Issue 185 - August 2018

Stop me if you've heard this one:

A young girl's elementary teacher hears little Sophia sing at school and recognizes what a beautiful voice she has. The teacher encourages the girl to nurture her gift and has her sing a solo at a school concert. Sophia's pure, clear voice and passion for music enchants everyone and generates the buzz of the evening. Her parents are encouraged to provide voice training and singing lessons for her.

Sophia's music teacher was determined to perfect her voice by removing occasional wavers, improving her breathing, clarifying her dictation, and learning proper posture. He chose practice songs that Sophia didn't enjoy singing to force her to address her deficiencies. Sophia became self-conscious and lost confidence under her teacher's constant corrections. Singing lessons became an unpleasant chore. After numerous fights with her parents she dropped out of the lessons and stopped singing.

A few years later Sophia was at a party where the kids were having fun with karaoke. She sang a few of her favorite songs with friends and a couple on her own. She blew the audience away with her powerful voice. Sophia started singing at more parties. Soon she was asked to perform at school, weddings, and social events.

Sophia recorded a few You Tube videos of songs she loved singing. The leader of a popular local band saw the videos and asked her to join their group. During one of their gigs an agent scouting for fresh young talent heard her sing. She recognized Sophia's passion and very strong abilities. The agent helped her get coaching suited to her personality and musical style. Today Sophia's building a successful singing and songwriting career.

This is a story with many versions. Sophia's story is a positive one. Many aren't. Too often, focusing on correcting mistakes and fixing weaknesses reduces confidence and effectiveness. How many talented people haven't built on their strengths and passion?

For decades psychologists and counselors have focused on what's wrong rather than what's right. Since founding the new field of positive psychology in 1998, Martin Seligman and his colleagues have assembled a mountain of evidence showing that building on, and strengthening, what's right is far more effective.

This month's issue features a review of Seligman's new book and quotes chosen to drive you to thinking. His memoir and history of this revolutionary approach show how psychology is rapidly changing its negative approach. Unfortunately, leadership development and coaching are still stuck back in the sixties. Despite the evidence, 360 assessments, performance management, and leadership training still focus on fixing weaknesses.

It's a major reason for "the great training robbery" that's sucking up so much time and money with dismal returns on investment.

Is it time to assess your balance of pessimism/optimism, negative/positive, or weakness/strengths focus? And as you'll find in this issue, is this the time to assess how to use your time? This issue also spotlights a common challenge to increasing customer service: do we agree on what it is, and who defines it? It's a vital leadership and culture development issue.

May you find a few bits of inspiration to help you sing -- or lead -- at your best!

Lessons from *The Hope Circuit*: Reducing What's Wrong Doesn't Increase Effectiveness

How can the absence of ill-being equal the presence of well-being? Does lessening unhappiness increase happiness? Does getting what is good in life require more than eliminating what is bad?

These are among the key questions researcher and professor, Martin Seligman, tackles in his inspiring and insightful new memoir, **The Hope Circuit: A Psychologist's Journey from Helplessness to Optimism**. Seligman founded the revolutionary field of **positive psychology** in 1998 when he was president of the American Psychological Association.
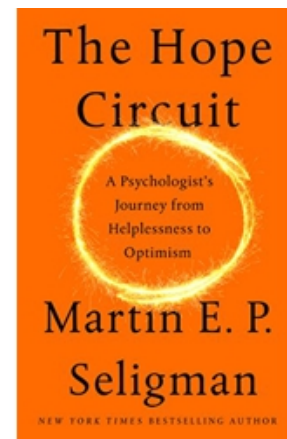
I've been following Seligman's work on optimism, happiness, and strength-building since the mid-eighties. This book filled in gaps and connected many dots in tracing how Seligman's thinking and psychology research evolved. He's at the center of a major shift from focusing on what's wrong to strengthening and building on what's right.

Seligman first made his mark with pioneering research on learned helplessness. He writes, "I and many of the practitioners and scientists in positive psychology came right out of work on misery and suffering. I devoted thirty-five years of my life to undoing depression and helplessness. I found that merely getting rid of the bad stuff was not enough, and so I advocated working on what makes life worth living as well...it is the presence of positive emotion, engagement, good relations, meaning, and accomplishment (PERMA)...getting what is good in life entails a lot more than just eliminating what is bad."

Seligman's work is grounded in rigorous academic research. He's one of the most cited psychologists of our time. However, his books are highly engaging, very readable, and practical. This book is a unique blend of personal memoir and history of positive psychology's evolution. Here, Seligman's own life is an open book. When Seligman began his career in the 1960s he was "always negative" and focused on "helplessness, hopelessness, trauma, fear, and depression" and was "anxious and grumpy a lot." Today he reports "I am no longer negative. I am actually quite positive. I now ask questions about what is best in life: positive emotion, meaning, human progress, virtue, and the long future of flourishing. My critical antennae are still up, but I pay much less attention to their tantrums."

There are powerful lessons we can draw from *The Hope Circuit* for leadership development and coaching. It's not the absence of weaknesses that define highly effective leaders. It's the presence of a few overshadowing strengths that elevate and set positive perceptions -- and responses -- to powerful leaders. Development plans aimed at reducing what's wrong or closing gaps are much less energizing and effective than leveraging what's right.

Current personal and leadership development approaches are badly broken and ineffective. Seligman could have been writing about leadership development when he observed, "the tongue's default mode is to swish around the mouth until it finds a cavity and then to worry the defective tooth. The tongue does not look for a perfect tooth and then savor its flawlessness. The tongue is there not to celebrate what is right but to detect what is wrong and hidden. The default mode of your mind is to swish around your life until it discovers a problem that just might explode into real trouble. It then hones in and plans how to avoid it."

If you're interested in how to build optimism, leverage strengths, or apply positive psychology -- and reading an interesting memoir about a pioneering thinker -- I highly recommend *The Hope Circuit*.

Thoughts That Make You Go Hmmm from...The Hope Circuit

As a long-time follower of Martin Seligman's applied research on optimism, happiness, strength building, and positive psychology I devoured his new memoir, ***The Hope Circuit: A Psychologist's Journey from Helplessness to Optimism*** (see review above). When he began his psychology career in the 1960s, the field focused on lessening misery. Thanks to his groundbreaking research and innovative leadership in founding positive psychology, there's now a counterbalancing shift to multiplying what's right and leveraging strengths.
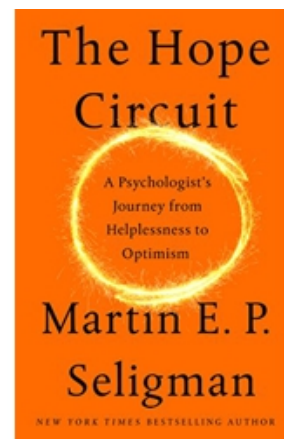
Here are a few powerful thoughts that jump out from this outstanding book:

"I could distinguish spending my life correcting what was wrong from spending it building what was right. Building a good life as opposed to correcting my shortcomings captured 'happier' rather than just 'less unhappy.'"

"The death grip of the negative exists not just because we are bad-weather animals but also because the negative has an urgency that the positive rarely does. Danger, loss, and trespass tend to arrive suddenly and insist on immediate attention."

"Pessimism is lazy; it comes easily and naturally. If you actually live in a more benign world than the Pleistocene and want to enjoy your species' hard-earned prosperity, you have to break out of the negative. What needs teaching -- what needs nurturance, support, and justification -- is an optimistic view of the world."

"Positive psychology does not do the prescribing; the values of the culture or the individual do that. Positive psychology is an exercise not in changing values but in helping cultures and individuals better achieve what they already value."

"I believe that the unrivaled human ability of imagining futures -- 'prospection' -- uniquely describes our species. We prospect the future uniquely well, and this ability might ultimately make the aspiration of wisdom a reality. Hence, we are better named Homo prospectus."

"Traditional psychology tried to undo what was wrong, or tried to derive what was right from what was not wrong, or neglected what was right altogether. Positive psychology corrected this imbalance."

"Our world, emerging at last from its vale of tears, now stands on the brink of a Florentine moment... it is perilously easy to forget these huge advances and to slip into our glib and quotidian

catastrophizing about what 'terrible times' we live in now. I exhort us to be more fully conscious of these positives… we have much more to aspire to than less suffering. We can also aspire to more **PERMA**, more well-being, and more happiness."

Do You Agree on What Customer Service or Quality Is?

We complain that "it" is disappearing. We all want more of "it." When asked to define "it," we say, "I'll know `it' when I see 'it'."

Organizations want to be known for delivering high levels of "it." Many understand that "it" will increasingly determine their success. Team members would like to be known for delivering high levels of "it" to their internal partners and the organization's customers. And they would like to be appreciated and rewarded for providing "it."

But when I write about "it," and you agree your organization needs more of "it," are we talking about the same thing? Even more importantly, when you talk to your people about improving "it," are they seeing "it" the same way you are? Or is everyone signing up for "it," then heading off in opposite directions toward their own vision of "it"?

"It" -- customer service and quality -- is one of today's most talked about and least understood concepts. Service/quality is a very slippery concept. It's exasperatingly difficult to define and a source of great confusion to many managers. There's a wide range of differences in premises, concepts, and even in the meanings of key words. What's worse -- many managers don't even realize the differences exist. For example, many people think that a "higher quality" deluxe hotel costs more than a "lower quality" budget hotel. But where is cost and value in that equation? How about brand, prestige, or image? Those simple words; *service and quality*, pronounced and spelled identically, have multiple meanings.

Definitions of "service/quality" also depend on the mind-set of servers/producers, their support groups, management, and especially on the culture of the organization. In some organizations, just showing up for work every day, in never mind how snarly a mood, is a heroic feat.

As Ted Levitt, former professor at Harvard Business School and author of the classic book, *The Marketing Imagination,* points out, *"The organization must learn to think of itself not as producing goods and services but buying customers, as doing those things that will make people want to do business with it."* Where's the customer's view in your definition of service/quality? Do you know (with facts and data) what your key internal partners and/or external customers expect from your team/organization? Is their definition of service/quality your starting point?

Your team/organization needs a clear, well understood, consistent -- and customer-centered -- agreement on what service/quality means and how to deliver it. If people throughout your organization can't consistently define service/quality, how can you measure it? And if you can't measure it, how can you achieve it? Most managers and team members want to improve service/quality, but they are not all reading the same road map. But then again, they're not even all heading to the same place. How about you and your team?

Further Reading:

- "**Outside In: Customer Perceptions Define Service/Quality Levels**"
- "**The First Ring: Meeting Basic Product/Service Requirements**"
- "**Defining The Second Ring of Service/Quality: Support That Satisfies**"
- "**The Third Ring: Enhanced Service That Delights Customers**"

Time to Assess How You're Using Your Time?

An old fable tells of a farmer with a wagon brimming full of cabbage heading to a new market. He stops for directions and asks, "How far is it to the market?" The man replies, "It's about an hour if you go slowly but if you rush it will take all day." It was a bumpy road and if the farmer went too fast he'd spend most of his time picking up the cabbage that bounced off his wagon.

This month's issue of *Harvard Business Review* shines its 'spotlight' on "How CEOs Manage Time." Professor (and strategy guru) Michael Porter and Dean, Nitin Nohria, of Harvard Business School report on their ongoing study of how CEOs in large complex organizations most effectively use their time. Their findings apply to all senior leaders because, "time is the scarcest resource leaders have. Where they allocate it matters -- a lot."

This lengthy article details many elements of CEO's strategic use of time. A core set of recommendations center on senior leaders "using broad integrating mechanisms." They outline four key ones; harnessing strategy, aligning organizational structure and culture, designing, monitoring, and improving processes, and developing people and relationships.

This is consistent with the podcast interview Nancy MacKay, president of MacKay CEO Forums did with me last year on **leveraging leadership time**. We discussed avoiding The Acceleration Trap, building culture and organization capacity, and strengthening executive team effectiveness.

We continually work with leadership teams on their use of individual and collective time. And I've written extensively on this vital topic. Here's a recap of key points from research and that work:

- Highly effective leaders treat time like money. A Bain & Company study of 17 corporations identified three big problems; "Companies are awash in e-communications," "Meeting time has skyrocketed," and "Dysfunctional meeting behavior is on the rise."
- Participants in a study on increasing knowledge workers productivity cut desk work by six hours per week and meeting time by two hours per week by identifying low-value tasks, deciding whether to drop, delegate, or redesign, off-loading tasks, allocating freed-up time, and committing to a development plan.
- A study of 343 businesses showed that when businesses "slowed down to speed up" they increased sales by 40% and operating profits by 52% over a three-year period.
- Studies by Glenn Wilson, a psychologist at London University's King College, showed an average IQ loss of 10 points among 1,100 frequent electronic communicators who were flipping back and forth between tasks, conversations, and their electronic messages.
- Don't load new projects and goals on top of existing workloads without rigorous "stop doing" pruning to make room for them.
- Take your team offsite at least once per year to reflect and refocus.
- Periodically discuss what your team should keep, stop, and start doing to increase your effectiveness.
- Regularly review and adjust the purpose, process, participants, and effectiveness of all meetings.
- Ensure your meetings have clear goals/outcomes for each agenda item, ground rules to minimize disruptions, document decisions, agreed action plans, and rigorous follow-through.
- Develop e-mail ground rules within your organization to reduce the quantity and improve the quality of e-mail communication.
- Define your desired culture, behaviors that help or hinder that culture, and implementation strategies to support everyone in living your core aspirations.
- Develop your coaching skills and get regular feedback on the effectiveness of your coaching conversations.
- Use a coaching framework to focus your team members on developing possible solutions and owning the issue.

- Identify and focus on your top three "strategic imperatives" and put teams together to manage them.

Is it time you **assess your strategic use of time**? Do you need to slow down to go faster?

Tweet Reading: Recommended Online Articles

This section summarizes last month's LinkedIn Updates and Twitter Tweets about online articles or blog posts that I've flagged as worth reading. These are usually posted on weekends when I am doing much of my reading for research, learning, or leisure. You can follow me on Twitter at **https://twitter.com/JimClemmer**

My original tweet commenting on the article follows each title and descriptor from the original source:

Learn how to navigate the demand for great agility, innovation, and pace by executing fast and well.

> **Zenger Folkman - Webinar**
> **https://www.clemmergroup.com/webinars**
> *"Rev Up Your Day—Try Leadership Speed! Complimentary Webinar Presented by: Jack Zenger and Jared Harding"*

The intersection of strengths, passion, and organizational need creates a powerful career coaching sweet spot to these tips.

> **"6 Tips for Supporting your Employee's Career Development from Individual Contributor to Formal Leadership"**-- Dr. Chantal Thorn
> **https://www.linkedin.com**
> *"Helping your employee navigate the individual contributor to people management waters is critical career and leadership development support."*

Read *The Leader Letter* in Weekly Installments

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 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@ ClemmerGroup.com** or connect with me on **LinkedIn**, **Twitter**, **FaceBook**, or my **blog**!

May the Force (of strengths) be with you!

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