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HAMILTON

AN AMERICAN MUSICAL

Beyond the genius of *Hamilton*: Lessons in thriving leadership

Lin-Manuel Miranda, creator of the hit Broadway musical, exemplifies the vitality, growth mind-set, and clear sense of purpose of a successful “superthriver.”



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It's tempting to call Lin-Manuel Miranda a genius. He's the creator of *Hamilton*, the universally acclaimed musical that improbably fuses hip-hop with the story of the first US secretary of the treasury. Since the show's debut in February 2015, it has won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, 11 Tony Awards, and the Grammy Award for Best Musical Theater Album; pulled in millions of dollars at the box office; and likely kept *Hamilton*'s portrait from getting bumped from the ten-dollar bill. And in September of last year, Miranda—the composer, lyricist, librettist, and until recently, star of the show—was awarded a MacArthur “genius grant.”

But rather than labeling him a genius, which tends to limit his accessibility as a role model, we would call him a “superthrivers.” Superthrivers not only attain extraordinary levels of individual performance but also create the conditions for others to thrive. Their behavior inspires others and helps sustain healthy organizational cultures, whether that culture encompasses the many moving parts of a major theatrical production or the complexities of a sprawling commercial enterprise.

The state of thriving is no metaphor. It is a verifiable balance of three psychological states of mind manifested in individuals like Miranda—vitality, a growth mind-set, and a clear purpose—as well as in organizations that know how to propagate those attributes throughout their cultures.

When we interviewed leaders considered by their peers to display these characteristics of superthrivers and conducted surveys of thriving organizations, we found that they balanced these three principles in their daily lives and work almost unconsciously. The benefits are significant: our research found that executives who score highly on the three characteristics were more likely to be rated as high performers compared with their peers, and that the presence of superthrivers was itself a strong predictor of a robust, high-performing company culture.

Tapping into vitality

Vitality, the first of those guiding principles, encompasses such traits as curiosity, creativity, resilience, and the capacity for innovation. Consider how Miranda came to create the most innovative show in a generation. He didn't set out to disrupt. Rather, his wide-ranging curiosity led him to pick up Ron Chernow's magisterial biography of Alexander Hamilton. The book recounts Hamilton's illegitimate birth in the West Indies, his difficult early life (including being abandoned by his father and the death of his mother), and his subsequent triumphs and travails as one of the most consequential Founding Fathers. Within the first 40 pages, Miranda came to the realization that Hamilton had led a “hip-hop life.” Like a rapper writing his way out of a difficult environment like Compton, Hamilton escaped St. Croix when townspeople, impressed by his writing, raised money to send the teenager to New York. Inspired by the Chernow book, Miranda then followed his creative instincts wherever they took him.

One of his first stops on that journey, when he was still imagining *Hamilton* as a concept album, was at a White House event in May 2009, “An Evening of Poetry, Music, and the Spoken Word.”¹ It's impossible to watch that performance and not feel Miranda's enthusiasm, energy, and vibrancy. By the end of it,

¹ The White House, “Lin-Manuel Miranda Performs at the White House Poetry Jam,” YouTube video, November 2, 2009, youtube.com.

the polite laughter that had greeted his introductory remarks about Hamilton embodying hip-hop culture had turned into a rapturous standing ovation led by President Obama.

Such vitality and responsiveness produce deeply rooted, genuine innovation. We have often seen comparable vitality among superthrivers in business settings. Consider the CEO of a large provider of customer relationship management services. Determined to prepare his top team to handle uncertainty, he had them gather in Madrid before taking them to an unspecified location. It turned out to be Morocco, where they moved between different cities every day, spent nights in the desert, took long cross-country hikes, slept in cold-water lodgings, and learned the agenda for each day only at breakfast.² Similarly, in a juxtaposition as startling as that of Hamilton and hip-hop, a Western European company prepared its senior executives for the challenges of expanding into Eastern Europe in part by taking them on a field trip to a black market on the outskirts of Warsaw.

Cultivating a growth mind-set

Superthrivers don't rest on their laurels. In the middle of the hugely successful run of *In the Heights*, Miranda's 2008 Tony winner for best musical, his restless imagination was already moving on to his next challenge. One night, while waiting for his cue to go onstage, he turned to his *In the Heights* co-star Chris Jackson and said, "Want to play George Washington?"

This appetite for new challenges has been identified as a "growth mind-set" by Carol Dweck, the Stanford psychology professor known for her work on the power of mind-sets to promote or discourage achievement and innovation.³ People who have a growth mind-set believe that their most basic abilities can be further developed through dedication and hard work—brains and talent are just the starting point.

By contrast, people with a fixed mind-set believe that traits like intelligence and talent are inborn and immutable. They buy into the "genius" myth—you either have it or you don't, and for those who have it, success comes effortlessly. That attitude can be corrosive in an organization. It discourages collaboration, encourages arrogance, shortchanges development, and inhibits innovation. If genius is effortless, why not start with the proverbial blank sheet of paper, check expertise and knowledge at the door, and await a bolt from the blue?

For Miranda there were no blank sheets of paper or the naïve belief that you must forget what you know in order to innovate. Steeped in hip-hop, pop, R&B, and musical theater, he drew on that expertise extensively. The sheer range of references and styles in the show is breathtaking. There are shout-outs to rappers Busta Rhymes, Tupac, DMX, the Notorious B.I.G., and many more—and intricate adaptations of their various styles. Musical theater allusions abound, with nods to *Sweeney Todd*, *South Pacific*, *West Side Story*, and Gilbert & Sullivan. Shakespeare and Harry Potter are in there, too.

Miranda also didn't hesitate to seek advice from legendary Broadway composers like Stephen Sondheim and John Kander. He brought Chernow on as an advisor. And he enthusiastically incorporated ideas from virtually everyone associated with the show. So extensive was this collaboration that more than two dozen actors and dancers involved in the show's development and first productions will share in its profits.

Can you propagate a similar growth mind-set in a corporation? Proximus, Belgium's largest mobile telecommunications company, did. Dominique Leroy, appointed chief executive in January 2014 by the Belgian government (the company's majority owner), devised a strategy to restore profitability, regain lost

² Colin Price and Sharon Toye, *Accelerating Performance: Mobilize, Execute, and Transform with Agility*, Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2017.

³ Carol Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, first edition, New York: Random House, 2006.

market share, and remain relevant to customers. But for the strategy to work, employees would have to become open to new ways of thinking and doing business. To get there, Proximus focused on defining a common vision, purpose, and strategy around three values—agility, collaboration, and accountability. By instilling those values deeply in the organization, Proximus broke down silos, creating openness and trust across the business that led to increased collaboration and innovation—the hallmarks of the growth mind-set.

The changes have already begun to pay off. Strong financials have reflected positive revenue performance, a growing customer base, and successful cost reduction. To Leroy, the new culture is what made the difference. “You really see the dynamic changing in the company because the learning and growth become concrete, anchored in the success of the company,” she says.⁴

Pursuing a clear purpose

Purpose, the third—and most important—principle of thriving, is that sense of personal mission that points beyond the organization itself toward a larger community or global vision. Miranda’s purpose shines forth from every aspect of *Hamilton*—the multiracial and multiethnic cast, the art form of hip-hop itself, the allusions to many different strands of theater and pop culture, and the central story about a poor immigrant who made America strong.

Thousands of New York high school students of all backgrounds, treated to the show by the Theatre Development Fund’s outreach efforts, have been able to see themselves as part of our national story. Hundreds of thousands more young people will do the same when the show inevitably becomes a staple of the high school repertory.

As with vitality and a growth mind-set, clarity around purpose and direction can be fostered and reinforced. Larry Merlo, CEO of the large US pharmacy chain CVS Health, put a bold stake in the ground when he declared that the company was phasing

out the sale of tobacco products, which generated \$2 billion a year in revenue, at its more than 7,600 stores. Resolved to lead CVS Health’s evolution from a pharmacy chain to a healthcare company, Merlo continually reinforces that higher purpose with his employees through word and deed. “Ending the sale of cigarettes and tobacco products at CVS Pharmacy is simply the right thing to do for the good of our customers and our company,” he wrote in a company statement. “The sale of tobacco products is inconsistent with our purpose—helping people on their path to better health.”⁵ Since removing tobacco products, CVS Health has also made a significant commitment to philanthropic giving and strategic partnerships with tobacco cessation and prevention programs.

The real genius of Larry Merlo, Dominique Leroy, Lin-Manuel Miranda, or any other superthriver is the ability to create and maintain a thriving state of mind throughout an organization. It’s a powerful formula for success: By tapping the vitality, growth mind-set, and purpose of a diverse set of colleagues, you can create a thriving culture where creativity, collaboration, and innovation are a way of life. You might not win a Tony, but like Miranda and company, you will likely be richly rewarded in the marketplace. ■

⁴ Ian Johnston, “The power of culture: A conversation with Proximus CEO Dominique Leroy,” Heidrick & Struggles, February 9, 2015, heidrick.com.

⁵ Larry J. Merlo, “Message from Larry Merlo, president and CEO,” February 5, 2014, cvshealth.com.

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The authors wish to thank Patty Klingbiel Connell for her contributions to this article.

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