SIMPLY BRILLIANT

8 Questions to Help You Do Ordinary Things in Extraordinary Ways

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Who doesn't want to be part of a great success story?

To run, start, or play a leadership role in a company that wins big and changes the course of its industry. To launch a brand that dazzles customers and dominates its market. To be the kind of executive or entrepreneur who creates jobs, generates wealth, and builds an organization bursting with energy and creativity.

These days, in the popular imagination, the quest for success has become synonymous with the spread of disruptive technologies and viral apps, with the rise of radical business models and new-fangled work arrangements. This is the stuff that fuels the dreams of countless engineers and venture capitalists in Silicon Valley, and inspires hard-charging innovators such as Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg and Uber's Travis Kalanick. The "new economy," the story goes, belongs to a new generation of companies and leaders who have little in common with what came before.

But why should the story of success be the exclusive domain of a few technology-driven startups or a handful of young billionaires? The less-noticed story of our time, the huge opportunity for leaders who aim to do something important and build something great, is both simple and subversive: In a time of wrenching disruptions and exhilarating advances, of unrelenting turmoil and unlimited promise, the future is open to everybody.

The thrill of breakthrough creativity and breakaway performance doesn't just belong to the youngest companies with the most cutting-edge technology or the most radical business strategies. It can be summoned in all sorts of industries and all walks of life, if leaders can reimagine what's possible in their fields. Summoning that sense of possibility, though, means answering eight questions that get to the heart of how the best organizations compete and innovate, and how the most effective individuals work and succeed. Your answers to these eight questions, I hope, will help you write a more rewarding story for yourself and the organizations you care about.

1 | Can you develop a definition of success that allows you to stand apart from the competition and inspires others to stand with you?

What struck me about every great organization and leader I've encountered was the sense of purpose they exuded, and how that sense of purpose motivated colleagues, customers, and allies to contribute to their success. Brand strategist Adam Morgan calls it a "lighthouse identity"—a "very particular take" on what organizations are trying to achieve, a "compelling conviction" that their goals are "uniquely theirs" and uniquely important. Venture capitalist John Doerr prefers to invest in entrepreneurs who conduct themselves as "missionaries" as opposed to "mercenaries," founders who strive not just for success, but for "success and significance."

The specifics of the metaphors are less important than the universality of the insight. The organizations and leaders that create the most value are the ones that position themselves as the most alluring alternative to a predictable (albeit efficient) status quo. Vernon Hill, founder of Metro Bank, the fastest-growing financial-services brand in the UK, likes to say, only half in jest, that he operates on the "lunatic fringe" of his industry—but that's precisely why so many employees and customers get so excited about something as mundane as a retail banking. In the United States, Quicken Loans, a financial institution with no brick-and-mortar branches, exudes much the same spirit. When I sat in on ISMs Day, an eight-hour session to celebrate the company's core values, founder Dan Gilbert made a similar point. "We are zealots" about customer service, he told his colleagues, "we are on the lunatic fringe." This not is an argument for lunacy. But it is an argument for uniqueness and intensity: What do you do that other organizations can't or won't do?

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2 | Can you explain, clearly and compellingly, why what you do matters and how you expect to win?

Ultimately, the only sustainable form of leadership is thought leadership—championing an extraordinary set of ideas, not just good-enough products and services. So leaders who think differently tend to talk differently as well. My Fast Company colleague and *Mavericks at Work* coauthor Polly LaBarre has observed that too many leaders communicate with "jargon monoxide"—empty rhetoric, mind-numbing buzzwords, eye-glazing acronyms. But the high-impact leaders I've encountered are as precise with their words as they are creative with their ideas. They understand that they have to explain, in language that is unique to their field and compelling to the outside world, why what they do matters and how they expect to win.

When celebrated social-change activist Rosanne Haggerty challenged her colleagues in the "homeless-industrial complex" to reimagine their strategies for addressing an intractable social problem, she led with a vigorous manifesto that spelled out the principles of her 100,000 Homes Campaign—a game-changing initiative to find permanent housing for 100,000 chronically homeless individuals within a fixed period of time. Only then did she invite others to come along. With precise and provocative language, she and her colleagues explained why they were breaking from convention in their field and how they expected to succeed.

As I got to know Alaska's Southcentral Foundation, which has reinvented healthcare delivery for the state's Alaska Native population, I kept tripping over the term "customer-owners," which holds a sacred place in the organization's vocabulary. "Can't I call people patients?" I pleaded. "Or customers?" But CEO Katherine Gottlieb was adamant. "We want people to live and breathe ownership of their health," she said, and to recognize that they literally owned the health system that delivers care. That's why she and her colleagues talk the way they do. Do you know how to "talk the walk?"

3 | Are you prepared to rethink the conventions of success in your field and the logic of your success as a leader?

The "paradox of expertise" is one of the most dangerous occupational hazards for leaders. In a world being remade before our eyes, leaders who make a difference are the ones who can rethink what's possible with their organizations. Yet the more closely you've looked at a field, and the longer you've been working and succeeding in it, the more difficult it can be to see new patterns, new prospects, new possibilities. The people with the most experience, knowledge, and resources in a particular area are often the last ones to seize opportunities for something dramatically new.

That's why I learn so much from leaders who are not just disrupting their industries, but also disrupting themselves, leaders who, in the words of management thinker and jazz musician Frank J. Barrett, practice the art of "provocative competence." Barrett describes provocative competence as "leadership that enlivens activity and rouses the mind to life." I think of it more simply—as the capacity to reflect on your career, think hard about the future, and recognize that the mindsets and skill sets that got you to where you are probably won't get you to where you want to go.

Robert Wennett, the boundlessly creative mind behind 1111 Lincoln Road, a one-of-a-kind parking structure and civic space in Miami's South Beach, challenged almost every assumption in his field to build his remarkable project. "Everything we do in the garage is not what you expect in a parking garage," Wennett told a video producer who made a short film about the creation of 1111.

"We said to ourselves, 'Let's look at what a parking garage is, and then let's twist every single notion about it.'" In fact, Wennett took the disruptive ideas behind his creation so seriously, and so personally, that he decided to live in the structure he built. "People always ask me, 'Why would you choose to live in a parking garage?'" he cracks. "But the moment they walk in, they never ask again." How do you make sure that what you know doesn't limit what you can imagine?

4 | Are you as determined to stay interested as to be interesting?

The most creative leaders I know are not just the boldest thinkers; they are the most insatiable learners. In his legendary speech on "Personal Renewal," civic-reformer John Gardner explored what it takes for leaders to stay relevant, effective, and engaged as they rose through the ranks. "Not anything as narrow as ambition," he said. "After all, ambition eventually wears out and probably should. But you can keep your zest until the day you die." Translation: As interesting as they may be, the most vital leaders figure out how to remain interested—in big ideas, in little surprises, in the enduring mission of their enterprise and all new ways to bring that mission to life.

Garry Ridge, CEO of WD-40, the fast-growing manufacturer of lubricants, has built an organization filled with what he calls "learning maniacs." He and his colleagues have made an extraordinary commitment to maintain their "zest" for learning and discovery, to stay interested in new ideas about products and purpose even as they work to make the company and its brands more interesting to the outside world. He actually affixes an electronic signature to his emails with the message "Ancora Imparo," Italian for "I am still learning"—a favorite phrase of Michelangelo. "My dream," Ridge says, "is for this organization to be viewed as a leadership-and-learning laboratory for business." What's your strategy for personal renewal?

5 | Do you pay as much attention to psychology and emotion as you do to technology and efficiency?

Nobody is opposed to a good deal—a dollars-and-cents value proposition that makes sense. But what we remember, what we appreciate, what we prize, are gestures of concern and compassion that introduce a touch of humanity into the all-too-bloodless calculations that define so much of modern life. In a world being reshaped by technology, what so many of us crave, what truly stand out, are small gestures of kindness that remind us what it means to be human. As Mother Theresa famously advised: "Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love."

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That's why leaders who aspire to do "great things" never lose sight of the small things that make such a huge impression inside and outside the organization. Pret a Manger, the fast-growing, fast-casual British sandwich shop, works diligently to create an atmosphere of high energy and good cheer that generates what its CEO calls the "Pret buzz." Mercedes-Benz USA, which sells some of the best-designed automobiles on the planet, understands that extraordinary performance is as much about authentic emotion as advanced engineering. "Every encounter with the brand," CEO Stephen Cannon declares, "must be as extraordinary as the machine itself." Which means that all 23,000 people who work for the company or at its dealerships must be "driven to delight" everyone they encounter. Are you trying to move products, or are you trying to move people?

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6 | Do the values that define how your organization works reflect the values proposition around which it competes?

The most successful companies I've studied don't just think differently from everyone else, they care more than everyone else—about the people they serve and the messages they send, about how everyone conducts themselves in a world with so many temptations to cut corners, fall back on procedure, and reward efficiency over empathy. You can't be special, distinctive, and exceptional in the marketplace unless you create something special, distinctive, and exceptional in the workplace. When it comes to "programming your culture," argues high-tech entrepreneur Ben Horowitz, the goal is to be "provocative enough to change what people do every day."

USAA, the financial-services juggernaut that does business with active and retired members of the U.S. military and their families, is so successful in the marketplace because it programs its culture so powerfully in the workplace. New employees eat MREs (Meals Ready to Eat) to get a taste for life on the front lines. They try on military backpacks and Kevlar vests, the better to appreciate the physical burdens soldiers carry with them. They read letters from soldiers home to families, and letters from families off to soldiers. USAA immerses its employees, managers, and executives in the complex lives and emotional needs of the people they serve, so that everyone understands the level of connection to which the company aspires.

Do you know how to elevate and energize how your organization competes, by elevating and energizing how your people behave?

7 | Are you as humble as you are hungry?

If there's one lesson at the heart of the organizations I've studied over the years, a perspective on success shared by leaders with vastly different personalities, it's that exceptional performance begins with extraordinary insights. But that doesn't mean it's your job to come up with those insights. In businesses (and social movements) built on new ideas, generating and evaluating ideas is everybody's business. That's why humility and ambition need not be at odds. Indeed, humility in the service of ambition is the most effective mindset for leaders who aspire to do big things in a world with huge unknowns. As one CEO cited by Harvard Business School leadership guru Linda Hill explained, "My job is to set the stage, not perform on it."

In Downtown Las Vegas, for example, Zappos CEO Tony Hsieh is trying to set the biggest stage imaginable—an entire urban neighborhood of artists, entrepreneurs, geeks, and other creative types, that surround his company's new headquarters. None of these creative types will work for his ecommerce company, but all of them will create "opportunities for serendipitous encounters" that can energize Zappos and fill it with new ideas.

"We prize collisions over convenience," he explained in an overview of the strategic logic behind the Downtown Project. "We want to be the co-working and co-learning capital of the world. Imagine TED or South by Southwest, not as events, but as a lifestyle. "The big bet is to get all these different, diverse groups together in a relatively small space," Hsieh has said, and "make sure they have a bias to collaborate." Can you limit your ego to expand your creative horizon?

8 | Are you prepared to share the rewards of success with all those who had a hand in achieving it?

The "winner-take-all" model of success is not just an unsustainable way to organize a society; it's a lousy way to run a company. How can leaders summon their colleagues to rethink what's possible in their fields, to do things that others won't do, if they can't summon a sense that everyone is in it together? Internet evangelist Tim O'Reilly likes to say that successful companies "create more value than they capture." Put another way: The organizations that inspire the deepest sense of commitment in the ranks, and thus have a chance to make the biggest waves in the market, are the ones whose members get a seat at the table in terms of decision-making and receive a fair share of the value they help to create.

The John Lewis Partnership, one of Great Britain's most admired retailers, is owned 100 percent in trust for its employees. To share the wealth, the Partnership distributes a big chunk of its annual profits in a year-end bonus that is eagerly anticipated inside the company and widely reported on by the media. All 94,000 employees vote in elections for colleagues to represent them in their local workplaces and at the highest levels of strategic deliberations. This full-fledged business democracy, complete with a written Constitution, create a sense of shared fate that has propelled the business forward. "The focus of most companies is to improve their financial capital," argues Jane Burgess, who oversees the democratic processes inside John Lewis. "Our focus is on social capital." Have you figured out how to give everyone in your organization a seat at the table and a piece of the action?

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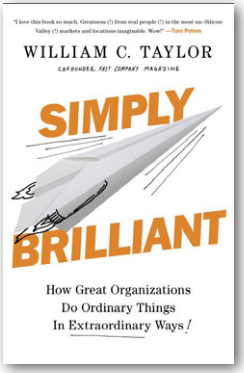
On a recent research visit, I traveled to Euclid, Ohio, a suburb of Cleveland, to spend time with a company I'd been eager to study for years. Lincoln Electric is one of America's great manufacturers, a globally successful producer of welding equipment and cutting machinery founded back in 1895. Lincoln Electric doesn't make many headlines, but it has made history since 1958 by vowing never to lay off a single employee and, since 1934, by sharing a big chunk of its profits with its Cleveland-area employees. In a decidedly unglamorous field, and in the face of recessions, financial collapses, and rapid technology shifts, Lincoln Electric has achieved something unrivaled by recognizing that people are at their most productive when they get a piece of the action and a seat at the table.

As I walked from the corporate offices, after a conversation with the CEO, to tour the company's massive factory complex, I saw a big sign in capital letters with a message from James F. Lincoln, the younger brother of the company's founder, and the visionary behind the company's social system and business model. THE ACTUAL IS LIMITED, the sign read. THE POSSIBLE IS IMMENSE.

That is the spirit of these times. That is the story of success.

What's your story?

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | William C. Taylor is an agenda-setting writer, speaker, and entrepreneur who has shaped the global conversation about the best ways to compete, innovate, and succeed. He is the cofounder of *Fast Company*, which published its premiere issue more than 20 years ago, the bestselling author of *Practically Radical*, and the coauthor of *Mavericks at Work*, a *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* bestseller. His new book, *Simply Brilliant*, is the latest chapter in a two-decade career devoted to challenging conventional wisdom in business and helping business leaders win. Learn more about Bill and the book at williamctaylor.com and follow him on twitter @williamctaylor.

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