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The Leader Letter

Ironically, in today's age of instantaneous communication and technologies that have made us a global village, communication breakdowns are the single biggest complaint we hear from our Clients. It's a complex issue with both cause and effect tightly intertwined. In many cases, people don't have the skills to address tough issues with each other. And so they do it poorly and raise defensiveness in the other person, or stir up conflict that can get personal and quite vicious. Many times people are afraid to speak up because they have seen others who have been ostracized, nudged off the promotion track, ignored, or punished with the least desirable assignments.

Adding to the noise of communication issues is technology overload. Lots of people confuse "communicating" with "dumping information" through e-mail or "death by PowerPoint." This often reduces meaningful two-way communication. Everyone is scrambling to frantically clear inboxes or grind through yet another meeting. There is no time for thoughtful and difficult conversations. Quantity is confused with quality.

As if that weren't enough, when the organization's structure is badly designed and the processes or methods for moving information, work flow, products, or customers through it are flawed, all kinds of errors, rework, waste, and frustration build up. People will often look at the resultant mess and say, "We need more communication around here." In fact, they probably need less, but they need it to be better! In these cases, communication problems are a symptom of underlying problems with processes, systems, or organizational structure.

The key question is: What are you doing to help remedy things? You're either part of the problem or part of the solution. There is no middle ground. You can ride the Bitter Bus and complain about "them" or "nobody ever tells me anything." Or you can build your communication skills, go get the information you need, connect with others, and identify the moose-on-the-table. You can act like a leader.

This issue publishes my February **blog posts** and features a recent coaching and leadership skill development webinar, articles on the impact of expectations on performance, influencing your boss, the powerful combination of technical expertise and relationship building, and how to define customer service and see it through their eyes.

These are all communication issues. And the quality of our communications ultimately determines the quality of our lives and workplaces.

Archived Webinar now Available: 6 Steps to Extraordinary Coaching Skills, Elevating Feedback, and Strengthening Leadership

Are you concerned about building leadership skills in your organization's supervisors, managers, or executives? Would you like to help leaders…

- Increase employee engagement by up to 8 times?
- Double/triple their motivation to implement a personal development plan?
- Build coaching and leadership skills around natural strengths?
- Make performance appraisals an inspiring event people look forward to?
- Double their rate of improvement from 360 feedback?

Two days ago I skipped across the tips of the giant icebergs of coaching and leadership skill development. During a densely packed one hour webcast I covered:

1. Six Steps to Developing Extraordinary Coaching Skills
2. Elevating Feedback
3. Building Coaching and Leadership Strengths
4. Critical Components of a Strengths-Based 360 Assessment
5. Cross Training: A Revolutionary New Approach to Building Strengths
6. Executive Briefing and Public Workshops

The challenge of many short presentations like this one is whether to zoom in on a topic or zoom out for a higher level overview. Since we had over 600 sites signed up from more than 20 countries and a broad cross section of leaders, HR, and development professionals, I gave a high level overview of the latest research and new approaches on coaching and leadership skill development.

Click on **6 Steps to Extraordinary Coaching Skills, Elevating Feedback, and Strengthening Leadership** to access the archived webinar. Contact me or **Brad Smith** if you'd like to zoom in further on any parts of the icebergs I quickly skipped over.

How Leaders Cause Their Direct Reports to Sink or Soar

"Tell me about the people at the organization you just left," said the senior manager who was screening candidates to fill a key leadership role. "They were uneducated and lazy," the candidate responded. "You always had to keep an eye on them because they were constantly trying to goof off or rip off the company. They were lousy communicators, resisted change, and only cared about themselves." "That's too bad," replied the senior manager, "I am sorry to say that's the same type of people you'll find here. This doesn't sound like a job you would enjoy."

Once the next candidate was seated, she was asked the same question. "Oh, they were great," she said. "Although many of them couldn't read and we had some trouble communicating with each other, they were very driven to succeed. Once we all got to know each other, they were constantly helping one other

and working together." "Great," the senior manager responded, "That's the same type of people you'll find here."

I first published this example in "**People Live Up or Down to a Leader's Expectations**" to illustrate all the research showing what parents, teachers, or leaders see in their kids or direct reports has a remarkable impact on their behavior and performance. A "**Native American Folktale Illustrates the Power of Expectations**" tells the story of an eagle's egg hatched by a prairie chicken. Growing up with the flock the eagle believed it was a chicken and never soared to great heights -- or even got off the ground. Whether a leader sees a chicken or an eagle has a huge impact on their direct report's self-image and performance. This has been called "The Pygmalion Effect" as shown in George Bernard Shaw's play "**My Fair Lady**" ("**My Fair Lady Shows the Power of Expectations**").

In their latest *Harvard Business Review* blog, "**Your Boss Thinks You're Awesome, You Will Become More Awesome**", Jack Zenger and Joe Folkman report on a recent study drawn from Zenger Folkman's large database of 360 assessments. They compared managers who rated their direct reports significantly more positive than everyone else against managers who rated their direct reports significantly lower than all the other rater groups. Digging deeper into the data they concluded ..."... leaders who see the best in their people actually make them better, while those who look more critically make their subordinates worse ... these biases and rankings have become self-fulfilling, influencing subordinates' behavior to the extent that others ultimately can see it."

Thoughts That Make You Go Hmmm on...Expectations Impact Performance

My last blog "**How Leaders Cause Their Direct Reports to Sink or Soar**" gave examples and research on the power of expectations. The impact of teachers, coaches, parents, or manager's expectations of the people they were leading on their performance has been well documented. "**Leaders Have Great Expectations**" reports on the pioneering work of Robert Rosenthal at Harvard University showing the impact of student's expectations of "bright" or "dull" (they were all the same) rats navigating a maze determined their performance.

In his latest *Forbes* column, "**Your Boss' Opinion Matters More Than You Think**", Joe Folkman, provides further research showing that "direct reports who worked for negative rating managers had engagement scores at the 47th percentile. Those reporting to positive rating managers had engagement scores at the 60th percentile. This difference is statistically significant."

> "What we expect, that we find."
>> - Aristotle

> "There are persons who always find a hair in their plate of soup for the simple reason that, when they sit down before it, they shake their heads until one falls in."
>> - Christian Friedrich Hebbel, German poet and dramatist

> "Be careful how you interpret the world: it is like that."
>> - Erich Heller, British Essayist

"You can't raise performance with lowered expectations."

"Research has demonstrated that students whose teachers were told that they were on the verge of an intellectual growth spurt not only were more likely than their peers to be evaluated more favorably by their teachers but also exhibited actual increases in IQ compared with students assigned to a control group. Many investigations of self-fulfilling prophecies have demonstrated similar effects on the attitudes and behavior of both partners in a given interaction."

> - Ellen J. Langer, *Counterclockwise: Mindful Health and the Power of Possibility*

"There is no rule more invariable than that we are paid for our suspicions by finding what we suspected."

> - Henry David Thoreau, American author and poet

"If we expect people to be untrustworthy, we will closely monitor and control them and by doing so will signal that they can' be trusted -- an expectation that they will most likely confirm for us."

> - Jeffrey Pfeffer, "Six Dangerous Myths About Pay," *Harvard Business Review*

"Some people, without knowing it, carry with them a magnifying glass, with which they see, when they wish, other people's imperfections"

> - John Wanamaker, American politician, post master general, and marketing pioneer

Upward Leadership: 7 Tactics to Influence Your Boss

One of the most read articles on our web site is "**Bad Boss: Learn How to Manage Your Manager**". Upward leadership is a crucial and often underdeveloped skill. Many people give far too much power and control to their boss. If they've won the "boss lottery" and report to a great leader, work life is good. If the boss is a mediocre or weak leader, work life can be tolerable. And if they've drawn the short straw and have a boss from hell, work life can be miserable.

We've long defined leadership as an action, not a position. Strong leaders influence, connect, change, and deliver results regardless of -- sometimes in spite of -- their formal role or position. That's especially important in influencing upward to the boss and even further up the organization.

The January-February issue of *Harvard Business Review* shines a spotlight on "soft skills you can't neglect." In "Getting the Boss to Buy In" Susan Ashford, professor at the University of Michigan, and James Detert, associate professor at Cornell University, report on their study of the most successful approaches to "issue selling" across a range of roles and industries. The researchers found these seven tactics used by the strongest leaders to "gain traction for their ideas:"

1. **Tailor Your Pitch** -- connect your message to his or her organizational goals, values, and knowledge.
2. **Frame the Issue** -- package and position your idea within the organization's larger strategy such as customer responsiveness.
3. **Manage Emotions on Both Sides** -- appropriately balance passion or anger/frustration to rouse motivation for action.

4. **Get the Timing Right** -- "catch the wave" when priorities shift, key players change, or more people are paying attention to a larger topic or trend.
5. **Involve Others** -- build coalitions, mobilize allies, and partner with people who have critical relationships with those you're trying to influence.
6. **Adhere to Norms** -- know what kind of data leaders like to use, how they prefer to receive information, or the best combination/sequence of informal and formal approaches.
7. **Suggest Solutions** -- if a solution isn't obvious suggest a process for analyzing and discovering one.

This research and approaches align with our **Influence Index**. Influencing in all directions is a vital leadership skill regardless of position or role.

Further Reading:
• **"Many Managers Disempower Themselves"**
• **"Stop Whining and Start Leading""**
• **"Being a Strong Leader Despite a Bad Boss"**
• **"Lead Your Boss to Build Support for Your Development""**
• **"Dealing with an Ineffective Boss"**

Powerful Combination: Technical Expertise and Relationship Building Skills

Craig was a brilliant young engineer who aspired to be the go-to technical leader in his company. He studied journals and books, attended professional conferences, enrolled in technical courses, and was active in his professional association. He prided himself in his outstanding academic ratings. He routinely aced technical exams and scored in the top 10% of his class.

As Craig's technical expertise, experience, and confidence grew, he became increasingly puzzled by how infrequently he was consulted by others for his technical advice. So when a career development opportunity was presented to key professionals he decided to participate in a "270 feedback process" (a 360 assessment without direct reports).

His highest rating was in solving problems and analyzing issues. Craig was disappointed to learn that his peers, manager, and others in his organization rated his technical expertise at the 75th percentile. He felt he was already in the top 10% of technical leaders and should have been rated at the 90th percentile.

The workshop facilitator presented Zenger Folkman research data that shined a bright light on his situation. A study of 35,210 leadership assessments like the one he was participating in showed:

- If *Technical Expertise* was rated as a strength (75th percentile) and *Relationship Building* Skills were OK but not a strength, the probability of being an extraordinary performer (90th percentile) was only 11%.
- If *Relationship Building Skills* were a strength and *Technical Expertise* was not, the probability of being an extraordinary performer inched up slightly to 13%.
- But... when *Technical Expertise* AND *Relationship Building* Skills were both rated as strengths at the 75th percentile, this powerful combination meant 73% of the time performers were in the top 10% of job effectiveness.

Craig went on to learn how Zenger Folkman "reverse engineered" the feedback on top performers rated at the 90th percentile in *Technical Expertise* to discover what skills and competencies most highly correlated. From that cross-competency map he chose to work on *Communicates Powerfully and Prolifically* and *Relationship Building* and *Networking*.

Further Reading:
• "**Leadership Cross-Training is Powerful and Revolutionary**"
• "**Powerful Combinations: Drives for Results and Build Relationships**"
• "**Competency Companion Development Guide to Cross-Training**"
• "**Cross-Training and Competency Companions**"

Who's Definition of Customer Service Are You Using?

Customer service and quality is highly talked about and rarely delivered. Consequently, many companies pay a high "marketing tax" to counteract damaged brand perceptions and bad buzz from poor customer service. Part of the problem is because service/quality is a very slippery concept. It's exasperatingly difficult to define and a source of great confusion to many executives.

There are a range of differences in premises, concepts, and even in the meanings of key words. Definitions of "service/quality" 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 however snarly a mood, is considered a heroic feat. An overworked and under-appreciated call center representative might consider providing minimal information, regardless of how long the caller has been waiting, as good service/quality.

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 or 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**"

Are You Seeing Through the Eyes of Your Customer?

It's all about perception.

Eons ago the ancient Greek Philosopher, Epictetus, mused *"What concerns me is not the way things are, but rather the way people think things are."* We so easily mouth the words "perception is reality." But do we seek out and work from our customers' reality? Or do we tend to dismiss key internal partner or external customer expectations as, "that's not reality, that's just their perception."

A major driver of the enduring service/quality leadership and success of the Four Seasons international hotel chain has been their definition of service/quality through the eyes of the customers they serve. One of their senior executives explains,

> "Customers don't buy a product, they buy what the product does for them. Quality in product or service is not what we think it is. It's what our customers perceive it is -- and what they need and want. If we don't give customers what they expect, they'll perceive our service as poor. If we give them what they expect, they'll perceive it as good. If we give them more than they expect, they'll perceive it as excellent. Perception is largely a matter of expectation."

All too often we've found that the features, attributes, or service/quality expectations of the customer are out of sync with what the organization considers to be important and is focused on delivering. As customers, we have all dealt with organizations doing an outstanding job delivering a service or product feature we could care less about. So as the salesperson prattles on about that "wonderful" feature, or the company markets some "unique" service, we're being driven crazy by the lack of attention to some other feature or service that the company considers unimportant.

One reason customer and organization perceptions of value are out of sync is that customer expectations are changing so quickly today. Teams/organizations not tuned into their customers often miss these shifts -- until someone else bursts onto the scene with more customer-responsive products or services. We must continuously improve and change our service/quality levels in step with those we serve or we risk being changed.

Further Reading:
• Customer Service **articles**
• Customer Service **blog posts**
• *Firing on All Cylinders: The Service/Quality System for High-Powered Corporate Performance*.
• **Leading a Customer-Centered Organization** workshops, offsite executive retreats, and supporting culture-change services

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.

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

In this short video clip Jack gives a compelling argument for shifting from our traditional and limiting focus on fixing weaknesses.

> **"Jack Zenger Discusses Building Strengths or Fixing Weaknesses"** -- Jack Zenger
> **www.youtube.com**
> *"Dr. Jack Zenger, renowned author, lecturer and guest speaker, talks about whether leaders should build strengths or fix weaknesses. His insights are a unique take on how leaders in any organization can increase employee engagement, boost productivity and build bottom-line profitability through focusing on building their strengths."*

Enjoyed giving an overview of our development approaches. Over 600 sites in 22 countries were registered.

> **(Archived) "Webcast: 6 Steps to Extraordinary Coaching Skills, Elevating Feedback, and Strengthening Leadership"** -- Jim Clemmer
> **www.clemmergroup.com**
> *Our research shows that extraordinary leaders and coaches can be developed by following a proven process. In this fast-paced 60 minute webcast Jim drew from extensive research and discussed new skill development breakthroughs.*

Read *The Leader Letter* in Twice Weekly Installments

The **items in each month's issue of** *The Leader Letter* **are first published in my twice 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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