Practical Leadership:
Inspiring *Action*, Achieving Results

Jim Clemmer's Leader Letter

February 2005, Issue 23

Courage is at the Core of Leadership

I have been thinking a lot about courage. It is at the core of leadership. What is courage? Most of us recognize its opposite in this snippet from The Wizard of Oz:

Cowardly Lion: **Look at the circles under my eyes. I haven't slept in weeks.**
Tin Woodsman: **Why don't you try counting sheep?**
Cowardly Lion: **That doesn't do any good. I'm afraid of them.**

But our own position on the cowardice-courageous continuum is much more subtle than that. Our personal development journey is strongly determined by the extent of our courage. Do we seek feedback that we don't want to hear? Are we open to opposing views or approaches? Are we ready to address personal and professional obstacles blocking our growth? Are we continually stretching our comfort zone?

What about our courage to address team or organization issues that are blocking progress? Do we point fingers or lament that "they" ought to do something? Having the courage of our convictions calls for strong leadership. It's much easier to be quiet and just go along. And the silence can say it all. We've become a Cowardly Lion.

After starting out the New Year in an intensive writer's conference, I have just started scoping out and getting ready to scribe my first business fable. It's built around having courageous conversations – both listening and talking. Given lots of travel with a very full speaking, workshop/retreat, and family calendar, and now moving in unfamiliar fiction writing territory, I am not sure when I'll finish this book. Here are a few preliminary thoughts that I want to flesh out further through the story line:

- ➢ Giving in to our fear is to die before our body stops functioning.
- ➢ Sometimes it takes more courage to sit down and listen than it does to stand up and speak.
- ➢ It takes courage to see myself through the eyes of others.
- ➢ Courage is the key that unlocks the door to our inner selves.
- ➢ We all have fear. Courage is to master rather than be mastered by our fears.
- ➢ Bravery often increases with distance.

I'd love to get your thoughts on courage. What helped you get up the courage to do what you feared? What holds you back? Please e-mail your thoughts and experiences to me at Jim.Clemmer@Clemmer.net.

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More on...Leading Spirited Teams

Life is full of such wonderful and mysterious coincidences. While I was working away on my next article for *The Globe & Mail* on the credibility gap between management and the people in their organization, Mark's e-mail below arrived. He was commenting on my last *Globe & Mail* piece that was reprinted in *Leader Letter* (click here to review that section):

> *The issue in this article resonates with me, and many people close to me. However, I do find that your suggested ways of solving the problem miss the fundamental problem: those who are in management positions who have become "un-connected" (or never were) with those they are responsible for. Several of your suggestions are too easy to be seen as cosmetic. You don't make people feel part of the team by buying them new shirts, having pep rallies, or having sessions that include their customers, or spectators. If managers don't "connect" with their staff they have failed to achieve the fundamental requirement of their job.*
>
> *Too often we see a promotion to "management" as being the reward for good or superior performance; "you are a great cashier therefore we will promote you to section manager..." Yet we fail to recognize that there are almost no common attributes between the positions. Not only does this put a (former) great performer into an environment where they are more likely to fail, we lost the great performer cashier. And when we discover the folly of that move, we find that it is irreversible due to the loss of face or apparent failure of the former cashier.*
>
> *The Peter Principal is alive and thriving. Furthermore I also believe that just because an individual is a skilled manager, I am not satisfied that they are profoundly more **valuable.** In short we have created a reward hierarchy that is often unsustainable; it over rewards modest performers in the upper areas of the organization and equally under recognizes excellence at the lower end of the hierarchy. This only compounds the sense of injustice and resentment from those who are primarily responsible for success through customer service. This is all the more ironic when the interface between the customer and the organization is at this point in the hierarchy.*

Mark Brown, Professional Quality Surveyor and Public Sector Manager in Victoria, British Columbia

I'd love to get your views on this. E-mail me at Jim.Clemmer@Clemmer.net.

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Accept What Can't be Changed and Change What Can Be

Occasionally when I speak to a group or someone reads something I've written, the hallelujah choir descends from the heavens in a blinding flash of insight for that person! Of course, I always love it whenever that happens. Equally as important (but less dramatic) is when someone's current thinking or approach is reinforced and encouraged to continue by something I've said or written.

Tabitha Rubin came across an excerpt from my latest book, *The Leader's Digest: Timeless Principles for Team and Organization Success*, that was just added to our web site. Here is the article's description and link followed by Tabitha's e-mail:

> Accept What Can't Be Changed and Change What Can Be
> Accepting responsibility for choices starts with understanding where our choices lie. We may not choose what happens to us, but we do choose how to respond – or not.

> *What an AWESOME article!!!! I have just recently learned how to let go of things that are beyond my control or beyond my boundaries. It is a hard pill to swallow sometimes. I am still trying to learn how keep things from getting under my skin and reacting to things that are not important. This article is confirmation that I am doing something right for a change!*

> *Your article breaks down the Serenity Prayer and gives it a whole new light... thank you for your wonderful insight!*

> **Tabitha Rubin, Business Office Manager, Central Florida Internists, Inc.**

Why is Real Leadership So Rare?

I enjoyed receiving this thoughtful message on the nature of the challenges of leadership in our organizations and society today. I hope "Kevin's" thoughts and questions along with my response help you further think through your own position on these vital leadership issues.

> *After decades of life in the corporate world, I am currently taking a masters degree in leadership. Since the first year residency portion of the degree I have become more and more convinced that "leaders" are far less common than business would like to think. I am seeing that we are getting more and more effective managers and because of their effectiveness, we may be bestowing upon them the description of leader.*

> *When we work with teams we sometimes kick them off by putting them through a survival exercise where each individual makes choices, and then works with the rest of the group on the prioritizing problem. In almost all cases the group decisions are shown to produce better results than individual decisions.*

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As a North American society we still seem to want a "white knight" to show us the way, which is contrary to the shared leadership and better decision making of the team process. A team can be fragile and needs to have commitment to a clear vision. A team not only has a commitment to their goal but also a commitment among team members to be supportive of each other. They need to put in place measures dealing with conflict to prevent the team from becoming dysfunctional.

Why don't we create flatter transformational organizations through the use of teams that allow spontaneous leadership based on the evolving and changing needs? Wouldn't a flexible, web-like, team-based management structure that is less hierarchical and bureaucratic produce better holistic decisions?

Is part of the problem the current individual decision maker paradigm of our business and political cultures? They would have a lot to lose and justify the sometimes obscene salaries and bonuses they receive. Is part of the problem the resistance most of us have to altering the status quo or being told we have to change?

We are in a biosphere that is fragile and on a planet of finite resources. The aboriginals used to make decisions based on the effects to the seventh generation. Our "leaders" currently seem concerned about the next quarter.

Although our current business, political and "free enterprise" paradigms seem to be working now, I do not feel our growth and consumption-based systems are sustainable from a biosphere and resource perspective. Am I wrong?

What business and political structures do you see in the future? What leadership characteristics will be needed on our evolutionary journey? Will the great divides between have and have-nots be there?

I would really appreciate your thoughtful considerations. Perhaps it is because I am nearing achieving a paid up pension and from my experience with teams as well as the way this current course has made me question "leadership" but I feel that change is needed.

"Kevin"

Hi "Kevin,"

I agree that true leadership is a lot rarer than we'd like to think it is – or should be. I have heard that 75% of us consider ourselves to be above average in our driving skills – a statistical impossibility. I often think the same is true about leadership.

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I believe a big part of the reason for the leadership shortfall is the confusion of "management" and "leadership" and the failure to appreciate the dynamic and creative tension between the two. I have written extensively on the conflicts and synergy of management and leadership. An entire section of free articles and columns on our web site is devoted to this topic at http://www.clemmer.net/excerpts/m_leadership.shtml. Chapter One of my latest book, *The Leader's Digest: Timeless Principles for Team and Organization Success* is built around this balance issue. It's freely available for reading at http://www.clemmer.net/excerpts/management_leadership.shtml.

Your experiences and questions around the use of teams are an accurate illustration of what a rotten job most organizations are doing at harnessing the power of collective effort. That's often because western society's strength and weakness is rugged individualism and the ideal of the heroic manager single-handedly plucking victory from the jaws of defeat. This ethic is embedded deep in our cultural myths and stories as told through popular movies or the business press. We love the drama of bold and courageous individual action. Strong and charismatic personalities captivate us because they play such a big part in exploring the unknown, fighting conventional thinking or oppression and injustice, and building new societies and organizations.

Strong teams are unmatched in their effectiveness at managing affairs inside existing paradigms. Rugged, entrepreneurial individuals who refuse to conform to group-think or the status quo do a much better job than teams at leading us to new paradigms. We need both. Only the best organizations can balance this paradox.

I agree that we live in a very fragile biosphere. We have shrunk the size of our world dramatically in the past century. And it's that growing realization that will save us. In my new *Growing the Distance: Personal Implementation Guide* I devoted a large section to the power of optimism and the dangers of pessimism. The American Heritage Dictionary defines optimism as "the belief that the universe is improving and that good will ultimately triumph over evil." In contrast, pessimism is "the doctrine or belief that this is the worst of all possible worlds and that all things ultimately tend toward evil."

We need the dynamic tension of both optimism and pessimism. Unrestrained optimism can lead to complacency and refusal to address problems that need improvement action. Chronic pessimism builds a self-fulfilling cycle that spirals ever downward to hopelessness, cynicism, and inaction. Leaders who make a difference and improve this world are forward thinking optimists balanced with strategic pessimism.

There are many hopeful signs in many spheres of life on this planet that we are awakening to the connections between the spiritual, environmental, business, and political realms. More people are asking the very questions that you raise. I am very optimistic that we'll solve many of these problems facing us today. I am also quite sure that those same solutions will cause tomorrow's problems. And so the wheel of life and leadership will continue to turn for future generations.

If you have perspectives to add, please e-mail them to me at **Jim.Clemmer@Clemmer.net**.

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Top Improvement Points from January

Of the short quotes with links to full articles that were e-mailed out as complimentary **Improvement Points** last month, the most popular with subscribers were:

> "Strong leaders who are effective coaches know the value of R & R (reflection and renewal). They periodically pull themselves and their teams back from daily work in operations to work on themselves. They are constantly asking questions like, 'What should we keep doing, stop doing, and start doing to be more effective?'"
> **- from *Leaders Focus on Reflection and Renewal***
> www.clemmer.net/excerpts/leaders_focus.shtml

> "For the most effective companies, organizational spirit or culture is a major competitive advantage. Companies can purchase the same equipment, technologies, products, people, brands, facilities and other tangible assets as their competitors. But they cannot buy the intangible culture of caring for customers or commitment to high quality that makes or breaks all their tangible investments. This can only be earned through strong and consistent leadership."
> **- from *Team Spirit Built from the Top***
> www.clemmer.net/excerpts/team_spirit.shtml

> "Leaders spend much less time personally solving problems. They invest their time in making sure that the right problems are being solved."
> **- from *Leaders Help People to Help Themselves***
> www.clemmer.net/excerpts/leaders_self.shtml

Subscribe or view the archives by topic area here: www.clemmer.net/improvement.shtml

Thoughts That Make You Go Hmmmm...on Courage

> **"But the bravest are surely those who have the clearest vision of what is before them, glory and danger alike, and yet not withstanding, go out and meet it."**
> - Thucydides, Ancient Greek historian

> **"Courage is doing what you are afraid to do. There can be no courage unless you're scared."**
> - Eddie Rickenbacker, American WW1 "Ace of Aces" and President of Eastern Air Lines

> **"I would rather be a coward than brave because people hurt you when you are brave."**
> - E.M. Forster, British writer

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"Laugh at yourself, but don't ever aim your doubt at yourself. Be bold. When you embark for strange places, don't leave any of yourself safely on shore. Have the nerve to go into unexplored territory."
- Alan Alda, actor

"I believe that courage is all too often mistakenly seen as the absence of fear. If you descend by rope from a cliff and are not fearful to some degree, you are either crazy or unaware. Courage is seeing your fear, in a realistic perspective, defining it, considering alternatives, and choosing to function in spite of risks."
- Leonard Zunin quoted in Tempered Radicals: How People Use Difference to Inspire Change at Work by Debra E. Meyerson

Public Upcoming – Leadership, Change, and Personal Growth

Leading @ the Speed of Change

Are you feeling overwhelmed and overworked? Do you need practical approaches to leading yourself and others through all the craziness in today's world?

Leadership is even more critical to our personal, team, and organization success in today's fast changing environment.

That's why you won't want to miss this rare opportunity (I only do a few open or public workshops per year) to spend two powerful days together on this crucial success factor.

Join me right here in my hometown, Kitchener, Ontario, for two intensive days at my **Leading @ the Speed of Change** workshop. Check it out at www.clemmer.net/events/lsc/lsc.shtml.
Kitchener, ON - May 31 - June 1, 2005

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. 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.

I hope to connect with you again next month!

Jim