



# LEADING THE UNLEADABLE

## How to Manage Mavericks, Cynics, Divas and Other Difficult People

*Alan Willet*

Reviewed by David Hanlon

### About Alan Willet

The son of a dairy farmer, Alan began his career as a software engineer and quickly moved into management. However, his passion for learning how organisations and individuals work began while growing up on the farm: while other farms around them struggled, his father's farm consistently won awards such as "best dairy of the year."

Alan was fascinated by how one farm could consistently achieve better results than another. The difference he learned was in his father's mindset about farming as well as how he organised the farm to do the work.

### Structure of the book

The book is organised into four sections as follows:

#### Part 1: The Call to Exceptional Leadership

The highlight of this section is the seven elements of the mindset required to achieve this level.

#### Part 2: The Leader in Action: spotting trouble, dealing with trouble

This section provides guidance on how to detect trouble, including methods to overcome the blind spots on your radar. It then prescribes practical steps to dealing with troublesome people and some useful techniques for follow-up to maintain standards.

#### Part 3: The Leader in Action: preventing trouble

This section emphasises the importance of setting clear and compelling goals, and gives some useful hints on how to set expectations for excellence on an ongoing basis.

#### Part 4: Leading Leaders

This section addresses the unique challenges and potential of leading people who lead people themselves, and growing these leaders in the process. It also provides advice on strengthening self-leadership and taking ownership of your leadership.

Willet's training as a software engineer shows through and each chapter includes:

- "Methods", techniques and tips based on experience and research;
- Decision criteria and considerations; and
- Reflection points to encourage you to further explore the concepts and within you own context and experience.

"Leaders have one obligation above all. Whether they are managing an entire company or a team, a division, a single project or simply a meeting, they must focus on the group, not the individual, and if an individual is hurting the group, that person must be brought back into the fold or cut out altogether."

*Alan Willet*



## 1. The call to exceptional leadership

This section has a lot of great tips and insights. Below I have summarised the key points of Chapter 3: *The mindset to Lead the Unleadable*.

1. Appreciate diversity. Good leaders encourage multiple ways of thinking and innovation.
2. Start with the belief that everyone has good intentions. This can be particularly hard for some of you to accept. (and by the way, this doesn't mean you like, accept or tolerate the behaviour). However, those who do accept this premise, can bridge divides more quickly and bring the "unleadable" into the fold with greater success.
3. Accept reality but don't let reality define you. Summed up as: relentless pursuit of seeing reality, accepting reality and, based on this, dealing with reality in a way that sets the highest possible standards. Those who don't accept the reality of a situation are usually those who are constantly whinging or making excuses.
4. Set the high bar for excellence that people desire. Know that excellence is achievable, have courage and set the bar high. Support this with investment and belief in your people so they can learn how.
5. Understand the power of gelled teams. The exceptional leader is always looking for ways to create teams of people in which the team can figure out how to address the trouble without management involvement. As you grow as a leader, the troubles you and your organisation encounter will not diminish, but as your skills grow at creating the desired culture, the number of times you must personally get involved will greatly diminish.
6. Treat trouble as information-rich data. If there is trouble occurring in any of the things you lead, it is important information — not just about the actual incident or the actual trouble; it also contains information on the process, the people involved, the culture you are creating through your leadership and you.
7. Own your leadership power. The meaning of this is simply that you understand and own all the keys of the mindset of leading the unleadable. It means that when you have setbacks in making those mindsets your first response (and there will be setbacks), you don't let the setback become a norm: you get back on track. It means that you don't let the trouble you have to deal with define your response; you take ownership of your response. You take ownership of your leadership process and the results.

"Your role is not to get things done, although you are absolutely accountable when things don't get done. Your role is not to get things done through others either, although that is how most leaders start.

**The real role of exceptional leaders is to create a culture where people do extraordinary things."**

*Alan Willet*

## 2. The leader in Action: spotting trouble, dealing with trouble

### Fine tune your radar for trouble

How good is your radar for trouble? For example, how often do the following types of trouble occur in your workplace or within your team:

- Quality issues which should have been spotted when they occurred not later;
- Jobs "promised" to be completed by a date, only to find out later they haven't been; and
- Conflict within team/s causing productivity issues and higher staff turnover.



And the question is: not how often do these situations occur rather, how often do you find out about them well after there was a first indication of trouble?

**Method 1: Talk to people. More importantly, listen to people**

The most obvious way to be able to spot trouble is to be there when the situation is beginning or at least right there when it happens. Willett very strongly pushes the need to be connected or “having your ear to the ground”. And the purpose is twofold:

- To be seen as being available to help solve/resolve issues to ensure the achievement of objectives; and
- To build trust in a way that people will come to you without fear about difficult situations.

Overwhelming, the most important actions you can do as a leader are:

- Listen, listen and listen
- Ask meaningful questions
- Seek their opinions before giving yours
- Follow-up

**Method 2: Pay attention to differences**

Often, the first indicator that something is wrong is a feeling that something is different from previous experiences. The key is to pay attention to that feeling and investigate whether your feeling is meaningful or not. Is there something that needs your attention? Notice the differences. Ask about them. The answers could be very interesting.

**Method 3: Look beyond the first level of data**

Ask:

1. Is the data giving us the real answer?
2. Is the data accurate? and
3. Given this data, what actions should be taken?

People often have a story that goes with data, especially if that data doesn't indicate good news about the project. And although the story gives a great context to the data, the data is still important.

## **Manage your blind spots**

Blind spots can occur in all of us and as leaders people will withhold the truth from us for a wide range of reasons.

One area I felt Willett has ignored in this section is what is referred to as psychological bias, also known as cognitive bias, which is the tendency to make decisions or take action in an illogical way. The five most common are listed here.

“As a leader you are different from the team and you will be treated differently....the higher you go in the organisation, the less access you will have to the full story and all of its details.”

*Alan Willet*

1. Confirmation Bias happens when you look for information that supports your existing beliefs, and reject data that go against what you believe;
2. Anchoring is the tendency to jump to conclusions – that is, to base your final judgment on information gained early on in the decision-making process;
3. Overconfidence Bias when you place too much faith in your own knowledge and opinions. You may also believe that your contribution to a decision is more valuable than it actually is;
4. Gambler's Fallacy you expect past events to influence the future;



- 5. Fundamental Attribution Error is the tendency to blame others when things go wrong, instead of looking objectively at the situation.

Psychological bias is the opposite of common sense and clear, measured judgment. It can lead to missed opportunities and poor decision-making.

**Giving correction**

This is the hard bit!!!! How many of us know, we should take action, but avoid it because of conflict.

1. Preparation. The best way to manage an uncomfortable message is to be crystal clear. The four steps Willett suggests are:
  - a. Your emotions: recognise how you are feeling (angry, frustrated, anxious) and see yourself moving past these;
  - b. Don't make assumptions or negative judgments about the person;
  - c. Prepare your statement – what you are going say; and
  - d. Make time to focus on this with the person/s.
  
2. Delivering the message. The following steps are well worth considering by all.
  - a. Meet in private (we say, public praise, private criticism);
  - b. Deliver your message without beating around the bush.....and deliver with empathy;
  - c. Wait for a response;
  - d. Listen to understand (not with judgment or preconceived arguments);
  - e. Discuss. Reflect both on the facts and the emotions. This is not a place to argue;
  - f. Set your expectations;
  - g. Ask for action steps and gain agreement; and
  - h. Summarise.

**Decision time – improve or remove**

Remembering, your most important responsibility is to the team as a whole, Willett provides a nice set of criteria for assisting in your decision-making which is provided below. Using this matrix assists in a more objective decision rather than a reactive or emotive one.

		-2	-1	0	+1	+2
1	Has the individual shown the willingness and ability to take critical input and use it for self-improvement?					
2	How well liked is the individual by the rest of the organisation?					
3	Is the individual able to raise the ability of others through collaboration?					
4	Do the technical skills and experience of the individual fit the needs of the team today?					
5	Do the skills and experience of the individual fit the needs of future projects?					
6	How likely will you be able to acquire the skills this individual has from outside the organisation in a timely manner? This is a critical factor.					



### 3. The leader in action: preventing trouble

#### Clarity on why

Clear goals and objectives that state why something is important for our:

- Customers (DIFOT, traceability, etc)
- Organisation (costs, etc)
- People (safety, etc)

People respond far better to inspiration and positives rather than negatives or not doing something.

#### Setting expectations of excellence

Far too often, excellence is set at the beginning, at a strategy meeting etc and then the pressure comes on and shortcuts occur.

The culture of your organisation is set by the everyday interactions you have, including:

1. Formal expectations of excellence. Do you have a sign or regular review that says "Quality is No 1"??;
2. How you start any job. Do you start with excellence in mind or a rush to get it finished?
3. Review. Do you regularly review each job against excellence?;
4. Meetings. Are your meetings run well, in the way you want jobs run?;
5. Bad news. How do you receive bad news (if with anger, its likely you will get less of it)?
6. Rewards and recognition. Is excellence regularly rewarded?; and
7. Training. Are you investing enough to ensure your people are skilled to deliver excellence?

#### Meetings

Meetings in most organisations are poorly run so much so that people hate them. Do your meetings:

- Start on time?;
- Finish on time?;
- Stay on topic?;
- Have clear outcomes for all?
- You leave energised?

If you can answer yes to all the above you are the exception. It is your job to take responsibility for the meetings you run.

#### Exceptional starts lead to exceptional results

Starting a project poorly leads to having to do significant re-work later and being constantly behind expectations of schedule and quality. In addition to resulting in constant stress for the project team, projects that start poorly very seldom fully "win" by delivering all expectations on time or early and delighting both team members and customers.

"When the formal expectations of excellence match the daily interactions, a powerful foundation is formed that enables the whole organisation to rise to expectations of excellence. What is happening is that the leaders are not just creating expectations of excellence, they are consciously forming a culture of excellence that makes the desired behaviors of leaders and team members a natural experience of how they do work. This is the key to preventing trouble from occurring in the first place."

**"Do not reward the sweat. Reward the results."**

*Alan Willet*



Four mindsets:

1. A commitment to excellent results. You may think you do this, however frequently is not articulated right from the beginning from the top down and, worse, that commitment is not reinforced when something adverse happens;
2. A focus on realistic expectations. Far too often, targets are not realistic which puts pressure on No 1 above;
3. No is a powerful positive word. A lack of willingness to say (or accept) no derails No 1 above; and
4. A commitment to a learning journey of starting well. Have your teams committed to starting with excellence every time.

## 4. Leading leaders

### Set your specific expectations for leadership excellence

Willett provides his own personal expectations and challenges us to develop our own. His are:

1. Make the noble purpose of the organisation your own. It is important that you as a leader of leaders engage your team in the purpose of the organisation and in the projects that contribute to the success of the organisation;
2. Take the long view. You must be able to articulate the direction in which your organisation is heading show how the successes of today will contribute to that;
3. Grow the talent of your organisation. Growing the talent within your organisation is important for tomorrows successes;
4. Expect to be challenged. And encourage it;
5. Expect conflict. And manage it to be constructive and non-abusive; and
6. Get things done. You are still responsible for the overall success of the group you manage.

### Trouble spotting – the first 100 days

Interviews and references checks only go so far and, if stepping up internally, the new role will often show up traits not visible previously. Willett suggests the following to help weed out potential disasters in the longer term.

1. Ask to review the strengths and weaknesses of the division they manage;
2. Start them with a difficult challenge; and
3. Engage them in conversations about the most difficult challenges they are likely to face

### Leader, lead thyself: exceptional self-leadership

Busyness and stress are unfortunately taken as badges of honour in today's leadership world. Unfortunately, they can result in leaders not truly being in control of their lives with burnout a common symptom.

Good leaders take control of their week and they deliver with:

- Passion
- Competence
- Value to others

As managers, and leaders, your obligation is to the group as a whole. Every time that there is a troublesome person or situation, it is an opportunity to help someone grow— and perhaps even yourselves. It is an opportunity to transform the troublesome to the tremendous.



## **Summary**

*LEADING the Unleadable* is a worthwhile book for leaders at all levels.

I think it fair to say that we have all experienced the effects of poor leadership, where we see team members frustrated and not performing to their potential. And similarly, on the other side of this, where good team performers have struggled to lead a team.

It is particularly useful for emerging leaders who wish to impact positively on their teams and their organisations. Willett provides useful techniques and guidance to help them understand their effects on others and how to make the choice to adjust their approach to better serve not just the team's goals, but their own personal values. These are the kinds of changes that are more likely to be meaningful and durable, and which can bring tremendous value to both the individual and their organisation.

## **Availability**

*LEADING the Unleadable* is available in good bookstores and in e-book.

## **The reviewer**

David Hanlon is a Director with The Right Mind International Pty Ltd. He works in the area leadership training and organisational alignment.