

# THE LEADER LETTER

Leading with *STRENGTH*

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## NOVEMBER 2013, ISSUE 128

As an avid reader and author I was delighted to come across recent research on the impact of reading on leadership effectiveness. In a series of five experiments conducted by social scientists at the New School for Social Research in New York City they found that readers of literary fiction scored higher in empathy and other measures of emotional and social intelligence.



With Canadian author Alice Munro recently being awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature for her work as "master of the modern short story" I was especially intrigued by this finding. Alice lives in and writes about small towns in Southern Ontario next door to where I grew up. Her stories are filled with intense and often complex characters wrestling with many of life's common interpersonal and social challenges. They do cause you to pause and ponder.

In his *Harvard Business Review* blog, "For Those Who Want to Lead, Read" John Coleman notes, "*the leadership benefits of reading are wide-ranging. Evidence suggests reading can improve intelligence and lead to innovation and insight. Some studies have shown, for example, that reading makes you smarter through 'a larger vocabulary and more world knowledge in addition to the abstract reasoning skills.'*" He also adds that reading for just six minutes can reduce stress by 68%.

The Irish writer, politician, and magazine cofounder, Sir Richard Steele, said "reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body." This issue

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publishes my October [blog posts](#). Exercising and building natural leadership strengths is a key theme running through many of this month's articles. We'll also discuss how most performance appraisals are focused on weaknesses and the trap of "wordwashing" this by just changing the forms. And you'll get warning signs of career vulnerability as well as Halloween tips for dealing with a scary boss.

After a good read or other learning experience we have more options than when we first started. I hope my blogs and *The Leader Letter* help you to read, lead, and succeed.

## **11 KEYS TO BUILDING EXTRAORDINARY LEADERS AND COACHES ARCHIVED WEBCAST NOW AVAILABLE**

We had over 400 sites join last month's webinar on building extraordinary leaders and coaches. During this 60 minute webcast I outlined a high level and highly condensed overview of 5 keys to strengths-based leadership development and 6 steps to building a coaching culture with exceptional leaders.



In this fast-paced webcast I rapidly covered:

- Key leadership competencies that cause leaders and their team/organizations to flounder or flourish
- The dramatic impact and performance differences between "good" and "extraordinary" leaders
- Why building on existing strengths is up to 3 times more effective than fixing weaknesses
- Catapult a leader's effectiveness from the 34th to the 80th percentile by developing just 3 existing strengths
- Companion Competencies, cross-training, and non-linear approaches
- How to correct the problem of many 360 feedback tools
- How Much Difference Does Coaching Really Make? (Hint: 8 times higher levels of employee engagement and commitment and more!)
- The Coaching Skills Gap - most managers believe they are providing coaching, however, most employees disagree
- Training, Mentoring, and Coaching: Development Distinctions
- Six Steps to Building a Coaching Culture with Exceptional Leaders

We provided a participant survey right after the webcast and were very gratified by the high number of extremely positive responses and were especially interested to hear responses to the question, "What points

from today's webinar did you find most useful?" Here's a representative small sample of comments:

- *Statistics on building on strengths -- unfortunately this is contrary to my current practice.*
- *The painful reality of how 360's are used in organizations and how your assessment tool really focuses on strengths instead of weaknesses.*
- *The distinction between trainer, coach and mentor. Your definition of "coaching" compared to traditional perceptions of the role.*
- *I see that my understanding of coaching is all wrong. I was doing more training than coaching.*
- *I found the FUEL framework very helpful -- a quick structure to use for coaching.*
- *The re-focusing of performance appraisals to be strength not weakness based.*
- *How building just 5 profound strengths puts you in the top ten percent of all leaders.*
- *Cross training on related leadership competencies can raise your perceived leadership to very high levels.*
- *When you focus on weaknesses that is the culture you create -- we need to focus on going from good to great and push existing strengths to exceptional.*
- *I found the stats amazing when combining the competencies of A & B together increased the overall performance by 72%.*
- *A leader doesn't have to be exceptional in all areas. But certain qualities together raise coaching/leadership skills in a very big way!*

Click on [11 Keys to Building Extraordinary Leaders and Coaches](#) to view the archived webinar now.

On December 5 and 6 in Mississauga (10 minutes from the Toronto airport) I am delivering our only public workshops (no others are planned at this point) of the revolutionary and powerful *Extraordinary Leader* and *The Extraordinary Coach* development systems. [Click here](#) for details on these sessions.

## **MOST PERFORMANCE APPRAISALS LIKE BEING POKED IN THE EYE WITH A STICK**

In 1998, Martin Seligman, Professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, was elected President of the American Psychological Association by a landslide. This set him casting about for a central theme for his time in this key leadership role. A few weeks later -- still puzzling over a theme -- he was weeding in his garden. His five-year-old daughter, Nikki, was throwing weeds in the air and singing. This



distraction caused Seligman to yell at her to stop. A few minutes later she came and said, "Daddy, I want to talk to you."

"Yes, Nikki?"

"Daddy, do you remember before my fifth birthday? From when I was three until I was five, I was a whiner. I whined every day. On my fifth birthday, I decided I wasn't going to whine anymore. That was the hardest thing I have ever done. And if I can stop whining, you can stop being such a grouch."

From the mouths of babes!

Seligman describes this encounter in his landmark book, *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment*. His encounter with Nikki is described in an early chapter entitled "How Psychology Lost its Way and I Found Mine." Seligman writes of his conversation with Nikki:

*"This was an epiphany for me ... I'd spent fifty years enduring mostly wet weather in my soul and the last ten years as a walking nimbus cloud in a household radiant with sunshine ... in that moment I resolved to change ... raising children, I know now ... was far more than just fixing what was wrong with them. It was about identifying and amplifying their strengths and virtues, and helping them find the niche where they can live those positive traits to the fullest."*

As discussed in last week's webcast, [11 Keys to Building Extraordinary Leaders and Coaches](#) (now archived and available for viewing), that's exactly the radical shift we desperately need in our performance management practices. Most performance appraisals spend a few minutes dutifully discussing the individual's strengths and accomplishment and then invest the majority of time developing an "improvement plan."

These "improvements" are believed to come from addressing weaker areas. This is painful and produces little change. It's why most people find giving and receiving performance appraisals about as much fun -- and productive -- as poking sticks in each other's eyes.

## **CHANGING FORMS DOESN'T CREATE STRENGTHS-BASED PERFORMANCE APPRAISALS**

As with my webinar, [11 Keys to Building Extraordinary Leaders and Coaches](#) (now archived and available for viewing), when presented with the overwhelming research, reflecting on their own experiences with good and bad leaders, and thinking about what motivates them to stick with an improvement plan, many audience members experience a sharp shift in thinking.





Most participants respond with some variation of "but of course it makes much more sense to build strengths rather than focus on weaknesses. But that's not what we're doing." Unconsciously we equate almost any type of improvement with fixing weaknesses.

When we then discuss how painfully ineffective performance management is because of its weakness-focus (described in above article "Most Performance Appraisals like Being Poked in the Eye with a Stick") many participants vow to immediately fix this approach. And that's a good news/bad news story.

Our gap-focused and badly broken performance management systems desperately need to be overhauled. The good news is that leaders and HR/development professionals quickly see that logic when introduced to strengths-based leadership.

The bad news is thinking that changing performance appraisal forms, revamping the performance management system, and even training leaders to take a strengths-based approach produces lasting change. It doesn't. What's worse, this backward approach can cause long-term damage.

If leaders haven't experienced a strengths-based leadership development approach based on a 360 tool and implementation map providing strengths cross-training designed for that purpose they won't really experience, truly understand, and sustain that focus. A sustained strengths-based performance management is a culture change. Research and experience shows that it takes two to three years to introduce a strengths-based performance management system. Revamping the forms and practices follow -- they don't start -- the process.

I read listener feedback on my [11 Keys to Building Extraordinary Leaders and Coaches](#) webinar with mixed emotions. It was great to see how many people bought into the shift to strengths-based performance management that's needed. But it was frustrating to see how many participants said their next steps from the session was to tinker with their performance appraisals to make them strengths-based.

Like not completely following the full medical treatment for an infection, this superficial change will have the long-term effect of creating a change-resistant strain of strengths-based leadership. Leaders will think they're practicing strengths-based leadership when all they're really doing is "wordwashing" their traditional weaknesses focus. Soon the underlying culture will reassert itself and leaders will revert back to "improvement plans" focused on weaknesses. And the organization's "immunity" to embracing a truly strengths-based approach will grow.

## IS YOUR CULTURE BUILT ON A WEAK FOUNDATION?

In the opening lines of the chapter entitled, "Making Strength Productive" in his 1967 book *The Effective Executive*, the "father of modern management," Peter Drucker writes, *"to make strength productive is the unique purpose of organization. It cannot, of course, overcome the weakness with which each of us is abundantly endowed. But it can make them irrelevant. Its task is to use the strength of each man as a building block for joint performance."*



It has taken decades for leadership research to catch up to Drucker's leading-edge thinking. Pioneering organizations like Zenger Folkman now have a research body of assessments on over 50,000 leaders by more than 500,000 direct reports, managers, peers, and others who work directly with them. As first documented in their groundbreaking book, *The Extraordinary Leader: Turning Good Managers into Great Leaders*, and just updated last year in [How to Be Exceptional: Drive Leadership Success by Magnifying Your Strengths](#) strengths-based approaches are 2 - 3 times more effective than our traditional focus on weaknesses.

Here are the fundamental differences we see in defining a team or organization's cultural foundation:

Weakness-Focused	Strengths-Based
Command and control (closed)	Participatory partnering (open)
Catching people doing things wrong	Reinforce people doing things right
Fear and force	Courage and cooperation
Focus on gaps/weakness/what's wrong	Build on strengths/what's right
Look for the worst in people	Bring out the best in others
Push and punish	Pull and coach

Two clear signs of an organization's cultural foundation are found in performance appraisals and training needs analysis. Most people dread giving and receiving performance appraisals because they focus mostly

on "areas for improvement" or weaknesses to be fixed. And most training needs analyzes are really a weakness analysis to identify the remedial training needed to fix gaps. This is one reason leadership development programs have had very little impact in most organizations.

Growing evidence from multiple sources is showing that strengths-based approaches lead to better parenting, lasting marriages, stronger teams, more effective leadership development, and peak organization performance. What's your team or organization's cultural foundation?

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Our only public workshop of *The Extraordinary Leader* provides strengths-based leadership development with our specifically designed 360 feedback tool and strengths cross-training development map. We're also offering *The Extraordinary Coach* -- a highly condensed and powerful one day workshop based on our proven FUEL framework. [Click here](#) for details.

## LEVERAGING STRENGTHS AND BUILDING TEAM SPIRIT

I was working with a highly energized financial services team who really connected with the power of strengths-based leadership. Part of our discussion centered on the story of a 7th grade teacher who had each student write down what they felt was the greatest strength of each of their peers (see "[The Enduring Impact of Focusing on Strengths](#)"). We then talked about the key questions/lessons that emerged from this example:



- What if the teacher had asked the kids to write down weaknesses and improvement suggestions?
- Why do most performance reviews focus on fixing weaknesses rather than leveraging strengths?
- What's the lingering effect on motivation to improve and performance?

After the workshop one of the session's organizers followed up with this e-mail:

*"We have embraced your strengths based approach and have brought the concept back to staff, since your session with us. More specifically, we went out to each department and had each team member write one strength for each of their direct colleagues (similar to the touching story you mentioned).*

*I have received these from each group and have consolidated them. Should it be done in person or by email? Basically, how do we take this to the next level by not only boosting morale but also improving upon it?"*

The kind of strengths discussion she's asking about is best conducted in person. There are various ways it can be handled that depend on the dynamics of the group. If they make it part of a larger team development meeting, they could have each person read their list to the rest of the group and then have a group discussion on how the team can help that person leverage those strengths and/or how the team can use those strengths to increase the team's effectiveness. This could follow or be linked to a team visioning exercise. [Click here](#) for an article on team/organizational visioning. [Building Team Spirit](#) has over a dozen past blog posts on this vital topic.

### **WARNING SIGNS: HOW VULNERABLE IS YOUR CAREER?**

As the frenetic pace of organizational mergers, downsizing, and restructuring picks up speed, middle and senior managers are faced with career opportunities and major threats. A few months ago I coached "Sheila," a manager who had been through our [Extraordinary Leader](#) development process. Sheila had been given 360 feedback from her manager, peers, direct reports, and others who regularly worked with her.



She was surprised by the low ratings given on her leadership -- especially from her manager. She'd been in the company for seven years and had never had a performance review or received any meaningful feedback from him. And she didn't ask for any. Sheila seemed to be operating on the principle that "no news is good news."

Her boss avoided confrontation or conflict of any sort. The closest he'd come recently to giving her any sort of meaningful feedback was an offhand remark that if she didn't deal with leading change more effectively she "could be redundant." As we discussed her career path over the last few years and her assessment report, she began to realize -- coming from him -- that was a very strong warning. As the company was going through a major restructuring, she began to realize just how tenuous her job really was. By putting herself in a personal feedback 'cone-of-silence' her career was now at great risk.

I thought of Sheila recently as I read Jack Zenger and Joe Folkman's latest *Harvard Business Review* blog "[Keep Your Name Off That Layoff List](#)." Zenger Folkman gathered data from a *Fortune* 100 company after



a downsizing effort to see if they could identify the factors that predict which people were most likely to be let go.

As with Sheila's case, they discovered, *"one factor that wasn't very predictive, it turned out, was a history of good performance reviews. Only 23% of those who were laid off had been given a negative review the previous year. The implication is that the other 77% who were asked to leave had no clue this was coming."*

Zenger Folkman identified six factors "that should have raised red flags." All those who were laid off shared at least two of these. Sheila had at least four and maybe five of the six factors. See "[Keep Your Name Off That Layoff List](#)" to assess your own career position.

Better yet -- since self-assessment is only half as accurate as 360 feedback -- get feedback from your manager, direct reports, peers, and others to more accurately assess and develop your career.

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## **THE KEY TO ENSURING LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PAYS-OFF**

Organizations too often waste time and money providing leadership development programs that don't work. Very little of their learning and development efforts significantly improve long term team or organizational results.



A major reason for this all too common performance improvement shortfall is lack of follow up. Participants are "sheep dipped" in a workshop or 360 assessment and feedback exercise as an act of faith that something will stick.

A big reason this "spray and pray" approach doesn't work is lack of follow up. A Goldsmith/Morgan study of over 11,000 managers shows the huge difference follow up makes in perceived changes in leadership effectiveness after a development effort.

## The Vital Importance of Follow-up

Goldsmith/Morgan study on the impact of follow-up, 3 to 6 months after Leadership Development programs (11,480 managers)



In his latest Forbes column, [In One Step: How to Ensure Leadership Development Works](#), Jack Zenger contrasts the leading software company Symantec's dramatic increases in leadership effectiveness with another company that saw no change. The big difference was follow up.

Just like a golf swing, the key to effective leadership development is follow through.

## HALLOWEEN TIPS FOR DEALING WITH A SCARY BOSS

Ghosts, goblins, and zombies are scary. But working for a bully boss can be terrifying -- like living with a creature from the black lagoon. If we allow ourselves to be a victim of a horrible boss we could even end up in an early grave.



Most bad bosses aren't evil. They're often good people doing a bad job. This may be because of low leadership skills or he or she may have a "fatal flaw" that overshadows their strengths. As Jack Zenger was quoted in last week's *Wall Street Journal* article "[The Truth About Bad Bosses](#)", "most bad bosses sin by omission, failing to articulate clearly what they want or failing to confront others when things are amiss. They're not good at collaborating with other people in the organization and they're not transparent with their groups."

The good news is that our research shows "[Bad Leaders Can Change Their Spots](#)". In this study 71 of 96 leaders were able to address their fatal flaws effectively enough to see a dramatic rise in their perceived leadership effectiveness over 18 – 24 months.

If you're challenged with working for an ineffective or even bad boss who isn't about to change his or her spots you can either lead, follow, or wallow. Here's where you can find tips, tools, and techniques for leading your boss:

- "[Stop Whining and Start Leading](#)"
- "[Bad Boss: Learn How to Manage Your Manager](#)"
- "[Being a Strong Leader Despite a Bad Boss](#)"
- "[Reflections on "Nine Leadership Behaviors" and a Bad Boss](#)"
- "[Lead Your Boss to Build Support for Your Development](#)"
- "[This Just In...Kissing up to Your Boss Doesn't Work](#)"
- "[Refusing to be Victimized by a Bad Boss](#)"

Don't be tricked into following or wallowing like an ineffective leader because you have a bad boss. Treat yourself to upward leadership and act like a leader.

## **JACK ZENGER WEBINAR ON SIX NEW WAYS TO BUILD LEADERSHIP INTO YOUR JOB**

Charles Darwin was a 19th century British naturalist who revolutionized the study of biology with his theory of evolution based on natural selection. His most famous works include *Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man*. One of his key research findings was that, "*It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent; it is the one that is most adaptable to change.*" Learning and personal growth is at the heart of an organization's or individual's ability to adapt to a rapidly changing environment. The key question is "does our rate of internal growth exceed the rate of external change?"



True and lasting security comes from constant growth and development. We can't manage change, but we can be change opportunists. The higher our rate of personal growth and development, the more likely we are to master the opportunities change unexpectedly throws in front of us. To master change and build a life of ever-deeper growth, we need to make learning a way of life rather than a phase of life.

In today's hyper-speed workplace you may be like many managers who have great difficulty carving out time for personal growth and leadership development. This is especially true if you see learning and development as a separate activity -- perhaps even rare down or quiet time -- which you try to steal away from frenetic crazy busy days at work.

Jack Zenger's been researching this issue and sees it as a false dichotomy. He's found that work and development shouldn't be treated as competing activities. In his October 23 webinar "[Throw Away Your Old Plan! 6 New Ways to Build Leadership Into Your Job](#)" Jack showed how to bring personal development and your job closer together. By following the steps he outlined, you can constantly improve your leadership skills while doing your job. This is a real win/win where you, your organization, and your associates all increase your rate of growth to deal with our fast changing world.

## TWEET READING: RECOMMENDED ONLINE RESOURCES

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 precedes each title and descriptor from the original source:

With the sharp rise of strengths-based leadership development come misunderstandings that can derail this powerful approach.

["Three Myths About Your Strengths"](#) -- Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman  
<http://blogs.hbr.org>

*"One of the most dramatic changes in leadership development in the past decade has been the shift in focus from correcting weaknesses to identifying and expanding on strengths."*

Providing effective feedback is central to extraordinary coaching. This checklist provides a good review of key elements.

["Feedback is the Breakfast of Champions: 10 Tips for Doing it Right"](#) -- Joel Patterson, Chairman, JetBlue Airways, Stanford Business School  
[www.linkedin.com](http://www.linkedin.com)

*"It isn't about pointing out others' weaknesses; on the contrary, it's about helping them eliminate stumbling blocks in order to build on their strengths."*

More powerful combination research -- this time on assertiveness and good judgment. Followed by practical keys to balancing assertiveness.



["The 6 Secrets of Successfully Assertive Leaders"](#) -- Joe Folkman, *Forbes.com*  
[www.forbes.com](http://www.forbes.com)

*"There are many leaders who feel that being assertive will make them seem too aggressive or pushy. What can leaders do to be assertive without becoming obnoxious?"*

Zenger Folkman's research identified six warning signs that could put an executive's career at risk during these turbulent times.

["Pssst: Want To Know If You're About To Be Fired?"](#) -- Jack Zenger  
[www.forbes.com](http://www.forbes.com)

*"Especially in a challenging economy, every executive should be watching these warning signals with care. Now is the time to evaluate yourself against each of these signals to be sure your name will never arrive on that list."*

Joe's research points to practical steps we can take for better decision making.

["Solving The Decisiveness Dilemma: The 4 Step Process For Making An Excellent Choice"](#) -- Joseph Folkman  
[www.forbes.com](http://www.forbes.com)

*"Even in the best of cases, decision making is hard. But by applying these four enabling behaviors and avoiding dogmatism you can substantially increase your probability of making the right choice."*

## **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 one of my books. 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@Clemmer.net](mailto:Jim.Clemmer@Clemmer.net) or connect with me on [LinkedIn](#), [Twitter](#), [FaceBook](#), or my [blog](#)!

**May the Force (of strengths) be with you!**

Jim



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