A Conversation with John H. Zenger: Leadership and Change

Susan R. Madsen, Utah Valley University
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Dr. Susan R. Madsen is an Associate Professor of Management at Utah Valley State College. She has taught a variety of topics in colleges and universities for the past 14 years. Susan has been a Human Resource Development consultant for many years, specializing in OD, training, and leadership. She obtained her EdD from the University of Minnesota in HRD. Her research interests include individual and readiness for change, leadership, strategic faculty development, and work-family issues.

John H. (Jack) Zenger writes, teaches, and speaks about extraordinary leadership. Today he is one of most authoritative voices on leadership and performance. He received a degree in psychology from Brigham Young University, an MBA from UCLA, and a doctorate degree in business administration from the University of Southern California. He has been the CEO and president of the world's largest performance skills improvement companies, Provant, Inc. In 1977, Jack co-founded Zenger Miller, a leading management and leadership development company. He also served for
many years as chairman of Times Mirror Training, Inc., which consisted of Kasct, Learning International, and Zenger Miller. He has authored or coauthored seven books, including *The Extraordinary Leader: Turning Good Managers into Great Leaders*, *The Handbook for Leaders: 24 Lessons for Extraordinary Leaders*, *Results-Based Leadership* (which was honored as the best book of 2000 by the Society of Human Resource Management), and best-selling *The New Self-Directed Work Teams: The New American Challenge*. In 1994, Jack was inducted in the Human Resources Development Hall of Fame.

Recently, we were fortunate to be able to interview Dr. Zenger about leadership and change. In this interview, Jack discusses the background of organization development, his early and continued involvement in the field, specific OD interests and passions, and the link between OD and leadership. He describes his work and presents a model of leadership that is illustrated as a tent with five poles representing the competencies that separate extraordinary leaders from others. In addition, he stresses the importance of results as well as attributes. He also emphasizes the value of change in an organization and says that extraordinary leaders must not only lead change but also provide an environment and culture whereby organizations can engage in continuous change and improvement.

**Interview**

**Madsen and Gygi:** How did you first become involved with organization development?

**Zenger:** As a young graduate student, I had gone to UCLA in the industrial psychology program. After being there, it became quickly apparent that, at least at that time, the program was much more interested in rats and college sophomores than they were about people working in industry; so I
switched over to business. I was working as a
research assistant in the Institute of Human
Relations at UCLA and, in the early days, that
group was very much involved in what we now
call organization development. It was particularly
one of the institutional pioneers in laboratory learn-
ing, sensitivity training, and T-groups. This
Institute became closely tied to the OD movement,
and it was here that I got my first exposure to it.

After this experience and after working for a cou-
ple of years in a job that was not directly related to
OD, I was recruited by Michael Blansfield, one of
the early pioneers in OD. He was an interesting
practitioner. He was attracted to the field, yet had
no academic background in it at a time when most
practitioners were PhD's and mostly academicians.
He later became a consultant to several companies
like TRW who were, indeed, the real pioneers in
the early days of OD. Mike invited me to join him
in the Pacific Finance company in Southern
California, and that is really where my passion and
interest about OD began. One of the early things
we did was to introduce organization development
into that company. I remember very well the first
day that Mike walked into my office and said, "I've
decided to change the name of our department
from Personnel to Organization Development," and
I said, "What's that?" He did change the name to
Organization and Management Development. Mike
was truly one of the people who really saw the
vision of what OD could and would become. I then
joined Mike in a consulting firm that did OD con-
sulting. The travel became onerous, and so I was
recruited to become the VP of Human Resources at
Syntex in Palo Alto.

Madsen and Gygi: How did employees at Syntex
respond to organization development?

Zenger: They really wondered what the organiza-
tion development "stuff" was all about. That was
one of the early questions in OD. I remember a
conference that published an article reporting inter-
views with a number of people about what OD
really meant. At that time the answer was that it
meant whatever the person who was describing it
thought it meant. At that time, there was no well-
defined, agreed-upon definition of what it was all
about. That certainly has evolved, but in the early
days, the definition was very fuzzy.

Madsen and Gygi: You seemed to enjoy the OD
part of your HR position at Syntex.

Zenger: I did. It was certainly my opportunity to
move away from just working with individuals and
small groups—which had been the primary focus of
the early sensitivity and T-group activities—to
broader, organizational-wide, systemic issues in the
organization. This made great sense to me. There
were not many examples of that type of work back
in the early days of OD, but there are a lot more
now. At that time broad, organization-wide OD
work was a very new and revolutionary idea.

Madsen and Gygi: What specific topics within
OD are you most interested in and passionate
about?

Zenger: Clearly, I am fascinated about the link
between leadership and OD. The link is fairly clear
in my mind. It is interesting to look at the broad
chain of events that we know leads to ultimate
organization performance. Sears did an interesting
project in the mid-1990s where they looked at the
value chain that occurred to get individual employ-
ees in a Sears store to be more committed and ded-
icated. They measured employees' levels of
engagement and dedication and saw an immediate
impact on customer satisfaction. Sears found that
dedicated employees truly impact levels of cus-
tomer satisfaction, and customer satisfaction clear-
ly impacts store profitability, which impacts share-
holder value. They had good numbers. If I remember right (but don't quote me) a 5 percent increase in employee engagement would result in a 1.3 percent improvement in customer satisfaction, which would result in a certain 0.5 percentage improvement in store revenue growth. It was very compelling evidence and the results were published in a Harvard Business Review article in 1998. Yet, it seemed to me that, in that whole equation, they missed what makes employees committed. So, what do you do that improves the level of employee engagement and commitment? As I see it there is a clear answer. It is what the leader does to build the climate and the culture of that group, setting high standards and insisting on results and performance. It was a great piece of work but the research possibly missed the first step—the fact that it all starts with leadership.

Organization development and leadership are very much intertwined. In fact, I don't think it is possible to separate the two. It's like two oars in a row boat; both work together for ultimate success. My interest in both of these areas [OD and leadership] started early in my career, and they are probably hopelessly tangled together in my mind and being.

Madsen and Gygi: Describe your work.

Zenger: A number of years ago, I said that I would like to leave a contribution to the fields of organization development and leadership by focusing on the conceptual understanding of the practice of developing leaders. At that moment of time (in 1997 and 1998), what struck me was that, amidst all the literature and discourse about leadership, what was missing was that leadership was ultimately all about results. If leaders do not produce good results for organizations, then they really aren't very good leaders. They may be a wonderful human beings, very ethical and honest, socially conscious, and wonderful interpersonally; but, holy smokes, if the organization does not do well under their leadership, then I don't think you could say they were very good leaders. This is what led me to believe that someone should say this and say it forcefully.

So, I contacted a publisher to be sure there was a market for it. The publisher told me that Dave Ulrich was very much interested in the same topic. So-to make a long story short—we got together and wrote the book Results-Based Leadership with Norm Smallwood. Fundamentally, the book had a very simple message in the form of an equation: Leadership = Results X Attributes. If either one of those [results or attributes] is zero then, in the long-term, leadership is going to be zero. So, no matter how great the person is in attributes, if there are no results, then leadership is zero. On the other hand, if a leader produces short-term results but doesn't have attributes that will sustain that leadership in the long-term, then the answer is probably going to be zero, too. So, this book was all about results and made the point that results have to be long-term and balanced between the employees, customers, and shareholders. I think that we made a contribution to the literature.

Then, I realized that we hadn't yet talked about the other side of the equation, which was the attributes that propel people into being very effective leaders, and how those attributes contribute to those results. So, after I finished the results book, I had the very interesting experience of being down the hall from Joe Folkman. Joe had been one of the partners in a company called Novations that, for a number of years, had been processing 360-degree feedback data. They had a database of some 200,000 instruments pertaining to about 20,000 leaders. So, my next book was about the specific attributes that effective leaders possess. I'm not a statistician but I've had enough exposure to know that when you have a large body of good data there are usually
some wonderful truths embedded in it. If I made any contribution to this book it was getting Joe to take the time to look into this very interesting body of data. I think we've shed some light on the "attributes" side of the equation. There were several interesting findings that came out of this research. There were some new insights, particularly that there may be some nonlinear and different ways for people to work on leadership strengths. Companion behaviors have really become a very compelling way for people to think about developing their strengths.

Now that we have a clearer picture of what makes up leadership on the results side and the attributes side of the equation, the last hurdle we have not yet crossed, and what would probably still be helpful, would be to have a more direct and clear understanding of what really works in helping people develop these leadership attributes and the focus on results. What is the optimum development process? There have been some research publications from the Corporate Leadership Council that have certainly spoken to these issues. But there is still a lot of confusion and wildly different opinions about appropriate approaches to leadership development.

Madsen: So, it sounds like you are thinking seriously about writing another book.

Zenger: Yes. If there is another book in me, it is probably trying to revisit the whole development process. There have been a lot of good things happening like the whole move to action learning.

Much good work has taken place, and we are quantum leaps ahead of where we were a decade ago, a quarter of a century ago, and certainly 50 years ago when I first got into it. The things we used to do 40 or 50 years ago were so abstract and theoretical.

We would conduct training programs for managers and we would have a lecture on planning, a lecture on organizing, a lecture on staffing, and a lecture on control. It was a very academic model, and we taught that management was all about planning, organizing, staffing, directing, and control. Nothing experiential or engaging was ever used. I once took a graduate course on group dynamics at USC, and the teacher lectured the entire semester. We were not once put into groups. We sat and listened.

Madsen and Gygi: You've used the word leadership quite a bit, and we're wondering if you have a different definition than other leadership gurus and experts.

Zenger: If you were to ask what my conception of leadership is then probably the simplest and clearest conception is in our book titled The Extraordinary Leader. We describe a tent, with a center pole and four outside poles holding it up. Each pole is a cluster of differentiating competencies. There are five of them. The center tent pole is character, and one of the side poles is a cluster we call "personal capabilities," another pole is "interpersonal skills," another is "focus on results," and the final one is "leading change." Our research showed that there were the behaviors that separated the extraordinary leaders from the ineffective ones.

Madsen: So, leading organizational change is one of the tent poles in your leadership model. Is it essential for effective and successful leaders to be able to lead organizational change?

Zenger: I have to go back to the Dalton-Thompson research1. I find it fascinating that only five percent of the leaders in an organization are what they call "Stage 4" leaders, the statesmen and visionaries of an organization. If you are an accounting manager, sales manager, marketing director, or even the VP of quality control—is leading change one of your principal skills requirements? I think the answer is, "Not really". As a CEO you want
continual improvement, you may want these individuals to be able to lead the organization to higher levels of performance, but you don’t want them to go off into a whole new direction, chart an entirely new path, or create and implement a new business model. If your accounting manager is doing that, you really are in trouble! I think the people for whom leading change is extremely important is that senior group at the top of any organization. These are the ones if the underlying market is changing, who really have to change the business model, chart new directions, add new products, or who make the decisions to do things quite differently. So the "leading organizational change" tent pole is one that is not as mandatory as the others. The other four [character, interpersonal skills, focus on results, and personal capability] are mandatory for everything. However, I do think that leading change is always mandatory for leadership at the top.

**Gygi:** Aren’t there times that you need a change leader and times that you don’t?

**Zenger:** I think that is true. There at least used to be times when organizations were experiencing some homeostasis and things were quite stable. Yet, it seems there is always a point when there’s a lot of turmoil, economic fluctuations, industry uncertainty or transformation, and other types of changes. For example, managers in the telecommunications industry (or for that matter any industry that is being impacted by the internet or Web technology) have got to be very nimble and agile. A manager in a university or health care institution may have more stability than one in real estate brokerage, insurance, or high-end jewelry. You obviously need leaders who are effective at organizational change when you are an organization that needs to keep changing.

**Madsen:** I’ve seen middle managers who haven’t been required in years to make any changes. Suddenly they are required to make changes and don’t have any idea how to do it. It seems so painful for them. Don’t you think it would be beneficial for everyone to understand how to change at some level?

**Zenger:** Absolutely. It would be wonderful if people understood change. That is why there’s a lot of value in organizations that adopt the TQM philosophy of being involved in a continuous change process. I think there’s a lot of virtue in a certain amount of change always being done rather than having an organization be totally placid for five or seven years and then suddenly finding it necessary to make lots of changes.

I worked with my father when I was a young boy. I’ve thought about this recently because I learned a lot of important lessons from him. He was the administrator of the Utah Valley Hospital for 25 years starting in 1943. As a young man I used to go to the hospital and mow lawns, file X-rays, and do many other menial things.

Occasionally his secretary would be gone on vacation so I would take her place and type letters. I got to know a lot of people there. My father used to drive the people in accounting nuts. They would just get a new accounting system in and operating smoothly and he would want to change it. I remember saying to my dad, "Why do you do this?" They used to complain to me saying, "We just got this thing up and going, and he wants to

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change it again." I asked my dad about it and he said, "I have learned that people really grow when they have to change and try new things. The only way you can keep an organization running at its peak level is to constantly be injecting change." I think he saw himself as a professional grain of sand in the oyster.

**Madsen:** Maybe that’s were you got your interest in change.

**Zenger:** Yes, that may be where I got it. He really was clear about the fact that the constant change process is very healthy.

**Gygi:** I’ve known people who have continually initiated large change efforts in organizations, and they seem to cause grief and pain for the employees. Maybe continuous change it not as painful or difficult.

**Zenger:** Especially if the employees adopt the change philosophy, and it becomes the driving force. Change efforts will be more successful and less difficult if the suggestions and ideas come from them. This is ultimately what you want to do. Employees should be driving the change rather than the change being imposed from on high. It is a very different issue if change is being imposed by some outside expert then if you are trying to generate it from within.

**Madsen and Gygi:** What are some of the most important skills or attributes a leader needs to have to be effective at leading change?

**Zenger:** Our research really points to three specific skills. The first is for a leader to have a strategic perspective-thinking in terms of broader strategies rather than kind of daily tactics, which clearly applies to a longer-term perspective. Second, one of the other differentiating competencies is a good connection to the outside world. The leader connects his or her work group to the industry and to the broader business community. They are the antennas that look over the horizon. It is fascinating that, as you look again at the companion behaviors to this strategic perspective, you see some very interesting things including a person who is highly customer focused. What is the link between those two things? How can I be really strategic in my thinking if I don’t really understand the customers or what they want and need? The third competency that makes us "leading change" is being a champion of change. These are the differentiating competencies that make up the "leading change" cluster. We’ve also found a number of related competencies or specific skills that are required for leading organizational change. In addition to being a champion for change in the organization; this person needs to lead projects or programs, present them so that others support them; and be an effective marketer for his or her work group's projects, programs, or products. They also need to have a strategic perspective; knows how his or her work group relates to the organizational business strategy with a direct line of sight; how to translate the organization's vision and objectives into challenging and meaningful goals for others; and how to take the long view. The list goes on. They need too balance short-term and long-term needs of the organization; connect the outside world with internal groups, represent the work group to key groups outside the organization; and help people understand how meeting customer needs is central to the mission and goal of the organization. These are the kinds of things that people do who are good at leading change.

**Madsen and Gygi:** How does a great leader prepare and motivate his or her employees for change?

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CEO) would be the first to say that the whole Six Sigma mentality has been very instrumental in a lot of their current success. I think these changes are not mysterious. There are a lot of things that need to be done and having the patience to hang in there seems to be extremely important in long-term success.

**Madsen and Gygi:** Describe one challenge you think we still have in organization development today.

**Zenger:** There are still many challenges in organization and leadership development. I think that our techniques of development are still primitive; I don't think we have really cracked the code on good development techniques. We've gotten clearer about what leadership is and the importance of results, but we are still using fairly primitive tools to do it.

**Gygi:** Do you see science as a way to do that?

**Zenger:** Yes. I think it is true for both organization development and leadership development. We have not collected enough data and analyzed it rigorously. We need to operate with at least some semblance of science.

**Madsen:** With "techniques" you mean different types of interventions?

**Zenger:** I do. If you look at the typical leadership development or organization development program, you could make a long list of these techniques: case studies, role playing, action learning exercise, simulations, third party intervention, and conflict resolution exercises. We do all these things. But if you are wondering which one of these really works the best, where you can find data about which has a lasting impact, or which really changes behavior most efficiently in the long-term-it is difficult. It feels like we've been practitioners similar to physicians who have had a patient and written a prescription to the pharmacist to "give this patient one of everything," hoping that something would do some good. We've done all these things-a little bit of this and a little bit of that. I think part of the problem is that academicians love to do new things. That's not a shot at academicians, because it is also true of trainers and OD practitioners. We do have some good data about things like behavioral modeling and we know what it does. We've also got some beginning data about simulations. But, we don't have good information about which of these things works best for the amount of time invested and the actual change that it produces.

**Madsen:** It seems to me that you are almost making a "call" for more experimental research, where we would try some type of developmental intervention and then research it from the start to the end, using both experimental and control groups.

**Zenger:** Yes, that would help. Philosophically, I am very much in agreement with the current move toward moving the learning experience into work instead of taking the learner into the classroom. I believe that blending the work and learning environments is really going in the right direction, but we need to understand how to do it more effectively. This is based on the whole notion of action learning. I've read Revans'² and his early conception of what action learning meant. I think we've incorrectly interpreted it today to primarily mean sending people off for two weeks to work on a new strategic initiative for the company, and then hav-

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ing them come back and report their efforts to top management. I interpret Revans to be talking about getting people out of their offices to visit others. Here they can see what others are doing and how to get people to intermingle with each other, work effectively in teams, and learn from each other in the context of work. This whole notion of after-action reviews that the military uses so well could be brought into every kind of thing we do in a business context. People in business should stop and kind of talk about what was intended to happen, what really happened, why the difference, and how can we do it differently next time. I don't think we've seen Revans' vision on what action learning really means.

There are good things happening, and I think executive management programs today are certainly a major cut above where they were 25 and 50 years ago. But, we still have a long way away to go to have the most effective, well thought through, and researched approach to achieving the objectives we have. I don't think we're there yet.

**Summary**

Based on his decades of experience in the business world, Dr. Zenger has developed some excellent techniques for training leaders. Using theory from academic research, combined with his practical experience and applications, he and his colleagues have built a model describing leadership as a tent with a center pole and four outside poles supporting it. The five clusters of competencies represented by the poles are character, personal capabilities, interpersonal skills, focus on results, and leading change. While much previous work on leadership has concentrated on the attributes of good leaders, Jack believes that results are critical. He uses an equation to define leadership: Attributes X Results = Leadership.

Although Jack feels that substantial progress has been made in understanding leadership and change, he is convinced that not enough data has been collected and rigorously analyzed. He purports that there is still much more we need to understand about leadership development. Jack believes in investigating and exploring leadership and organization development truths through scientific research methods. Many issues remain to be studied. Jack continues to teach that leadership is a skill that can be learned and developed by everyone.

Throughout the interview it was clear that Jack still has immense passion and heartfelt hope and excitement for the future of OD and leadership. Currently, he is the CEO of Zenger-Folkman; for more information about his current projects, Jack can be contacted at jzenger@zfco.com.

**References**


