



Practical Leadership: Inspiring Action, Achieving Results Jim Clemmer's Leader Letter

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in My Hoose

It was a busy summer here at The CLEMMER Group. Mixed in with all the sun and fun was a lot of work on my newest book, *Moose on the Table: A Novel Approach to Communications @ Work*.

So I'm happy to say that it's now complete and ready to emerge from the woods! As a subscriber to *The Leader Letter* you have an inside opportunity to get ahead of the curve by previewing the book online at www.mooseonthetable.com.

And if you're not sure what Moose-on-the-Table is, let this issue be your introduction to one of my most popular metaphors for creating authentic communications in the workplace.

We ran a contest earlier in the summer to give away twenty-five signed copies of the new book to those who filled in our [Leader Letter Fourth Anniversary Survey](#). We'll extend it for the rest of this month and announce the winners in the November issue.

If you haven't done so already, take it now for your chance to win. http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=kxhltGZwSiBmdYWNQCOJhw_3d_3d

The Story Behind the Story

I started using the Moose-on-the-Table metaphor in the mid to late nineties when helping management teams identify and address the issues that were getting in the way of higher performance. Just like dysfunctional families, many such teams find it easier to avoid tough conversations. But rarely do problems get better when left unaddressed. Rather, the moose grow larger, breed, and increase the size of the herd.

I had an idea bubbling in the back of my mind for maybe ten years of using the fable approach or a fictional story to explore these themes. But it really kicked into gear as I was writing *Growing the*



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Distance and *The Leader's Digest* and using some fiction in some of the sidebar stories. I actually created, Frank, a fictional character in both books in the chapters on Spirit and Meaning to convey the key ideas behind these more ephemeral topic areas.

I used Frank's story to discuss different scenarios through a series of little vignettes. It was really my first experience writing any kind of fiction and I really enjoyed it.

A few years before that, I heard the Moose-on-the-Table analogy from a group participating in one of my *Pathways to Performance* workshops. The image of a moose on a table really struck a chord with that audience, so I started using this analogy in other workshops and it really connected with people all over the world.

I've long said that stories and metaphors are the language of leadership. When you're talking about management you're talking about facts and figures and business cases and the usual PowerPoint stuff.

But leadership is different. Leadership deals with issues of the heart. Since time began the way these more conceptual ideas and values have been conveyed is through stories.

I really felt I could put together a story that would be fun and quirky but at the same time be woven around real case study-type material, showing how the leadership principles The CLEMMER Group uses in our training, workshops, and consulting work can be brought to life, to reach readers in a way that drier approaches can't.

The new web site, www.mooseonthetable.com, is also a marked departure from what readers have come to expect. For one thing, we're actually giving this book away for free one chapter at a time. Over the course of the next sixteen weeks, you will have an opportunity to download a PDF of a new chapter each Monday. At the same time you can also purchase a special pre-release copy of the book, e-book, or audio book directly from the site.

As an added feature, each week, we'll also be posting a new and brief (most are about ninety seconds) video with me introducing the latest chapter and explaining how its core messages or concepts work into the narrative, along with the key themes you can take away from it.

The moose site also has links to all the moose-related articles, workshop and seminar material you'll find on our main site. You can complete an exercise to help you see how much of a moose problem you may have in your office.

Here is a brief outline of the book and a short video of myself introducing the metaphor:

"As an athlete, family man, and star employee, Pete Leonard had it all. But now the years and years of going along to get along are taking their toll.



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His second marriage is as shaky as his right hand after a night spent coddling a bottle, his employees think he's a joke, and his boss is just looking for an excuse to show him the door.

Can things get any worse? Well, how would you feel if you actually started seeing moose around your office?

Moose on the Table is one manager's story of finding and overcoming fear - one tiny step at a time. Come along as Pete learns to face the moose threatening the communications and effectiveness of his department, organization - and even his life."

Video will be posted next week.

If you want to learn more you'll find the entire preface (along with Chapter 1) available online at www.mooseonthetable.com

Is That a Moose Standing on the Table?

One of the more popular metaphors I have been using in workshops and management retreats is the notion of Moose-on-the-Table. It's a playful, fun way to open up deep, authentic conversations about problems or issues that aren't being addressed. When I work in the U.S., people are sometimes more familiar with the idea of Elephant-in-the-Living Room. I have also heard of pink skunks and other such creatures.

One reason I like Moose-on-the-Table is because it's so Canadian. Another reason is that moose can be very territorial, hard to remove once established, dangerous when confronted, and awkward, gangly creatures. You can read an excerpt on Moose-on-the-Table from *The Leader's Digest* (and view the graphic slide I use in my presentations) at www.clemmer.net/excerpts/authentic_comm.shtml.

Of course the metaphor is extended much further in the new book.

Toward the middle of September, as the final text took shape, a lot of the action moved to the recording studio as we completed work on the audio book. Read by Barrie Bailey and recorded at Clare Burt Studios in Toronto, this is also something new for me and I hope that it comes in useful for those of you who've been asking for my books "on tape."

The audio book is now available at www.mooseonthetable.com.

Moose Hunting: Ways to Reduce or Eliminate Moose

You know there's moose. Your team knows there's moose. But unless you all work together to identify those moose, you may just end up kicking up a lot of dust.



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- Brainstorm potential moose issues by asking for ideas on the "dumbest things we do around here," "biggest barriers to reaching our goals," "major implementation issues we need to address," "pet peeves," "dumb rules and forms," "things that drive you crazy," or the like. List each point. Cluster the similar points until you have five to seven major groupings or clusters.

Identify those things you or your team directly control, can influence, and don't control at all. Prioritize the things you control and get ideas/volunteers/plans to address them. Do the same for things you can influence. Discuss how you can all accept and let go of the things you can't do anything about.

- The worst thing you can do is ask for input to identify moose issues and then not deal openly and effectively with them. You're better off to not ask if you aren't going to follow-through. Follow up to see if team members feel you have done all you can to address it.
- Potential ways to play with the Moose-on-the-Table approach:
 - Give everyone on your team a little toy stuffed moose.
 - Hold a moose hunting retreat/meeting and give everyone moose hunting T-shirts
 - Get team members at a meeting to write down and hand in a few of the biggest moose they feel are present. Cluster the similar issues and hold a secret ballot vote on the top clusters.
 - If you suspect people aren't being open during a discussion, ask, "Is there a Moose-on-the-Table we need to talk about?"
 - Get a consultant/facilitator outside of your team to run focus groups, conduct confidential interviews, or do a survey of your team to identify and prioritize moose issues.
 - As a meeting participant, you might frame an issue with, "I'd like to put a little Moose-on-the-Table..."

Moose Still on the Loose

I continue to use the analogy of Moose-on-the-Table with many management teams to get at issues that are blocking their progress but aren't being discussed. Click here for an excerpt from *The Leader's Digest* explaining this concept:

www.clemmer.net/excerpts/authentic_comm.shtml.

I was working with the head of a small professional services organization where, prior to the retreat, her autocratic style was identified as a big moose hindering the team. During our off-site retreat this moose was joined by equally large siblings in a Moose-on-the-Table exercise showing that professional staff was inhibited by feelings of very low trust, respect, and openness within the organization. When faced with this type of feedback, too many leaders discount, rationalize and



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(consistent with the problem) try to command the moose to go away (often by expressing extreme annoyance with people who point to the moose). Of course, it doesn't. It just starts hiding under the table and lurking in the hallways as part of whispered conversations.

I encouraged the leader to use the moose feedback (and work that will emerge from a teamwork and communication initiative they launched as a result of the retreat) as the key opportunity to

reduce the "We/They Gaps" between the leadership team, professional staff, and administrative support staff. I pointed out to her that this is a great chance to examine the leadership team processes around meetings, planning/review/follow-through, Staff Forum, and decision making. I suggested she might find the following articles on our web site useful:

www.clemmer.net/excerpts/pp_teams.shtml
www.clemmer.net/excerpts/empower_word.shtml

One of the major problems within this organization is that the biggest moose was sitting in the chair at the head of the leadership table. Her style and approach shut down debates and discussion and created unhealthy jockeying and politics among the team. This rippled out in the organization through turf battles, disrespect, and blaming.

I tried to coach her toward getting feedback on her leadership and working to shift her style. Unfortunately, she would not look in the mirror. As far as she was concerned, the problem was with everyone else's leadership. The rift between her, her team, and the rest of the organization grew ever bigger and the organization's results steadily declined. She is no longer there today.

Site Seeing

We're always working to improve our web site. The two most important aspects of any site are usability and findability.

In September we took another step forward on the usability path as we improved the [Top Ten Articles listing](#). You'll now be able to sort most popular articles by day, week, month and year. That should make it easier than ever to see what other readers are looking at!

Findability is something a little more subtle. Most folks come to our site because they know me through referral from a colleague or have attended a workshop or seminar. But a lot of folks come to our site through search engines. September saw the implementation of a detailed Search Engine Optimization strategy. This should bring even more people to the site in the coming months.

And last but certainly not least is the launch of www.mooseonthetable.com. With free PDF downloads, videos and online tools, this site is a huge part of how we plan to reach out and



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promote The CLEMMER Group and the new book in the coming years, so drop by and see what's new!

More Moose Hunting

As generally happens whenever I use the Moose-on-the-Table approach (go to http://www.clemmer.net/excerpts/authentic_comm.shtml for an explanation), it generates lots of feedback and questions.

One reader asked, *"How would you, or can you, change the leadership style of individuals who have come to believe that this is normal behavior?"*

Here's my response:

Changing the leadership style of anyone is very difficult. I have not found any one formula that applies to everyone. Each situation is so different. Here are a few thoughts:

- The first and key part of any change is the wish to change. The individual that you may be trying to change needs to feel the need for change him or herself. Unfortunately, like unhealthy lifestyles that led to a serious health problem, most people only change leadership style to escape pain. So the challenge is to show that the pain or problems that person is experiencing could be improved by using a different approach.
- The vicious cycle of denial or avoidance leading to ignoring the moose is what shuts down conversation about the problem. Some people will delude themselves into thinking there can't be a Moose-on-the-Table because no one is talking about it. Finding a way to open the conversation about the moose and get everyone to acknowledge it's there is the big challenge. That may involve biding your time and waiting until the pain is great enough, the problem becomes obvious enough, or receptivity seems to be opening up.
- Organizational or team surveys can be a good way to see if others are seeing a moose. If so, you can then talk more reflectively or objectively about why those perceptions exist and what can be done to address the issues. That's one of the reasons I developed a confidential online management team assessment tool (details are at http://www.clemmer.net/books/tld_assessment.aspx).
- Regular reflection exercises (such as after meetings) or off-site retreats should include gathering everyone's input to questions like what should our team keep doing, stop doing, and start doing. Make input open and safe (such as through an anonymous survey or third party run focus groups or personal interviews) to ensure all voices and perspectives are being heard.

Another reader asked, *"What if you think you are an 'almost moose'?"*

If you think you're an 'almost moose' and want to know whether others see you as a 'full moose,' you need a safe process to allow people on your team to give you honest feedback on your



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behavior. That's usually an anonymous process like a survey or interviews and/or focus groups facilitated by an objective third party consultant or expert. Soliciting this kind of unvarnished and open feedback is one of the most difficult and courageous things a leader can do in his or her personal growth.

Another Good Reason to Reduce Our Moose Problems!

"Moose normally eat branches in the winter, a not particularly nutritious diet,' says Erling Solberg of the Norwegian Institute for Nature Research. 'But since snow has become so much rarer, they have access to wild blueberries.' The result has been fatter moose that are more likely to break wind. 'In one year,' biologist Reidar Andersen adds, 'a fully grown moose expels, from both ends, methane that is as destructive to the atmosphere as the emissions released by 13,000 kilometres of car travel'."

Social Studies: A Daily Miscellany of Information by Michael Kesterton, *The Globe & Mail*, August 27, 2007

Thoughts That Make You Go Hmmm...on Avoiding Difficult Conversations

"We go back far enough together for me to know just what leadership you're capable of," Harold said. "I don't know how you've lost your way. I'm going to tell you this as a friend as much as a colleague, but it's disappointing to see you in this state. For your own sake and ours, you've got to get back on track."

"I'm not that guy anymore," Pete mumbled. "Now I am just going along to get along. If we lie low long enough, this too shall pass. Assuming the company makes it through this rough patch – and that I do too – I've got about seven or eight more years until my pension kicks in. I'll still be young enough to move on and do what I really want to do. The truth is, I can't afford to do anything at this point to jeopardize my job."

- Jim Clemmer, *Moose on the Table: A Novel Approach to Communications @ Work*

"As a specialist in learning disabilities, I have found that the most dangerous disability is not any formally diagnosable condition like dyslexia or ADD. It is fear. Fear shifts us into survival mode and thus prevents fluid learning and nuanced understanding. Certainly, if a real tiger is about to attack you, survival is the mode you want to be in. But if you're trying to deal intelligently with a subtle task, survival mode is highly unpleasant and counterproductive."

- Edward M. Hallowell, "Overloaded Circuits: Why Smart People Underperform," *Harvard Business Review*, January 2005, page 58

"Without courage, wisdom bears no fruit."

- Baltasar Gracian



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"What I observed and what I wrote about in, When You Say Yes But Mean No, is the tendency to silence our differences.... that tendency undermines the very

relationships that we are trying to preserve. And, it slows down the tasks we are trying to get done.... we all have had the experience of going to a meeting where we know there are issues but we sit around and don't talk about those differences. We leave the meeting saying how proud we are that there is so much consensus, but behind closed doors we say, "What a waste of time. We didn't deal with any of our issues... in the short run keeping silent does have a positive effect but most people don't recognize the longer term costs of doing so."

- Interview by David Creelman at HR.com, "Leslie Perlow On Destructive Silence"

"Many times, often with the best of intentions, people at work decide it's more productive to remain silent about their differences than to air them. But as new research by the authors shows, silencing doesn't smooth things over or make people more productive. It merely pushes differences beneath the surface and can set in motion powerfully destructive forces."

- Leslie Perlow and Stephanie Williams, "Is Silence Killing Your Company?", *Harvard Business Review*

"He kept working me over until he got to the root of my problem with P&G, which was the bureaucracy. He said, 'You're running away. You don't have the guts to stay and change it. You'll run from the next job too.' "That really ticked me off. I stayed. And from then on, every time something didn't work, I spoke up. I realized that you can make a difference if you speak up and set your mind to changing things."

- Alan G. (A.G.) Lafley, Chair and CEO, The Procter & Gamble Company, Commenting on when he tried to resign in frustration years ago after his boss tore up his resignation letter

"I would call lack of candor the biggest dirty little secret in business. Lack of candor basically blocks smart ideas, fast action, and good people contributing all the stuff they've got. It's a killer."

- Jack Welch with Suzy Welch, *Winning*

Most Popular September Improvement Points

[*Improvement Points*](#) is a free service providing a key thought or quotation from one of my articles, provided three times per week, directly to your e-mail inbox. Each complimentary Improvement Point links directly into the full article on our web site that spawned it. If you'd like to read more

about that day's Improvement Point, you can choose to click through to the brief article for a quick five-minute read. This is your opportunity for a short pause that refreshes, is an inspirational vitamin, or a quick performance boost. You can circulate especially relevant or timely articles or Improvement Points to your team, Clients, or colleagues for further discussion or action.



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Here are the three most popular choices of the *Improvement Points* we sent out in September:

Suggestion systems work best in traditional "command and control" or paternalistic organizations. Workers come up with ideas and managers decide which ones get implemented. In a highly involved organization, teams generate and test ideas as part of a bigger focus on improving their own key processes.

- from Jim Clemmer's article, "How to Make Effort Rewarding"

http://www.clemmer.net/articles/article_176.aspx

Honesty and integrity is a given in most conversations about leadership values. But some people seem to feel it's something you can slip on and off like clothing. They will speak of personal, professional, or business behaviors as if different suits of honesty are put on according to the situation. This shows "doing honesty" rather than being honest.

- from Jim Clemmer's article, "Honesty and Integrity Build a Foundation of Trust"

http://www.clemmer.net/articles/article_21.aspx

Less effective groups that feel powerless will point fingers at senior management, customers, shareholders, suppliers, governments or other departments. Instead of re-setting their sails and navigating through their problems they curse the wind and wait to be dashed upon the rocks.

- from Jim Clemmer's article, "A Coach's Playbook for Workplace Teams"

http://www.clemmer.net/articles/article_260.aspx

Feedback and Follow-Up

I am always delighted to hear from readers of *The Leader Letter* with feedback, reflections, suggestions, or differing points of view. Nobody is ever identified in *The Leader Letter* without their permission.

I am also happy to explore customized, in-house adaptations of any of my material for your team or organization. Drop me an e-mail at jim.clemmer@clemmer.net.

Keep learning, laughing, loving, and leading -- living life just for the L of it!

Jim

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