



Practical Leadership:

Inspiring *Action*, Achieving Results

Jim Clemmer's Leader Letter

August 2006, Issue 41

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Too Busy to Learn

An [Improvement Point](http://www.clemmer.net/excerpts/stagnation.shtml) subscriber read my article "Signs of Stagnation," (at <http://www.clemmer.net/excerpts/stagnation.shtml>) connected with a June [Improvement Point](#). She asked permission to reprint the article as part of their company university's electronic update. As the corporation's organizational and employee development manager, she also added:

"I really liked your emphasis on self-accountability for continual learning and improvement. Following your advice can be self-energizing and can boost an organization's momentum, in pursuit of new ideas and trying new ways of doing things.

"Would you have some 'words of wisdom' to add for answering one more bullet point?"

- *"I'm too busy to learn"*

"This is one argument we're hearing a lot of these days, facing some short staffing during summer vacations, demanding workloads, and a rapid pace of change. I need just a bit more ammunition to answer that one!"

She hit a major theme of my work. I have written extensively about this huge leadership development obstacle, in many books and articles. I also deal with this issue quite directly and forcefully in my workshops and retreats. Of course, there is no quick and easy answer to her point, that many people are too busy to learn. Here's a selection of articles on our web site that I thought she might

find helpful.

[Reflection and Renewal](#)

A fictional story, illustrating a major problem we encounter again and again in our work with individuals, teams, and organizations trying to move to higher levels of performance. It's the problem of balancing the speed and pace of daily life or operations, with periodically stepping back to make sure we're heading in the right direction.

[Always on the Grow](#)

If we continue to do what we've always been doing, we will continue to get what we've always been getting. To get somewhere else, we need to grow into someone else.

[Interested in Leadership, or Committed to Becoming a Leader?](#)

Many managers in leadership roles have stunted personal growth. We can focus on the gain of improvement, by keeping our preferred future and purpose firmly in front of us, and develop the 'habit' of personal improvement.

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[Leadership and Learning are Indispensable](#)

Not all learners are leaders. But the research clearly shows that the strongest leaders are continuous learners. They are 'self-made' leaders.

[The Law of Improvement Displacement](#)

Too many managers allow today's cash flow needs to crowd out tomorrow's wealth producing activities. If we want to expand tomorrow's wealth, expand today's capabilities.

A central issue in this problem is: what is the typical busy manager, so busy doing? June's issue of *The Leader Letter* tackled that with the lead story entitled, "Who's in Control of Your Time?" You can read it at <http://www.clemmer.net/news/jun2006.html>. I also suggested she look at the "Thoughts That Make You Go Hmmm...on Goals and Priorities" in the June 2005 issue at <http://www.clemmer.net/news/june2005.html>.

Thoughts That Make You Go Hmmm...on Personal Growth

"There are three kinds of people: The ones that learn by reading, the few who learn by observation, the rest who have to pee on the electric fence."

- Will Rogers, American humorist

"Reflect more, not less. Successful leaders strive to become more reflective. That's paradoxical given that today's business culture celebrates action over hesitancy. (We) 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."

- Roderick M. Kramer, "The Harder They Fall," *Harvard Business Review*

"A failure is a man who has blundered, but is not able to cash in on the experience."

- Elbert Hubbard, American writer and publisher



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"Derailed executives made about the same number of mistakes as those whose careers continued onward and upward, but derailed executives did not use setbacks or failure in an assignment as a learning experience. They hid their mistakes from others, not alerting colleagues to the consequences of how their mistake would affect the colleagues' activities. They did not take immediate steps to rectify what they had done. Finally, they tended to brood about the mistake, constantly reliving it for years afterward.

"Those whose careers continued to soar did exactly the opposite. They readily acknowledged what happened to those about them, alerted colleagues to the potential consequences, did their best to fix it, and then proceeded to forget about it and move on in their career. Our research confirms that the inability to learn from mistakes is the single biggest cause of failure."

- Jack H. Zenger & Joseph Folkman, *The Extraordinary Leader: Turning Good Managers Into Great Leaders*

"If we knew what it was we were doing, it would not be called research, would it?"

- Albert Einstein

"Not only can emotional intelligence be learned, but it also can be retained over the long term....people who successfully change in sustainable ways cycle through the following stages:

- The first discovery: My ideal self - Who do I want to be?
- The second discovery: My real self - Who am I? What are my strengths and gaps?
- The third discovery: My learning agenda - How can I build on my strengths while reducing my gaps?
- The fourth discovery: Experimenting with and practicing new behaviors, thoughts, and feelings to the point of mastery.
- The fifth discovery: Developing supportive and trusting relationships that make change possible.

"Ideally, the progression occurs through a discontinuity - a moment of discovery - that provokes not just awareness, but also a sense of urgency."

- Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis & Annie McKee, *Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence*

"Authentic happiness derives from raising the bar for yourself, not rating yourself against others."

- Martin Seligman, *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment*

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How Others See Me

Excerpted from *Growing the Distance: Personal Implementation Guide*. To review this personal leadership development resource, go to <http://www.clemmer.net/books/gtdpg.shtml>.

Following are some of the ways we can get feedback on our leadership behavior:

- a. During project reviews.
- b. Reflecting upon my leadership with a team member as we're completing his or her performance appraisal.
- c. Informal hallway or cafeteria conversations.
- d. Assessment of our meeting effectiveness and my leadership of the team.
- e. Picking up on grapevine chatter.
- f. Asking someone to be the 'devil's advocate' and lead debates into areas we may not have considered fully.
- g. Chatting over a coffee or beer after work or during an offsite lunch.
- h. Focus groups (cross-section of people in our organization) run by a neutral facilitator, who prepares a report summarizing the feedback.
- i. Opinion, morale, or attitude surveys with everyone in our organization answering anonymously and compiled by a third party.
- j. Operational reviews or financial reviews.
- k. '360 degree' feedback survey process, based on a leadership competency model, with anonymous feedback on my leadership behavior from those reporting to me, my peers, my boss, and possibly those we serve (internal or external).
- l. Off-site retreats with our management team, focusing on organization and team development strategies.
- m. Assessment from expert external consultants, based on some combination of surveys, documentation/process review, focus groups, customer feedback, or confidential interviews.
- n. Self-assessments by our management team and/or others we lead, based on an organization effectiveness framework/approach or best practices model.
- o. Personal development from a mentor who wants to help me succeed.
- p. Informal networking, among peers who may not be in my immediate organization, but as part of the bigger organization, can provide personal input/observations or rumors.
- q. Ongoing personal development through an external executive coach.

Non-structured or less formal feedback is most balanced and useful if we ask what should 'I' or 'we' keep doing, stop doing, and start doing.

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Feedback DOs and DON'Ts

Excerpted from *Growing the Distance: Personal Implementation Guide*. To review this personal leadership development resource, go to <http://www.clemmer.net/books/gtdpg.shtml>.

DO:

- Ensure the setting and timing is right.
- Show you're listening attentively.
- Summarize what you heard.
- Probe and ask questions to clarify your understanding.
- Thank the individual for helping you.

DON'T:

- Become defensive or try to explain your behavior.
- Interrupt. Just listen to what you're being told.
- Fill in silences or pauses. Let the person prepare his or her thoughts.
- Challenge the feedback and get the person to defend his or her opinion. Your view of "the reality is..." will likely be different from his or her perception.
- Ask for feedback from just those people who agree with you, or puff up your ego.

Articles and Excerpts on Feedback

Here are a few additional articles and book excerpts on feedback currently available on our web site:

Feedback is an Essential Element of Learning and Improvement

As managers, our frequency, sensitivity, and action (or lack of it) on personal performance feedback sets the pace and tone for the rest of our team and organization.

Feedback to See How Others See Me

We tend to define levels of service or quality through our own eyes and values. That may not be the way our customers or partners define it. If we're going to improve the service or quality delivered, we need to first understand how those we're serving, or producing for, perceive service or quality.

Culture Change Starts with the Management Team

When change fails, it can almost always be traced to dysfunctional leadership.



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More Reflections on Managing Life's 'Retirement' Transition

In the June issue, I published Layton Fisher's advice and experience on shifting into the retirement phase of life (read the article at <http://www.clemmer.net/news/jun2006.html#retire>). Here's another thoughtful response to Layton's advice:

"Layton hits the nail on the head. One's sense of self worth is measured by what we achieve or do in a productive work atmosphere.

"I've gone from 70 hours weeks to 30 hour weeks of work with my new responsibilities. I've solved the problem by taking on a teaching role at Humber College, downloading to all the architectural students my experience in the construction industry. The money gets taxed away, but the experience and fun has been worth every minute of prep time and time in front of the class.

"Many colleges are in dire need of industry experienced business people to do the same as I have done, download my expertise. The students love to hear real stories, not just what comes from a text book as so many academics are inclined to teach from. Suggest you invite your readership to explore this venue of semi-retirement at their local college or university."
- Bruce Taylor, Visionary Leader, Res Group of Companies, Innisfil, ON, Canada

Favorite July Improvement Points

Improvement Points is a free service providing a key thought or quotation from one of my articles, provided three times per week, directly to your e-mail inbox. Each complimentary Improvement Point links directly into the full article on our web site that spawned it. If you'd like to read more about that day's Improvement Point, you can choose to click through to the short article for a quick five-minute read. This is your opportunity for a short pause that refreshes, is an inspirational vitamin, or a quick performance boost. You can circulate especially relevant or timely articles or Improvement Points to your team, Clients, or colleagues for further discussion or action.

Here are my personal three choices of the Improvement Points we sent out in July:



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"When we don't know how we're doing we can't improve. Yet so many times we fail to periodically review and assess our progress. This makes about as much sense as setting off on the high seas for a far away destination and then ignoring instruments, stars, or maps to determine that our ship is still on course. Failing to periodically review and assess is one of the major reasons so many improvement efforts lose their way."

- from Jim Clemmer's article, *Stepping Back to Step Ahead Through Reviewing and Assessing*
Read the full article now!

http://www.clemmer.net/excerpts/stepping_back.shtml

"Communication is both a symptom and a cause of organization performance problems. Over the years, we've heard hundreds of managers use communication as a vague catchall for every type of organization and team problem imaginable. Generally, the root cause of many 'communication problems' was deeper than that."

- from Jim Clemmer's article, *Communication Strategies, Systems, and Skills*
Read the full article now!

http://www.clemmer.net/excerpts/communication_strategies.shtml

"Most 'overnight successes' take years to achieve. Most 'natural talent' is created through thousands of hours of disciplined training and practice (that's the final level of mastery – making it look natural)."

- from Jim Clemmer's article, *Persistence Goes the Distance*
Read the full article now!

<http://www.clemmer.net/excerpts/persistence.shtml>

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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