, Marine Corps four-star General “Fighting” Joe Dunford, was one of these rare, exceptional bosses.

Dunford, currently the 36th Commandant of the United States Marine Corps, earned the nickname "Fighting Joe" on the battlefields of Iraq by creating conditions for success with careful planning and harmonious execution. I had the immense privilege of serving with General Dunford for 13-months during my final tour of military duty. Serving as the Commanding General of NATO’s Air Training Command in
Afghanistan, I witnessed time-and-time again how Dunford’s approachable and inclusive approach to tackling even the thorniest of situations transformed seemingly insurmountable obstacles into opportunities to elevate performance and enhance collective confidence.

Under Dunford’s leadership, we helped our Afghan counterparts successfully balance multi-billion dollar budgets, enhance conventional and special operations capabilities, and develop long-term sustainment strategies for everything from infrastructure, to logistics, to medical response. But perhaps most challenging of all, General Dunford led the development of a militarily responsible, drawdown strategy in spite of a politically charged 24 hour news cycle. I believe it is fair to say he was exactly the right leader at the exactly the right time to honor the sacrifice, investment, and commitment to what has become America’s longest war.

As I close the chapter on my military career and transition into leading full-time out of uniform, I am convinced we can all learn something from the rare breed of exceptional bosses like General Dunford. Let me share four no-fail characteristics I have observed in every exceptional boss I’ve had the privilege to serve. My hope is the traits will help you enhance your own effectiveness wherever you are called to lead.

**Exceptional Bosses Promote Inclusion over Exclusion:** Exceptional bosses refuse to hoard information, control decision-making, or focus their attention and energy on a small, clique-ish group of people. They prefer, instead, to create a wide-spread sense of belonging.

Belonging is one of the most basic needs that every person has. As such, exceptional bosses understand the importance of making others feel included. Just as parents ensure their children feel they are valued members of the family and couples make the person to whom they are committed feel like a cherished partner, the leaders we most want to follow make inclusion a priority. They take every reasonable opportunity to let people know they belong, that they are valued members of the team.

*Exceptional bosses recognize creating a wide-spread sense of belonging creates conditions to fulfill people’s innate desire to flourish and thrive and come fully alive.*

**Exceptional Bosses Prefer Substance to Superficial:** Exceptional bosses strive to bring together and accept diverse opinions, views, ideas, and styles. At the same time, they are unafraid to pursue a different path or take an unpopular stand. They routinely marshal the confidence to take smart risks and make the most of every opportunity to communicate respect. They refuse to allow themselves to appear as more sizzle than steak.

In this vein, each time General Dunford was summoned to Afghanistan’s presidential palace he first made a quick dash to switch out of his camouflage fatigues and combat boots and into his full-dress uniform, pressed and creased down to the buffed shoes. It was a demonstration of respect that did not go unnoticed. Of the 15 commanders who have preceded him in his role only one, Stanley McChrystal, had done the same.

*Exceptional bosses inspire others to raise the bar on their performance and achieve their dreams--Less by their words, more by their actions, always by their example.*

**Exceptional Bosses Make Connection a Priority:** Exceptional bosses understand the most valuable commodity in life is relationships. As a result, they refuse to engage in idle gossip that could damage someone else. They do not interrupt or make others look inferior. They are humble and never boast about their own accomplishments, and they do not blame others for errors or mistakes. They are quick to share credit, selflessly accept blame, and offer constructive criticism rather than
communicate remarks that can be destructive and damaging.

In a recent article in *Fortune* magazine, Dunford shared the best leadership advice he ever received came from his first battalion commander when he was a young Marine. His commander told him there are three rules to success. The first? Surround yourself with good people. “Over the years,” says Dunford, “I’ve forgotten the other two.”

*Exceptional bosses understand interpersonal relationships are what paves the path to success. A genuine desire to connect is what influences others to be and do their best, no matter how challenging their circumstances.*

**Exceptional Bosses are Unafraid to Color outside the Lines:** Exceptional bosses are unafraid to deviate from the status quo. They recognize they don’t need to have all the answers before making a decision or establishing a direction. They choose, instead, to see instability and uncertainty not as barriers to be overcome but rather, as enablers to achieving a higher level of success. They make it a priority to create conditions to reorganize, reshape, and re-engineer if doing so will make the organization stronger.

*Exceptional bosses understand and accept Albert Einstein’s timeless truth that, “you have to color outside the lines once in a while if you want to make your life a masterpiece.”*

I am grateful the last senior military leader I had the opportunity to serve with on active duty was an exceptional boss named Joe Dunford. Now, I’m looking forward to taking what he, and others like him, have taught me and applying it anywhere and everywhere I am privileged to lead in the future.

I hope you will consider doing the same.

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**About the Author**

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John E. Michel is a speaker, author, business advisor, and widely-recognized expert in culture, social media, strategy & individual and organizational change. A recently retired Air Force General, he is also the founder and senior curator of the world’s largest senior military leader blog platform in *GeneralLeadership.com*. An accomplished, unconventional leader and proven status quo buster, his award-winning work has been featured in a wide variety of articles and journals, including the *Harvard Business Review*, *Fast Company*, *Huffington Post*, *National Geographic*, *Joint Forces Quarterly*, and the *Washington Post*. His new book, *The Art of Positive Leadership*, will be released in April. John can be reached on Twitter at @JohnEMichel.

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