



Issue 208 - July 2020



In Shakespeare's play, Hamlet says, "there is nothing good or bad but thinking makes it so." This has become a widely quoted bit of wisdom. It's both an ancient truth as a cornerstone of mindfulness and on the leading edge of cognitive psychology. Research on the nature of reality, consciousness, and quantum physics is putting scientific foundations under eons of philosophical/spiritual teaching; our perceptions, beliefs, values, mental models, etc. create the world we experience.

What's your thinking on this pandemic? Is it a depressing disaster or can we grow and become stronger? Richard Tedeschi has been studying questions like this for decades. He's a professor of psychology emeritus at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte; the distinguished chair of the Boulder Crest Institute (where Retreat for Military and Veteran Wellness programs is based on a posttraumatic growth model), and a coauthor of the book, *Posttraumatic Growth*. In his recent *Harvard Business Review* article, "Growth After Trauma," he writes, "We've learned that negative experiences can spur positive change, including a recognition of personal strength, the exploration of new possibilities, improved relationships, a greater appreciation for life, and spiritual growth. We see this in people who have endured war, natural disasters, bereavement, job loss and economic stress,

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serious illnesses and injuries. So despite the misery resulting from the coronavirus outbreak, many of us can expect to develop in beneficial ways in its aftermath. And leaders can help others to do so."

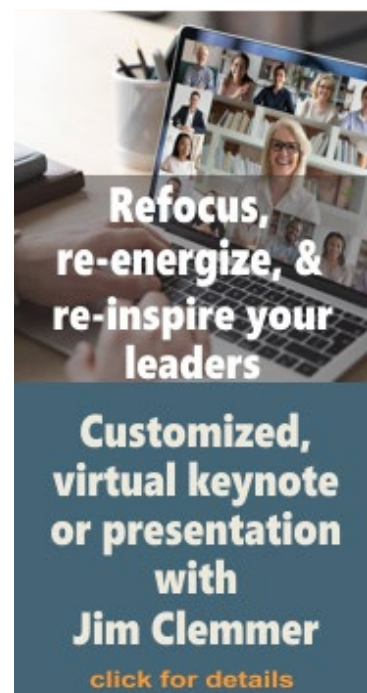
Tedeschi provides "five steps for coming out of a crisis stronger." Here's my summary:

1. **Education** -- realize that our public health, social, and economic systems don't protect us from disasters like this one. We haven't eliminated major diseases that have plagued humanity for eons. And they don't just happen to distant people in other parts of the world.
2. **Emotional Regulation** -- focus on successes and positive possibilities instead of losses, failures, uncertainties, and worst-case scenarios. Use mindfulness, meditation, and thinking about our thinking, to recognize and acknowledge our thoughts and fears.
3. **Disclosure** -- talk about your feelings, struggles, and concerns. Invite others to tell their stories, challenges, and loss.
4. **Narrative Development** -- discuss how these times could lead to a better future. Talk about how this trauma has helped to reset priorities and opened new opportunities.
5. **Service** -- help to provide relief to people and communities to get through this crisis. Express gratitude, show compassion, and empathize. Find meaningful personal and shared missions.

I've long studied, written about, and worked to build **resilience**. Approaches to strengthening hardiness and resilience are easy to understand, but tough to do, especially during traumatic times. We need constant reminders. A few months ago, I summarized **nine ways** I continue to find very helpful.

Hopefully, you'll find approaches in this issue to help strengthen resilience in yourself and others. "Empartnerment" can harness the collective energy and creativity of teams and organizations to overcome big challenges and even thrive on chaos. Building on strengths is a proven -- but underused -- way to deal with adversity and boost effectiveness. It's another example of a concept that's easy to understand, but difficult to do. Workplace learning is more vital than ever. LinkedIn's Workplace Learning report reinforces well tested approaches to boost leadership and organization effectiveness. And humor can be a powerful antidote to pessimism and disaster. But only if it's healthy humor. Unhealthy humor can be highly destructive.

When we change how we look at the world, the world we look at changes.



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Powerful Leaders Go Beyond Empowerment to Empartnerment



To fix organizational problems or make major changes, managers often hire consultants to analyze what's happening and provide improvement recommendations. The consulting firm usually interviews people, runs focus groups, and gathers input from a variety of sources. Lots of good ideas are gathered and the best ones presented to leaders along with a recommended action plan.

As a firm that does a lot of this kind of work, we don't find the practice objectionable! What's sad is how frequently the ideas that excite leaders have been inside the organization for years. Too often, leaders are hearing them for the first time. Or they are finally paying attention because the ideas and plans come from outside experts. This is a big leadership failure.

In "Harnessing Everyday Genius," in the latest edition of *Harvard Business Review*, Gary Hamel and Michele Zanini show what a big problem this is.

They cite a recent Gallup survey showing that only one in five U.S. employees strongly agree with the statement, "My opinions seem to count at work." It gets worse. An American Working Conditions Survey found that "just 11% of frontline U.S. employees said they were consistently able to influence decisions important to their work." The researchers' analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics data "shows that 70% of U.S. employees are in jobs deemed to require little or no originality."

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Everybody loses. Hamel and Zanini conclude, "As a result, a vast reservoir of human ingenuity is going untapped. That depresses performance of individual firms and the economy overall." But it doesn't have to be that way. The article centers on how the France-based tire manufacturer, Michelin, harnessed the genius and engagement of frontline teams for major performance breakthroughs. Called "responsabilisation" (French for empowerment), the company saw plants who've embraced this approach reduce deficits from 7% to 1.5%, productivity increase by 10%, absenteeism drop to virtually zero, expand their workforce by a third without hiring additional managers or professional staff, and deliver \$500 million of improvements.

We've seen that when **leaders help people to help themselves**, major culture shifts can generate these kinds of results. It means leaders **doing it with** -- not to or for -- their teams. Our experience is that this needs to go beyond empowerment -- which stays rooted in power and hierarchy -- to "empartnerment."

Here are three key reasons frontline teams need to be empartnered:

1. They're the experts in the work within their areas and have deep insight into the effectiveness of cross-functional or organization-wide processes. Their understanding of what does and doesn't work is far greater than most managers and outside experts.
2. Empartnerment generates greater energy and engagement. Most people want more from their jobs than just a paycheck. We want to be part of an organization with a meaningful purpose, feel like our work makes a difference, and contribute to a winning team.
3. Frontline teams have ultimate implementation power. Too often, they're asked to execute plans they know won't work. Some even engage in "malicious compliance" and implement what they know are irrelevant approaches. Good -- even great -- strategies poorly executed wastes everyone's time, burns money, and gives the disengagement cycle another downward spin.

Empowerment calls for a leader shift. Good managers often empower. Great leaders empower. [Click here](#) for a chart showing the difference. You might also want to use this 10 point check list for a [leadership checkup](#).

A few steps by 1,000 people is far better than 1,000 steps by one person. Leaders who can tap into everyone's genius are far more likely to help their organizations navigate our stormy seas.

Is What's Missing Throwing You off Your Game?



One of my favorite podcasts is Terry O'Reilly's "[Under the Influence](#)," focused on the advertising and marketing business. Terry's a master storyteller. He continually finds unusual and interesting stories to start each podcast. His recent podcast, "Setting the Table: Best Opening Stories," looked back at his stories from over 300 episodes that generated the most listener feedback. A top-rated story about a one-armed martial artist was especially intriguing.

A young man lost his left arm in a car crash. He was determined to continue pursuing his dreams and studied martial arts. As he progressed, he asked his teacher, or sensei, if he was good enough to enter competitions. His sensei said he could be with intense training, especially learning one very difficult throw. They practiced the extremely difficult technique over and over until the student had mastered it.

The sensei said he was now ready to compete. "But shouldn't I learn more moves?" the student asked. He teacher said, "This is an extremely advanced technique, and you can use it to win."

At the day of the tournament, the young man easily won the first few matches. But in the final match, he was losing so badly that the referee was about to call it off. "Let him continue," the sensei insisted. Soon after the match resumed, his opponent made a critical mistake. The young man instantly saw his chance to use the difficult technique he'd practiced for months. He grabbed him, threw him, and pinned his bigger and stronger opponent to win the tournament.

On the way home, the young man asked his teacher how he could win the tournament by relying on just that one technique. The sensei said, "You won for two reasons. First, you mastered one of the most difficult throws in all of judo. Second, the only defense for that move is for your opponent to grab your left arm."

This story illustrates how a profound strength can overcome a weakness. Our work with *The Extraordinary Leader* process shows that whether it's in an online/personal **workshop** or through **one-on-one coaching**, leveraging strengths is much more effective. Numerous pre-post studies show building leadership strengths is **2 - 3 times more effective** than fixing weaknesses.

So often leaders review their 360 feedback and are **seduced by the dark side** to focus on what they don't have -- like missing an arm -- than on developing their strengths to overcome that gap. We continually see that **towering strengths** can overcome weaknesses.

Are you and your leaders leveraging your strengths? Don't let deeply a conditioned focus on what's wrong throw you.

Further Reading and Research

- **Leadership Lift: Significantly Boost Effectiveness by Raising Strength Clusters**
- **Are You Focused on What's Wrong to Make Things Right?**
- **Developing Strengths or Weaknesses: Overcoming the Lure of the Wrong Choice** (research paper)
- **Focusing on Strengths Webinar: What Extraordinary Leaders Do Differently**
- **Who Decides What's a Strength?**

6 Key Takeaways from LinkedIn's 2020 Workplace Learning Report



LinkedIn Learning's 4th Annual 2020 **Workplace Learning Report** reinforces key trends in boosting leadership and organization effectiveness. This report compiles survey responses from 1,675 Learning and Development professionals, 2,000 learners, and 2,932 managers in North America, Asia-Pacific, and Europe.

The survey data looks like it was compiled before the pandemic turned our world upside down, so the section showing strong growth in L&D budgets is out of date. It's clearly at odds with the *Chief Learning Officer's* Business Intelligence Board's "**2020 Learning State of the Industry**." This survey of 1,500 L & D professionals shows that 46% expect a budget decrease this year. The 'half-full' view of this glass shows a majority expect an increase or no reduction.

Five themes especially stood out in the LinkedIn report. Most of these have been ongoing themes and challenges for learning and development. These are even more vital in today's turbulent times:

Soft Skills -- "Soft skills are the essential interpersonal skills that make or break our ability to get things done. We think of them as foundational and every professional should be working to build them. "The top five soft skills are creativity, persuasion, collaboration, adaptability, and emotional intelligence. This is a consistent and timeless finding of **numerous studies**.

Executive Leadership -- executives "believe that closing the skill gap is an urgent business priority." Yet only 27% of CEOs are actively championing learning. The report states that when asked about their biggest challenges, "getting managers to make learning a priority for their teams topped the list." We find that moving leaders beyond lip service about development to **involved leadership** is the biggest factor in "the great **training robbery**."

Culture Development -- a culture of learning, directly connects to executive lip service or leadership. As the report notes, "top managers drive engagement and create a culture of learning." Creating a culture of learning and increasing employee engagement in learning were two of the top three challenges reported in the survey. Unfortunately, the **rhetoric-reality gap** between an organization's aspired and lived culture is huge.

Career Development -- over half of learners said they'd invest more time in learning if managers coached with learning opportunities and courses linked to their career growth. Career coaching is especially effective when managers can help the coachee find their personal **sweet spot** at the intersection of their strengths, passion, and organizational needs.

Personalized Learning -- "learners are craving a highly personalized learning experience that serves up the right learning at the right time." The skills that top the list are management and leadership effectiveness. Our experience shows that a powerful combination of highly personalized management and leadership learning is **360 feedback** and **personal development planning**. After providing **one-on-one coaching** to hundreds of leaders, I will admit to a little bias on on the power of that personalized approach!

The sixth takeaway of both surveys is the surge in online learning. LinkedIn respondents expected to spend 57% more before the pandemic hit. That number will grow exponentially as a key part of the new world of remote work. Classroom and team sessions are not likely to revert to previous levels any time soon. Having delivered many virtual **keynotes**, **webinars**, and remote **coaching** sessions, I know this approach can be highly effective.

Given the reductions in L & D budgets and move to online approaches, **targeted approaches** linked to organizational strategy and senior leader priorities has never been more important.

Humor at Work: Take my Boss... Please!



If you're a father, I hope you enjoyed Father's Day last month and were treated like a king. Over the years, I've tried to get our three kids to give me the gift of laughing at all my Dad Jokes for just that one day. Still no luck. I think they're afraid of pulling a groan muscle.

Our daughter, Vanessa, gave me a Father's Day card years ago. The front cover stated, "Dad, today I am going to do something really special for you." Inside it read, "I am going to laugh at one of your jokes." She has yet to deliver on that promise. Vanessa is now married to Andy -- an emerging Dad Joker who does crack a smile at some of my jokes. Hope springs paternal.

Puns are maliciously maligned as the lowest form of humor. That probably comes from some uptight sour puss sucking on a pickle! I am a bottom feeder. I do like to poke pun at lots of situations. I agree with comedian Steve Patterson (host of CBC's *The Debaters* and master punster where lots of wit happens), "a groan is as good as a laugh."

Over the years, I've had lots of fun teasing (some might argue tormenting) my audiences with Dad Jokes, so they don't suffer from jest lag. I often get encouragement from other Dad Jokester, such as this e-mail from a participant, "We have three children as well. They, too, groan at 'Dad Jokes.' In fact, a couple of years ago, they and my wife implemented a house rule of only allowing me two Dad Jokes a night! Great stuff ... keep it coming ... and don't give up the Dad jokes." I forward those comments to my family. But such feedback seems to further scare the wit out of them.

Humor often raises or lowers leadership effectiveness. A new study just published in *Harvard Business Review* reports, "One good laugh -- or better still, a workplace culture that encourages levity -- facilitates interpersonal

"communication and builds social cohesion...it also influences critical behaviors and attitudes that matter to leadership effectiveness..." In "Sarcasm, Self-Deprecation, and Inside Jokes: A User's Guide to Humor at Work," University of Michigan researcher, Brad Bitterly, and Harvard Business School professor, Alison Wood Brookes, report on a range of research how humor helps or hurts leadership, teams, and workplace effectiveness. A few key points stand out from their research:

- **Context is Critical** -- a comment can be funny, fizzle, or inflammatory depending on the situation and group.
- **Inside Jokes** -- can build team cohesion or exclusion
- **Self-Deprecation** -- shows confidence and humility or highlights competency shortfalls
- **Defusing Difficult Situations** -- could reframe tough problems or show lack of understanding and empathy
- **Delivering Negative Feedback** -- sets up a receptive response or undermines the seriousness of the issue or behavior
- **Coping Mechanism** -- reduces and diffuses negative emotions or looks callous and uncaring

The authors found, "Humor not only helps individuals ascend to positions of authority but also helps them lead more effectively once they are there...when leaders used humor, their employees were more likely to go above and beyond the call of duty."

Leadership teams often poke fun at each other and send playful "zingers" around the meeting room. This can be a valuable addition to the team's Laughter Index and boost its health. But becomes destructive when team members "shoot below the water line" with "humorous" putdowns and potshots. Cowardly team members who don't have the skills or courage to constructively confront their colleagues often wrap serious messages in "humor."

It can be like having a snowball fight. As long as the snowballs are soft and fluffy, throwing them lightly at each other can be fun. But sometimes someone throws a snowball at another person's head with a stone buried inside. When the team member is hurt, the offender will often say: "I was just joking."

This can set a pattern of stone-laden snowballs and sometimes a few rocks thrown back and forth. The sniping, snowball, and stone-throwing continues in the halls, conference calls, and workplace. Wounded team members often go back to their teams and get the people reporting to them to help make and throw barbs and complaints at the other team member's organization.

An effective way to reduce stones in snowballs is to set up a "no-sniping rule." If a team member makes a comment that sounds like a putdown, cheap shot, or cynical remark, others tap their glasses or cups with a pen.

What your team's Fun Factor? How healthy is your Laughter Index? Visit **The Fun Factor: Steps to Making Work Engaging and Rewarding** for a list of ways to energize your team.

You might not jest for the pun of it because your sense of ha ha is at a higher level. However, you do it lighten up your leadership with healthy laughter.

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!

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**!

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



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