

# **SAY IT LIKE YOU MEAN IT**

**AND OTHER WAYS TO  
INSPIRE PEOPLE EVERY DAY**

**Kristi Hedges**

# The conversation is first. Then the spark.

That's how it happens with all of us, and how it happened to me yet again. In this instance, it was actually hundreds of the same conversation, over and over. Until it hit me.

**We have some major misconceptions about what causes inspiration.**

But let me back up a bit and explain. I'm a leadership coach and an author, so as part of my work I speak to audiences in workshops and keynote settings at companies around the world. As a warm-up exercise for my topic, leadership presence, I began posing a simple query: Who inspired you and why?

And here's what happens. As the audience talks among themselves, the room visibly shifts. Faces light up. Eyes shine. The volume rises. As they recall those who have had an impact on them, the people in the room create a groundswell of energy and positivity.

It's a group of people who look ready to tackle anything. I began wondering: how do we get more of this in our lives? In our workplaces? Communities? Homes?

Here's what I discovered. In these discussions, over and over again, people mentioned the same communication behaviors that inspired them. And they are behaviors every one of us already knows how to do.

So why are we not inspiring more often? After all, we can use it.

# Inspiration Right on Time

First, let's state a truth. Inspiration can't be forced. We can't push someone to be inspired. What we can do is create conditions where inspiration is triggered. In other words, we can communicate in inspiring ways that create an offer another may choose to accept.

Consider how much money and effort goes into cultivating inspirational leadership in organizations. Trainings are conducted, grand visions are developed, and cultures are aligned. Yet, our organizations aren't brimming with inspired workers. Gallup's [annual engagement survey](#) shows that 70% of U.S. workers are not engaged at work—a figure that's held steady for 15 years.

Clearly, something's not working. My research shows that what we call "inspirational leadership" isn't what's most likely to inspire people individually. Rather than lofty ideals, we should focus on teaching people how to have conversations, and to communicate intentionally, in ways that create a light in others. We're actually making it harder than it needs to be.

Rather than lofty ideals, we should focus on teaching people how to have conversations, and to communicate intentionally, in ways that create a light in others.

I put the research together in a model called The Inspire Path to help make inspiration accessible to anyone. If we want to be an inspirational force for another person, it's most likely to happen when we communicate in a way that is:

- **Present:** We're focused on the person in front of us, not distracted by the swirl of our day, visibly stressed, or beholden to our agenda. We keep an open mind, and let conversations flow.
- **Personal:** We're authentic and real, and listen generously. We notice what's true about others and help them find their potential.
- **Passionate:** We infuse energy, and manage this as one of our greatest tools. We blend logic and emotion, and show conviction through our presence.
- **Purposeful:** We are willing to have courageous discussions about purpose, and role model how to live into our own.

You may be thinking that these sound like simple concepts in the abstract, but actually adopting these behaviors may not be as easy. That's definitely true, though just knowing what to do is a huge first step.

More good news: I've found in my research that you don't have to incorporate all of the actions in the Inspire Path model—a few key communication behaviors go a long way. So if you want to be someone who lights a fire in others, whether they are your coworkers, team members, neighbors, or kids—here's a place to start. Below I've outlined five power inspiration moves that lift people up.

# Inspiring Behavior #1: Stop talking.

When we imagine what inspirational communication might be, our first thoughts go to talking. We may try to speak cogently to grab attention, or craft a pithy argument others will adopt. Here's a first surprise. Based on research I commissioned with Harris Poll, listening was the #1 rated inspirational behavior. That's right, we're not inspired as much when someone talks *at* us, as we are when someone listens to us.

If you think about your own life, consider how good it feels to have someone truly listen to you. Listening, in fact, feels a lot like love. And deep, focused listening feels like understanding. But not all listening is equal. We can hear but not listen at all. The “father of listening research,” University of Minnesota Professor Ralph Nichols, spent his career studying listening patterns. He argued that our main problem in listening is that we have a speaking/processing gap that gets in our way—our brains can process far more quickly than someone can talk. It's during this gap that our mind wanders, we jump to conclusions, pass judgment and take mental off-ramps from the conversation.

To be an inspiring listener, we have to learn to listen fully, with an open mind. One way to do this is to shift how you listen. The next time you have a meaningful conversation, try to shift your listening one of these ways:

## **FROM → TO**

Listening to judge → Listening out of curiosity

Listening to what you want to hear → Listening to what the other person needs to say

Listening for facts → Listening to the whole person



## Inspiring Behavior #2: Pay attention.

It won't come as a surprise that ignoring someone is a sure fire way to leave them uninspired. Yet, we have important conversations all the time while we're distracted and unfocused. Just consider how many times you've been in a leader's office when he or she is checking emails, picking up a phone, or half-paying attention to what you're saying. In many situations, it's the normal culture of the company.

Much has been written about the deleterious impact of electronic devices on our relationships. We know enough to try to combat it by surreptitiously checking our phones rather than putting them in front of our faces. But it goes deeper than that. One Virginia Tech [study](#) found that just the appearance of a phone on the table during a conversation—even while silenced—reduces empathy.

If we want to be inspiring, we need to get away from distractions, electronic or otherwise, and singularly focus on the conversation in front of us. If we don't have the mindshare to do that, we should find another time when we can show up ready to be fully there.

If we want to be inspiring, we need to  
get away from distractions, ... and singularly  
focus on the conversation in front of us.

## Inspiring Behavior #3: Call out potential.

The other day I was describing the thesis of my latest book, *The Inspiration Code*, to a colleague. His eyes lit up. “I get it!” he exclaimed. He described his high school English teacher who told him he had an unusual talent as a writer. Her comment propelled him to spend his morning bus ride each day fine-tuning his essays to sharpen his skills. He kept his love of writing, eventually earning a law degree. Because of what she saw in him, his view of himself forever changed.

I’ve heard more stories like this than I could count. Bosses who noticed a particular talent. Friends who called out a quality they admired. And countless coaches and teachers who inspired others to be, and do, more.

What these stories all have in common is that people who inspire us notice and build our potential. Just the act of vocalizing what they see in us, in a true and authentic way, has an impact on us. We may carry their words around for months, years, or our entire lives.

If we want to be inspiring, we can tell someone their potential: honestly, specifically, and graciously.

We all see potential in those around us. We notice it, and talk about it frequently with other people. *I'm so envious of Ben's command of a room when presenting his ideas. Sarah is one of the most creative people I know.*

The person we're least likely to mention it to is the one who actually has the potential! If we want to be inspiring, we can tell someone their potential: honestly, specifically, and graciously. People too often forget their own unique talents. Having someone take the time to tell us is a powerful reminder, and can open our own minds to what's possible for ourselves. It doesn't have to be said with flowery language, try stating one of these phrases:

- I see \_\_\_\_\_ in you.
- You're always good at \_\_\_\_\_.
- I'm proud of you for \_\_\_\_\_.
- I've seen how you've grown/progressed.
- Let me share what I see is possible for you.

## Inspiring Behavior #4: Say it like you mean it.

People who inspire us are real. They don't script their words, put on false airs, or try to be perfect. They get through to us because they're authentic. Their words seep in because we can see that they mean them.

Rather than holding themselves above us, inspiring people talk to us face-to-face, on the level, shoulder to shoulder. Even if we hold them in the highest regard, they treat us as if we are worthy of their attention. While we may admire them, they are never out of reach.



Compare this with the common cultural myth that to be professional, we show stoicism, unflapability, and flawless execution. Emotion, even passion, can seem to be qualities to tightly control—or even quash.

To be more inspirational, you need to let any well-honed uber-professional persona go. We connect with people on emotional terms. We want to see what they actually care about. Conveying true emotion allows other people to share it.

One way to think about this is the concept of embodied cognition. This is the idea that what we feel shows up in our bodies, and what our bodies show affects how we feel. It's a natural loop. Instead of trying to outsmart it—I won't show how nervous I am!—we're more inspiring when we learn to ride it.

This can be especially difficult when we're unsure of a conversation, and certainly when it's in front of a large group. Instead of fighting your emotions, try out a situational intention. Take a few moments and consider what emotion you want to convey with your message. Do you want the other party to feel excited, sad, assured, urgent? Then mentally consider what that emotion looks like in your body. By making this mental map, you are far more likely to show up that way naturally in your conversation.

Know what you mean, and what you say will convey it.

# Inspiring Behavior #5: Talk purpose.

It's hard to imagine any topic as inspiring as our purpose. As we go about the busyness of our days, we rarely lift our heads up and question why we're doing what we're doing. In the midst of doing, we seldom consider if our activity is leading anywhere.

Having someone engage us in these deeper questions can lead to some serious inspiration. However, this can feel like a topic that's too large for a typical workplace touch-base conversation or hallway chat.

I have heard a lot about purpose-filled conversations as I've spoken to people about the inspiring people in their lives. No question—we can be deeply moved by someone who is willing to step into this space with us as either a thought partner or a guide.

But I've also discovered that these conversations are so needed that we don't have to go big or go home. Sure, the biggest purpose, our life purpose, is a good topic to explore. But it's also inspiring to talk about a middle spot, or contextualized purpose. This type of purpose hits upon the meaning for where we are at this moment in our lives and in our careers. It helps to transcend what we're doing in the here and now, and to find the patterns that enable this work to take us further in our journey, to find enhanced enjoyment, to tap into our passion, and to be in service to a larger cause. It's our own personal why: why we are doing what we're doing at this point in time? Given the choices we have before us, why is this important to us?

Being a guide to another to put their efforts into context to their greater goals for themselves helps connect dots that may otherwise go unseen. For example:

- A leader in a chaotic culture determines she's in the biggest learning situation of her career.
- A manager in a stagnant job realizes his main purpose is maximizing family time with his kids through their teen years.
- A new professional decides she'll use her unfulfilling entry-level job to better figure out her true interests and talents.
- A CEO uses the power of his position to tackle a larger social cause.
- An executive with a controlling boss learns to rise above the negativity to build higher-level relationships to further her career.

You may be game for engaging in this type of sense making but still wonder, hmm, how would I actually bring that up? Here's one way. Based on research around motivational theory, several themes emerge that help people feel most engaged. To guide conversations toward purpose, ask:

- What are you good at doing?
- What do you enjoy doing?
- What do you find useful about what you do?
- How can your efforts now carry you forward to the future?
- How can you cultivate the kind of relationships that you find fulfilling?

You'll find that people are so ready to be in this conversation that one question will flower in multiple ways.

*"A mighty flame followeth a tiny spark." —Dante*

Some people may feel that they're busy, have other priorities or don't feel quite right about being inspirational. To them, the question is why?

To you, however, the question is why not?

I know this because you chose to read this manifesto. You inspire because you can. Anyone who cares enough to connect in a meaningful way has an impact. We often don't know the effect we've had on others when we were simply trying to reach out, encourage, and empathize. Only the other person knows the true effect and where it leads. It's as if we're all in a giant game of pinball, where we bounce off each other. Sometimes the bounce is small, and we go on our way barely touched. Other times, however, we get a big bounce that ricochets through our lives and changes us in ways we couldn't have predicted.

My hope is for more of the meaningful bounces of inspiration in the world, in whatever domain we can get it—work or personal, public or interpersonal. When we're a force for others to find purpose or ignite their passion, or give the gift of our full presence and connect personally, then we are part of a virtuous cycle. We create a ripple effect of positivity, confidence, excitement, agency, and possibility.

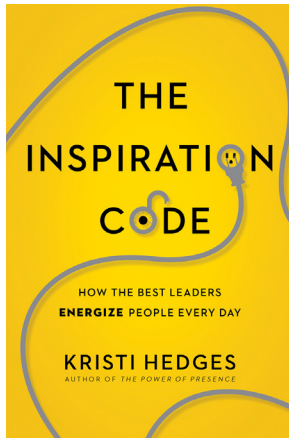
**Inspired people make big things happen.**

**Sometimes they change the world.**

**Because, why not? 📖**



# Info



## Ready to dig deeper into this idea? Buy a copy of *The Inspiration Code*.

Want copies for your organization or for an event?

We can help:

[customerservice@800ceoread.com](mailto:customerservice@800ceoread.com) 800-236-7323

### About the author

Kristi Hedges is a nationally recognized expert in leadership communications, and coaches CEOs and senior executives at leading global companies. Her workshops and keynotes have reached thousands of leaders from the Fortune 50, to the U.S. government to nonprofits. Kristi writes about leadership for Forbes.com and is regularly featured in publications such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Financial Times*, *Entrepreneur*, BBC, Chief Learning Officer and CNBC. She is a teaching faculty member of the Georgetown University Institute for Transformational Leadership. For additional tools and resources, to stay in touch, and for more information about Kristi's executive coaching, keynotes, or group workshops, please visit [thehedgescompany.com](http://thehedgescompany.com).

800  
CEO  
read

Powered by the love  
and tender care  
of 800-CEO-READ,  
ChangeThis is a

vehicle for big ideas to spread.  
Keep up with the latest  
developments in business  
books and ideas at  
[800ceoread.com](http://800ceoread.com)

This document was created  
on June 14, 2017 and is  
based on the best information  
available at that time.

The copyright of this work  
belongs to the author,  
who is solely responsible for  
the content. This work is  
licensed under the Creative  
Commons Attribution-  
NonCommercial-NoDerivs  
License. To view a copy  
of this license, visit Creative  
Commons. Cover image  
from Adobe Stock.

### Share this

Pass along a copy  
of this manifesto  
to others.



### Subscribe

Sign up for e-news  
to learn when  
our latest manifestos  
are available.

