



Practical Leadership:

Inspiring Action, Achieving Results

Jim Clemmer's Leader Letter

May 2005, Issue 26

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This month's issue contains more stories on courageous leadership. I am very grateful for the many insights and experiences contributed by such a diverse group of readers. The continuing response to this key organization and life issue has given me further inspiration, ideas, and insights for the business fable I am currently writing.

A Kid Gives a Lesson in Courageous Leadership

I have known John for nearly twenty years. Our relationship started before he retired from his previous company and delivered his experience and wisdom to the larger world through consulting. He was an excellent coach and trainer with a strong internal reputation in the large Canadian bank where he worked. And his storytelling skills were always a key part of his communication effectiveness.

Hi Jim and greetings. Really enjoyed as always your newsletter and wanted to add a little story on courage for your files.

Years ago, I was a coach for a little league baseball team. One of the boys on that team was a catcher named David. He was a quiet leader of sorts, never one to brag about his accomplishments on the field but rather all too eager to add encouragement to others and help them with aspects of their game. One day during a routine visit to his doctor, a small lump was detected on the back of his skull. Tests determined that an operation at Sick Kids Hospital in Toronto was necessary. It turned out that the lump was cancerous and a good portion of his skull had to be removed. Months of chemotherapy and radiation would be necessary and then, if all went well, reconstructive surgery to repair the skull itself. I was with David at the hospital shortly after he woke up from the surgery and was told about the ordeal that lay before him. It was undoubtedly one of the hardest moments in my life watching this ten year old facing such a tremendous ordeal. I looked at him and said "David, Coach would do anything to be able to switch places with you if he could." David replied, "That's OK Dad, I'll deal with this, don't you worry."

That was close to 20 years ago, and today, my son David is doing great and is a successful film production co-ordinator here in Toronto having just finished his latest film with Russell Crowe entitled, "Cinderella Man"... another true story of courage and determination.

What David taught me, however, was that courage means a lot of things but probably most of all, it means taking ownership of both your wins and losses in life.



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During my career of over 35 years in banking, and when I look back now at the leaders who inspired me, they were the ones who had that same type of ownership. Never ones to shirk from the fallout of a negative situation, but rather taking ownership and not casting blame onto others.

When we think of courage Jim, we can come up with several adjectives that fit. I just thought you might enjoy my perspective on this wonderful topic.

Keep up the great work and providing us with much needed inspiration.

John Chisholm, Burlington, ON

Only a Few Seats Left for My Only Public Workshop in 2005

Leading @ the Speed of Change

We are very close to reaching the capacity of our meeting facilities for my upcoming two-day session, right here in the center of the universe – my hometown of **Kitchener, Ontario, May 31 - June 1, 2005**.

The latest version of our ***Leading @ the Speed of Change*** workshop is the evolution of my work with thousands of managers and team leaders over the past few decades. It is built around my two most recent books, *The Leader's Digest* (go to <http://www.clemmer.net/books/tld.shtml>) and *Growing the Distance* (go to <http://www.clemmer.net/books/gtd.shtml>). We will use their new *Practical Application Planner* (go to <http://www.clemmer.net/books/tldpp.shtml>) and *Personal Implementation Guide* (go to <http://www.clemmer.net/books/gtdpg.shtml>) to provide lots of practical 'how to' steps that dramatically boost personal, team, and organization results. Check out details here: www.clemmer.net/events/lsc/lsc.shtml.

It is the only open enrollment or public workshop I'll be offering this year.

Reflections in Our Courage Mirror

Tom's response below raises two important points on leadership courage. The first point is about having the courage as a leader to make it easy for people in your organization to speak up. Most managers dump out information (mainly through e-mail) and call it "communication." Strong leaders develop multiple forums, processes, channels, and opportunities to foster genuine conversations – real communication – up, down, and across their organization.

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I am starting to define courage as doing what our heart tells us needs to be done despite our fear. Tom's second point is the tough question of whether we have the courage to speak up or get out of work situations that are dripping acid on our self-esteem, diminishing our happiness, and even jeopardizing our health. What price are we paying for "going along to get along?" This is the central issue of the main character in the business fable I am currently writing.

Just read the stories in your latest "Leader Letter". I can relate to the older gentleman who had decided to begin speaking up [to read this story go to our web site at <http://www.clemmer.net/news/apr2005.html#story>]. Funny, but I almost find myself at the opposite end of the spectrum. In my younger years, I found myself resisting a movement which I saw as totally foolish (Total Quality Management being implemented in our company). I'm convinced that because of my attitude, I was tagged as one who was laid off when the company began hitting the skids in the early 1990s. In hindsight, I realize that it may have been more my passive-aggressive approach, then my actual resistance in that situation as well as others, which has hurt me.

Still, I think this is something which companies need to recognize from the top down. There needs to be a culture which allows people to voice their objections, AND to have those objections objectively considered. Also, companies need to provide avenues for those who are not as comfortable sharing their concerns in public forums like meetings. Some of us need to weigh our thoughts on a matter before we can raise a question or objection. Or, we may need to put our thoughts down in writing. Today, it seems leaders are swayed more by people like themselves, who can think quickly on their feet, and voice themselves in a meeting forum, where the decisions get made, while others are still analyzing their reactions.

Having said all that, I know that personally, I'd rather be like the first story you related, about the man who stood up for what he thought, and accepted the consequences. I just don't know if I'm courageous enough to put my career and my family's well being on the line again - especially in today's environment where companies seem so unwilling to care for their employees.

Tom Turton, Grapevine, TX**Retaining Top Talent and Our Self-Worth**

Grant's experience below underlines the need for manager's having authentic conversations during performance discussions. His is a vivid example of how people join an organization and quit their boss. Retention is going to become a critical issue in the next few years in many organizations as baby boomers retire in much larger numbers than new people coming into the workforce. Research on attracting and retaining top talent shows that 70% of the reasons people quit is because of their immediate boss. What does your turnover rate say about your leadership? How about any supervisors or managers you may have leading your staff?

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Grant also provides an excellent example of having the courage to leave if you feel victimized by a bad boss. How much job pain are we willing to accept for the security of a paycheck? What's the price of our self-worth?

I am about half-way through reading "The Leader's Digest" and had to write you to say how wonderful I'm finding your book. It has been re-affirming my leadership passion and stoking me with confidence. You see, I had a bad experience in my last job (where I was a software team leader) and was wondering why I was so upset and unhappy at work.

I thought lots of things were going wrong (and so did many of those I was leading), but my managers thought the project was doing great. Now I realize my leadership intuition was right on the money! My decision to leave was the correct one -- I had no leaders to support or motivate me; time to move on and find some.

What motivated me to write was a section I just read on "The Power of One" explaining that a key leadership word is "care" (page 126). On my last performance review, I made the following comment about my own job satisfaction:

"I care about my job. I care about quality. I care that customers are happy. I care that we do a good job. But if my job satisfaction doesn't improve, then I will stop caring."

During my performance review, my managers didn't care enough to dig into this issue! Here was an employee crying out for help, but their inaction to understand my concerns was flabbergasting. To make matters worse, one of the managers took the concerns and issues that I raised as a personal attack on him and the company. He then went on the offensive and started to attack me in an attempt to 'put me back in my place.' He told me the project will not change the way it is being run, and don't expect everyone to change to suit me! After he ranted at me for a few minutes, I calmly looked him squarely in the eye and told him I would no longer commit to his project. His chin dropped. I smiled.

I had realized at that instant he was no longer the leader that I could follow. He was the root cause of my low job satisfaction. Too bad for them, as I was considered one of the better team leads and despite my low job satisfaction rating (3 out of 10), I still had a strong review from my peers. So they lost a good employee that day - but some other company out there will gain one! One that knows the value of leadership.

Grant Edwards, Delta, BC

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How Team Building Exercises Can Be Harmful

I am an ardent reader of your articles. The latest improvement point article on Team Development is indeed good [go to http://www.clemmer.net/excerpts/leaders_harness.shtml to read it]. The only point where I disagree is where you have brushed aside the adventure games as just "fun," nothing more. This is not true.

I would like to point out that these - the games or the wilderness experiences - are the means of educating people on how effective the team work will be. Of course, the teams have to apply what they have learned in their workplace. Nature teaches us best, like the penguin story you narrated.

I am sure that some teams get value from those activities. I am not a fan of these approaches because I have spent so much time with teams who have tried these techniques and not received much value from them. It might be argued that those same teams likely wouldn't get much value from any team development activity because they aren't open to learning or don't diligently apply the lessons that are available for them.

But what most teams really need are practical approaches they can apply to real issues now. Perhaps some of these games and exercises obliquely do that. But many have a high play or entertainment value and a very low relevancy or application value. Participants see only theoretical connections between this make-believe world and their real world issues. The team games or 'experiential learning' I have seen or heard lots about over the years don't get very practical. They can be fun and energizing but if they aren't helping the team address real-time problems and opportunities, they ultimately frustrate participants. They can raise dissatisfaction and decrease teamwork because team members contrast the theories and team ideals they are learning with what they're experiencing every day in the team, and feel an even bigger disconnect.

Living in the Leadership Gray Zone

Recently my name was a part of the typical corporate "talent review." When my boss returned he informed me that I am too black and white and need to work on being grayer. My current position is managing an operation department in banking. I was promoted from a front-line employee to manager. I have been in the work force for many years and I am working on my bachelor's in business finance.

How do you feel about gray versus black and white? Should I really focus on changing my ways and becoming grayer? Would you have any recommendations for a person to become less black and white?



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It sounds like your boss is suggesting that you need to get more comfortable with paradox and ambiguity. This has been a favorite theme of mine since I began studying and writing about leadership over twenty years ago.

Your inquiry is well timed. Recently our son, Chris, was home from university to celebrate his 22nd birthday. During the weekend, he and I had a conversation about how much more complex, nuanced, and interesting the world has become for him than when he was a teenager. During his teenage years the world, and most of the people he encountered in it, could be easily divided into right and wrong, stupid and smart, good and bad, cool and not cool, and so on. With his interest in politics we had many ideological debates about the social and political issues of the day. He had strong beliefs and clear answers for just about every situation. I often argued both sides of an issue – even the side I didn't believe in – to try to help him understand that it wasn't that black and white. Since he was studying politics in high school and "political science" was his first year major in university, he failed to see the humor in me calling "political science" an oxymoron. Now in his third year, he's had to write papers arguing both sides of issues or even presenting the opposite side of an issue to his own belief. He's becoming more tolerant and understanding of many social and political issues today. In other words, he's growing up.

There are clearly times when we need to take a stand and draw a firm line between what we see as right and wrong or moral and immoral. Continually hiding behind ambiguity and waffling on our position is a sign of weakness and a real lack of leadership. But I have also long believed that the capacity to live in the gray zone between black and white is a sign of maturity. A great deal of destruction and disaster in organizations, relationships, families, religions, and throughout societies comes from the intolerance and inflexibility of immature "leaders" who believe there are clear right and wrong answers to just about every situation. Their harsh and judgmental position usually comes from a base of fear. Mature leaders can live with not having clear answers or letting situations unfold. They seek to understand with a more accepting position that comes from a base of love.

There are dozens of my articles on our web site (www.clemmer.net) that provide perspectives and examples of leadership, team, and organizational paradoxes. Click on the "Search" button second from the bottom on the left navigation bar of our web site and enter the word "paradox" if you'd like a list of those articles and columns that you can skim through or read.

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Thoughts That Make You Go Hmmm...on Paradox and Ambiguity

"Now, more than ever, management is a balancing act – the juggling of contradictions to try to get the best of attractive but opposing alternatives. Order is a temporary illusion, strategy a moving target. Leaders cannot impose authority on a world of constant motion; they can only hope to steer some of that action toward productive ends."

- Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *author and Harvard Business School professor*

"True genius resides in the capacity for evaluation of uncertain, hazardous, and conflicting information."

- Winston Churchill, *British Statesman and Prime Minister*

"The quest for certainty blocks the search for meaning. Uncertainty is the very condition to impel man to unfold their powers."

- Erich Fromm, *author, psychoanalyst, and social philosopher*

"An old Hasidic story says we should wear a coat with two pockets in order to receive God's message. In one pocket, the message is: 'You are nothing but one of billions of grains of sand in the universe.' In the other, the message is: 'I made the universe just for you.' Sufi masters offer a corollary: 'Wisdom tells me I am nothing; love tells me I am everything. Between the two, my life flows.'"

- Mark Albion, *author*

Re-Discovering the Management – Leadership Balance

Participants in my sessions or readers of my books know that I build all my personal, team, and organization effectiveness work on the foundation of balancing management and leadership. I have developed various charts, diagrams, and analogies over the years to sharpen the distinctions and interdependencies of these two vital areas. You can review my attempts to outline the management-leadership balance at http://www.clemmer.net/excerpts/m_leadership.shtml. Tom's succinct e-mail message provides a great reminder from his experiences.

It's been some time since I sat in on one of your courses. I've been in a major change management position for the past couple of years. With the help of some very good people we are taking a 'Mom and Pop shop' to the next level. It's been very hard changing the mindset of the 'old regime' but we have finally turned the corner. I've self-discovered the difference between leadership and management. You lead people and manage a process. One is flesh and blood, the other tends to be bits and bytes and paper.

Tom McBride, Calgary, AB

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Customers Make "Clever" Companies Pay for Deceptions*Jim,**I enjoy your material, perhaps because one of my sons, Grant, is also a fan.**Perhaps that is why the letter from a Toronto subscriber about her own dad rang a bell [to read the story go to <http://www.clemmer.net/news/apr2005.html#courage>]. It also reminded me of a situation that arose while I was CEO of Swift's in Canada.**One of the top guys in the US was from a consumer products company, and he liked to tell anyone who would listen how smart he was by instigating a small increase in the diameter of the hole out of the toothpaste tube, thus increasing usage because of the millions of consumers squeezing more than they realized (or needed) every brushing.**It seemed to me that this was bone-headed, as well as deceitful. One thing I learned during the heyday of consumerist activism was that the average grocery shopper needed the protection of the activists about as much as Rocky Marciano needed protection. These sweet and lovely shoppers put more companies out of business in an average year than Elliot Spitzer can in a dozen. So beware of customers— assume that they are a whole lot smarter as buyers than I am as a seller!***John F. Heggie, Newmarket, ON****The Big Question: What's it all About?***Hi Jim,**I really appreciated your April newsletter, it's my first and I found the discussions very thought-provoking.**The courageous leadership issue touched on some things I've been thinking about given all the current discussions out there regarding ethics in business. For example, there was a recent discussion in the Harvard Business School newsletter 'Working Knowledge' about whether or not it would help reduce ethical violations like we saw with Enron and WorldCom (and now AIG) if 'business managers' were required to be professionally licensed the way that doctors and lawyers are. I personally don't think that would do much good (look at all the ethical violations from those two groups) but it was an interesting debate.*

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One of the angles I've been thinking about is values - it seems logical to me that given the values of corporate-level capitalism, such as privileging short-term return and winning the game over other considerations, that of course we would wind up with these kinds of leaders. Now I'm not a communist or anything, and perhaps the American brand of corporate capitalism is worse than elsewhere, but these kinds of violations seem to me the logical behavioral consequences of such values.

No one is ever happy with mere profitability, it has to be MORE profit than last quarter or the shareholders aren't happy. Surely I am not the only one who sees what this kind of thinking naturally leads to? Surely "more" is not infinite? And if you can't deliver "more," might as well cash in and make sure your own bottom is covered, right? People like to apply Darwin's "survival of the fittest" to the business world and society in general. But what about the theories of symbiosis and cooperation as driving evolutionary and cultural forces? It seems to me that you guys in Canada have a much better grasp of this than we do! But then again I live in the state that other people in my country like to call "The Socialist Republic of California."

Forgive the politics, but it's been on my mind, and after reading your newsletter I just wanted to share my thoughts. Thanks.

Lorri Leon, California Human Resource Management Institute, A Division of Northern California Human Resources Association

Hi Lorri,

You raise very good points. I don't know if Canadians have a better grasp of these issues than Americans. My work in your country, Canada, and Europe shows me that many organizations and the leaders within them are struggling with the "what's it all about" questions that you raise.

The ethics issues and high profile disasters like Enron and WorldCom are causing us all to shake off a bit of lethargy and ask ourselves what's really important. If we add the environment, international security, wealth disparities, pandemics, and other big issues like those to the discussion, we start getting deep into the spiritual realm of purpose, meaning, and our obligations and connections to each other.

Jim

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Hi Jim,

It's good to know that I'm not alone in some of these thoughts. I am encouraged that in your experience some people in the business world are taking these questions seriously. I hope so, because I genuinely fear the long-term consequences of not doing so. I am not religious, but I am spiritual, and I think everything we do and are connects to that spiritual realm you mention. It is my hope that the more people come to understand this, the more things will change. You are welcome to include this in a future newsletter, and thanks for the great discussions!

Lorri

You can read more of my thoughts on values and purpose at http://www.clemmer.net/excerpts/t_o_vision.shtml or spirit and meaning at <http://www.clemmer.net/excerpts/spirit.shtml>. I would love to get your views on this important discussion. Please e-mail me at Jim.Clemmer@Clemmer.net. Nobody is ever identified in *The Leader Letter* without their permission.

Top Improvement Points from April

Of the short quotes with links to full articles that were e-mailed out as complimentary **Improvement Points** (you can find these at <http://www.clemmer.net/improvement.shtml>) last month, the most popular with subscribers were:

"Where there's a will there's a way. A leader who really values the people in his or her organization will be constantly showing it through some formal programs and lots of informal gestures."

- from *Ways to Show Meaningful Appreciation*
www.clemmer.net/excerpts/ways_show.shtml

"Studies show that in many organizations a majority of frontline people are afraid to speak up. That's why leaders spend huge amounts of time with people throughout their organization. They're busy listening at breakfasts, lunches, barbecues, and town hall meetings. They're conducting surveys, participating in cafeteria conversations, working together with people on the frontlines, and attending celebration events."

- from *Bridging We-They Gaps*
www.clemmer.net/excerpts/bridging_gaps.shtml



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"If no one receives what a manager transmits, does that communication exist? The answer depends upon a definition – this time, of the term "communication." If the receiver does not listen to the sender and respond in some way, then, as in the example above, there is no communication. There is only noise."

- from *Speaking Of Success: Informing versus Communicating*
www.clemmer.net/excerpts/speaking_success.shtml

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

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

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