Zealots Rising

The Case for Practical Visionaries

"Revolutionaries" and "change agents" can keep companies vibrant. But to drive profitable growth, now and tomorrow, you need leaders who can create value, align people to value, and deliver value.

Illustration by David Bowers

by Paul Branstad
and Chuck Lucier

When executives talk about the frenetic pace of their lives, they are typically reacting to the multiple demands placed on them in three arenas at once. They are simultaneously called upon to create value (to produce strategic innovation in products, processes, and business models); to align people to value (to lead and motivate change and to stimulate people to become higher-performance "human engines"); and to deliver value (to capture the profits and other results that are promised by every strategy). Even the most admired leaders find it difficult to pursue all three imperatives at the same time. Classically, managers tend to cycle among these goals, pursuing a sequential agenda — innovating a new approach to their industry, then strengthening operational excellence to implement their new

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approach, and finally (after the new way of business reaches maturity), restructuring to achieve the same results with more efficiency, before starting the cycle over again.

The days of sequential focus are gone. In the current business environment, sustainable corporate success can occur only when all three of these essential management tasks become interconnected. Yet it is not obvious how to accomplish this. That is why, over the past four years, we have sought out examples of companies that seem to have found a viable approach, at least in some of their businesses, to managing these three imperatives together. Again and again in the most successful business units or product lines, we see a particular type of individual emerge prominently who can lead this charge. Our name for these individuals is "zealots." This is their moment.

The Zealot's Vision

Zealots are practical visionaries. Placed in charge of the bottom line in a particular business endeavor, they come across to others as visibly passionate about achieving results today, creating a superior business for tomorrow, and continuously forging development opportunities for their people. They are, in the truest sense, zealous. That word, which derives from the Greek for fervor and rivalry, has two connotations. The original Biblical-era zealots were members of outlaw bands, often at odds with local rulers. Their passion often translated into martyrdom, as it did at Masada.

In a corporation, however, the word can carry a different meaning: a person with enough passion for an endeavor to put oneself, but not the enterprise, at risk. Zealots in corporate life are those people who are willing to make themselves uncomfortable in the pursuit of a larger purpose, and to cause other people to be uncomfortable as well, all in the service of transformation and growth.

Even in a company full of "revolutionaries" or "change leaders," zealots are noteworthy individuals. Most executives and managers understand the value of zealotry in principle, but very few of them are predisposed to put it into practice, and even fewer have the corporate support and infrastructure they need to truly make zealotry pay off. Instead, line managers are generally kept too busy to attend to all of the concerns of an effective zealot. The result: Large mainstream corporations may deliver value effectively through incremental improvement, but they fail to create value fast enough. New dot-com companies set forth bold strategies that might create value, but that lasts only until the first round of venture financing is depleted, because the dot-coms ignore the operational and human-resource issues needed to align people to the new strategy. And companies known for being great places to work often fail to deliver the value needed to satisfy their shareholders.

Despite rhetoric about empowered managers and skunkworks, the task of creating value in most companies today starts and ends at the top of the hierarchy, with the CEO and the strategic planning staff. Business-unit managers are responsible for delivering value, and everyone delegates the task of alignment, as much as possible, to specialized human resources and organizational development staffs. The result: HR staff and "learning organization" proponents emphasize alignment; IT, marketing, and finance staffs emphasize value capture; and strategic planners look for new ways to create value. The capabilities of the whole system remain unexploited, for as soon as any part of the task is delegated, the opportunity to foster zealotry is lost.

To be sure, the concept of a charismatic, visionary individual who leads successful business innovation, inspires people, and delivers results is not entirely new. Both company-founding entrepreneurs such as Henry Ford and Steve Jobs and business "heroes" such as General Electric Company CEO Jack Welch play the role of zealot. But the definition of zealot involves more than a set of personal characteristics. It is a role that can be established in any business suitable for individuals with varied temperaments.

It is also necessary. Today's environment — marked by rapidly evolving technology, blurring industry boundaries, and rising expectations of shareholders and employees — demands that organizations transform themselves, over and over again. We believe that the most effective way a company can transform itself, along with the industry around it and the general economy, is through harnessing the power of zealots.

The Power of Zealotry

In hierarchical terms, a zealot is a manager high enough in the organization to have profit-and-loss responsibility for a significant part of the business. That manager could be the CEO, especially in companies with less than $1 billion in revenues. Most Fortune 500 companies are too large to depend upon a single zealot. In these companies, zealots usually are line managers with P&L responsibility; the CEO may or may not be a zealot as well, but he or she must certainly be skilled at identifying and mobilizing the talents of zealots.

In personal terms, the zealot is an independently motivated individual with an overwhelming sense of commitment to the organization's success, who can conceive, develop, *and implement* new business ideas at an order of magnitude of scale, scope, or synthesis beyond the current business. In temperament, zealots may embody (or feign) vigor, charisma, and creativity, but zealots are not just charismatic leaders or idea generators. They are choreographers of implementation, bringing improvements in the business to the bottom line and reconciling tomorrow's imperative for transformation with today's need for performance. To accomplish these things, zealots must be accountable for business results, demonstrating the discipline to scrupulously deliver the kind of bottom-line performance that often seems beyond the capacity of a leader who merely inspires. If they are not CEOs themselves, zealots enjoy the legitimacy of the CEO's approval. They also know how to break out of the organization's culture to drive necessary change.

At heart, our perception of zealots represents a theory about the nature of organizational creativity. This theory suggests that, first of all, creativity has become the primary generator of corporate growth and will remain so as long as investors expect (and can get) 15 to 20 percent returns. Second, creativity is a multifaceted talent, and each facet of the talent makes the other ones stronger.

We estimate that there are several thousand zealots, in key positions in the most successful companies in the world, with highly disproportionate responsibility for those companies' successes. Compiling a list is difficult, because zealotry is not indexed anywhere; you cannot hunt for *zealots* in Hoover's databank or Bloomberg's library of news clips. And although a few zealots are highly visible (think of Lee Iacocca when he headed the Mustang launch at Ford Motor Company, or Robert Wright, who as the new president of GE's NBC unit forced a complacent broadcast network to embrace cable and the Internet), most of them prefer to keep low public profiles. They know that business celebrity would make it harder for them to lead a part of the company to dramatic results. They leave the spotlight to the CEO.

Inside the company, however, everyone knows who the zealots are. We keep our own informal list, based in part on stories we hear or contacts we have made. One member of the list is the Enron Corporation's Joe Hirko, the former CEO of Enron Broadband Services Inc., a new, highly competitive broadband telecommunications business that piggybacks on the parent company's energy and gas infrastructure to establish and maintain fiber-optics channels. The list also includes Dave Marsing, the Intel Corporation vice president who reoriented both human and technical processes at the company's largest fabrication plant. Another zealot is Tony White, the CEO of the PE Corporation (formerly the Perkin-Elmer Corporation), a computer and optics manufacturer. Building on Perkin-Elmer's genetic analysis technologies, Mr. White established the Celera Genomics Corporation, the company that first sequenced the human genome.

Anatomy of a Zealot

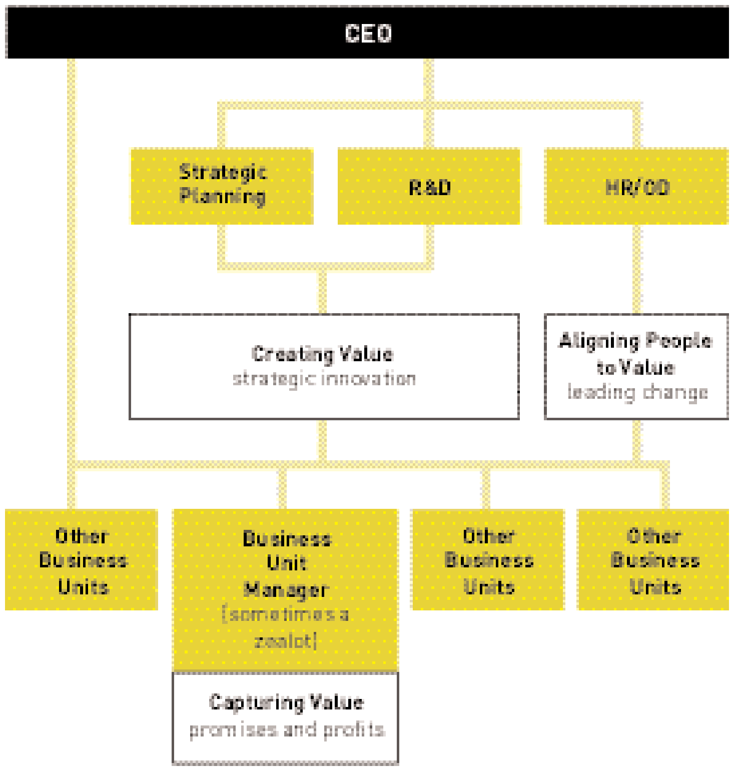
These individuals, and more, work in a wide variety of industries; but they have become associated with the kind of dramatic success that people associate with the New Economy. As different as they may be temperamentally, as distinct as their businesses are, they are alike in their ability to see their roles synergistically. Consider, then, the three basic components of that role, the reasons they are generally kept separate (see Exhibit 1), and the ways in which zealots are putting them back together:

1. Creating value. The pressure for strategic innovation has never been greater. For one thing, there are today few clear boundaries separating one industry from another, or one region from another, so new competitors continually emerge from unexpected places. Wal-Mart finds itself competing with Amazon.com one day, Home Depot the next, and Ralph Lauren the third. At the same time, as the most effective organizations have proven that 15 to 20 percent shareholder returns are possible, investors who were happy with 6 percent a decade ago will not settle for less than three times this today. To meet these new standards, it is not enough to improve operations. Managers thus find themselves continually called upon to carve out new strategic territories for products and services in quickly evolving industries, and to initiate brand-new ways of doing business.

A few companies, such as BP (formerly BP Amoco), have developed an ethic for creating value by continually asking, "Can we take what we do and do it in a radically different way?" Not long ago, for example, BP created a new internal network for trading marine oil, changing its former top-down allocation method to a stock market–like free exchange. Similarly, GE's ethic of creating value empowers zealots like former NBC executive Tom Rogers, who was charged with setting up the new cable news operation, CNBC. Among Mr. Rogers's innovations was the Olympics Triplecast — a hugely expensive arrangement for wall-to-wall coverage on network, pay-per-view, and cable TV. Although it lost some $100 million, Mr. Rogers was not punished; instead, his zealotry was recognized, and he subsequently pursued and developed the deal with Microsoft that led to the influential MSNBC cable channel and Web site. Today, as CEO of Primedia Inc., Mr. Rogers is driving zealotry down into the business units of that company.

Such bold moves don't result from conventional strategic plans. Zealots resist codifying their strategies; a

Exhibit 1: **A Traditional Organizational Structure**



codified strategy, all too often, becomes an end in itself. To a zealot, the strategy must be reinvented on a regular basis. Zealots have critical images in mind of the evolution of their businesses — not just incrementally, but in radical terms, especially for the upcoming couple of years. Based on those images, they are willing to place bets, and to invest all the personal capital they have in giving their strategy a fair chance for success.

Zealots believe the success of their strategy depends less on the power of the idea than on their ability to implement it effectively and quickly. Gary Hamel recognizes this in his call for corporate "revolutionaries." But strategic planning and operational change fall to zealots not just because they have a revolutionary temperament, but because the organizational structure has affirmed their ability to keep moving in new directions. A typical zealot changes the business model repeatedly, and with it, the way he or she does business.

2. Aligning people to value. The skills and capabilities needed for high-performance operations have crossed a threshold of complexity during the last decade. Any significant business operation involves five or six vastly different lines of technology and an equally sophisticated set of human capabilities, from R&D to marketing to purchasing. This calls for a continual emphasis on aligning people to value: improving the recruitment, development, and redeployment of the people who work for the company, and effectively motivating them toward productive change. The task is all the more difficult in an environment in flux; zealots must have a gut feel for the value of their people today, and a plan for developing and orienting them to best suit the (probably completely different) business environment of tomorrow.

At the end of the day, a zealot-driven business is defined by its human leadership and relationships. Many organizations espouse empowerment. But only a zealot, who is granted bottom-line authority and is skillful at involving people in decision-making, can take empowerment seriously and put it into practice. This is precisely because of the tension the zealot creates. Zealots push people past their comfort zones; they routinely pursue higher-risk paths than most people would choose to follow on their own.

Zealots can manage this, however, because of the effort they put into establishing trust and credibility. In most bureaucratic environments, credibility is granted to the institution. But people are not willing to trust an institution when they are called upon to do something that nobody has done before. Those are the times when they need to be able to put their trust in a person. Successful zealots consistently make a commitment to the people who are part of their organization — not to preserving their jobs per se, but to looking out for the people themselves. Intel's Mr. Marsing actually applied at one point for the position of director of human relations. "I wanted to formally associate myself with tools and processes that could help Intel tap into the potential of its people," he recalls in an article in the Peter Senge field book *The Dance of Change*. His bosses convinced him that he would be of more value starting up $2 billion factories, but he didn't regret the stand he took. "It gave me, more or less, a green light to experiment with learning-oriented approaches, without scrutiny and micromanagement from above," he says.

For the sake of credibility, the zealot needs to express confidence in his or her actions, even if decisions are ambiguous. It's as if the zealot is driving a bus down a narrow mountain road: Passengers will have more confidence in a driver who navigates the bus at maximum prudent speed, as long as it is done with assurance and skill, than in an overcautious driver who slowly creeps down the mountainside.

A zealot needs to know how to train others and how to recognize and provide the resources they need, but perhaps the zealot's most important skill is the ability to make the case for change. Like all good risk-takers, zealots must be able to explain to people why the direction chosen (for this product, this year, or this quarter) represents the best interest of the company (and of their own jobs). The zealot must articulate a sense of direction ("I know where we're going, and here are the risks we are taking to get there") in a way that makes it possible for people at all levels to recognize its value. That is the only way to invite people to align most of the subsystems of the organization, including the rewards and recognition systems, to the zealot's strategy.

3. Delivering value. Zealots may be visionaries, but the world sees them primarily as operators. The zealot's core skill is not just to imagine changes in business processes or develop new products, but to consistently hit quarterly earnings targets amid all the innovative work of corporate change. This is accomplished through nitty-gritty attention to detail: establishing viable relationships with customers who recognize the value of the zealot's innovations and are willing to pay for them; avoiding or eliminating waste; finding better ways to demonstrate the value proposition of the business; setting priorities so the business is not spread too thin; and making the continual, incremental improvements and small innovations that yield steady gains in performance.

In our view, a startling number of CEOs and other strategically oriented executives have lost sight of how their organizations actually produce results. When contemplating a new strategic direction, they say, "I hope the organization is ready for this," revealing that they don't actually know their company's capabilities. Zealots *do* know, because they are continually working the system to improve bottom-line results. This operational experience gives zealots their fearlessness. They are knowledgeable enough about their business processes and bottom-line realities that they can take risks with confidence. This, in turn, allows them to be strategically adaptive.

For the past 30 years, Wal-Mart Stores Inc. has been the American company most successful at consistently delivering superior value to its shareholders. The foundation of Wal-Mart's success is continual operational innovation, not only pioneering logistical systems and vendor relationships but also continual learning and adaptation, using techniques such as its famous Saturday morning meetings, in which senior managers analyze the stores' computer information together and recast strategies on the fly. In this way, Wal-Mart repeatedly delivers quarterly returns that are better than the preceding quarter's.

A Zealot's Tale

Zealots understand — because they see it in their work — that innovation is less risky than conventional practice, if only because innovation insulates a company from its markets' cyclical downturns. They recognize the importance of strategy; they know that a great innovation imperfectly executed is less risky than a mediocre new product executed with excellence. Yet they are sufficiently aware of the importance of implementation and keenly cognizant of the needs and aspirations of the people who do the implementing.

Under a zealot named John Barth, JCI grew its auto components business from $300 million in revenues to $12 billion.

The most valuable zealot cases we know demonstrate the power of combining these three activities, and the specific kind of autonomy needed to accomplish this. Consider, for example, the story of Johnson Controls Inc. (JCI). In the early 1980s, JCI was a sleepy manufacturer of thermostats and temperature monitoring devices, with a small automotive parts division. Then JCI acquired Hoover Universal, a manufacturer of components for car and truck seats. To manage the new $300 million auto components business, it promoted a Hoover engineer named John Barth. Today, that business is $12 billion. Zealotry made the difference.

Mr. Barth's first contribution was strategic vision. From the beginning he (and his mentors at JCI) could see that the auto components business was changing. Large manufacturers in Detroit and Japan were moving to outsource more and more component manufacturing. More significantly, the nature of outsourcing was changing, from pure parts and components to full vehicle subsystems. By 1990, Mr. Barth had articulated a new mission for the business — to become a developer, designer, and supplier of innovative seating systems that work together as a functional whole.

This could not happen, however, if he didn't deliver value in ways that would reinforce and expand JCI's capabilities. Thus, in the early 1990s, JCI became one of the most advanced just-in-time suppliers in the business. It developed the operational discipline to assemble car and truck seats in sequence, so that they could be unloaded without sorting to match the trim coats, colors, and other requirements of each car as it rolled along the assembly line. This capability, in turn, allowed JCI to acquire Toyota as a customer, which then meant that it could learn the world-class Toyota production system.

By 1994, JCI's automotive business was $3 billion. Now Mr. Barth moved in a new strategic direction: creating contracts that stretched the time cycle of a product from one year to eight years (from three years before production to five years after). This gave JCI the room to get involved in seat design and innovation. In 1996, the company bought Prince, one of the most respected auto interior design companies, making a preemptive bid with a $900 million premium over asset value, to ensure JCI would not lose it to a competitor.

Mr. Barth had always been accomplished at the third critical skill of zealotry, aligning people with value. He had nurtured a group of key zealot–lieutenants, acting as counselor to them but treating them individually with discretion and varying degrees of bottom-line responsibility. With the Prince acquisition, these skills became crucial. Integration between the two companies was slow and purposeful because Mr. Barth wanted to retain the zealots who worked at Prince. The JCI–Prince deal is recognized as one of the few successful mergers in post-World War II automotive history.

Today, JCI is expanding to become a global company, with a presence in Europe and the largest North American footprint in the Asian automobile industry (after acquiring the Nissan supplier Ikeda Busan). Mr. Barth has been tapped as the new JCI president, and one of his primary responsibilities is the continuing organization of JCI as a company of zealots.

A Management Context for Zealotry

The zealot concept is, in essence, an argument for empowering creative people to drive business forward in radical and potentially risky new ways. In traditional companies, taking on the role of zealot is often uncomfortable, especially for managers who were hired for analytical and technological competence, not for their creativity or leadership. In New Economy companies, such as dot-coms, the zealot concept provides an escape route from a different kind of entrenched comfort: the chronic lack of operational rigor and bottom-line growth. Zealots we have studied — and those with whom we have worked — have typically driven innovation on a much larger scale and at a much faster pace than anybody else is happy with.

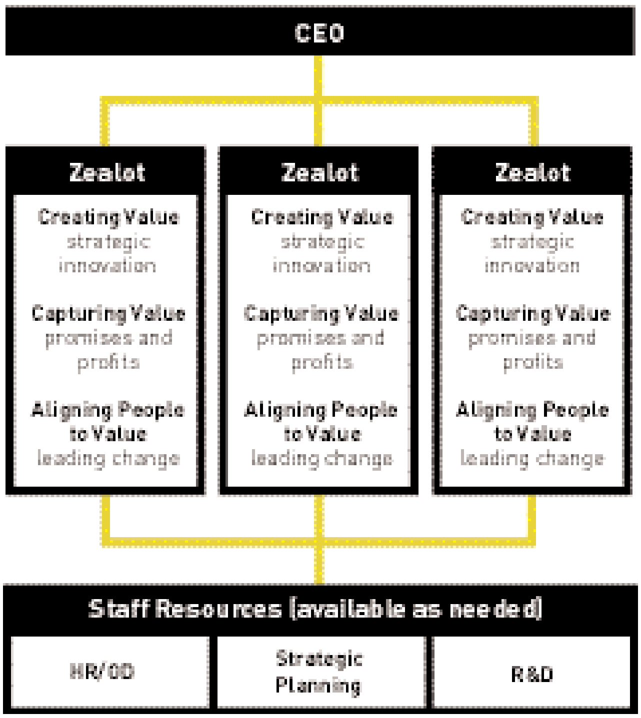
We first recognized the zealot phenomenon five years ago, during one of Booz-Allen & Hamilton's evaluations of successful client engagements. When looking for the common thread among the clients who received the most value from our work, one of our consultants said, "You know, they're all zealots!" — and the name stuck with us. As we explored the contributions of zealots to our clients' success, we realized that these contributions were significant not only when consulting firms were engaged, but also at any time an organization achieved a significant change. There's been a lot of debate within Booz-Allen about whether "zealot" is a good name. But we gradually realized that the connotation of high-stakes fervor, which made the term discomfiting to some, was precisely the reason it evoked the contribution that these people made.

As we looked for more examples of zealots, we quickly concluded that they were prevalent, but not easy to spot. Creative businesses, such as companies in media, entertainment, and advertising, have always attracted prominent zealots. Indeed, zealotry is institutionalized in the roles of the conventional creative producer (for example, the "show runner" in the television industry, who is responsible for production as a whole system). In manufacturing, computer services, and marketing, zealots are everywhere, but they quickly learn not to draw attention to themselves. Not everyone is ripe for the role; it requires enough imagination to envision a new kind of product or service, enough moral courage to take a stand in favor of something no one has done before (at least within the organization), and enough operational knowledge to translate the vision and stand into action. A zealot, in this sense, is not a wild-eyed fanatic — and, from a recruiting standpoint, that's a shame. It's a lot easier to find a wild-eyed fanatic than a well-tempered, capable, and compellingly passionate zealot.

The idea of zealotry is appealing in principle, particularly to the kinds of management authors who continually promote change. John Katzenbach's "real change leaders," Tom Peters's "liberation" managers, Gifford Pinchot's "intrapreneurs," Peter Block's "empowered managers," Noel Tichy's "transformational leaders," and Gary Hamel's "revolutionary entrepreneurs" all reflect some of the imperatives of the zealot. But these characters are seen as mavericks and heretics, operating outside the organization's cultural mainstream.

Mr. Tichy writes about directly attacking that culture; Mr. Hamel offers only the sketchiest advice for understanding and embracing it. The zealots that we know are intimately familiar with the existing culture. They do not reject it or discard it as "resistant." Rather, they know how to establish a productive relationship with it, in a way that can transcend its limits. They are less gladiators than jujitsu masters, taking the force of a company's culture and deflecting it toward a more powerful good. A company that promotes zealots has, in effect, brought its heretics inside, to the center of the core business. Arguably, in an era of turbulent change and growth, they should have been there all along.

Exhibit 2: **An Organization for Zealots**



One might argue that the emergence of zealots is actually a reemergence — a return to an earlier era of capitalism when the industrial infrastructure of telephones, electricity, and motor vehicles was being developed. The General Motors Corporation, for instance, owes its early success to a series of archetypally passionate zealots: founder William Durant, who created the once-upstart brands Buick, Pontiac, and Chevrolet, each of which has endured almost 85 years; the Fisher Brothers, who stamped not just their name but a craftsmanlike sensibility on the otherwise mundane auto body; and Charles F. Kettering, inventor of the ignition system and one of the great idiosyncratic engineers and philanthropists of the 20th century. Each (perhaps excluding Durant) was not just an innovator but an administrator; a person who could envision a radical new business, sustain its operation over time, and bring in bottom-line results as well. Most of the successful managers of the 19th and early 20th centuries brought the same set of skills to their work.

There is one major difference between that era and today: The technologies of that time led to natural monopolies, in areas from oil to telephony to railroads. Setting the Microsoft Corporation vs. Judge Jackson aside, today new industries are created so quickly that a zealous business leader may establish a dominant position in a new industry, only to find other industries quickly emerging that compete for the same customers. So zealous companies can no longer afford the complacency that allowed a GM to ignore its customers and rest on its presumed market strengths. Contemporary zealots know they must create new endeavors continually, leaping forward to avoid becoming irrelevant.

Zealots and Their Bosses

Many CEOs, particularly those with flamboyant personalities, are tempted to take on the strategic role of zealots themselves. But a zealot-like role is not always appropriate for the CEO. Large companies in particular are difficult for one zealot at the top to manage, appropriating all the responsibility for creative activity for him- or herself. It can be done, of course: Larry Ellison's success at the Oracle Corporation and Steve Jobs's reemergence at Apple Computer Inc. show the viability of a zealous CEO.

But such individuals can, through their own laudable commitment and confidence, unintentionally lead a large company into instability and unnecessary turbulence. When combined with the CEO's overwhelming role, a zealot's passion can become so pervasive that it makes it difficult for any group, let alone any individual, to see when the original plan isn't working. That's less of a risk when zealots are deployed throughout the organization, as in the Enron model. Then, an individual business may suffer from a zealot's stumble (as Enron's Azurix spinoff did when Rebecca Mark couldn't succeed at creating a global water powerhouse); but the corporation itself is not vulnerable.

The issue is not whether the CEO is a zealot: It's whether the CEO is the *only* zealot. If so, the checks and balances don't exist to keep the company vital. CEOs must learn to nurture others. The zealots of a company need the CEO to be a counselor and mentor, to provide

A shift to a zealot-driven organization is the only reliable path to sustained 20 percent growth.

resources and perspective, to raise cautionary notes, to draw attention to moves that aren't working, and to offer consistent, honest, impartial advice.

This role doesn't have to come from the CEO alone. Strong board members and subordinates or outsiders can also play the role. In most cases, however, a company of zealots has an organizational structure somewhat like that shown in Exhibit 2.

This corporate structure also harks back to an earlier era, echoing the form of corporations more than a century ago. The monopolist/financier J.P. Morgan was a master at cultivating zealots. He backed Thomas Edison in 1878, when the vision of cities lit by electric lights was still a fantasy. Morgan wasn't a micromanager — he liked to install people he trusted to run his businesses, and then stand back from them. But he was not a passive partner, either. He involved himself symbolically as both conscience and public support; when he backed Edison, Morgan made his own home the first electrically lit residence in the world, subjecting himself to short circuits, blackouts, generator fumes, and an electrical fire in his study.

As a leader supporting others' zealotry, Morgan has numerous modern equivalents. Although some exist at the better-run venture-capital groups, the best-known are CEOs of diversified multinational companies who set top-line goals, create a context for success, press knowledge across their firm's internal boundaries, and have clear visions of their company's futures — but who get zealots to drive change and profits at the business-unit level. Jack Welch may be the ultimate such zealot-creator, but he is far from alone. Sir Martin Sorrell, the CEO of advertising's WPP Group PLC, is one. BP's Sir John Browne is certainly another. So are Enron's Kenneth Lay, and Hewlett-Packard Company's Carly Fiorina. (See Ms. Fiorina's profile on page 116.)

Whatever the structure may be, the strategic process in a company of zealots is not conducted in isolation. There is a regular give-and-take among the CEO and other senior executives, peers, and people in the zealots' business units. This requires the zealot to take accountability for following through with the ideas of people working on his or her project.

Creating a Company of Zealots

Although a shift to a zealot-driven organization represents the only reliable path we know to sustained 15 to 20 percent returns, it also means severe culture shock in the short term. Many CEOs, especially those schooled in command-and-control management, will resist giving line leaders such latitude over business-unit functions. Staff may chafe at the rigors of continual corporate change, with its incessant demand for both strategic transformation and bottom-line results. And the zealots themselves will face the constant prospect of failure — and the knowledge that, win or lose, tomorrow they will just have to start over again anyway.

What does this mean for you? It depends on where you are in the company.

For CEOs: You need a process for identifying and recruiting potential zealots. Most companies probably have more candidates than the CEO might think. You can recruit them by giving them the opportunity to step up and manage a business with some degree of autonomy. Those who succeed will move on to greater and greater successes, if they are given a chance to grow. For greatest leverage, a CEO should find a few linchpin line managers who have the temperament and brilliance for zealotry, and give them room to take risks, along with the support to make the most of those risks. In a company that does this, being a zealot is a good career move — a way to be noticed by senior executives.

But you, the chief, have to learn a new kind of engagement — neither hands-off, nor command-and-control. You have to demand results, but you can't scrutinize and approve every line item on the business unit's budget. You also must establish a new tolerance for failure — if it's the kind of failure that results from zealots making big, well-analyzed bets. If you're not willing to take the risk to let your people change the world, it's unlikely you'll get the growth you need to satisfy shareholders.

For Corporate Staff: You need practices and policies that establish legitimacy for zealot-driven change. The presence of zealots alone is not sufficient; the organization must put into place a corporate structure for assessing and evaluating their ideas and putting them into practice. The structure of the organizational reward systems, resource allocations, and market presence must be designed to make the company attractive to zealots and capable of refining and realizing their ideas.

Your company also needs a concerted, systematic way to develop and draw forth zealots from within. To attract the best and brightest people to zealotry from inside and outside your company, you may need to model your approach on the Hollywood style of free agency. This goes far beyond promoting "the brand called you" or other quick-fix ways of boosting creativity. It means training creative people in bottom-line awareness and training bottom-line producers in the cultural imperatives of risk-taking and risk management.

For the Zealot Inside You: When you walk into an organization, you know within 15 minutes if it's run by zealots or not. You can tell by the tone and feel of conversations. Are people confident but not complacent? Is there a pervasive sense of creative excitement, and yet a down-to-earth awareness of the relevance of every action or decision? Look for the companies where there is some precedent for zealotry, or where a CEO has assured you that you will have opportunities to try.

Even then, there will be times when it seems that everyone around you is against you or trying to hold you back. Sometimes they are; other times, this simply reflects the audacious sweep of your ideas. Our advice would be to persevere, but you hardly need to take it; the zealots we have met cannot help but persevere. And they are the ones who have changed the world. +

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Resources

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