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The Leader Letter

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After listening to an angry customer vent his dissatisfaction with the organization's service, a supervisor replied, "If it's any consolation to you, we treat our employees worse than we treat our customers."

You've heard it said that no one can serve two masters. In too many organizations with their traditional top-down hierarchy, that means that frontline teams are too often focused on serving the boss as their master. High-performing service/quality

organizations turn their organization chart upside-down to keep everyone focused on the only master who counts -- the customer who's paying the bills. As the CEO of one outstanding company put it, "The energy in this business comes from the bottom up. Not the top down. They (employees) run us (management), not we them."

Imbedded in this upside-down view of the organization, is a deep understanding that service/quality is produced by the organization and delivered by the front line. Everyone beneath the front-line servers needs to understand and, even more importantly, act to serve and support those further up the line. Top organizations recognize that the entire purpose of the organization -- if not its only purpose -- is to support the efforts of the frontline people to do their service jobs.

Until front-line individual contributors and their teams feel served and supported, they can't serve customers consistently well. A frontline server at a retailer with decades of top ratings for service quality commented that her boss was "a little weird" because "three or four times a day, he asks if there is anything he can do to help me. He acts like he works for me." Exactly.

Our lead article in this issue is about serving the servers to delight customers. Part of this comes from leadership and culture development built around feedback. Building on strengths and avoiding nine habits that lead to terrible decisions also develop more effective cultures serving the servers so they can delight customers.

Who's serving whom in your organization? If you're leading a team or organization with a level of service/quality that you're not happy with, it's time to look in the leadership mirror.

Put Employees First to Delight Customers

How can apathetic or disengaged frontline servers produce happy customers? Some exceptional employee will delight customers despite how they're treated by their boss or the organization. Most don't. The vast majority of employees directly reflect the care and service they experience every day in their team or workplace.

"The Secret to Delighting Customers? Put Employees First", co-authored by Disney Institute

Put Employees First to Delight Customers

Webinar: 10 Keys to Identifying People with High Potential

Feedback is Critical to Leadership and Organization Effectiveness

9 Habits That Lead to Terrible Decisions

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and McKinsey & Company, reports that "companies offering an exceptional customer experience can exceed their peers' gross margin by more than 26 percent. Emotionally engaged customers are typically three times more likely to recommend a product and to repurchase it themselves ... companies that had a 1-percentage-point lead over their peers in key customer journeys typically enjoyed a 2-percentage-point advantage in revenue growth. In addition, companies that deliver

excellent customer journeys increase employee satisfaction and engagement by 30 percent."

Research on the strong connection between leaders serving the servers who then delight customers has been around for decades. Here are the results of a Zenger Folkman study correlating data from 360 ratings of leadership effectiveness with customer survey data:



The Secret to Delighting Customers article reports that the best companies follow these steps:

1. Listen to your employees
2. Hire for attitude, not aptitude -- then reinforce
3. Give people purpose, not rules
4. Tap into the creativity of your front line

These results are consistent with our studies and approaches such as "**American Express Boosts Customer Service with Transformed Leadership and Culture**", a University of Pennsylvania report at "**Want to Improve Customer Service? Treat Your Employees Better**", and summarized in "**Thoughts That Make You Go Hmmm on...Serving the Servers**".

How delighted and engaged are your frontline servers by their boss, team, or organization? How do you know?

Webinar: 10 Keys to Identifying People with High Potential

A critical Talent Management challenge is who to promote into leadership roles.

Many organizations, either formally or informally, compile a list of people they believe will have high potential for promotion. These high potential individuals, HIPOs, often receive extra developmental opportunities beyond what's available to the rest of their peers. But will these

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people succeed?

From an individual's point of view, being selected to be on the high potential list has enormous benefits.

From the organization's point of view, however, there is a great deal at stake in this process. If they select the wrong individuals, then they are pouring valuable development resources into the wrong container. Even worse, a wrong choice means highly talented people whose

development is ignored.

How do you identify your candidates for promotion? People may stand out for a variety of reasons. Watch our webinar to learn the 10 competencies our research shows differentiate the very best candidates for promotion.

View this archived webinar for insights and advice from Jack Zenger and Joe Folkman's extensive research.

Feedback is Critical to Leadership and Organization Effectiveness



We are working with a large industrial company having big problems with a multi-billion dollar project that will make or break the company's future. To understand the roots of this potential disaster we interviewed and surveyed key project leaders, managers, and executives. This was followed by offsite retreats with key leaders that included "moose hunting" exercises (see "**Authentic Communication: Dealing with Moose-on-the-Table**") using a safe and anonymous process to bring out

everyone's true views of what was really happening and to foster real conversations about the issues that need to be addressed.

It's now clear that a core problem threatening the success of their mega-project -- and company -- is broken feedback loops. Part of the problem was hierarchy: the more senior the manager present in a meeting, the less likely others below him or her on the organization chart would disagree, push back, or engage in a healthy debate. Symptoms include:

- The real discussions happen after the meeting
- People seem to agree at the meeting then go and do something else
- Commitments aren't kept and deadlines are missed
- Once the more senior manager gives his or her opinion others usually agree or remain silent -- the manager confuses this with commitment
- Senior leaders lead off with and then dominate meetings and discussions
- Touchy issues or discussions are avoided and become the "sacred moose"
- Key project leaders rarely debate all sides of important issues

In his *Talent Management* article, "**How Much Feedback Do Managers Want and Need**", Joe Folkman sheds light on this critical issue by drawing from Zenger Folkman's research of nearly 500,000 360-assessments of 20,000 global leaders. His data shows that "as leaders go up the

ranks, they ask for less feedback. That's bad for not just their own performance, but also for the organization as a whole."

The critical question for this company is whether its senior leaders can learn to more actively encourage openness, transparency, and real feedback. The company and their own future depends on it.

9 Habits That Lead to Terrible Decisions



Zenger Folkman continues to mine their growing database (over 500,000 raters of more than 50,000 leaders) for new leadership insights. Jack Zenger and Joe Folkman's recent *Harvard Business Review* blog reports on their latest research study comparing the behaviors of the very best and the very worst decision makers.

These nine behaviors -- listed from most to least significant -- emerged as the most common approaches of the worst decision makers:

- Laziness
- Not anticipating unexpected results
- Indecisiveness
- Remaining locked in the past
- Having no strategic alignment
- Over-dependence
- Isolation
- Lack of technical depth
- Failure to communicate the what, where, when, and how associated with their decisions

[Click here](#) to read Jack and Joe's column for a more detailed description of each behavior.

Many of these pathways to poor decision making leads to going down the middle of the road. As Texas Agriculture Commissioner, Jim Hightower once observed, "Ain't nothin' in the middle of the road but yellow stripes and dead armadillos."

Video Clip: Focusing on Gaps 2 – 3 Times Less Effective

**...they struggled
to let go of a few
weaker areas**

Last month I had two separate one-on-one coaching sessions with the Provost and a key Dean at a major university. We were reviewing the 360 assessment report they'd just received from students, faculty, peers, their manager, and others. Both assessments were quite strong with many leadership competencies rated at the 90th percentile and most above the 70th percentile. These scores put them in the top 10% of leaders in both our academic and global databases.

Perhaps because of their careers steeped in academia they struggled to let go of a few weaker areas (they weren't "fatal flaws") and focus instead on building strengths from good to great. We discussed how it might make sense to raise a grade point average by focusing on lower scores because it's a straight mathematical formula.

But a leader's effectiveness is not judged by objective criteria carefully and mathematically weighed out by everyone around him or her. We live in a world of perceptions. Great strengths will tower over and lessen weaker areas, and glaring weakness blocks others from appreciating our strengths.

Weighing ourselves five times a day won't change our weight if we don't do anything with the information. The main point of getting feedback on our leadership effectiveness should be to help us improve. What to focus our personal development plan on becomes the key issue. Our research clearly shows that focusing on fixing weaknesses is 2 - 3 time less effective than building strengths. Click on **Focusing on Gaps 2 – 3x Less Effective** for a two minute video clip explaining this further.

I'll be covering strengths-based leadership in my upcoming October Talent Management webinar and executive briefing. See our **Coming Events** section for details and to register.

Further Reading:

- (Research paper) **Developing Strengths or Weaknesses: Overcoming the Lure of the Wrong Choice**
- **"Building Leadership Strengths 2 – 3 Times More Effective Than Fixing Weaknesses"**
- **"Don't be Fooled into Focusing on Weaknesses"**
- **"Wasting Time on Weaknesses"**
- **"Struggles with Wasting Time on Weaknesses"**
- **"Join Our Strengths-Based Leadership Discussion Group"**
- **"Authentic Leadership Comes from Building Our Strengths"**

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:

A strong argument for performance reviews shifting from correcting weaknesses to building strengths.

"Forcing employees to overcome their weaknesses is a waste of time" -- Tim Baker
www.theglobeandmail.com

"You will always get a better return on investment in time and effort by investing in the development of your strengths than by trying to overcome your weaknesses."

Compelling evidence on the high impact of building strengths rather than our traditional approach of fixing weaknesses.

"Want To Become A Great Leader? Here's The Key" -- Joe Folkman
www.forbes.com

"Today I am sharing some research that should give you pause when you're tempted to focus on your faults instead of building upon what's going right."

Zenger Folkman gave a complementary webinar on this research in September. [Click here to view the recording.](#)

"Who To Promote? 10 Keys To Identifying People With High Potential" -- Jack Zenger
www.forbes.com

"While there were some differences among differing industries, there was also a surprising consistency of the traits and behaviors that executives appear to use in deciding who they will likely promote."

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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