



## Practical Leadership:

Inspiring *Action*, Achieving Results

### Jim Clemmer's Leader Letter

October 2006, Issue 43

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#### Pathways to Personal Learning

The August issue of *The Leader Letter* featured articles and reader input on "Too Busy to Learn" (read the August issue at <http://www.clemmer.net/news/1/aug2006.html>). In September, this discussion continued. I also responded to a reader by outlining "My Personal Learning Habits" (read the September issue at <http://www.clemmer.net/news/1/sep2006.html>).

Following, are experiences and perspectives shared by three readers. I am in strong agreement and fully supportive of Rick's practical 'how-to' advice.

*"Hi Jim,*

*"Your e-newsletter continues to impress me with both its design and content. I especially appreciate your practical and inclusive approach, like the invitation to offer ideas and comments.*

*"The current thread about continuing learning is one that strikes a chord for me. For several years, I have been leading an MBA course in Management Skills Development and I have been able to witness the significant career and life changes accomplished by many who have taken this course. Based on this experience, I would offer a few rules of thumb for effective learning:*

1. *"Be clear about where you want to be, within a reasonable time frame. For my course, I ask people to look three to five years out and to be as specific as possible about the position or role they see themselves in at that time. Beyond defining a career goal, people also need to validate it through conversations with mentors, current or potential managers, human resource professionals and others. This ensures that the goal is grounded in reality and represents an informed choice rather than a pipe dream.*
2. *"With a clear sense of direction, the next step is to get a crisp, clear picture of where you are today. The tools for this are many, including multi-source feedback, self assessment instruments, formal appraisals, and updated resumes. These inputs will be used to produce an inventory of strengths and developmental challenges, derived from diverse sources.*

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3. *"The next steps in the learning process help the individual choose and focus on those critical few skills that will allow noticeable progress. I suggest selecting two strengths to sustain and two challenges to develop. For me, it is vitally important to maintain focus on strengths while addressing one or two areas that require attention. This is more rewarding, since changing less effective behaviors can be difficult. And to the surprise of many, people often report improvement in both strengths and challenges.*
4. *"Once the focus areas are decided, a structure for fulfillment is needed to ensure success. That means applying the same kind of discipline and rigor to sustaining and developing skills as you would to creating a new marketing plan or upgrading a production process. So, there is a need to create plans, identify measures for tracking progress, set specific targets to be achieved, and design feedback loops to ensure things go as intended.*

*"What never ceases to amaze me is the creativity and power that people bring to such a simple approach. For example, people employ a wide range of tracking tools, such as learning journals, action logs, mini-360 surveys, physical measures (e.g. weight, heart rate), job observations (watch me, give me feedback) and more. The combination of structure (clear goals and project framework) and freedom (choose the areas that are meaningful to you, select your own measures and targets and feedback mechanisms) seems to work well for a wide range of individuals and various learning styles.*

*"Of course, context is important and so it is important to acknowledge that this work is completed within a graduate degree course; a paper based on the developmental projects does contribute to the final grade. In spite of this, feedback - often received months or even years after the final marks have been recorded - suggests that this continuing learning approach is valuable and effective. What the course context does, is get people's attention and legitimize paying attention to themselves and their career development. Once that happens and people see the results that are produced, they are much more likely to take care of their ongoing learning.*

*"And for me, I find the opportunity to engage with such talented and committed groups of learners to be the greatest gift for me and my own learning.*

*"Keep up the good work,"*

**- Rick Fullerton, PhD, Principal, Fullerton Consulting, Fletcher's Lake, NS, Canada**

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*"Working at the University of Florida has great perks. I try never to eat lunch alone, inviting colleagues, graduate students, and faculty to go out or brown bag whenever I can. Casual conversations are very important to my learning and retention and are a great way for me to discover what others are reading/researching/teaching. I also audit courses (when I have time) and have been a teaching assistant for the College of Engineering course, Advanced Quality Management & Engineering for Business Processes. Finally, my children are required to read for 60 minutes a day, so we make it a family affair. I read a minimum of the hour with the kids, sometimes fiction, but more often non-fiction. It's important for the kids to see you 'study' for your job and continually learn.*

*"Great e-zine. I enjoy it a great deal."*

**- Allan Preston, Coordinator, PPD Quality Office, University of Florida**

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*"I found your article very informative and your approach practical. It is one that is easy to fit learning into, as it is the best use of a precious commodity...time. My two regular ways to learn are reading and listening.*

- 1. "Reading.....I love to read all types of self-help books, on a variety of topics.*
- 2. "Listening.....I think that this is my first and most important way of continuously learning. Listening seems to be becoming a lost art or skill. Listening to not only hear, but to understand is critical for a variety of reasons, but most critically to ensure a mutually successful relationship and partnership and to grow as an individual. If we can agree that we can learn from everyone and really listen to what each person says, then it is truly amazing how much we can learn in a given day. It may be the answer to a critical issue that we are challenged with, or it may be as simple as pointing out a solution to a challenge that we know we don't want to exercise. None the less, we learn in both situations.*

*"It is surprising how you can actually end up applying information gained, that you might have originally thought never applied to you."*

**- Joanne Vallat, Regina, SK, Canada**

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**How Can E-Learning Be More Effective?**

*"One of the challenges I'm facing is 'how can I get people to continuously learn?' I always get the response 'I'm too busy to learn' or 'I have some really important deadlines to meet'.*

*"Although we have thousands of e-Learning courses for team members to take, people just aren't taking it or don't find it effective. Would you be able to share some thoughts on how to make e-Learning effective?"*

**- New Leader Letter Reader**

Dear Reader,

E-learning can work very well for teaching technical skills. It's not as effective for leadership or management skill development. I believe that's why implementation has fallen well short of the expectations that promoters of these approaches set for us when they first came into being. I don't have enough experience with e-learning to share any thoughts on how to make it more effective. I will ask readers of *The Leader Letter* for input.

Jim

Please send to me your experiences with how to make e-learning more effective, at [Jim.Clemmer@Clemmer.net](mailto:Jim.Clemmer@Clemmer.net).

**Developing Young Leaders**

As I discussed e-learning with the reader in the above section, she moved our learning and development conversation to the following discussion:

*"I just read August's section "[Too Busy to Learn](#)" - that's how I started to subscribe to The Leader Letter. I would be interested in hearing more about "Developing Young Leaders to be Leaders". I haven't found many articles out there on how to be a successful young leader.*

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*"I graduated from university 2 years ago and joined our company's leadership development program. The program's goal is to develop future leaders. I joined the program because of my interest in leadership development and the company culture. The program was designed to be 2 - 3 years long, but 'many' of us exited the program 12 - 18 months in. Some say it's due to the lack of leadership development - attending seminars/training and reading books on leadership. Some say there isn't much promise in getting a senior role after you are done the program. Although we do get a lot of challenging assignments and receive support through one-on-one meetings with our manager/ director, something is still missing. Have you done any research on organization's leadership development or management trainee programs? Would love to hear your thoughts on it!"*

I replied that her question on leadership development programs is huge. It really encompasses the entire field of succession planning, and training and development within an organization. Practices vary a great deal from one organization to the next. The longer term good news for someone at her career stage, is that many baby boomers will be retiring in the next five to ten years and opportunities will be opening up. The bad news is that opportunities will likely be tighter until then.

Anne Fisher published a very good story in the August 21, 2006 of *Fortune* magazine entitled "Are You Stuck in Middle Management Hell?" The article discussed how a generation of workers is having trouble getting ahead because aging boomers above them won't budge. Anne went on to outline steps on how to "break the gray ceiling."

Please e-mail me at [Jim.Clemmer@Clemmer.net](mailto:Jim.Clemmer@Clemmer.net) with any personal experiences or advice to address developing young leaders.

**Working *in* the Team versus Working *on* the Team**

A growing problem we see with many management teams in less than outstanding organizations, is they don't feel they can afford to take time out from hectic daily operations to step back, look at their effectiveness, and refocus their work. In other words, they have no time to learn.

About one month after finishing a very successful and energizing offsite planning retreat with one of our Clients, I got an e-mail suggesting they postpone the follow-up session a few months so they could "resolve more immediate problems." Here's my reply:

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*"I would strongly advise you to re-read the notes from our May retreat and continue with your July follow-through meeting. Many of the change/improvements you identified in May and especially your four Strategic Imperatives (top goals/objectives) are highly dependent upon staying in touch with each other. Management Team Development (your second Strategic Imperative) and many of the trust, communication, and morale issues that surfaced in the pre-May surveys – and at the retreat itself – call out for much more face-to-face meeting time. The gap between head office/senior management and the branches needs to be closed very quickly and branch managers need to collectively feel like they are key members of the management team (they all pushed hard for being included in more of your meetings and having more sessions like the one in May). Otherwise, your two critical initiatives – branding and process management – will fall into the classic and often fatal trap of great concepts/ideas that aren't well executed at the local level. It's stating the obvious – but I think so critical to where you're at right now – that great strategies, powerful branding, and technologies/processes that aren't well executed (and highly trusted or believed in) at the local level, will ultimately do you more harm than good.*

*"I'd urge you not to let the urgent crowd out the important. The reason many companies get on a perpetual and ever faster spinning trend mill of operational issues, is they don't step back often enough to check in with each other. They don't balance working in the business with working on the business. Don't wait until you think you've got the issues under control to get together. Develop regular meetings (I'd recommend once per month with your management team) and good meeting processes to build stronger strategic and implementation discipline in your key head office and field managers.*

*"XYZ is in a tough place right now. You're trying to get the business back on track while taking your culture, leadership, processes, and strategic skills to the higher level you need to truly live your brand. Raising customer and employee expectations around your new marketing campaign will really hurt you if you don't deliver on those expectations. You have a great base of loyal employees – a real asset. But they are very clearly reaching the limits of their patience and understanding. If you don't keep them tightly in the communications and decision making loop while strengthening your follow-through discipline (and head office accountability to the branches), you could easily raise the 'snicker factor' and cause a lethal giving up reaction. "*

This organization did proceed with their follow-through meeting and the implementation process. It's still too early to say whether they will make the big jump from good to great, because they have let the vicious circle of 'busyness' drag the business down to dangerous levels. Don't let this happen to you and your team! Don't get too busy to learn!



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#### **Thoughts That Make You Go Hmmm...on Not Minding Our Own Busyness**

**"People who get little done often work a great deal harder."**

- Unknown

**"Over the past five years, we have studied hundreds of managers as they have gone about their daily work in a variety of settings...**

**"...a highly fragmented day is also a very lazy day. It can seem easier to fight fires than to set priorities and stick to them. The truth is that managers who carefully set boundaries and priorities achieve far more than busy ones do.**

**"To beat the busy habit, managers must overcome the psychological desire to be indispensable. Because their work is interactive and interdependent, most managers thrive on their sense of importance to others. When they are not worrying about meeting their superiors' (or their clients') expectations, they fret about their direct reports, often falling victim to the popular fallacy that good bosses always make themselves available.**

**"At first, managers—particularly novices—seem to thrive on all this clamoring for their time; the busier they are, the more valuable they feel."**

- "Reclaim Your Job" Sumantra Ghoshal and Heike Bruch, *Harvard Business Review*

**"There is more to life than increasing its speed."**

- Mahatma Gandhi

**"Nowadays, people don't ask you how you are, they say, 'Are you busy?,' meaning, 'Are you well?' If someone actually does ask you how you are, the most cheerful answer, of course, is a robust 'Busy!' to which the person will reply, 'Good!' 'Busy' used to be a negative sort of word. It meant having no time for yourself, no leisure. 'No, I can't come out this weekend, I'm too busy.' 'Sorry about that, you poor stiff.'**

**"Now, though, busyness is bullish. Conspicuous industriousness is the rule."**

- Richard Stengel, Managing Editor, *Time* magazine

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"A little fable about a farmer with a wagon full of apples helps illustrate the point. The farmer stopped a man on the side of the road and asked how far it was to the market. The man responded, 'It is an hour if you go slow.' He continued, 'If you go fast, it will take you all day.' There was a bump in the road, and if the farmer went too fast he would hit it, all his apples would fall out, and he'd have to spend the day picking up the fruit. The farmer would then be in all the greater hurry to get to the market.

"The pressure to go fast ends up feeding on itself, perpetuating an internally generated and self-destructive, ever-increasing need for speed. Overstretched workers become more overstretched; managers focused on crisis become all the more so."

- "Speed Trap" sidebar in the article "Is Silence Killing Your Company?" *Harvard Business Review*

"What seems to be happening with this great speed-up is that we try something and if it doesn't work, we don't reflect on it, we just try something else, something else, etc. We haven't realized that our experience is the best teacher for how to succeed at achieving the outcome. We are living in a time of accelerating stupidity."

- Margaret Wheatley, president of The Berkana Institute and leadership research/author

**Favorite September *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.



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Here are my personal three choices of the Improvement Points we sent out in September.

***"Reflecting on our progress is as rare as a proud man asking for directions. But to be more effective, we need to step back, take time out, and assess our direction. It will help us grow and keep up with change."***

- from Jim Clemmer's article, "Growing With Change"

Read the full article now!

[http://www.clemmer.net/excerpts/embracing\\_change.shtml](http://www.clemmer.net/excerpts/embracing_change.shtml)

***"In most organizations — if it's given at all — feedback is a distorted jumble of mixed messages and past results. It's almost impossible to draw connections between today's results and yesterday's behavior or today's behavior and tomorrow's results."***

- from Jim Clemmer's article, "Measurement and Feedback are Vital to Improvement"

Read the full article now!

[http://www.clemmer.net/excerpts/measurement\\_feedback.shtml](http://www.clemmer.net/excerpts/measurement_feedback.shtml)

***"In many organizations, what's often called leadership is really management. Activities such as planning, analysis, problem solving, strategy, process improvement, goal setting, measurement, and such are critical. And they call for good intellectual thinking. But for all their importance, they don't add up to leadership."***

- from Jim Clemmer's article, "Power of Passion"

Read the full article now!

[http://www.clemmer.net/excerpts/power\\_passion.shtml](http://www.clemmer.net/excerpts/power_passion.shtml)

## Feedback and Follow-Up

*"Hi Jim,*

*"Greece might be far from Canada, but...your words and thoughts are just a finger tip away. I truly thank you for your newsletter, it is an excellent self-improvement tool for me and I always look forward to receiving it.*

*"Be well and God bless you!"*

- **Alex Margonis, General Director, LAKITIRA SA, Athens, Greece**



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Hi Alex,

Thanks very much for your supportive feedback! I am delighted to hear that you find The Leader Letter so useful. Of course, my books are even better! :) Do you mind if I publish your comments in *The Leader Letter*?

I was close to your country last week when I traveled to Doha, Qatar to work with a Client. There truly is quite a distance between your part of the world and Canada!

Jim

*"Hi Jim,*

*"No, I don't mind publishing my comments. You are right about your books! Soon I plan to make the purchase (I have my yearly budget on books). However, your Improvement Points that I look forward to receiving every week, is like sweets to a child who never gets enough of it – especially if it's FREE!*

*"Take care,*

*"Alex"*

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).

**Keep learning, laughing, loving, and leading -- living life just for the L of it!**

**Jim**

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