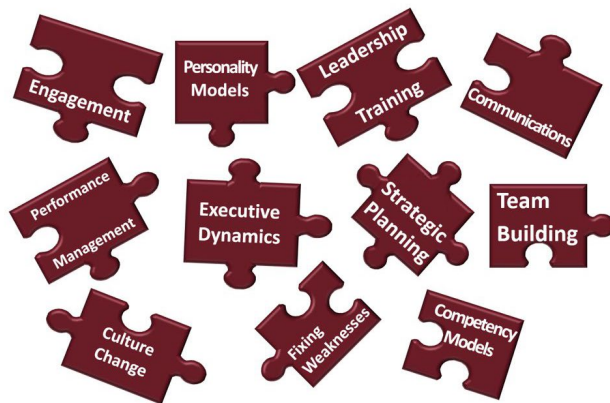




Issue 217 - April 2021



In his 19th Century *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, Ebenezer Cobham Brewer writes, "Euclid, having opened a school of mathematics at Alexandria, was asked by King Ptolemy whether he could explain his art to him in a more compendious manner. 'Sire,' said the geometrician, 'there is no royal road to learning.'"

The timeless quest for shortcuts, "secrets," or faster routes to growth and development is behind so much fad surfing. Many leaders and development professionals search for new technologies and quick and easy approaches to personal, team, and organization development. These partial and piecemeal approaches waste scarce resources and raises "the snicker factor." People quickly learn to mouth the latest buzzwords, popular books, or trendy approaches -- and then get back to their real work.

Peter Drucker once defined a champion as a "monomaniac with a mission." Abraham Maslow famously observed, "if the only tool you have is a hammer you treat everything as if it were a nail." Many fad champions swing the hammer of the latest big organizational fix with monomaniacal zeal. When this piecemeal approach fails to have much of an impact, a new hammer, swung by a new champion, appears. And the snicker factor rises another notch.

In this Issue:

Leadership Team Dynamics and Culture Development are Entwined

Personality Models: Have Fun, but Step Carefully Around the BS

Is Your Team Coughing Up a Culture Hairball?

Many Competency Models are Failing: 5 Keys to Make Them Flourish

Read *The Leader Letter* in Weekly Installments

Feedback and Follow-Up

We've used variations of the above graphic to show the shortcomings of this partial and piecemeal approach. This version illustrates key topics and their shortfalls in this issue. We start with how leadership team dynamics and culture development are inseparable. Yet many leaders and development professionals don't see what the research clearly shows: an organization's culture ripples out from the team leading it. And the leadership team's dynamics often reflect the organization's culture.


Many leadership teams at middle or lower levels disempower themselves. They orbit the "culture hairball" in frustration. By following or wallowing in their organization's mediocre or dysfunctional culture, they add more knots to the hairball. Or even worse -- they cough up their own culture hairball.

Four quadrant personality models can be entertaining. But they're not evidence-based and are practically useless. At best, they're fun fragments of what make each of us unique. At worst, they overly simplify and type-cast people into confining boxes.

Competency models can be quite useful pieces of leadership and organization effectiveness. But most are poorly designed fragments used in piecemeal approaches by a monomaniac with a mission. We'll look at five keys to make them flourish.

Take another look at the above puzzle pieces. How would you fit them together? Notice anything about their edges? Except for one piece, they're all border or edge pieces. There's no way to put them together. This is typical of many champions pushing hard to make their program THE program that frames the organization's development work. It'll never work. The pieces must be reshaped to fit the leadership team's vision of their desired culture and cascading behaviors.

May you find key pieces in this issue to put your personal, team, or organization puzzle together.



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Leadership Team Dynamics and Culture Development are Entwined



I recently had a call from "Judy," an HR VP, to discuss team building. She said their executive team effectiveness is slipping. Team issues and challenges are overlooked, factions are forming, and trust issues are developing. As we discussed (online) **executive retreat** options, she wondered if using a four-quadrant personality type training program might be helpful.

As we went deeper into their team dynamics, we agreed that a workshop on personality types wouldn't address the underlying team issues. Judy and I discussed how an organization's culture reflects its leadership team. The team sets the pace and direction by their own behavior. What the team does overshadows what its leaders are saying.

Executive team effectiveness tightly interweaves with the organization culture's culture in a reinforcing feedback loop like a Mobius strip. We agreed that their team-building work needs to focus on both team dynamics and organizational culture.

An organization's culture **ripples out** from the team leading it. Mediocre or dysfunctional organizations are led by weak mediocre or dysfunctional teams. Team failure factors are often a combination of seven common traps:

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- **Speed Traps and Tyranny of the Urgent** -- flooded by e-mails, endless meetings, and crisis management, the team is highly reactive and loses sight of the big picture.
- **Partial and Piecemeal Programs** -- leadership development, succession planning, customer service, agile, safety, talent/performance management, IT systems, executive coaching are separate programs not strategically linked together.
- **Leadership Lip Service** -- leadership team members send contradictory messages about core values and desired culture through inconsistent behaviors.
- **Not Building Change Capacity** -- change and development efforts don't engage the hearts and heads of key leaders and frontline staff and don't energize and equip them to make it happen.
- **Teams Not Pulling Together** -- strong leaders drive change in their "silo" and work at cross-purposes. This weakens the team and culture development efforts.
- **Communication Breakdowns** -- leadership teams aren't united in strategic priorities, key messages, or behaviors that model their vision and values, and rigorous implementation planning.
- **Failing to Follow-Through** -- strategies and development plans often lose focus because they don't have a robust implementation process engaging key teams with a disciplined follow-through process.

Our webinar on ***Executive Team Building and Culture Development*** starts with a deeper look at these traps. I then walk through the key steps to a leadership team retreat that refocuses the team on critical strategic issues to strengthen both their teamwork and their culture.

We've developed a brief assessment to help leadership teams look in the mirror. Click on **Seven Leadership Team Failure Factors** to take the 14-item assessment. You can complete the assessment and compare your total score with our scoring guide. We'll provide you with links to leadership team development resources. An even more powerful approach is to have your leadership team complete the assessment and compare your scores.

Many leadership teams don't recognize their own behavior reflected back to them in their culture. What leadership team dynamics do you see reflected in your culture?

Personality Models: Have Fun, but Step Carefully Around the BS



Life's full of interesting coincidences or -- depending on your belief system -- mysterious synchronicities. As I was preparing a **retreat** proposal with a range of options for Judy's executive team (**last week's blog**), I came across Laith Al-Shawaf's provocative article, **Should You Trust the Myers-Briggs Personality Test?**

Al-Shawaf, a researcher and Assistant Professor of Psychology at the University of Colorado, writes, "as any psychologist worth their salt will tell you, it's bullshit." He details eight reasons:

1. It Is Based on Carl Jung's Ideas
2. The Test Lacks Predictive Validity: It Does Not Predict Outcomes in the Real World
3. Human Personality Falls Along Continua, Not Into Discrete Categories
4. The Types Used by the MBTI Have Arbitrary Boundaries
5. The Myers-Briggs Has Poor Reliability
6. The Myers-Briggs Misleadingly Implies That There Are Big Differences Between Types and Minimal Differences Within a Type
7. When You Turn a Continuous Variable Into a Categorical One, You Throw Away Information
8. The MBTI Doesn't Measure Neuroticism

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) is the world's most popular and widely used personality tool. It leads a horde of four-quadrant personality models with a wide variety of colors and descriptions. Classifying personality types seems to be deep in human nature. Nearly 2,500 years ago, "the father of medicine," the Greek physician, Hippocrates, sorted personalities into four types: sanguine, choleric, melancholic, and phlegmatic.

The enduring popularity of personality models appears to come from the same place as horoscopes. We have a deep need to understand people and predict our future. And they both have about the same amount of science behind them! By another coincidence/synchronicity... last week, I read a Toronto Star editor's apology to their readers for the discovery that an astrologist "whose horoscope writing was syndicated in Torstar papers and dozens of other publications had...a pattern of recycled predictions, in some cases more than once...unsuspecting readers have been duped." He closed his column with "this unfortunate episode defied prediction."

The main criticism Laith Al-Shawaf has for trusting MBTI is its poor reliability, validity, omissions like neuroticism, and the many other personality idiosyncrasies that make each of us unique. Personality categorizing type-casts people into confining boxes.

My very first training tool certification was on one of the pioneering personality type models called Social Styles. Facilitating the discovery of personality types for self and others was fun and sometimes insightful for participants. While entertaining (and highly rated on the end-of-workshop "happy sheets") very little lasting behavior change or practical applications came from these sessions.

The main value I could see came from sensitizing participants to looking for indicators of our own and other's preferred communication style. This helped to shift from our preferred style to connecting with others as they'd like to be approached. This is a version of "the platinum rule:" do unto others as they'd like to be done unto. Social Styles emphasizes a versatility scale. That's their key measure of communication effectiveness and the main goal of training on this model.

Leadership development has fallen into the same trap of focusing on what's popular rather than what works. Numerous studies show abysmal returns on these investments. One of the key reasons we partnered with Zenger Folkman almost 10 years ago is because of their **research/evidence-based** approach to leadership development.

Like horoscopes, four-quadrant personality models can be quite entertaining. Like watching a good fantasy movie, have fun, give it a high rating, but don't expect to find many real-life applications.

Is Your Team Coughing Up a Culture Hairball?



Recently, I reposted an article on cultural assumptions often being wrong because leaders don't understand how their current culture is perceived. A reader posted a comment asking if it's realistic to expect to change the culture of large organizations, especially "mature ones with profound legacies and cultural liabilities." He then suggested, "it might be better to 'orbit the hairball' than try to untangle it."

Expecting to change a culture of any size organization is quite realistic. We've seen major culture shifts of large organizations resulting in dramatic improvements in safety, quality, service, engagement, and profitability. It starts with strong and sustained leadership **rippling** out from the senior leadership team. Orbiting the hairball is a funny image. It's also a cynically humorous expression of helplessness and victim-speak.

Many divisional, departmental, branch, or other sub-unit leadership teams add to the tangled culture hairball by following along with a weak or dysfunctional culture or -- even worse -- wallowing in **helplessness**. Like that pessimistic, doomster, Eeyore of Winnie the Pooh fame, weak leadership teams believe it's futile to try changing the situation. These teams use excuses for inaction like "we tried that before," "they (senior management, unions, head office, other departments, etc.) won't let us," "the systems/policies won't let us," "it's just part of our culture," and so on.

Weak leaders often flounder in blame storming sessions where they frame organizational problems with following or wallowing rather than leading. So, the team adds more knots to the cultural hairball. They don't step up to what Jack Zenger's research shows; "taking responsibility is the highest mark of great leaders."

Upward leadership is the hallmark of an effective mid or lower-level leadership team. We've seen municipal managers lead their councils, divisional teams lead head office, and regional teams pilot highly effective culture development efforts.

Any organizational unit's culture reflects the dynamics and behavior of its local leadership team. Culture development starts with team development. Highly effective leadership teams avoid common traps such as too many priorities, overloading, reactionary focus on operations, conflicting messages, avoiding difficult issues, poor meetings, and the like. Click on **Seven Leadership Team Failure Factors** to assess your team.

These **five steps** have helped many leadership teams boost their effectiveness and get their culture shift together:

1. Assess current systems, practices, culture, and readiness for change
2. Leadership team planning strategy session
3. Realign/integrate/prune current projects, processes, systems, and development initiatives
4. Plan implementation strategies and timeliness
5. Monitor, follow up, and adjust implementation plans

In his novel, *Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas*, Tom Robbins writes, "Mediocrity: now there is ugliness for you. Mediocrity's a hairball coughed up on the Persian carpet of Creation."

Is your team following or wallowing in mediocrity? Are you orbiting -- or even coughing up -- a culture hairball?

Many Competency Models are Failing. 5 Keys to Make Them Flourish



Competency models are widely used for 360 assessments, performance management, and leadership development. When used well, they provide a strong framework for defining and developing key behaviors, increasing leadership and culture effectiveness.

But most aren't used well. That's a key reason so many studies have documented so many failed leadership and organization development programs.

I recently updated an article on **Leadership Competency Models: Why Many Are Failing and How to Make Them Flourish** for Zenger Folkman's monthly newsletter. Virtual assistant, **Lee Dantzer**, has been doing an excellent job working with us for many years editing *The Leader Letter* and articles like this one. The comment she sent after editing this article is a good example of a key problem with many competency models -- and how to make them flourish:

This made me think about where I was many, MANY years ago versus where I am today. After high school, I went to a visual arts college, aspiring to be an artist. I worked part-time in the finance office to help pay for school, and when I graduated started working there full time as I had to get a "real job" to pay the bills. Many years later, I still found myself in finance and admin-type positions and was quite miserable.

I was looking for answers and read somewhere that sometimes you have to do what you have to do to pay the bills. However, finding creativity in the work you do can change everything.

This spoke directly to me! It changed my course. It elevated my strengths, and I found more enjoyment in the work I did. As the years went by, I grew into this mindset, and today I absolutely love the work I do, so much so that I now feel I am the artist I always wanted to be.

Here's a summary of the key points in **Leadership Competency Models: Why Many Are Failing and How to Make Them Flourish** (click to read a deeper explanation of each point):

6 Reasons Many Leadership Competency Models are Failing:

1. **Out of Thin Air** -- many competencies have no empirical link to performance outcomes.
2. **It's a Bird, It's a Plane, It's SuperLeader** -- leaders don't need to excel at all competencies to be extraordinary.
3. **One Size Fits All** -- competencies aren't all equal for all leaders across a range of roles.
4. **The Way of the Weakness** -- focusing on fixing weaknesses weakens motivation for, and effectiveness of, development efforts.
5. **Here Comes the Judge** -- using competencies for performance evaluation/appraisals is destructive.
6. **Performance (Mis)Management Systems** -- often competencies (how) and performance outcomes (what) are confused.

5 Keys to Make Leadership Competency Models Flourish

See the [article](#) for charts showing the research behind these approaches:

1. **What Really Matters: Correlate Competencies to Performance Outcomes**
2. **Don't Try to Do it All: Build 3-5 Competencies from Good to Great**
3. **Develop Towering Strengths to Overshadow Weaknesses**
4. **Use Competency Models for Building and Developing**
5. **Evaluate Performance Results (The What), Not Competencies (The How)**

Competency models are sometimes invisibly embedded in leadership and performance development 360 and other surveys, training models, and performance management systems. Like Artificial Intelligence algorithms, their leadership biases and assumptions can be hidden.

What competency models underlay the development approaches you're using? Where's the research supporting their design? Are they perpetuating failed approaches? How do you **know**?

Bridging the Distance: Reading, Leading, and Succeeding



Leaders bring hope, optimism, and positive action. That's really tough to do while social distancing and facing an uncertain future. We multiply misery if we allow the pessimism plague to infect us as well.

To counter Headline Stress Disorder and strengthen resilience, I actively scan a list of resources for research, articles, and tips on leading ourselves and others through these turbulent times. I post those articles every day.

Let's shorten our social media distancing. Follow or connect with me:

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Together we can Learn, Laugh, Love, and Lead -- just for the L of it!

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The items in each month's issue of *The Leader Letter* are first published in my weekly **blog** during the previous month.

If you read each blog post (or issue of *The Leader Letter*) as it's published over twelve months, you'll have read the equivalent of a leadership book. And you'll pick up a few practical leadership tips that help you use time more strategically and tame your E-Beast

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 his or her permission. I am also happy to explore customized, in-house adaptations (online these days) of any of my material for your team or organization. Drop me an e-mail at jim.clemmer@clemmergroup.com or connect with me on [LinkedIn](#), [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), or my [blog](#)!

Let's leverage our leadership strengths to work together and get through this challenging time.



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