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Kim Cameron and Marc Lavine

Making the Impossible Possible

Leading Extraordinary Performance
—the Rocky Flats Story

- By the author of *Developing Management Skills* (over 150,000 copies sold)
- Tells the inside story of one of the most astonishing organizational accomplishments: the clean-up and closure of the controversial Rocky Flats nuclear weapons plant
- Identifies specific practices, approaches, and techniques all organizations can adopt to achieve extraordinary performance

Kim S. Cameron is professor of management and organizations at Michigan's Stephen M. Ross School of Business, and Professor of Higher Education in the School of Education at the University of Michigan. He is the coauthor or coeditor of ten books, including *Developing Management Skill* and *Positive Organizational Scholarship*, and is co-founder of the Ross School of Business' Center for Positive Organizational Scholarship which *Harvard Business Review* recognized as one of the Breakthrough Business Ideas for 2004.

Marc H. Lavine is a doctoral student and instructor at the Wallace E. Carroll School of Management. Lavine has consulted to multinational firms, nonprofit organizations, and public schools on issues of social responsibility, organizational learning, leadership development, and strategic growth.

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The most contaminated nuclear plant in the country, Rocky Flats was an environmental disaster and the site of rampant worker unrest. Although it was estimated that it would take 70 years and \$36 billion to clean up and close the facility, something stunning happened. The project was completed 60 years ahead of schedule and \$30 billion under budget and is now on its way to becoming a wildlife refuge. *In Making the Impossible Possible*, Kim Cameron and Marc Lavine explain how this remarkable feat was achieved—and how breakthrough levels of performance can be achieved by any organization.

After analyzing numerous firsthand accounts and public records, Cameron and Lavine realized that the leaders of the Rocky Flats clean-up took a distinctive “abundance approach” to the task. These leaders focused on identifying and building on sources of strength, resilience, and vitality, rather than simply solving problems and overcoming difficulties. The result was extraordinary positive deviance: outcomes far exceeding what normally would have been expected.

For the first time, Cameron and Lavine identify the specific leadership roles and key enablers—levers, techniques, and practices—involved in realizing this innovative approach. This fascinating and thoroughly researched case study concludes by revealing 21 leadership principles that sum up the Rocky Flats turnaround, providing a guide for any organization wanting to better understand and apply the lessons of this incredible achievement.



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Praise for *Making The Impossible Possible*

“At a time when many organizations that people depend on have failed spectacularly, it is inspiring to read about an organization that has managed to achieve the impossible. This is not just an inspiring story. The lessons learned at Rocky Flats can be applied by managers in a variety of organizations to improve organizational capabilities and performance.”

—**Rick Mowday**, former editor of the *Academy of Management Journal* and currently serves on the editorial review boards of *Organizational Dynamics*, *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies*, and the *Journal of Applied Management and Entrepreneurship*. He is a past-president and a fellow of the Academy of Management

“This is a remarkable book detailing a remarkable case study of outstanding organizational performance. The fundamental lesson—that extraordinary performance is possible if leaders focus on what can be and use mistakes and false starts for learning rather than blaming and evaluating—is one that every leader ought to embrace.”

—**Jeffrey Pfeffer**, Graduate School of Business, Stanford University and coauthor of *Hard Facts, Dangerous Half-Truths, and Total Nonsense: Profiting from Evidence-Based Management*

“Arie Lewin, James March, and William Starbuck, among others, have introduced organization scientists to the ideas of learning from outliers and from samples of one. In these veins, *Making the Impossible Possible* is a richly described examination of a remarkably successful organizational change effort, and an exemplary analysis of how to learn from outliers. Anyone needing to create or understand bases for extraordinary organizational performance will benefit from this book.”

—**George Huber**, Prothro Regents Chair in Business Administration in the McCombs School at the University of Texas at Austin. His recent scholarly book, *The Necessary Nature of Future Firms* was published by Sage Publications and has been described by several authorities as a “must read” for both academics and top managers.

“A Brilliant book that will help readers discover and capitalize on the values of positive psychology, astute leadership, and culture. It’s a scintillating saga of how an organization can change using basic concepts from an outstanding research team.”

—**John W. Slocum, Jr.**, O. Paul Corley Professor of Management, Southern Methodist University, and coauthor of *The Smarter Organization*

“Making the Impossible Possible tells a powerful story of an organization that undertook an engineering task that seemed unfathomable—the first cleanup and closure of a nuclear-weapons production facility anywhere in the world. Evocatively written and intellectually engaging, this book is a remarkable mix of rich description, cognitive analysis, and reflective insights. Cameron and Lavine show how carefully crafted social-science research can be a tool for understanding the key enablers—the levers, techniques, and practices—that explain extraordinary performance. In doing so, they offer a fascinating and penetrating treatment of leadership principles that can be employed by managers at all levels for making the heretofore impossible an established reality.”

—**Arthur G. Bedeian**, Boyd Professor, Louisiana State University

“The clean up and closure of Rocky Flats is a story of success that exceeded the expectations of virtually every knowledgeable observer. You will learn the organizational practices and leadership lessons that explain how extraordinary performance was achieved in the face of great difficulty. I highly recommend the book.”

—**Bill Richardson**, Governor of New Mexico

“Any leader with a major, complex organizational change mandate will benefit from reading about the hundreds of innovations generated at Rocky Flats. Cameron and Lavine bring this leadership and organizational change epic alive with innumerable detailed illustrations in the words of the participants themselves, while simultaneously offering a comprehensive theory that can be applied to any organizational setting.”

—**Bill Torbert**, author of *Action Inquiry* and Professor, Carroll School of Management, Boston College

“As a Colorado State Legislator, I challenged both Kaiser-Hill and the DOE to accomplish closure and cleanup of Rocky Flats by 2006, a goal deemed impossible to achieve by almost everyone. This book explains how this extraordinary success was accomplished and what others can learn about achieving similar outstanding success.”

—**Federico Peña**, Former United States Secretary of Energy and United States Secretary of Transportation