Issue 211 - October 2020

Fast and flexible is vital -- even lifesaving -- today. Recently we had discussions with a senior leader about his goal to build a more agile organization. This leader has been talking urgently about agility for the past six months. When we started our coaching and consulting work with his leadership team, it soon became clear they were frantically implementing a partial and piecemeal effort.

Poorly aligned agile teams were launched to implement critical new programs. But these teams confused activity with results, and motion with direction. Many of the teams were making changes that didn't really matter to customers. They were focusing on trivial issues that had very little impact on performance.

Leadership teams failed to guide the improvement activities and establish clear improvement priorities. That led to a desperate "do something -- anything" flurry of unfocused activity that sent the organization scurrying off in all directions at once.

In their frantic rush to implement the latest change program, many organizations, have essentially said to their project teams, "don't just sit

there; improve something." Often that means teams make changes that hurt other parts of the organization. Not only are these cause-and-effect relationships unrecognized, but the team may be rewarded because, at the micro-level, their improvement project produced "results."

As is the case with so many "activity-frenzied" improvement efforts, this company lacked an integrated focus. They're launching a series of programs bolted-on the side of operations rather than an integrated process of change and transformation.

Bolt-On Change Programs	Built-In Change Process
Experts/Specialist Led	Line Management Led
Stand-Alone Projects/Programs	Integrated/Interconnected
Constantly Out to Launch	Disciplined Follow Through
Electronic/Information Overload	Two-Way Conversations
Mission/Values with High "Snicker Factor"	Core Values/Purpose Guide Programs, Operations, and Behaviors
Reactive Management, and Search for Guilty/Weaknesses	Proactive Root Cause Analysis and Search for Systemic Changes/Strengths
Measurement and Performance Management Gaming	Feedback Guides Learning, Improvement, and Change
Inside Out Focus and Controls	Outside In Aligns Internal Partnerships

This month's issue looks at leadership teams and their impact on the organization's culture, especially on becoming more agile. It starts with recognizing when a team is trapped in rigid thinking and approaches across three key areas.

Over decades of helping leaders strengthen their culture, we find time and again that that culture ripples out from the team leading it. Their individual and collective behavior is THE single biggest driver of organizational culture. Unfortunately, many leaders don't recognize their own behavior reflected back to them in cultural norms.

Is your team out of focus? I once heard a branch office leader describe head office as a "puzzle palace." Each time a leadership team member visited their branch, they delivered contradictory and confusing messages about goals,

priorities, and direction. Is your team delivering consistent messages on where you're going, what you believe in, and why you exist? We'll look at six ways your team can sharpen its focus.

Slowing down can help us go faster. Taking time to reflect upon and renew the key leadership and culture approaches in this issue will help you more quickly respond to, and capitalize on, today's high speed of change.

Escaping the Change Management Trap: From Rigidity to Agility

There's lots of talk about building agile organizations. For good reason. The world's moving way too fast for traditional approaches. They're too rigid. Organizations that will survive -- even thrive -- in these disruptive times are fast and flexible.

Agile approaches began a few decades ago with software development. According to the **Agile Alliance**, "One thing that separates Agile from other approaches to software development is the focus on the people doing the work and how they work together. Solutions evolve through collaboration between self-organizing cross-functional teams utilizing the appropriate practices for their context."

In the last few years, there's been a broader movement to applying agile principles to leadership and organization development. According to the Agile Alliance, "If you extend the idea of Agile as a mindset, then people seeking Business Agility ask themselves, 'How might we structure and operate our organization in a way that allows us to create and respond to change and deal with uncertainty?' You might say that business agility is a recognition

that in order for people in an organization to operate with an Agile mindset, the entire organization needs to support that mindset."

Here's what we're seeing as the three vital leader shifts needed to deal with today's seismic disruptions:

Rigidity	Agility
Internal Focus	**Customer Focus**
Products and services pushed out to the market.	Products and services pulled through the organization
Management and experts "manage change"	"Naive listening" keeps everyone tuned to and aligned with changing needs
Performance measurements are top-down and aimed at internal control	Outside-in measurements are based on customers' perceptions of value
Functional Accountability	**Horizontal Teamwork**
Department managers accountable for the results of their individual units	Teams accountable for understanding and managing core strategic processes flowing across departments
Departmental walls cause communication breakdowns and searching for *who went wrong*	Cross-functional teams look for *what went wrong* and rapidly streamline processes
Management budgets and priorities drive decision making and resource allocation.	Rigorous data and analysis clarify and leverage systemic cause-and-effect relationships
Empowerment	**Empartnerment**
Management's Key Performance Indicators cascade "command and control" hierarchy.	Leaders are "servant-leaders" to highly engaged teams.
Employees serve management.	Teams serve internal and external customers.
Information controlled by management.	Information widely and openly shared.

Change management is an oxymoron. Those two words make about as much sense together as "holy war," "non-working mother," "rap music," "help desk," or "political principles." Change can't be managed. Change can be ignored, resisted, responded to, capitalized upon, and created. But it can't be managed and made to march to some orderly step-by-step process.

Whether change is a threat, or an opportunity depends on preparation. Whether we become change victims or victors depends on our readiness for change. As Abraham Lincoln said, "I will prepare myself and my time must come." That's change agility.

An Agile Culture Ripples Out From the Leadership Team
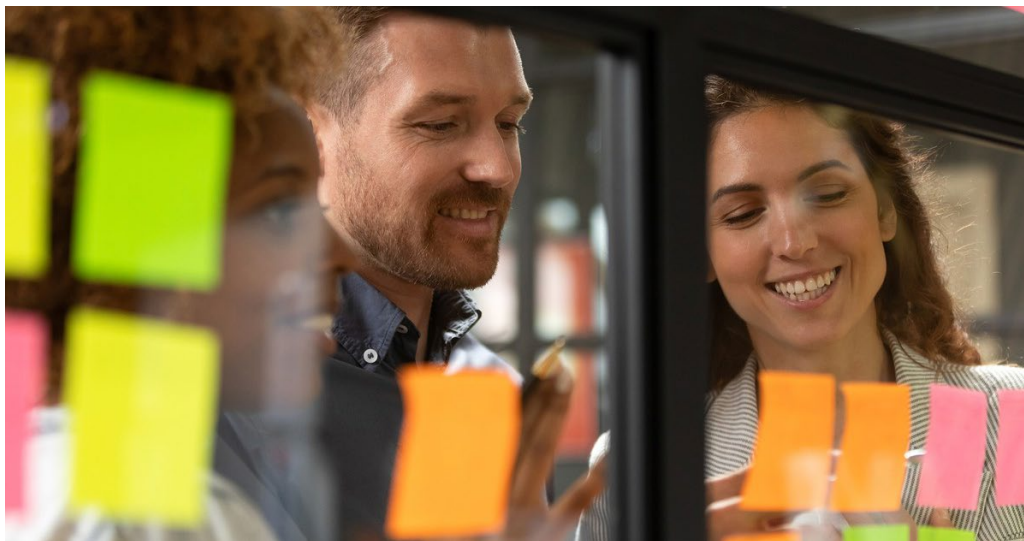
Many leadership teams seem to think that talking about agility will magically transform their organizations. If only change were that simple. Talking isn't doing.

A department, division, or organization's culture ripples out from its leadership team. Organizational behavior reflects leadership team behavior. A team that wants to change "them" needs to start with a deep look in the mirror to change "us."

A rigid leadership team stuck in traditional methods of internal focus, functional accountability, and empowerment can't reshape their organization with more agile approaches of customer focus, horizontal teamwork, and "empartnerment" by talking about it. Leadership teams need to hit the shift key with less talk and more action. Their culture ripples out from what they do, not what they say.

Culture change strategies, programs, branding, and communication campaigns can help shift "how we do things around here." But the single biggest cultural lever is leadership behavior. The authors of a recent *Harvard Business Review* article, "The Agile C-Suite," studied hundreds of companies. Key findings include:

- Senior leaders of successful agile transformations "quadrupled the time spent on strategy (from 10% to 40%) and reduced the time spent on operations management by more than half (from 60% to 25%)."
- Leaders need to get out of their silos and work together as a multidisciplinary group to rebalance and realign the organization.
- Meetings need to focus less on operating details and more on strategic issues.
- Key projects and initiatives need owners with technical expertise and leadership skills in coordinating the team and customers, senior executives, and functional managers.
- Rapid and transparent feedback loops and shifting from commanding to coaching are critical.
- Meetings must become collaborative problem-solving sessions rather than "tedious reviews of activity reports."

The authors concluded, "Agile leadership demands that executives create a carefully balanced system that delivers both stability and agility -- a system that runs the business efficiently, changes the business effectively, and merges the two activities without destroying both elements."

Getting Your Shift Together

We've found these five steps are key to successful **culture development**:

1. Assess current systems, practices, culture, and readiness for change.

- This can range from the least rigorous such as self-assessment by the executive team (next step) to interviews, focus groups, surveys, or a rigorous audit.

2. Leadership Team Planning (click for typical agenda)

- These are often offsite retreats (or online sessions). Broadly they often follow this flow:
    - **Divergent Thinking** -- reviewing/assessing, learning, defining key leadership behaviors, and aligning systems/processes.
    - **Convergent Action** -- (Re)setting vision and core values to anchor culture change, (re)establishing 3 - 4 Strategic Imperatives, setting up steering/project teams, robust implementation framework, and disciplined follow up process.

3. Realign/integrate/prune current projects, processes, systems, and development initiatives.

- The goal is pruning, aligning, and streamlining existing work, not piling more on top of an overloaded organization.

4. Plan implementation strategies and timelines.

- Charter cross-functional, multi-level **Strategic Imperative Teams** with clear mandates, timelines, and deliverables.

5. Monitor, follow up, and adjust implementation plans

- Senior leaders actively involved in working with Strategic Imperative Teams in monitoring, coaching, and adjusting implementation activities.

Leadership teams must set their culture compass. Failing to map a route through the many swamps and sinkholes of building a more agile organization is why 70% of culture change efforts sink and disappear. Aesop, the ancient Greek fabulist, and storyteller observed, "After all is said and done, more is said than done."

Further Reading

- **6 Dysfunctional Leadership Team Behaviors**
- **Culture Change Starts with the Management Team**
- **Executive Team Building and Culture Development** (webinar)
- **7 Leadership Team Failure Factors**
- **How to Boost Leadership Team (and Culture) Performance**

Is Your Team Out of Focus?

I've been interviewing senior leaders and reviewing documents to tailor a keynote presentation for the company's executive strategy session this month. They're a textbook example of effectively using the COVID crisis to renew and refocus their leadership and culture development. Their "strategic framework" succinctly cascades from vision, mission, and values to strategic goals, key initiatives, and key performance indicators. They're revisiting and adjusting their priorities and behaviors to stay focused.

This is a refreshing change from the muddled mush of visions, values, mission statements, and strategies we too often see. In their article, **Why Corporate Purpose Statements Often Miss Their Mark**, three leadership professors and researchers analyzed nearly 2,000 CEO's descriptions of their company's purpose. "Incredibly, we found that 93 percent failed to state why their company is in business. In other words: Most purpose statements lack any meaningful sense of purpose."

Over the years, we've been involved in many "vernacular engineering" debates as leadership teams debate whether the statements they've been crafting are a vision, a mission, a statement of values and goals, or the like. Often these philosophical labeling debates are picking the flyspecks out of the pepper. Unless you're lexicographers in the dictionary business, don't worry about definitions of vision, mission, values, or whatever you may be calling the words you're using to define who you are and where you're going.

What matters is that your leadership team has discussed, debated, and decided on the answers to these three questions (in no particular order):

- Where are we going (our vision or picture of our preferred future)?
- What do we believe in (our principles or values)?
- Why do we exist (our purpose or mission)?

Label them whatever works best for your team and organization. They are critically important questions. They are fundamental to leading others. They're the core of a vibrant and effective organizational culture.

Once your leadership team has agreed on where you're going, what you believe in, and why you exist, you can breathe life and vitality into your Focus and Context with these approaches:

- **Engage and Energize** -- management speaks to the head with goals, plans, and budgets. Leadership connects with the heart using emotive language, images, stories, metaphors, and experiential learning.
- Simplify and Emotionalize -- wordy and bureaucratic mission statements that include everything and everybody are boring and lifeless. Boil it your reason for being, or purpose down to a **snappy phrase** less than 10 words long.
- **Balance Electronic and Human Connections** -- no matter how well they're written, vision, values, and purpose statements need to come alive. They need powerful verbal communication for heart-to-heart connections.
- Powering People Decisions -- align **performance management** and promotion practices to your vision, values, and purpose. What's rewarded and measured is what's treasured. People decisions are where your desired culture sinks or soars.
- **Evolution not Revolution** -- organizational immune systems are triggered by dramatic and radical change that dismiss past efforts. Effective leaders blend and build on strengths with the shifts needed for a more adaptive culture to capitalize on our uncertain and rapidly unfolding future.
- Lighten Your Load -- a clear vision, values, and purpose can help avoid being **stupid busy**. Periodically, your team needs to step back to assess and reset your **goals and priorities**.

The authors of the *Harvard Business Review* article, "**Put Purpose at the Core of Your Strategy,**" conclude, "Many companies consider purpose merely an add-on to their strategy, but the most successful companies put it at the core, using it to redefine the playing field and reshape their value propositions."

Further Reading

- **To Reason Why: Are You Leading on Purpose?**
- **Are You Managing Human Capital or Leading People?**

- **Good Companies Are Changing the World and Everyone Profits**
- **Leadership on Purpose**
- **The Purpose Motive: Why Does Your Organization Exist?**

Bridging the Distance: Reading, Leading, and Succeeding

Leaders bring hope, optimism, and positive action. That's really tough to do while social distancing and facing an uncertain future. We multiply misery if we allow the pessimism plague to infect us as well.

To counter Headline Stress Disorder and strengthen resilience, I actively scan a list of resources for research, articles, and tips on leading ourselves and others through these turbulent times. I post those articles every day.

Let's shorten our social media distancing. Follow or connect with me:

LinkedIn and follow **The CLEMMER Group**

Twitter

Facebook

Read *The Leader Letter* in Weekly Installments

The items in each month's issue of *The Leader Letter* are first published in my weekly **blog** during the previous month.

If you read each blog post (or issue of *The Leader Letter*) as it's published over twelve months, you'll have read the equivalent of a leadership book. And you'll pick up a few practical leadership tips that help you use time more strategically and tame your E-Beast!

Feedback and Follow-Up

I am always delighted to hear from readers of *The Leader Letter* with feedback, reflections, suggestions, or differing points of view. Nobody is ever identified in *The Leader Letter* without his or her permission. I am also happy to explore customized, in-house adaptations (online these days) of any of my material for your team or organization. Drop me an e-mail at **jim.clemmer@clemmergroup.com** or connect with me on **LinkedIn**, **Twitter**, **Facebook**, or my **blog**!

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

Jim Clemmer
President

Phone: (519) 748-5968
Email: **jim.clemmer@clemmergroup.com**
Website: **www.clemmergroup.com**

Please forward this newsletter to colleagues, Clients, or associates you think might be interested -- or on a 'need-to-grow' basis.

Did you receive this newsletter from someone else?
Subscribe to ensure you don't miss the next issue!

The CLEMMER Group
476 Mill Park Drive, Kitchener ON N2P 1Y9
Phone: (519) 748-1044 ~ Fax: (519) 748-5813
service@clemmergroup.com
www.clemmergroup.com