



MANIFESTO FOR A LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT REVOLUTION

by Jim Clemmer

It's both jarring and exciting to learn that I've been wrong.

Most of my last few decades in the leadership development field I've fallen headlong into the trap ensnaring a vast majority of us in this business; focusing on closing organizational or managerial gaps and weaknesses. We've used needs analysis or facilitated a gap analysis to find the weak spots and then gone to work on fixing those. And if we're successful, we get them up to average! This is a key reason leadership and organization development efforts have a 70% failure rate.

I've spent the past few months deeply immersed in Zenger|Folkman's revolutionary strengths-based leadership development system. Last spring Jack Zenger and I had another of our periodic updates. Jack and I go back to 1981 when my previous company, The Achieve Group, was the Canadian partner with his previous company, Zenger Miller.

I've been following the excellent leadership work he and his partner, Joe Folkman, and others had been doing. Ten years ago I reviewed their first book *The Extraordinary Leader*. I was highly impressed by Zenger|Folkman's research depth. With a data base of 200,000 responses from managers, peers, and direct reports who completed 360 feedback surveys on over 20,000 leaders, Jack and Joe identified 16 competencies that differentiated the weakest and strongest leaders.

I've also reviewed their subsequent books *The Extraordinary Coach* and *The Inspiring Leader*. Both are outstanding. They are deeply grounded in evidence and provide highly practical frameworks for developing leadership strengths. As we caught up with each other, Jack told me Zenger|Folkman was seeing huge impacts of their

strengths-based leadership development system, growing rapidly, expanding internationally, and looking for a Canadian strategic partner.

So we took a closer look. The more we learned about Zenger|Folkman's development research and approaches, the more excited we became about becoming their Canadian strategic partner. Strengths-based leadership development is the biggest revolution in the leadership development field in the last 50 years. We didn't pick up pitch forks or arms, but we have joined the revolution.

We're standing at a very critical crossroad. Our organizations desperately want and need much stronger leadership at all levels. But a torrent of studies show most leadership development approaches aren't working. In a McKinsey & Company large scale global survey of CEOs and senior executives, 76 percent cited leadership development as important. But our current approaches are falling woefully short. The study participants reported that only 7 percent

thought their organization was effectively developing leaders! To paraphrase a popular love song, we've been looking for leadership development in all the wrong places. We need a better way.

We're also at the intersection of powerful and revolutionary research emerging from the new movements of Emotional Intelligence, Positive Psychology, Appreciative Inquiry, and Strengths. These emerging fields are scientifically – and conclusively – showing that we can only flourish by moving away from focusing on what's wrong, performance gaps, and weaknesses. The evidence for *what* needs to change and *why* is growing every day.

“You cannot build performance on weaknesses. You can build only on strengths. To focus on weakness is not only foolish; it is irresponsible. It is a misuse of a human resource as what a person cannot do is a limitation and nothing else.”

**- PETER DRUCKER,
THE EFFECTIVE
EXECUTIVE**



But there's been a huge vacuum around *how* to apply these findings to leadership development.

The revolutionary manifesto for radical change is mostly succinctly and powerfully laid out in Zenger|Folkman's newest book, *How to Be Exceptional: Drive Leadership Success by Magnifying Your Strengths*. Published in September 2012, the book provides a practical, how-to roadmap for navigating the new territory of strengths-based leadership. For weary leaders feeling beat up by engagement surveys, performance reviews, training needs analysis, 360 and other feedback tools highlighting their deficiencies, and suffering from change fatigue this book couldn't come at a better time.

The book's core, Parts One and Two are built around "What Leaders Can Learn From their Strengths" and "How Exceptional Strengths Are Developed." A third "Special Considerations" Part discusses building strengths with individual or frontline staff, when to fix weaknesses or Fatal Flaws, addressing the misconception that strengths can be taken too far, vital keys to effective 360 multi-rater tools, are leaders made or born, and a brief history of the strengths movement.

How to Be Exceptional starts with an update of Zenger|Folkman's ever expanding leadership database since publishing *The Extraordinary Leader* in 2002. They continue to slice, dice, and correlate their aggregated leadership effectiveness scores with organization performance data. The results are stunning! For example, the differences between the weakest and strongest leaders are 4 - 6 times higher profits, 6 times higher sales revenues, 10 - 20 times higher levels of employee engagement, 3 - 4 times reduction in employees thinking about quitting, 50% fewer employees that do leave, double the satisfaction with pay and job security, 4 - 5 times more employees "willing to go the extra mile," and 1.5 times higher customer satisfaction ratings. Now there's hard evidence for "soft" skills!

What's especially remarkable is how obtainable extraordinary leadership is proving to be. This isn't a mission impossible quest for perfection or becoming superhuman. A leader needs to develop just three existing strengths out of the sixteen differentiating competencies to catapult his or her leadership effectiveness from the 34th to the 80th percentile! Zenger|Folkman's research shows very clearly that it's the presence of strengths – not the absence of weaknesses – that defines highly effective leaders. And

the research clearly shows that building strengths is the only way to move from an average or ordinary leader to extraordinary or exceptional.

In a series of pre and post studies Zenger|Folkman looked at the impact of leaders choosing to fix weaknesses versus building on existing strengths. 12 to 18 months later the leaders who magnified their existing strengths showed two - three times more improvement in leadership effectiveness than leaders who worked on fixing their weaknesses.

Why Strengths-Based Leadership Development is so Effective:

- Building strengths is the only way to become an extraordinary leader.
- A strengths focus produces up to three times higher change and improvement.
- Profits, sales, engagement, morale, and energy levels, turnover, health and safety, and customer satisfaction skyrockets.
- The spectrum of development methods broadens with cross-training and companion competencies.
- Participant motivation to improve is much higher.
- Organizational culture is much more positive and energized.
- It's a lot more fun to work on strengths!

In my 35 plus years of studying, applying, writing about, and providing leadership development programs and services I've never seen such powerful data leading to a clear path for developing leaders. I am delighted to be a rebel with a cause!

JIM CLEMMER

For over three decades Jim Clemmer's keynote presentations, workshops, management team retreats, seven bestselling books translated into many languages, articles, blog, and newsletters have helped hundreds of thousands of people worldwide. The CLEMMER Group is Zenger|Folkman's Canadian Strategic Partner. Jim was co-founder of The Achieve Group (which became Canada's largest leadership training firm) when they worked with Jack's previous company, Zenger Miller. Zenger|Folkman is an award-winning firm best known for its unique evidence-driven, strengths-based system for developing extraordinary leaders and demonstrating the performance impact they have on organizations.