

Jim Clemmer's Leader Letter



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MAY 2010, ISSUE 86

May Day marks the midpoint of spring. Perhaps you danced around a Maypole to celebrate!

One theme running through this issue draws inspiration from a very important annual tradition - the spring cleanup. Highly effective teams and organizations regularly get out their pruning shears, throw open the windows, and grab brooms. They rigorously strip away deadwood, scrub away layers of grime, and clean out old dust bunnies.

Growth needs energy and room to thrive. Strong leaders create opportunities for improvement by courageously looking at current processes and recognizing that just because "we've always done it that way," isn't a good enough reason to continue to do so.

When they do this they cut away bad habits that promote unfocused and frantic busyness, way too many priorities, and even lack of appreciation and recognition. After reading this issue maybe you can get your teams dancing around a bonfire of your shredded To-Stop and old project lists!

This month we're introducing some new social media tools to the online version of *The Leader Letter*, as well as the main jimclemmer.com site and [my blog](#). As you click on various links you'll see buttons to "Recommend" or "Like" pages or content. If you have a facebook account, you can click on one of these to automatically post that page, article or blog to your Facebook profile. It's a simple way to share interesting tidbits with your Facebook friends.

NEW FEATURE: CHOOSE FROM A DIGEST OR FULL EDITION

Last month was the seventh anniversary of *The Leader Letter*, first published in April 2003. We're moving into our eighth year with an experiment offering you either a digest or [full version](#). The digest version has an introduction to each item. You can click the "Read More" links on those you're interested in and go to the original blog posting for the full item.

To read the full *Leader Letter* online, [please click here](#).

We'd really appreciate your feedback on the helpfulness of these two versions. Please [CLICK on this link](#) to answer the following question:

I prefer (please check one):

- The digest version with links to each full item.
- The full version.
- Either version is fine with me.

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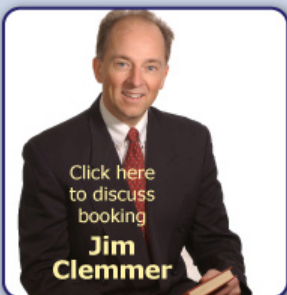
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THE ACCELERATION TRAP: FRANTIC BUSYNESS AND PRIORITY OVERLOAD IS OVERWHELMING WAY TOO MANY TEAMS AND ORGANIZATIONS

As I was preparing to facilitate a senior management team retreat and planning session I came across an excellent article in the April issue of *Harvard Business Review* on the huge problem of frantic busyness and priority overload. This was especially timely since the executive team was debating how they'll deal with a long list of urgent projects, goals, and priorities, poor accountability, and lack of follow through. We used the research to reinforce that "less is more." It also provided further evidence that we needed to better target our priority setting agenda and set up a rigorous follow through framework for the large group of senior and middle managers we were bringing together.

The research was summarized in "[The Acceleration Trap](#)" by Heike Bruch, professor of leadership at the University of St. Gallen in Switzerland and Jochen Menges, lecturer in human resources and organizations at the University of Cambridge's Judge Business School. In their study of more than 600 companies over the past nine years they found, *"over-accelerated firms fare worse than their peers on performance, efficiency, employee productivity, and retention, among other measures, our research shows. The problem is pervasive, especially in the current environment of 24/7 accessibility and cost cutting. Half of 92 companies we investigated in 2009 were affected by the trap in one way or another - and most were unaware of the fact."*

When they compared higher performing companies with a more effective and strategic approach to "accelerated" companies (lots of frantic activity with little focus) the differences are stark and dramatic!

"At companies we define as fully trapped, 60% of surveyed employees agreed or strongly agreed that they lacked sufficient resources to get their work done; compare that with 2% at companies that weren't trapped. The findings were similar for the statements 'I work under constantly elevated time pressure' (80% versus 4%) and 'My company's priorities frequently change' (75% versus 1%). Most respondents at fully trapped companies disagreed or strongly disagreed that they saw a light at the end of the tunnel of intense working periods (83% versus 3% in non-trapped companies) and that they regularly got a chance to regenerate (86% versus 6%)."

The article provides a quiz on "Does Your Company Have an Acceleration Culture" along with a series of suggestions on how to break free. Some of those include:

- Ask employees for suggestions on what to terminate.
- Terminate projects that don't clearly and actively support the company's strategy.
- Develop a systematic and regular method for making hard choices.
- Regularly clean out task and project lists before starting new projects.
- Cap annual goals at three "must-win battles."
- Filter and prioritize new projects by asking what to get rid of to make room for the new ones.
- Focus on one thing for a limited time.
- Slow down to speed up by alternating periods of high energy and regeneration.
- Celebrate successes.
- Managers must model "think time" and renewing their energy and commitment.

Overload is a major leadership problem that swamps way too many organizations creating stress, disengagement, and poor results. Click on these titles to read a few past blogs or articles on dealing with this growing issue:

[The Learning Paradox: Slowing Down to Go Faster](#)

[Attention Deficit Disorder is Becoming a Major Management/Organizational Crisis](#)

[CLICK HERE](#) for more archived items on this critical topic from past issues of the [The Leader Letter](#).

To check out my approach to facilitating management team retreats [CLICK HERE](#) for an overview and [CLICK HERE](#) for retreat options and an agenda menu that includes developing focused "strategic imperatives" with an implementation process.

SPRING FORWARD AND AVOID THE SPEED TRAPS

North America enjoyed an unseasonably warm April. Our Easter weekend weather was more like summer than spring. It was perfect timing for me to get my soft top roadster out of winter hibernation and let the wind blow through my few remaining hairs while welcoming back the warm sunshine of the open road.

This is the perfect time to think about springing forward in our personal, team, and organization growth and development. But most of us need to be much more strategic and thoughtful about what we call growth and development. I once sat through a scarily high-energy presentation given by an academic specializing in knowledge management. He poured out an overwhelming array of statistics showing that the world's knowledge was growing at mind-blowing rates. The gist of his presentation was that we need to re-train our brains to absorb more and more information, more and more quickly. His goal seemed to be to bombard us into using his knowledge management approaches so we could cram more stuff in our craniums.

This is dead wrong.

He was peddling dangerous misconceptions that lead to high stress, attention deficit disorder, and unhappiness. In times of dramatic, discombobulating, light-speed change, we need to step back to step ahead. We need to slow down to increase our speed.

Roderick M. Kramer, social psychologist and professor of organizational behavior at Stanford University explains, *"Successful leaders strive to become more reflective. That's paradoxical given that today's business culture celebrates action over hesitancy. Americans in particular admire leaders who break new ground, transform industries, and smash glass ceilings. Given this overemphasis on doing, perhaps it's not surprising that many of the fallen leaders I studied appeared to have a strikingly impoverished sense of self. Though they often know how to read others brilliantly, they remain curiously oblivious to many of their own tendencies that expose them to risk."*

The growing mass of research on time effectiveness, strategic focus, our increasing volume of electronic messages, happiness, dealing with stress, relationships, coaching ... the list is endless ... clearly shows us that less is more. Paradoxically, we get more done, build stronger teams, and increase personal and organizational effectiveness by stepping back regularly to assess our progress, savor our successes, celebrate achievements, and set new priorities.

SPRING CLEAN-UP: DOES YOUR TEAM KEEP AN ACTIVE TO-STOP LIST?

A few weekends last month provided perfect weather to clean up our perennial garden. The garden was springing back to life with plenty of green shoots (sadly, the deer and rabbits did chew off a few) and vigorous growth. So it was time to sharpen the pruning shears and clean up all the winter kill and dead plants from last season.

This is a great time for management teams to sharpen their shears for a disciplined pruning and clean-up of old projects and dead initiatives. Many managers and their teams keep adding to their To-Do lists with new plans, objectives, and projects. But only the most effective put as much effort into their To-Stop lists.

A chronic complaint of many frontline staff and supervisors is priority overload. They are constantly being asked to take on more work and urgent new priorities are constantly pushed on them. But rarely are priorities rigorously reshuffled, initiatives chopped, and goals moved down the list. This relentless pressure to do it all not only adds to our growing disengagement and de-motivation problem, but it leads to massive amounts of wasted time and money.

One simple pruning activity is to pull together a master inventory of projects. This can be a lot harder than it sounds. Clients with just a few dozen teams and a few hundred staff find that the project list inventory can take weeks to compile once everyone is polled and asked for input. There are generally 50, 75, or more than 100 projects, initiatives, and old To-Do lists being used in all sorts of nooks and crannies throughout the organization. Once everyone sees the master list there's a sense of incredulity and lots of "how could we have let this happen?" Duplication, redundancy, rework, overlaps, and wasted time become much clearer. This provides a foundation for strategic integration, improved coordination, and better planning.

But using To-Stop lists and disciplined pruning needs to be much more than an annual spring cleaning or occasional activity. Peak performing teams make this an ongoing and normal part of their continuous improvement quest.

[CLICK HERE](#) to review archived articles from past issues of *The Leader Letter* on common causes of the problem and tips for ongoing pruning and managing priority overload. [CLICK HERE](#) to peruse a selection of articles on this vital topic.

THOUGHTS THAT MAKE YOU GO HMMM...ON REDUCING PRIORITY OVERLOAD

There's an epidemic of frantic busyness, multi-tasking, project overload, way too many goals, and tyranny of the urgent. An old folk saying reminds us "the hurrier I go the behinder I get." A theme running through this month's issue is the critical need to be more focused, disciplined, and strategic with our personal, team, and organizational time and resources.

Here are a few timeless and timely reminders of this critical leadership skill.

"He who begins too much, accomplishes too little."
- German proverb

"I am really tough on time, on prioritizing those things that are truly important -- 'high-leverage'

activities...that's what I constantly talk about to our executives: Spend time on the high-leverage activities, and delegate those activities that aren't high-leverage."

- Fred Smith, founder and CEO of FedEx

"It seems essential, in relationships and all tasks, that we concentrate only on what is most significant and important."

- Søren Aaby Kierkegaard, 19th Century Danish philosopher, theologian, and psychologist

"After observing scores of managers for many years, we came to the conclusion that managers who take effective action (those who make difficult - even seemingly impossible - things happen) rely on a combination of two traits: focus and energy."

Think of focus as concentrated attention - the ability to zero in on a goal and see the task through to completion. Focused managers aren't in reactive mode; they choose not to respond immediately to every issue that comes their way or get sidetracked from their goals by distractions like e-mail, meetings, setbacks, and unforeseen demands. Because they have a clear understanding of what they want to accomplish, they carefully weigh their options before selecting a course of action. Moreover, because they commit to only one or two key projects, they can devote their full attention to the projects they believe in."

- Heike Bruch and Sumantra Ghoshal, "Beware the Busy Manager," *Harvard Business Review*

"The secret of getting ahead is getting started. The secret of getting started is breaking your complex, overwhelming tasks into small manageable tasks, and then starting on the first one."

- "Mark Twain" pen name of 19th Century American author and humorist, Samuel Langhorne Clemens

"Much of the answer to the question of 'good to great' lies in the discipline to do whatever it takes to become the best within carefully selected arenas and then to seek continual improvement from there. It's really just that simple. And it's really just that difficult."

- Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap... and Others Don't*

GROW THE OTHER 90% OF YOUR ORGANIZATION'S LEADERSHIP

Spring brings renewal, rebirth, and new growth. Thankfully, we're also seeing strong signs of economic growth after the most severe "economic winter" in many decades.

Forward thinking organizations are now looking toward renewing or rebuilding leadership skills. That generally starts with learning and development initiatives for supervisors, managers, and executives. This is about 10% of the people in most organizations. They are critical players in growing and moving the organization forward. But peak performing organizations also grow, develop, and engage the other 90% as well.

Many people think narrowly of leadership as an appointed role. In our organizations and institutions, we do need clarity around roles and

responsibilities. It does need to be evident where "the buck stops" and who's in charge.

But the action of leading -- taking initiative, seeing new possibilities, encouraging and supporting, reframing, harnessing the winds of change to grow forward, and overcoming helplessness with hopefulness -- needs to be broadly shared by everyone everywhere, regardless of formal roles or positions. The scope of leadership might be determined by roles, but the actions of leadership are determined by approach. To thrive and grow, we all need to be leaders in every aspect of our lives. True leadership is defined by what we do, not the position we hold. Leadership is action, not a position.

Our basic choices are to lead, follow, or wallow. [CLICK HERE](#) to read more about these choices. North American proverb reminds us "We can't control the wind, but we can adjust our sails." When we wallow we're cursing the wind, when we follow we wait for conditions to chance, when we're leading we get busy adjusting the sails.

In today's stormy and unpredictable seas we need all hands on deck. We need "leaderful" teams and organizations to inspire everyone upward to higher performance and results.

For more on the keys to developing leadership at all levels [CLICK HERE](#) to watch my archived webcast on *Thriving in Turbulent Times*.

BEWARE THE VISION AND MISSION STATEMENT TRAP OF WORDSMITHING HELL

Recently a reader asked me for advice on the best way to craft a vision and mission statement for their organization. Beware! This could be a big trap.

I often poll my speaking or workshop audiences and ask for a show of hands on how many participants' organizations have a vision, values, or mission statement. Usually 75% or more hands go up. I then pose the question -- but don't ask for a show of hands -- on how many of those statements have a high "snicker factor."

Many managers fall into the trap of trying to craft the definitive or perfect set of statements. Typically the management group -- or even worse; a sub-committee -- will agonize over words and commas to create just the right set of values, vision statement, or mission. Our experience helping Clients boost their leadership and culture development aligns with the findings of Jim Collins (author of *Built to Last* and *Good to Great* and his extensive research on high performing companies: "*We did not find any specific ideological content essential to being a visionary company. Our research indicates that the authenticity of the ideology and the extent of which a company attains consistent alignment with the ideology counts more than the content of the ideology.*"

When I am facilitating a planning or strategic retreat with a management team and we seem to be heading toward Wordsmithing Hell, I'll put a set of core values on the screen and ask if this is the sort of description they aspire to. The set of values clearly and eloquently outlines four core beliefs on communication, respect, integrity, and excellence. Participants will often nod their heads and agree that this is the sort of statement they need to come up with.

Then I show the logo of the company that crafted these high sounding words. They were written by the executives of Enron - the defunct poster child of corporate corruption and dishonesty.

Crafting or reviving an inspiring and energizing set of core values with a snappy statement of purpose and a compelling vision is a very powerful first step toward a high-performance culture. The process of first engaging the management team in this debate and then the rest of the organization in bringing them alive is very useful. But the ultimate fate of whether an organization or team's vision, values, and purpose/mission is at the centre of vibrant culture or starves to death is found in daily leadership behaviors and how they guide people decisions like hiring, promoting, performance management, recognition, and so on.

[CLICK HERE](#) for a selection of brief articles on organizational Vision, Values, and Purpose. [CLICK HERE](#) for a selection of articles on Culture Change.

AVOID MOTIVATION MADNESS: LITTLE REWARDS AND SMALL RECOGNITION CAN PRODUCE BIG PAYOFFS

Big bonuses and skewed incentives paid to a tiny minority of elite money managers created huge pain and suffering for millions around the world in the past few years. Finally we're seeing one of the main players, Goldman Sachs, charged by the U.S. Security and Exchange Commission for their part in the fraud, deception, and massive Ponzi scheme that contributed to our global economic meltdown. Hopefully, this is the start of a trend and we'll see more of these criminals prosecuted.

This is a highly visible example of common problems with the reward and recognition programs and practices in many organizations. Too often a few elite, or top performers are given big rewards while the majority of people feel like "human capital" (assets with skin) and get little appreciation for their key contributions to team or organizational success. This dangerously distorts the organization's culture and defines leadership as a position or who we are rather than action or what we do. It also disengages most people.

Fortune magazine just published an article reporting on a Boston-based company, Globoforce, and a study showing that "the standard way of recognizing good performance -- bonuses, new titles, high-priced quarterly giveaways to only the very top people -- doesn't motivate employees very effectively." Entitled "[Motivate Without Spending Millions](#)" the article reports that Globoforce found what really works "are the things you might dismiss as the stuff of kindergarten: small awards, all the time, to almost everyone."

Promotions, bonuses, incentives, recognition programs, celebrations, and daily performance feedback -- or lack of it -- most clearly reflect a manager's values. These often flow from organizational culture ("the way we do things around here.")

Jim Rohn, personal development author and speaker, once pointed out "A rose on time is far more valuable than a thousand dollar gift that's too late." Here are a few keys to effective reward and recognition:

- Don't allow recognition to focus only on the big successes or breakthroughs. Find lots of opportunities to celebrate and recognize the many small wins along the way.
- Make sure rewards and recognition are predictable and based on a solid outside-in feedback process. Individuals and teams should be assessed by the internal or external customers they are serving.
- Give everyone lots of information and feedback and make it as visual and visible as possible. You want to run a very transparent organization where it's clear who is making the greatest contributions to continuous service/quality improvement.

- Involve those to be rewarded and recognized in deciding who should be rewarded and recognized for what activities and results and how this should be done.
- Ensure that senior managers are highly visible in the recognition process. They should be handing out the awards, giving the thank you speeches, and shaking lots of hands.
- Find alternatives to upward career ladders that reward high performers with promotions. This traditional process too often takes an outstanding individual contributor and makes them into a second-rate manager. In today's organizations there are fewer opportunities for upward mobility. The higher income and prestige found in promotions needs to be built into horizontal opportunities for continuous job expansion and contributions to the team.
- Make recognition as immediate as possible. Otherwise the excitement or connection to why it was significant will be lost.
- Provide plenty of training, follow-up, encouragement, and personal examples for supervisors, managers, and executives to give personal one-on-one recognition and thanks.

[CLICK HERE](#) to peruse a series of short articles on Reward, Recognition, and Celebration.

BUILDING FLEXIBLE AND RESILIENT TEAMS AND ORGANIZATIONS IS CRITICAL TODAY

Now that we're now a few months into a new decade, has the pace of change slowed down for you or your organization? Not very likely! Constant change is constantly with us. Like the earth's tectonic plates continuously grinding against each other, change is often produced with a massive earthquake-like shift. This can be a time of crisis leading to disaster or it's a big opportunity leading to new success.

Whether grinding change and its sudden shifts are a tragedy or a triumph for your team or organization depends heavily on everyone's change readiness. Here are a few keys to building flexibility and resilience:

- Increase shared leadership throughout your entire organization around the critical concept that "leadership is action, not position."
- Provide practical approaches and shared language to improve morale, increase engagement, and boost energy by constantly discussing with all staff at all levels that change, uncertainty, and turbulence are times for us to lead and move forward. We especially need to "stay off the Bitter Bus and out of Pity City."
- Get everyone involved in focusing on what we can control or influence and letting go of problems outside of control. Some teams have a "no scab picking rule" that involves getting the offender to put a few dollars in a fine pot when he or she "awfulizes" issues that can't be changed or influenced. This wallowing behavior sucks the energy out of everyone.
- Keep everyone focused on your bigger vision, goals, priorities, and core values or team ground rules.

Harvard Business Review published a short piece in their December 2009 issue entitled "To Be a Better Leader, Give Up Authority." The authors' research led them to conclude that "leadership is not really about delegating tasks and monitoring results; it is about imbuing the entire workforce with a sense of responsibility for the business. This applies mainly to knowledge organizations, but even production-oriented companies can benefit from having employees who feel more empowered and engaged."

After a Toronto presentation on "Leading in Turbulent Times: Building

Flexible and Resilient Organizations," *Canadian HR Reporter* editor, Shannon Klie, recorded a four minute interview with me on the number one leadership challenge in turbulent times, how to get everyone leading, what leadership looks like as an action and not position, why it's important to build leadership throughout the organization, and how to help people get out of negative wallowing and become positive. [CLICK HERE](#) to view the four minute interview in our Media Centre. It's the second screen shot in the center of the page under the heading of "Canadian HR Reporter."

You can also see my two minute video outlining how I wrote my latest book, *Growing @ the Speed of Change*, for dealing with constant change at <http://www.growingatthespeedofchange.com>. It's at the bottom right corner of the page.

CHECK OUT MY COMING EVENTS

I have a series of public sessions in various Canadian locations coming up over the next few months. [CLICK HERE](#) to check them out.

COMPLIMENTARY MONTHLY PODCAST OF *FIRING ON ALL CYLINDERS* EXCERPTS NOW AVAILABLE (NO CHARGE)

Just after [Firing on All Cylinders: The Service/Quality System for High-Powered Corporate Performance](#) was published (now over 100,000 copies sold), I recorded an audio series reading excerpts from the book. We are now making these freely available in a weekly podcast series. [CLICK HERE](#) to access the installments as they are posted. We'll be posting all 10 segments over the next 10 weeks. On this page you can sign up to be notified whenever the next segment is available.

You can learn more about this series and look at an overview of the audio on the [Firing on all Cylinders audio CD](#) web site page.

READ IT HERE OR HOT OFF MY BLOG

The items in each month's issue of *The Leader Letter* are first published in my [blog](#) (updated twice per week) the previous month. You can wait to read it all together each month in *The Leader Letter* or you can read each item as a [blog](#) post and have them sent directly to you hot off my computer by signing up at <http://www.jimclemmer.com/blog/>. Just enter your e-mail address in the upper left corner box under "Sign up for E-mail Blog Notification."

MOST POPULAR APRIL IMPROVEMENT POINTS

[Improvement Points](#) is a no-charge service to bring timely and inspirational quotes from my articles to subscribers three times a week. Built around our new [topic index](#), Improvement Points are crafted to help you become a better leader of yourself, your team and your organization. Each Improvement Point links directly to a full article on our web site. If you'd like to read more about the point being made in that day's Improvement Point, you simply click on the "Read the full article now" link below each IP. Many subscribers circulate especially relevant [Improvement Points](#) articles to their team, Clients, or colleagues for further discussion or action.

Here are the three most popular Improvement Points we sent out in April:

"In today's increasingly skeptical (and, some might say, cynical) society, our BS detectors are getting

much better at exposing leadership fakes. Such people are routinely exposed through various media - in television reports, books, newspapers, even by cartoon characters (like the pointy-haired Dilbert boss.) They are revealed as "empty suits" who aren't authentic leaders at all."

- from Jim Clemmer's article, "Strong Leaders are the Real Deal"

[Read the full article now!](#)

"Maybe it's just because I was raised on a farm, but whenever I hear managers use the term "head count" (and I hear it a lot), it grates on me like fingernails scratching a blackboard. When managers say things like "we've got to reduce our head count," I immediately think of cattle. In the community where I grew up, farmers would ask each other questions like "how many head are you milking?" when talking about cows in a dairy herd. People were never referred to this way."

- from Jim Clemmer's article, "Cultivating Leadership"

[Read the full article now!](#)

"It's easy to confuse goal setting with picturing our preferred future, clarifying our principles, and identifying our purpose. Our Focus and Context (vision, values, and purpose) is the road we've chosen, goals are the mileposts along the way. Setting and reaching stretch goals is a critical part of fulfilling our purpose and moving toward our vision. Goals are means not ends. Goals have a beginning and completion. Our Context and Focus is an unending, continuous process."

- from Jim Clemmer's article, "Personal Purpose Pathways and Pitfalls"

[Read the full article now!](#)

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@Clemmer.net.

Keep learning, laughing, loving, and leading – living life just for the L of it!!

Jim

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