UPLIFTING LEADERSHIP

How Organizations, Teams, and Communities Raise Performance

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Contents

List of Illustrations

List of Tables

UPLIFTING LEADERSHIP

HOW ORGANIZATIONS, TEAMS, AND COMMUNITIES RAISE PERFORMANCE

Andy Hargreaves

Alan Boyle

Alma Harris

JOSSEY-BASS

A Wiley Brand

To our Mums and Dads who raised us.

Introduction: Uplift

> *The greater danger for most of us lies not in setting our aim too high and falling short; but in setting our aim too low and achieving our mark.*
>
> *—Michelangelo*

How does a giant multinational company turn itself around after seventeen straight quarters in the red? What does it take to transform a tiny developing country into a global economic powerhouse within a single generation? How can you be a top sports team when you're choosing from the smallest pool of players and have fewer resources than all your competitors? How do you do a lot with a little, create something from almost nothing, and turn failure into success?

These are the kinds of challenges we uncovered and questions to which we found answers when we studied fifteen organizations and systems in business, sports, and public education between 2007 and 2012. We set out to discover how each of these groups dramatically improved their performance against unfavorable and even overwhelming odds. Eventually, after analyzing hundreds of interviews, and writing thousands of pages of case reports, the answer came down to one word: **uplift**.

In aerodynamics, uplift is the force created by airflow, momentum, and wing design that enables large birds or huge aircraft to take off against gravity. Among people and within organizations, uplift is the force that raises our performance, our spirits, and our communities to attain higher purposes and reach unexpected levels of achievement. This book is about uplift, its effect on

performance, and the ways to achieve it. It's a little word that makes a big impact.

"Up" is one of the first words we respond to when we are babies. We hear it spoken with a raised pitch. We lift up our eyes and stretch out our arms. Two letters. One syllable. *Up.*

Up is a direction, the way to get to a place we want to be. It pulls and invites us towards our destination. It is as viscerally inviting as the very first times we heard it when our parents lifted us into their arms.

"Up" is more of a *process* than a state. If you feel "up" about something, you are being optimistic. If you are "picking up" after an illness, you are starting to improve. We use "up" when we want to express that we're *making progress* towards our desired state—even though we haven't quite arrived.

Being "up" isn't always positive, of course; you can be uprooted, experience upheaval, or feel upset. But in general, it's better to be up rather than down. If you're up, starting up, or moving up, you are usually headed in the right direction, and you're definitely further along than you used to be.

Uplift has three interlocking meanings that are concerned with emotional and spiritual engagement, social and moral justice, and improved performance in work and life. Let's look at each of these.

Emotional and Spiritual Uplift

Being up is one thing. Getting up is another. It takes effort. The force that moves or holds us up is "lift." Authors Ryan and Robert Quinn describe lift as the "force that pushes a solid body upwards through the air."[1] The inspiration for

their book, *Lift,* is the pioneering contribution to early aviation of Orville and Wilbur Wright. The Quinns explain that before the Wright Brothers famously launched their first manpowered flight from Kitty Hawk in North Carolina in 1901, they built a wind tunnel out of a soapbox to measure the effects of wing design and wind-speed variation on the relative impact of the forces of lift and drag—two forces that their German predecessor Otto Lilienthal had first identified in his ultimately fatal experiments with gliding. The Wright brothers concluded that in order to achieve successful lift in flight, you need the right kinds and combinations of forward motion, currents of air, and a navigation system of wing technology and steering controls. These forces, Ryan and Robert Quinn argue, apply not only to physics but also to personal and organizational change as well.

Often in human relationships, we can get an emotional or spiritual lift. At times like this, we say that we feel "uplifted." Powers of levitation and ascension are central to Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian theology. Great myths and true stories have the same effect when they describe people who have overcome adversity, survived ordeals, dramatically turned their lives around, or sacrificed themselves for the sake of others. People felt uplifted by Mother Theresa's actions to give her life to destitute children of India's slums, and by Nelson Mandela's forgiveness of the enemies who had imprisoned him on Robben Island. By enabling us to empathize with other people's example, such stories about acts of courage, humility, and selflessness inspire extraordinary effort in ourselves.

Uplifting actions and words are infectious; their effects spread out and influence others. We uplift others when we uplift ourselves, and vice versa. We lift each other's spirits,

raise each other up to higher moral ground, and surpass ourselves.

Emotional and spiritual uplift is the beating heart of effective leadership. It raises people's hopes, stirs up their passions, and stimulates their intellect and imagination. It inspires them to try harder, transform what they do, reach for a higher purpose, and be resolute and resilient when opposing forces threaten to defeat them. Uplifting leadership makes spirits soar and pulses quicken in a collective quest to achieve a greater good for everyone, because we feel drawn to a higher place as well as to the people around us as we strive to reach it.

Social and Community Uplift

"Up" says things not only about our emotional state, but also about our power and status. If we go upmarket, we are appealing to higher-status customers. Uprisings can overthrow oppressive regimes. And upward mobility improves people's opportunities and life chances.

The idea of uplift has been a driving force of struggle and improvement within African American communities for more than 150 years.[2] "All labor that uplifts humanity," Martin Luther King Jr. told us, "has dignity and importance and should be undertaken with painstaking excellence."[3] More recently, Barack Obama has written about how he was lifted up from his surrounding circumstances when he attended a magnet school. He in turn now endeavors to uplift the American people as their president.[4] Uplift is a collective force that leaders create together to raise everyone's prospects—especially those with the least advantages.

Uplifting Performance

Uplift's emotional, spiritual, and collective social powers mean that it also has the power to **improve people's performance and results**. It makes individuals and organizations do better than they had before, helps them to outperform their opponents, and inspires them to succeed despite meager resources. Uplift enables people to take off and then stay aloft. The way they achieve this is through *uplifting leadership.*

Uplifting leadership raises performance by creating spiritual, emotional, and moral uplift throughout an organization and among the wider community that it influences. It draws on and uses many of the "soft" processes or skills that have made a comeback in business in recent years.[5] Countless sources tell us that sustained high performance comes from focusing more on values than on profits.[6] Great companies encourage exceptional performance when they inspire a driving passion for the work that their people do.[7] Enduring success occurs when we feel that our work is creating emotional and social value —not just financial returns.[8] Employees want their organizations to stand for something important, to contribute to something that is worthwhile, and to improve people's quality and experience of life.[9]

Improved performance doesn't just come as a result of a focus on "soft processes," though. It's not just about wishing and hoping, or even about having more emotional intelligence or giving better support. This doesn't mean that the pursuit of excellence should be hard-nosed, callous, or cynical, either. But we can only realize high performance through hard work. Businesses that go bankrupt ultimately create no social value for anyone. And if people are going to achieve their dreams, they will need perspiration as well as inspiration.

Combining "soft skills" and hard work is central to sustainable success—not only in the corporate world, but in public services too. Indeed, the public sector offers some of the best examples of soft skills around—not surprising, perhaps, given that this is where some of the best women leaders are to be found. In public education, for example, schools that succeed in the face of overwhelming odds inspire their teachers and students with bold visions and also set impressively high expectations for everyone involved.[10] Though leaders in this field insist upon relentless dedication, they know that it cannot come at the expense of burning people out. There is great pressure on everyone to improve, but there is also constant support for the adults in the school to bring out the best in their students. When whole systems with hundreds of individual schools succeed despite their challenging circumstances—and manage to do so over many years, not just one or two—this is because they bring together what other people too often drive apart—pressure and support, passion and performance, the insatiable desire to learn along with the uncompromising demand for success.[11]

Investigating Uplift

We have more than a few clues, then, about the different factors that produce sustained high performance, especially in circumstances where we might least expect it. But there has been little firsthand investigation of what these factors look like across very *different* sectors, or of what it is that holds them together.

This is what our book sets out to do: to explain and exemplify the actual practice of what we call *uplifting leadership* from our seven-year study of fifteen organizations in business, sports, and public education in eight countries across four continents. Details of our

multiple case-study methodology are presented in the Appendix.

Our original research question was: *"What characteristics make organizations of different types successful and sustainable, far beyond expectations?"*

The cases included in this book had to meet two or more criteria for performing above expectations:

- They **did considerably more with less** in terms of having relatively weak investment, experiencing limited resource capacity, or encountering very challenging circumstances.
- They performed **better than they had previously**.
- They performed **better than similar organizations** or systems.

We concentrated on analyzing organizations and systems that had done a lot with a little, could create something from almost nothing, or had turned failure into success. We also did our best to ensure that none of our cases had obvious records of unethical performance in the way they treated workers, clients, and the community. Indeed, we rejected cases where there was disregard for environmental responsibility in business, lavish spending on players to boost success in sports, or statistically questionable manipulation of achievement data in education.

The organizations we studied had been performing well for some time when we investigated them. But we know that high performance is not a permanent state, even for those at the very top of their game. The performance of many of the "excellent" companies identified by Peters and Waterman, for example, later plummeted—some of them quite quickly.[12] And in *How the Mighty Fall*, Jim Collins

acknowledged that a number of the outstanding companies he had identified in his previous books had not endured.¹³

Our own work is about enduring achievement, not everlasting success. Many businesses suffered to some degree or other during the global economic collapse of the past few years, and our business cases too were among some of these. One or two of the sports teams fell back a little after our study was completed, though they rebounded again just as quickly later on. Although the high performers in public education have been the most impressive in maintaining long-term success, even they have not been immune to changes in the systems within which they have had to operate.

Analysis of our extensive database on sustained high performance beyond expectations condensed around six factors of uplift and uplifting leadership that together make up a kind of journey in which all of them play equally significant roles.

What Uplifting Leadership Is NOT

Before we introduce these six factors of uplifting leadership, it's important to be clear what uplifting leadership is *not*. Many all-too-common approaches to improvement and turnaround actually drag people down rather than elevating them to higher levels of performance.

First, uplifting organizations and their leaders in our study **didn't make it their goal to be at the top**. It wasn't their sole purpose to be Number 1, top of their league, or even best in class for their own sake. They were not driven by how high they wanted to go, or what rank they could achieve as their overriding purpose. Interestingly, the nations that have ranked among the highest on international tests of student achievement, such as

Singapore, Finland, and Canada, didn't get there by *wanting* to be Number 1, or even in the top five.[14]

Second, uplifting organizations and their leaders **didn't follow others to the top**. They weren't merely imitating the practices of those organizations that made it there before them, by following the paths they had already taken or by borrowing the strategies that they deployed. Indeed, if you follow the path that others have taken, it is unlikely you will get any further ahead than they have.

Third, uplifting organizations and their leaders **didn't concentrate solely on hitting every milestone along the way**. They didn't just set targets and define Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that their people were required to meet, in order to reach every milestone on the way, on time, and on target. Yes, KPIs can often help team members to attain high performance; however, when they feel under excess pressure to meet these KPIs in situations where goals are unclear or the consequences of failing are punitive, people typically adopt self-defeating practices driven by fear of failure rather than ambitions for success. In business, this often results in focusing efforts on quarterly returns at the expense of long-term strategy.[15] In education, it leads to narrowing the curriculum and constantly preparing children for tests, rather than actually teaching them *how to learn*.[16]

Fourth, uplifting organizations and their leaders **didn't push people to the limit** to deliver results in line with imposed targets. They didn't place undue reliance on relentless top-down pressure to hold people accountable for their desired outcomes. They knew that too much top-down pressure as well as insufficient bottom-up support would hold people down rather than lifting them up.

Last, uplifting organizations **didn't race to the top as quickly as possible** in a feverish attempt to "beat out"

everybody else.[17] Indeed, those who adopt this fast-track strategy find that they expend all their resources too quickly, and wear people out before attaining their goal.

Uplifting Leadership

So, if uplifting organizations and their leaders didn't aim to be top, race to the top, drive people on towards the top, set milestones that people had to reach on the way to the top, or try to get to the top by following others' paths—what *did* they do?

What the organizations and leaders we studied *did* do was to engage in a process of uplifting leadership involving six interrelated factors that compose a journey to improbable success. Each of these factors also exhibits some inner tensions between what people conventionally consider to be "soft" and "hard" parts of leadership and management—tensions that uplifting leadership welcomes and capitalizes upon, rather than avoids or eliminates.

Together, these combined factors create the process of Uplifting Leadership as illustrated in Figure I.1. They also make up the framework of the next six chapters. They are
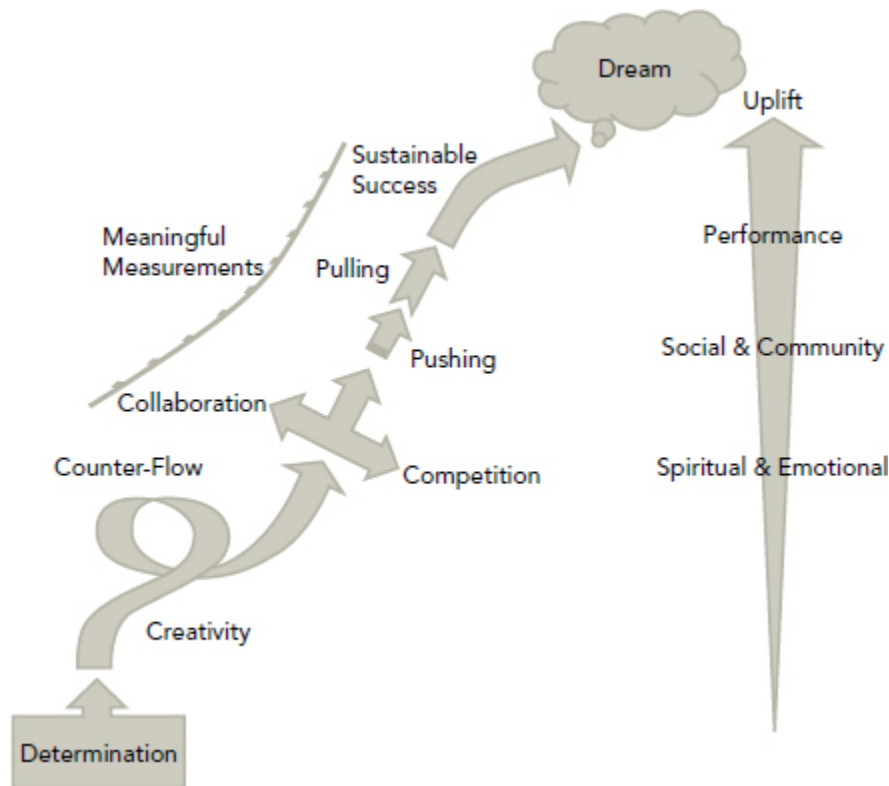
Figure I.1 Uplifting Leadership

- Dreaming with Determination
- Creativity and Counter-Flow
- Collaboration with Competition
- Pushing and Pulling
- Measuring with Meaning
- Sustainable Success

We outline each factor before going into detail in the following chapters.

1. Dreaming with Determination

The journey of uplifting leadership begins by defining a clear and compelling **"dream" or destination**—and determining how we'll get there from an unwanted or

underestimated departure point. This destination also resonates with or revives people's sense of their own best identity. The process requires that we set out for a distant and improbably fantastic destination from a lowly, unlikely, and even stigmatized starting point. It is a compelling journey, necessitated by a moral imperative that is greater than anyone undertaking it—to support or even save the community they serve, or to create something of new or greater value that did not exist before. In this courageous and committed quest, destiny and destinations are connected to what people feel part of, to where they have come from, and to the best of what they have been before. Later, we will see how the incoming CEO of UK-based retail giant Marks & Spencer (M&S) reminded his workforce of the company's historic commitment to quality, price, and value, while becoming a leader in environmental sustainability. This is more than merely rebranding; it's about making a coherent connection between a motivating future and a well-remembered past.

In uplifting leadership, the dream is worth fighting for, and pursuing it is a matter of resolution and persistence as well as imagination and inspiration. Doing so builds momentum and helps ensure the effort does not fall short of the mark. In the quest to achieve and sustain high performance far above normal expectations, progress is typically uneven, adversity is abundant, and obstacles or even enemies have to be surmounted and surpassed. But the memory or prospect of failure is a constant force that deters backsliding and fuels determination to keep on moving forward to fight for a higher purpose rather than taking flight from the fray. Failure is not fated. Rather, it fuels the determination to keep forging ahead. We will see examples of companies who had to fight off rivals in order to reach extraordinary levels of performance—just as global auto-manufacturing giant Fiat Auto is constantly challenged to

do. You may even need to take on opponents as formidable as the Terminator in order to secure justice for the children in the state where he is your governor. But the battle is more of a moral fight for what you believe in than a fight to kill off opposition for its own sake.

2. Creativity and Counter-Flow

Uplifting leadership forges **creative pathways** to reach the desired destination. You won't always be able to take the easiest or most obvious path. In part, creativity consists of flair, fantasy, and playful speculation about alternate possibilities to what already exists.

But the creativity of uplifting leaders is also counterintuitive. It goes against the flow at the risk of provoking doubt and derision. Uplifting leaders see opportunities that their competitors miss. They use opposing forces to their advantage. They do not follow in others' slipstream, but head into the wind to force a change of direction. Dogfish Head Craft Brewery began by putting ingredients in its ales that were inconceivable in mainstream beers; yet it is now one of the most successful independent breweries in the United States. Later, we will see how this success has come about not just from having unusual ingredients, but also from building a culture among the employees that is just more "fun" and "funky" than comparable competitors.

3. Collaboration with Competition

Part of the counterintuitive approach to uplifting leadership is to collaborate and combine with actual and potential competitors. Leaders and members of uplifting organizations know that competition and collaboration are not mutually exclusive alternatives, but coexist in unlikely

combinations. Competition is the driving force behind most team sports, and is particularly intense in the sports-crazed nation of Australia. Yet, as we will show in this book, Australia's national organization for its top sport—cricket—took a business idea from two professors from Harvard and Yale to collaborate with their biggest competitors for financial advantage. We will also see how a private nonprofit company, The Learning Trust, changed the worst school district in England from being an educational no-go zone into a high-achieving system.

4. Pushing and Pulling

Uplifting leadership harnesses the power of the group to push and pull the team to complete their challenging journey together. The secrets of achieving far above normal expectations are to be found in the fellowship of the team. Team members draw themselves and each other forward. If they get knocked down, they spring back up again and lift up those who have fallen around them. They also push each other to keep moving ahead. The team remains true to each other and to the common, inspiring purpose that binds them. We learn more about this kind of team spirit from Ireland's Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) than we do from many professional sports organizations—where players on inflated wages with matching egos have no lasting commitment to each other or to a higher purpose beyond their own personal glory. And we will learn from an unusual multinational chemical company that operates as a commonwealth what needed to be done when teamwork degenerated into groupthink and the pull of the team began to undermine the push for success.

5. Measuring with Meaning

Uplifting leadership identifies indicators of direction and progress for navigating the route and for ascertaining how far an organization or system has come—and still has to go —in reaching its destination. Indications of early success build collective confidence and become a psychological investment for accepting greater struggles in the future. Every horizon that team members glimpse and then reach and every summit they surmount provides hope and optimism to continue the journey ahead. It both encourages and emboldens leaders and their teams to persist with their quest together. Uplifting leadership makes extensive use of data to manage and monitor progress, but also uses data intelligently in ways that fit the values of the organization— and that are *meaningful to* and *genuinely owned by* the people who work there. Our book will show how the "metric-obsessed" leaders at online footwear retailer Shoebuy.com used data intelligently—not just to respond swiftly to customer preferences, but also to add value to customer experience, empower employees to get involved in ongoing website experimentation and design, and complement the personal interactions between Shoebuy's management and customers.

6. Sustainable Success

Uplifting leadership takes off from a solid foundation and proceeds at a rate that does not consume everyone's effort and energy before they achieve the final objective. Leading people far above expectations is not merely initially successful; it must also be sustainable. Progress is rarely swift, and both leaders and team members must take care to avoid exhaustion as well as overreach. Although it can be exciting to *start* something new, uplifting leaders know that it is much harder to keep things going after they have started. Uplifting organizations and their leaders do not

think about sustainability once the first flush of innovation has passed. They plan and prepare for it from the beginning. In this book, we read about start-ups like Shoebuy.com and Dogfish Head Craft Brewery that refused venture capital and turned down fancy equipment because they didn't want to get deep into debt or grow too quickly. We will see how turnarounds and changes that benefit many children in many schools in the poorest boroughs of London or whole countries like Finland do not happen overnight with sudden switches in leadership—but only after years of continuous and unrelenting commitment to stronger working relationships and greater success.

The Uplifting Journey

We derived these six factors of uplifting leadership that make up the journey to higher performance and purposes from our research. At times, our findings resonate with previous explanations of exceptional performance—especially research on inspirational and transformational leadership that highlights the "soft processes" that often underpin dramatically improved performance. These include having compelling visions of where to go, establishing a clear sense of direction of how to get there, and engaging the team in realizing that vision together.[18]

But other findings from our work sometimes depart from or even challenge these "soft skill" explanations in terms of the value they also attribute to old-fashioned hard work; the significance that is attached to hard data; and the continuing importance of bottom-line competition. Table I.1 distinguishes between the two extremes of "hard" and "soft" approaches to turnaround and uplift. We will show that it is not how we choose between these alternatives that defines exceptional success, but how we *combine them into one*. Finding common ground with those who most

seek to oppose you, firing people with dignity, using your metrics to initiate personal phone calls with dissatisfied customers, and making sure that the spirit of innovation does not make guinea pigs of students or valued clients— these elements comprise the ironic essence of uplift.

Table I.1 Approaches to Turnaround and Uplift

Soft	Hard
Dreaming	Persisting
Creating	Challenging
Collaborating	Competing
People-Centered	Data-Driven
Pulling	Pushing
Long-Term	Short-Term

In the organizations we examine, leaders of many kinds enhanced their peoples' performance by uplifting spirits, communities, and even themselves. They embarked on an epic journey together, and kept going by combining skills and qualities of a "soft" and "hard" nature that others might have regarded as mutually exclusive.

Uplifting leadership pursues an improbable dream. People are prepared to fight for it with courage and tenacity. They chart unlikely courses that others have overlooked or even avoided. They use opposing forces to their advantage and employ data and indicators intelligently and in ways that involve the wider workforce or community. People measure their progress toward achieving their goals as a matter of collective responsibility more than top-down accountability. Uplifting leaders push and pull their teams to fulfill their dreams and to further each other's well-being as they move toward their destination. They make allies of their enemies and collaborate with their competitors. And they achieve all

this not by the miracle cures and quick fixes that produce only temporary false recoveries, but by committing to sustainable growth that is relentless rather than reckless.

Let's see now just how uplifting leaders in all our organizations pulled all this together to achieve a lot with a little, create something from almost nothing, and turn failure into success.

Notes

1. R. W. Quinn and R. E. Quinn, *Lift: Becoming a Positive Force in Any Situation* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2009), 2. When we had analyzed all the data from the cases in our project and induced the overall category and explanation of uplift and uplifting leadership, we could not find any literature on uplifting leadership or uplift in the broad sense that we had discovered, but we did come across Quinn and Quinn's very helpful book, *Lift*. We have undoubtedly gained a great deal from the Quinns' aerodynamic explanation of "lift" and its operation as a social psychological force that is able to "move ourselves and others up to greater heights of achievement, integrity, learning, and love, becoming a positive force in any situation." "When we experience these thoughts and feelings," the Quinns say, "we feel uplifted and lift the people around us," 3. Our own work resonates with the Quinns' social-psychological understanding of lift.

Our book builds on and adds to their preceding framework in three ways. First, whereas the Quinns draw on the insight of personal experiences, their consulting work with leaders and organizations, and social psychological literature, we have been able to use a detailed database of fifteen high-performing organizations, and to infer the nature and power of uplifting leadership from this

evidence base. Second, while Quinn and Quinn's work tends to emphasize the positive psychology aspects of being centered on purposes and personal values, empathy with others, and openness to change, we have also found that there are "hard" as well as "soft" qualities of uplift and uplifting leadership such as grim determination, hard work and struggle, confronting and capitalizing on resistance, working with the dynamics of competition as well as collaboration, and combining the personal knowledge of human relationships with the metrics and navigational tools of hard data. Last, as we will see below, uplift is also historically a sociological force that has underpinned the struggle of minorities such as African Americans and the poor to overcome prejudice, disadvantage, and oppression; it is therefore a force for social justice and the betterment of human life and experience as much as an emotional process of personal improvement and interpersonal influence.

2. In his history of the idea and strategy of uplift among African Americans from the early to mid-nineteenth century, Kevin Gaines describes how "the notion of self-help among blacks as building black homes and promoting family stability came to displace a broader vision of uplift as group struggle for citizenship and material advancement." See K. K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 6.

3. Retrieved from www.thekingcenter.org/blog/mlk-quote-week-all-labor-uplifts-humanity-has-dignity-and-importance-and-should-be-undertaken.

4. President Obama was accepted into the prestigious Punahou Academy in Hawaii from grade 5 until his graduation in 1979. In his autobiography, Obama writes

about the "elevating" effect this had on the family. "For my grandparents, my admission into Punahou Academy heralded the start of something grand, an elevation in the family status that they took great pains to let everyone know." B. Obama, *Dreams from My Father* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1995), 58.

5. Some of the founding literature in this area of soft skills is more than a quarter century old. For example, Bernard Bass argued that leaders of organizations that perform beyond expectations articulate a convincing and inspiring vision. They appeal to people's emotional engagements and attachments to their leaders and fellow followers so that everyone will be prepared to transform their habits and work practices in order to reach an entirely new level of performance, see B. M. Bass, *Leadership and Performance Beyond Expectations* (New York: Free Press, 1985).

6. Tom Peters' and Bob Waterman's classic study of leading executives in forty-three Fortune 500 companies highlighted the "soft processes" of excellence that explained outstanding performance—including developing people, having clear and common values, and pursuing innovation through effective leadership, see T. J. Peters and R. H. Waterman, *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best Run Companies* (New York: Grand Central, 1982).

7. J. Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap . . . and Others Don't* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).

8. R. S. Sisodia, D. B. Wolfe, and J. N. Sheth, *Firms of Endearment: How World-Class Companies Profit from Passion and Purpose* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Wharton School, 2007), 4.