



## Practical Leadership:

Inspiring *Action*, Achieving Results

### Jim Clemmer's Leader Letter

June 2005, Issue 27

Page 1 of 11

#### In this issue...

- **Common Causes of Priority Overload**
- **Steps to a Goal Deployment System**
- **Tips for Setting Team or Organizational Goals and Priorities**
- **Leading by Example: Setting Personal Goals and Priorities**
- **Thoughts That Make You Go Hmmm...**
- **Visualizing and Navigating**
- **Tone of Voice: It's All in How We're Saying It**
- **Improvement Points Balance Organizational and Personal Leadership**
- **Top Improvement Points**
- **Feedback and Follow-Up**

In the workshops, retreats, and consulting work we do at The CLEMMER Group, the most common problem we encounter is priority overload. The vast majority of individuals and management teams we work with are overwhelmed. Everything is urgent. Their personal and organizational "to-do lists" of projects, team activities, daily tasks, crisis, strategic goals, and the like are jumbled together in a crushing weight of frenetic busyness. At the organizational level this results in reduced productivity, quality, customer service, innovation, and profitability/results. At the personal level, this hectic pace results in stress, health issues, reduced satisfaction, and lower personal and professional effectiveness.

This issue of the *Leader Letter* addresses some of the organizational and personal causes of priority overload and how to deal with this growing problem as the pace keeps accelerating.

#### Common Causes of Priority Overload

**Too Much Time In the Business and Not Enough Time On the Business** – many organizations are so busy dealing with daily issues and operations that there is no time for the "luxury" of progress assessment and planning. This leads to even more busyness and crisis management which means even less time for progress assessment and planning which leads to even more busyness which means less time for...

**Weak Goal Deployment Process** – most organizations have an annual strategic planning and/or budgeting process. Some put a huge amount of time and energy into the front end of the process. Very few organizations continue that same discipline into cascading those plans and goals throughout the organization. And only a handful of organizations have any disciplined follow through and follow-up process.

**Focusing on What's New Rather Than What Works** – most management teams are so busy asking each other "what's new" or "what's up" that we spend little to no time reflecting on what's working. The energy of many meetings and planning processes is in launching new initiatives and plans, not in following up to learn what we should keep doing, stop doing, and start doing.

**Practical Leadership:***Inspiring Action, Achieving Results***Jim Clemmer's Leader Letter**

June 2005, Issue 27

Page 2 of 11

**Bolt-On Programs Versus Built-In Process** – strategic planning, The Balanced Scorecard, performance management, KPI (key performance indicators), and the like are programs used in many organizations. Most times they are programs run by staff support groups like HR and not part of how the management team actually manages the organization.

**Unbalanced Measurements** – what gets measured gets managed. Most organizations use lagging indicators like production numbers or financial results as their primary measures. Higher performing organizations balance those with leading indicators like customer service, quality, employee satisfaction, or market trends.

**A Culture That Rewards Activities More Than Results** – where programs are bolted-on and measures are unbalanced, "face time" (when a manager is at his or her desk), availability, and responsiveness become the key ways to judge a manager's contributions and effectiveness. This leads to the unhealthy and unproductive 24/7 world of e-mails and voice-mails that are overloading and stressing out so many people.

**Disorganized Managers Trying to Build Organized Teams** – many overloaded organizations or teams are led by managers with poor personal time management practices. This ripples out into poorly run meetings, highly reactive and constantly shifting priorities, poor operational processes, sloppy customer service and quality, and even MBW (management by whim).

**Steps to a Goal Deployment System**

High-performing organizations like Toyota have developed and evolved a very disciplined methodology that they call "Hoshin kanri." It starts with high level or strategic imperatives and then cascades these through every part of the organization. Follow through and follow up is the key to moving this process from just another bolt-on planning program to a built-in management process. From my experience facilitating the senior management team through parts of this process in their Cambridge, Ontario plant, I know this is a core management process for Toyota. They aren't just "doing their planning thing" and going through the motions.

The generic diagram below shows the flow of a process like this. It starts at the centre with the management establishing, reaffirming, or revitalizing their Vision, Values, and Purpose (what I call Focus and Context).

**Practical Leadership:***Inspiring Action, Achieving Results***Jim Clemmer's Leader Letter**

June 2005, Issue 27

Page 3 of 11



1. Agree on three to five strategic (high leverage/impact) imperatives (do-or-die) for the planning cycle (usually annually). This generally involves using some form of Affinity Diagramming or clustering similar goals together to form a higher level strategic objective.
2. Establish management ownership/accountability (and steering/improvement teams) for each imperative.
3. Develop key measurements for each imperative.
4. Have every department/division at all levels develop their three to five imperatives and measures that flow directly from one or more of the strategic imperatives.
5. Set regular (e.g. weekly/monthly/quarterly) review and follow-up meetings at all levels, and communicate the results broadly (the more visible the better).
6. Start the next cycle by agreeing upon the three to five strategic imperatives for the next planning cycle.

Many organizations do steps #1 and #2 each year. With tools like the Balanced Scorecard, some organizations are trying to develop a balanced set of leading and lagging indicators. Few organizations get to step #4 with any vigor or consistency. And only a handful of the best-run organizations ever follow through on step #5 with any discipline.

**Practical Leadership:***Inspiring Action, Achieving Results***Jim Clemmer's Leader Letter**

June 2005, Issue 27

Page 4 of 11

**Tips for Setting Team or Organizational Goals and Priorities**

- Ensure you're following the three keys to effective goals and priorities: 1) Follow-up; 2) Follow-up; and 3) Follow-up.
- Continuously communicate how your strategic imperatives connect to your vision, values, and purpose.
- Set goals and priorities from the outside (customers) in and help everyone see the big picture and where they fit in it.
- Keep the "line of sight" from customers, external partners, and internal partners clear and strong for everyone.
- Don't allow your team meetings to be tyrannized by operational crisis/issues at the expense of effective and regular goal deployment follow-up.
- Ensure training, measurements, technology, human resources, restructuring, project teams, process changes, and the like are strongly connected to, and flow from your strategic imperatives.
- Regularly review your meeting and decision making processes. Are you using your time well? Are the right people involved?

**Leading by Example: Setting Personal Goals and Priorities**

Too many managers seem to operate on a variation of an old Groucho Marx routine; "I've got top priorities. I am going to stick to those priorities. And if you don't like those priorities...I have others." It's very hard to bring the discipline of a goal deployment system or other planning process to a team or organization if your own time management and personal organization is a joke.

- What are you so busy doing? Are you working on high leverage activities that will catapult you, your team, and your organization toward your vision? Are people "delegating up" to you and your team? Has busyness and long hours become a dangerous status symbol of importance? Are you and your team members measuring your importance by how many e-mails you get, vacations missed, or crazy hours you work?

**Practical Leadership:***Inspiring Action, Achieving Results***Jim Clemmer's Leader Letter**

June 2005, Issue 27

Page 5 of 11

- Know thy time. Figuring out how effective your busyness is, starts with a time log. This takes some real discipline, but the learning and personal effectiveness you'll gain is immeasurable. For a few weeks, (ideally a month), keep a log of how you spend each fifteen minute block of your day from the time you get up until the time you go to bed. Before you start, develop categories such as reading, learning, meetings, dealing with e-mails, family time, relaxation, travel, telephone calls, visiting, preparing, planning, etc. Estimate how much time you spend in each activity before you start your log. Once your log is complete compare your estimates to the way you actually use your time.
- Plan your time. Use a time organizer system, software program, or Personal Digital Assistant. Take it with you everywhere you go. Develop weekly or monthly activity lists that link to your vision, values, and purpose so you're always doing the most important things. Over the weekend or first thing Monday morning, sketch out your week. Each morning reprioritize your day's activities and plans.
- Learn how to lead effective meetings. Poorly run meetings cost you and everyone else an enormous amount of precious time. There are few excuses for not starting and finishing on time, not having clear meeting outcomes and agendas, not keeping discussions on track, not minimizing disruptions, or not handling conflict effectively. It's a skill issue. Improve yours and you'll free up time for everybody.
- Schedule regular reflection time (daily/weekly/monthly) to review progress on your goals and reset your priorities.

I'd like to get your reflections and experience on how you set personal or professional goals and priorities. Please e-mail me at [Jim.Clemmer@Clemmer.net](mailto:Jim.Clemmer@Clemmer.net).

**Thoughts That Make You Go Hmmm...on Goals and Priorities**

**"ADT (Attention Deficit Trait) is now epidemic in organizations. The core symptoms are distractibility, inner frenzy, and impatience. People with ADT have difficulty staying organized, setting priorities, and managing time... ADT springs entirely from the environment. Like the traffic jam, ADT is an artifact of modern life. It is brought on by the demands on our time and attention that have exploded over the past two decades. As our minds fill with noise -- feckless synaptic events signifying nothing -- the brain gradually loses its capacity to attend fully and thoroughly to anything...ADT can be controlled only by creatively engineering one's environment and one's emotional and physical health."**

- Edward M. Hallowell, "Overloaded Circuits: Why Smart People Underperform," Harvard Business Review, January 2005

**Practical Leadership:***Inspiring Action, Achieving Results***Jim Clemmer's Leader Letter**

June 2005, Issue 27

Page 6 of 11

**"...very few managers use their time as effectively as they could. They think they're attending to pressing matters, but they're really just spinning their wheels...our findings on managerial behavior should frighten you: Fully 90% of managers squander their time in all sorts of ineffective activities. In other words, a mere 10% of managers spend their time in a committed, purposeful, and reflective manner...focused managers aren't in reactive mode; they choose not to respond immediately to every issue that comes their way or get sidetracked from their goals by distractions like e-mail, meetings, setbacks, and unforeseen demands. Because they have a clear understanding of what they want to accomplish, they carefully weigh their options before selecting a course of action. Moreover, because they commit to only one or two key projects, they can devote their full attention to the projects they believe in...many insecure managers try to impress others with how much work they have. But the pressure to perform can be amplified by organizations themselves. Indeed, many companies encourage, and even reward, frantic activity."**

- Heike Bruch and Sumantra Ghoshal, "Beware the Busy Manager," Harvard Business Review, February 2002

**"Do you have a "to do" list? Do you also have a "stop doing" list? Most of us lead busy but undisciplined lives. We have ever-expanding "to do" lists, trying to build momentum by doing, doing, doing-and doing more. And it rarely works. Those who built the good-to-great companies, however, made as much use of "stop doing" lists as "to do" lists. They displayed a remarkable discipline to unplug all sorts of extraneous junk...much of this book is about creating a culture of discipline. It all starts with disciplined people."**

- Jim Collins, *Good to Great*

**"Be like a postage stamp. Stick to one thing until you get there."**

- Josh Billings, (Henry Wheeler Shaw) American humorist and essayist

**Visualizing and Navigating**

After the January 2004 newsletter on visualization (you can find it at [www.clemmer.net/news/jan2004.html](http://www.clemmer.net/news/jan2004.html)) and the March 2004 issue on being a Navigator rather than just a Survivor or Victim (you can find it at [www.clemmer.net/news/mar2004.html](http://www.clemmer.net/news/mar2004.html)), I began exchanging e-mails with Phil Kerslake in Wellington, New Zealand. With his permission, I am sharing some of our correspondence with you.

**Practical Leadership:***Inspiring Action, Achieving Results***Jim Clemmer's Leader Letter**

June 2005, Issue 27

Page 7 of 11

*I always enjoy your monthly thoughts and ideas, but at present your messages have taken on added significance for me. While being a general manager with a strong interest in the kind of leadership philosophies you espouse, I'm also half way through a 6 month scheduled chemotherapy regime for a Hodgkin's Disease recurrence and was due to receive my first post-treatment CT scan results yesterday afternoon. Reading your article 'Keeping problems in perspective' when your newsletter arrived in timely fashion that morning reminded me of the power I had to choose my response and point of view no matter what the results."*

*...I am a big believer in visualizing and creating your own future also but again, the reminder you've provided is useful because I'd slipped out of the habit lately of regularly adhering to my visualization regime. My cancer experience started when I was just a teenager and doctors suggested I had 10 years to live maximum then, so I'm pleased to have proved them wrong at age 44 but I'm also certain that adopting the Navigator's perspective is how I've gotten through to this point and how I'll carry on for as long as I choose to. The great thing about your article was that it arrived at a time where I was at risk of slipping down emotionally to the survivor line with the risk, God forbid, of becoming victim-oriented. Not the 'me' that any of my family, friends and colleagues knows but again, something that can seemingly occur through repeated (fortnightly) chemo sessions and the soul-suppressing after effects.*

A year later, Phil sent me this inspiring update:

*Hi Jim,*

*Thanks for your latest newsletter. Just thought I'd update you briefly on where I'm at. I e-mailed you last year in the middle of a cancer recurrence, commending your 'navigator' approach and telling you how I took it as further motivation to fight when I was at a low ebb.*

*I'm very pleased to report that I'm now in full remission, against the expectations of the doctors and most everyone else. Looking at me and my replenished vibrancy, you wouldn't know that 2004 was for me a year full of chemotherapy, spleen removal, biopsy operations and a stem cell transplant. I've re-gained the 20kg I had lost along with my energies and zest for life.*

*Perhaps most importantly I've also taken the necessary steps to re-focus my life onto things that align directly with my values. I left my corporate job as a general manager and set up my own life and business coaching company. I've also secured a publisher and a sponsor for a book I long wanted to write entitled "Life, happiness and a cancer diagnosis." My book should be released at year end or early 2006, and will aim to help and inspire cancer patients and others looking for motivation to live their passions.*

**Practical Leadership:***Inspiring Action, Achieving Results***Jim Clemmer's Leader Letter**

June 2005, Issue 27

Page 8 of 11

*I hope your readers and clients fully appreciate the value and power of navigating - taking a never quit approach and constantly looking for solutions when brick walls are presented! It helped me get to this point and will continue to enable me to achieve what others thought unlikely.*

*Kind regards,*

*Phil Kerslake, Wellington, New Zealand*

**Tone of Voice: It's All in How We're Saying It**

*This is my first supervisory role and I feel that I am failing badly. I'm one of those who feel that if you don't want to hear the answer, don't ask the question. I'm also not one to sit by and wait to be told what to do, but take action when I feel that I can make a difference. All of this is getting me in trouble. A friend in HR passed along your web site info, so here I am a new subscriber.*

I am sorry to hear that you feel that you're failing badly. Perhaps you're being too hard on yourself. You certainly need to cut yourself some slack during the learning process.

Your comment about "if you don't want to hear the answer, don't ask the question" could show that it's not what you're saying, but how you are saying it. Most people want and appreciate a boss or work colleague who is direct and to the point. But it's about the way that's conveyed. We've all found ourselves resisting someone else not because of what they are saying, but how they are saying it. They may strike us as arrogant, unfeeling, rude, or overly critical. It's been said that 90 percent of the friction in our relationships comes from the wrong tone of voice.

The number one rule in working with others is to focus on the issue, problem, or behavior and not the person. We often don't recognize when we're making statements of exasperation, broad brush ("you're always so \_\_\_\_\_"), or judgment ("you're too \_\_\_\_\_"). Make sure you focus on facts, what you've observed, or what you're feeling. Don't put labels or generalizations on other people or their behavior. A good team leadership or supervisory training program would be a great investment for you.

You definitely want to continue to take action when you feel you can make a difference. That's being a navigator or leader, not a just-getting-by survivor or victim. But it's all about how you take that action as a supervisor. Bosses or managers get people to do things because they have to. Leaders get people to do the same things because they want to. It's the same goal, but with a world of difference in execution and long-term results.

**Practical Leadership:***Inspiring Action, Achieving Results***Jim Clemmer's Leader Letter**

June 2005, Issue 27

Page 9 of 11

Congratulations on your new role. Keep searching, self-examining, getting feedback, and learning. That's the exciting leadership route to great effectiveness and personal fulfillment.

Jim

**Improvement Points Balance Organizational and Personal Leadership**

*I enjoy your improvement points but think that you are far too hard on managers and leaders. Your articles show a distinct bias for employees rather than leaders, supervisors, and managers. While you often indicate that you need a balance, I have trouble sending some of your stuff out to staff as it will just encourage them to be critical of their supervisors. You need to provide a better balance. I've been a leader, a manager, a supervisor, etc. for 26 years and you clearly have not worked in a union environment or had staff that really and truly don't like anyone in authority.*

Thanks for your feedback. I always appreciate when readers or audience members voice concerns or issues that I need to look at more closely in my work. Your message has pushed me to think further about the bias issue you raise.

As you can see on our web page describing the Improvement Points service ([www.clemmer.net/improvement.shtml](http://www.clemmer.net/improvement.shtml)), I have focused this service on organizational effectiveness and personal/leadership effectiveness. The most appropriate Improvement Points to pass on to staff would be those on personal/leadership effectiveness. The organizational effectiveness points are aimed at helping managers continuously improve the way they lead their organizations or teams. Many of these would not be appropriate to pass on to staff. I know many readers pass them on to other supervisors/managers and sometimes use the Improvement Point or its linked article for further management team discussion.

Like my books and workshops or presentations, these management messages are designed to stretch the recipient further. They often are critical of managers because I am pointing out mediocre or bad management practices and providing suggestions for improving those. Of course, as with any advice in our lives, we have to weigh what's being said against our growth or development goals and personal approach. If the comment irritates or causes us to flinch, that may be the grain of sand around which we can spin our own pearl of improvement. If it doesn't fit, we need to ignore the advice or hit the delete key.

**Practical Leadership:***Inspiring Action, Achieving Results***Jim Clemmer's Leader Letter**

June 2005, Issue 27

Page 10 of 11

I have worked extensively in union environments with my Clients for over 25 years. Many of my sessions have included active and quite vocal union leaders or been designed exclusively for them. I've certainly encountered my share of frontline people who don't like anyone in authority. The big challenge in this environment is for the manager to not fall into the classic We/They Gap and become a victim pointing fingers at "they." You can scan through a large collection of articles on taking responsibility for our choices at [www.clemmer.net/excerpts/responsibility.shtml](http://www.clemmer.net/excerpts/responsibility.shtml).

Thanks again for your input. This has been a valuable reflection exercise for me to re-examine the focus and intent of Improvement Points.

**Top Improvement Points from May**

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:

**"Leadership deals with the world of emotions and feelings. It is more of an art than a science. Like artists, leaders have the ability to share their vision of the world. Leaders influence our perceptions and help us look at situations in new ways."**

- from *Soft Skills, Hard Results*  
[www.clemmer.net/excerpts/soft\\_skills2.shtml](http://www.clemmer.net/excerpts/soft_skills2.shtml)

**"Managers try to motivate. Leaders inspire. Managers try to understand how to motivate people. Leaders try to understand why people aren't feeling motivated. Managers try to add more drivers to increase mobilization and energy. Leaders try to identify, prioritize, and remove the biggest resistors."**

- from *Motivation is an Inside Job*  
[www.clemmer.net/excerpts/motivation\\_inside.shtml](http://www.clemmer.net/excerpts/motivation_inside.shtml)

**"There are numerous modern technologies, instruments, and techniques to help managers see where they are today. But many of them still attempt to navigate their own personal development or organization-change processes with tools similar to old-fashioned sextants or star charts. Some may have lookouts posted in the crow's nest, but ignore or discount any warnings that don't coincide with their own perception."**

- from *Pinpointing My Leadership Position*  
[www.clemmer.net/excerpts/pinpointing.shtml](http://www.clemmer.net/excerpts/pinpointing.shtml)

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**JIM CLEMMER**

## **Practical Leadership:**

*Inspiring Action, Achieving Results*

### **Jim Clemmer's Leader Letter**

June 2005, Issue 27

Page 11 of 11

#### **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](mailto:Jim.Clemmer@Clemmer.net).

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I hope to connect with you again next month!

Jim

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