Let's be Frank
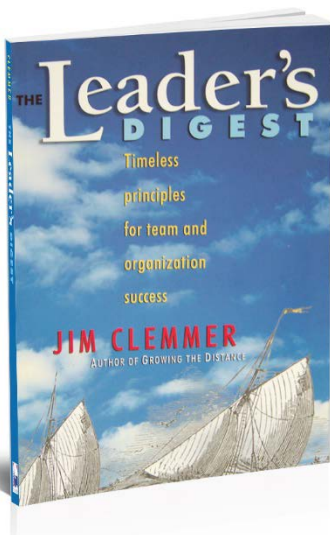
Four Part Series

Adapted from *The Leader's Digest*

by Jim Clemmer

The **CLEMMER** Group

Stronger People. Stronger Organizations.

In search of a company's lost heart

In the midst of that morning's operations review meeting, Frank started wondering just how the company had lost its heart. As he looked around the meeting room he saw nothing but stern faces, apprehensive expressions, and a few stifled yawns. The humorous quips he had added to the conversation a few minutes ago to lighten things up fell as flat as a day-old glass of Coke. Everyone was so serious. They solemnly reviewed yet more numbers and looked at more charts and graphs.

Frank knew that management issues were critical to success. Facts, processes, systems, data — all were vital to efficient operations. But how did the company become so unbalanced? When did efficiency crowd out effectiveness? How had the management vampire been able to sneak into the organization and suck the energy out of everyone, leaving these lifeless corpses behind?

Frank knew a bit of his company's history. He knew that the original founder, Roy Fitzsimmons (who was now retired), had deep technical expertise and extensive professional training in their industry. He knew that Roy was passionate about the company's pioneering technology. He had an exciting and powerful vision with an intense drive to blaze new pathways.

This energy and excitement had attracted like-minded team members, customers, partners, and investors, and had fueled their rapid early growth. Over the next few days, Frank made a point of seeking out the company veterans to ask them about the culture and focus of the early days. He also reviewed some archival material on their first products, strategies, financial statements, correspondence, and the like. He learned that the company grew strongly on the strength of its technology.

It was an exciting, fun place to work. But it struggled financially. Management systems and processes were weak or nonexistent. So costs were high. Error rates and rework were also high and Frank heard lots of "heroic recovery" stories of fixing up customer problems.

As Roy neared retirement, he decided to hire a "professional manager" as president and CEO while he stepped back into the role of chair. The new president imposed much-needed organization and order on the growing company.

But, Frank knew, you can take any good idea too far. While the pendulum had been way over on the leadership side of the equation, the new president swung it sharply to the management side. Slowly the spirit and vitality was squeezed out of the company. The soft, intangible feelings of making a difference and being part of a meaningful cause were driven out by the drive to achieve hard results — goals, objectives, and the bottom line.

Communications and meetings that were once full of exciting reports about new customers, innovative products developed on a shoe string, new market frontiers opening, and outstanding service delivered in extraordinarily tough circumstances were now filled with dry reports on progress to sales and profit goals, committee activities, strategies, budgeting, and business planning.

It became uninspiring and lifeless. The management imbalance dehumanized people and turned them into their roles. Expressions like "business is business" and "it's not personal, it's business" were heard more regularly. People become number crunchers, orders processors, product producers, sales pushers, researchers, technical problem solvers, managers, and budgeters.

Their heart and soul were hung up in the closet with their coats on the way in to work each morning. People went from being part of a cause that provided a paycheck to collecting a paycheck without a cause.

Snowballs, stones and stories

Frank had a few ideas about how to strengthen his leadership and bring more spirit and meaning into the organization. But he felt that he needed the fresh and informed perspective that an outside expert could offer. So he hired Pat, a consultant, to provide an assessment.

Pat conducted confidential interviews with Frank and with each of the managers on his team. Pat sat in on a few management meetings. Pat also ran some focus groups with frontline staff groups.

During their first feedback session, Pat asked Frank if he'd noticed how much sniping there was going on between his managers. "It's just good fun," Frank objected. "Yeah, often it is and that's great," Pat replied. "But it can also be like having a snowball fight. As long as the snowballs are soft and fluffy, everything's fine. Then someone throws a snowball with a stone inside, which hits you in the head. That person might say, 'It was just in fun'. But that doesn't make the buried stone hurt any less."

Pat looked down at his notes and concluded, "There are a few stones and some rocks being thrown around your meeting rooms, offices, and halls. A number of people have told me privately how much some of these hurt. They are eroding the team's spirit. Also, a lot of the humor around here is pretty cynical, and nothing destroys team spirit faster than cynicism. Snide remarks, barbs, and pessimism are like an acid that corrodes deeper connectedness and meaningful workplaces."

Frank and Pat decided that the sniping problem was a good place to start reconnecting the team. In consultation with the managers, they agreed to set up a Sniping and Cynicism Rule: If any team member made a comment that sounded like a putdown, cheap shot, or cynical remark, the others would tap their glasses, cups, or table top with a pen.

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The offender would then be required to deposit two dollars in a "fine pot." The money would be donated to a designated charity at the end of each quarter. (This strategy also prompted Frank to identify local charities and community projects that were of interest to people in the organization, and to provide them with support — both in allowing time off work and in donations of financial support.)

Frank's leadership plan to reconnect people focused on communication — holding "town hall" meetings in which he shared Pat's assessment report, discussed strengths, weaknesses, and improvement opportunities, asked for input and ideas, and got everyone involved in the improvement process. Frank also worked to develop his verbal communication skills. He became a corporate "storyteller," sharing with others what he had learned about the company's rich heritage and how previous leaders had dealt with many changes and crisis points.

Growing to the next level

Frank found that Richard Barrett's seven-level hierarchy provided a useful model for thinking about what was needed to bring spirit and meaning to his organization. Sitting in his home office during one of his early-morning R & R (reflection and renewal) periods, he thought to himself, "I can see that I allowed myself to become a victim of our short-sighted management culture — both personally and professionally.

– *Organizational Transformation: Liberating the Corporate Soul*, Richard Barrett

Our company has been locked into the lower levels. At the beginning, we needed to focus on survival (Level 1), then build relationships (Level 2), and then become more efficient and productive (Level 3). The problem is we haven't moved up any further in the growth hierarchy.

By failing to grow in spirit, our basic needs have stagnated into greed for both more money and power. It's never enough. We're all tuned into radio station WIFM — What's In it For Me. I need to find a way to help people through the transformation I've personally gone through (Level 4) and into the higher orders of spirit and meaning represented by Levels 5 to 7."

Frank focused on leading his division to higher levels of consciousness. From there he hoped to influence or inspire his peers, boss, and the rest of the company to evolve as well. Frank read books and searched key phrases like "spirit in the workplace," "soulful leadership," and "culture change." He even took time off to attend an international conference on business and consciousness.

At that conference he participated in a workshop led by a very experienced and knowledgeable transformation consultant whose books he had read and admired. Frank

peppered her with questions on the specifics of taking her noble and uplifting ideas, and applying them in his workplace.

But all he seemed to get from her in reply were vague generalities. Sensing his frustration, she approached Frank after the session and said, "I'm sorry I wasn't able to give you the simple formula you were looking for. But attaining higher levels of being isn't a paint-by-numbers project. Part of it is about readiness. Some people and organizations are more ready then others for the transformation from 'what's-in-it-for-me' to 'what's-best-for-the-common/greater-good.'

We must each find what works for our own unique personalities, corporate culture, and individual team members. It's like trying to find a path in a field of newly fallen snow.

Once we walk across the field, we've discovered our path."

Redefining the role of leadership

Some months after they had implemented the new leadership plan, Frank talked with Pat about how well the improvement process was going. He reported that energy and commitment levels around the organization were rising. "We are starting to see a big drop in absenteeism, complaints, and service/quality problems," Frank enthused.

"People are really getting into things around here. Yesterday, when I talked to Steph from accounting during their Hawaiian theme day, she had just come back from visiting a client. She went on and on about what a different place this was becoming. 'It's sure a lot more fun to come to work now,' she told me." "There's just one thing," Frank continued. "I'm spending so much time out of my office now that I am getting less and less of my own work done." "Last week my boss saw me in the parking lot and asked if I was taking more time off! Seems he had been trying to see me and always found me out of my office."

Pat looked at Frank and asked, "What do you think your real leadership work is?" "What do mean?" "I mean, you have been turning around the spirit of your organization and bringing a deeper sense of meaning and fun to people here. That's leadership. Shouldn't you delegate and develop people to do more of the day-to-day work?"

Frank thought for a moment. "You're right. My work is caring for the context. My role is working on the business, not in the business. I need to explain that to my boss and help him see how the turnaround we're now producing here comes from leadership, not micromanagement. Perhaps I can even influence him to take a look at his leadership…"

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