

THE LEADER LETTER

STRONGER PEOPLE. STRONGER ORGANIZATIONS.

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Past Issues

Practical Leadership Blog

In this issue...

July 2014, Issue 136

[Do You Have What it Takes to Be a Good Coach?](#)

[Are You Falling Into These Common Coaching Traps?](#)

[How Am I Doing? Asking for Coaching Feedback](#)

[Do You Agree on What Customer Service or Quality Is?](#)

[Are You Using Your Customer's Yardstick?](#)

[Canadian and American Independence: Busting Barriers](#)

[Book Review: "What We Can Change and What We Can't" By Martin Seligman](#)

[Thoughts That Make You Go Hmm on... What You Can Change...And What You Can't](#)

[Tweet Reading: Recommended Online Resources](#)

[Feedback and Follow-Up](#)

JULY 2014, ISSUE 136

There's an old story about a man walking into a drugstore to use the pay phone: "Hello, ABC Company, sometime ago you had an opening for an operations manager. Is the position still available?" After a slight pause, he continued: "Oh, you have. Six months ago, huh? How's he working out?" A somewhat longer pause. "I see. Well, thank you. 'Bye." The druggist, having overheard the conversation said in sympathy; "I am sorry you couldn't go after that job." The man, surprised, turned and said; "Oh, I'm not looking for a job. That was my own organization. I was calling to see how I was doing!!"



We all want to know where we stand. Decades of research shows that we want recognition for our skills and accomplishments, feedback that tells us when we have accomplished something that someone else values, some input to the decisions that affect our work, and the chance to grow and develop. One of the outstanding characteristics of an effective coach is the frequency and quality of the feedback he or she provides to reinforce, support, and help others continue to improve. Feedback is an absolutely critical issue all across the organization. Organization improvement can't happen without it. Operating without feedback is like blindly shooting at targets and never seeing or being told whether you hit the bull's eye or missed altogether. You can't improve when you don't know how you're doing.

Organizations with effective feedback loops have cultures that view continuous feedback as continuous learning opportunities. And the cultural feedback patterns are set by management. If most teams and their members are being well coached, they will come to view feedback as a positive and much needed step in the continuous improvement process.

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Coaching traps, research, assessment, and asking for feedback are featured in this issue. And the quality of coaching along with a coaching culture determines the levels of customer service -- another key topic in this issue. Finally, we look at the need to break free of learned helplessness and The Pike Syndrome. The burgeoning practice of Cognitive Psychology provides powerful evidence for just what we can change or break free from and what we can't.

Here's to busting self-imposed barriers and using coaching and feedback skills to liberate and develop others.

DO YOU HAVE WHAT IT TAKES TO BE A GOOD COACH?

Ask 100 people if they have good common sense and more than 95% will tell you they do. Similarly, if you ask 100 managers if they are good coaches the number may be lower than 95%, but not by much. The managers we talk to assume that if they are a good manager, being a good coach is like your shadow on a sunny day. It just naturally follows.

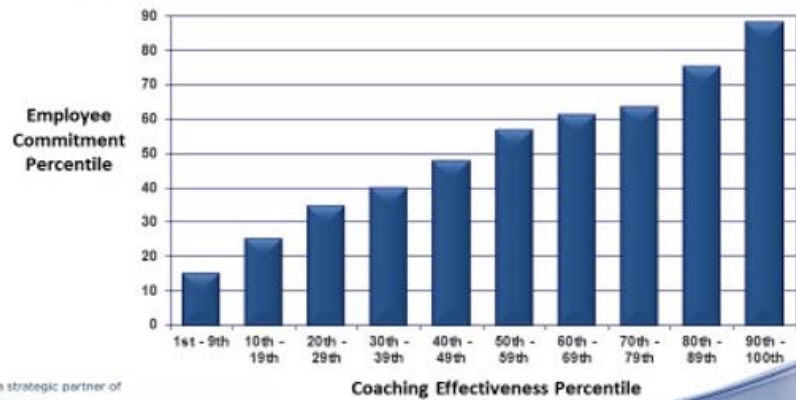


Today, more and more top executives expect their managers to coach their subordinates. One newly appointed CEO of one of America's largest banks announced that he expected managers in that company to spend more than one-half of their time coaching subordinates.

Why? The empirical evidence is clear. Effective coaching makes a huge difference in employee commitment and engagement, productivity, retention, customer relationships, and how the upper levels of leadership are perceived.

Coaching Effectiveness and Employee Engagement/Commitment

Employees whose managers are more effective at coaching express dramatically more satisfaction and commitment



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In their *Harvard Business Review* blog "[Finding the Right Balance Between Coaching and Managing](#)", Jack Zenger and Joe Folkman report on a few key attributes they're now measuring to predict who make the most effective coaches. The article provides a link to [take a coaching evaluation](#) to see how you compare to outstanding coaches.

Last month Jack and Joe provided a free webinar on how to become a better coach. [Click here to view it](#). When you register for the webinar you will also have the opportunity to participate in our complimentary Coaching Attributes and Perspectives Assessment as well. This self-assessment helps you see how you compare to the scores of outstanding business coaches. It measures:

- how strong your collaboration and directive skills are;
- how prone you are to giving advice;
- how effective you are at enabling other people to discover answers for themselves;
- how apt you are to exert your expertise and treat everyone as equals.

We hope you have the good coaching sense to participate!

ARE YOU FALLING INTO THESE COMMON COACHING TRAPS?

In an organizational survey at a large telecom company, managers were asked to rate how well they coached the people reporting to them. They scored themselves high. The people reporting to those managers were asked to rate the coaching they received. They scored their managers very low.



A big part of the problem is around the definition of coaching. Many managers call training (skill development or giving information) and mentoring (providing advice or sharing experience/wisdom) coaching. Many also confuse daily updates, task assignments, or problem solving for coaching.

I reviewed Jack Zenger and Kathleen Stinnett's outstanding book, [*The Extraordinary Coach: How the Best Leaders Help Others Grow*](#), years before The CLEMMER Group became Zenger Folkman's partner. It's by far the best book on coaching available today. In the book and our [*Extraordinary Coach*](#) workshops we see these common coaching traps ensnaring many managers:

- Lack of preparation – one big reason commercial aviation has an incredible safety record is because pilots don't just strap themselves in and take off.
- Not clarifying what the coachee wants from the conversation – this determines whether it's an adult to adult collaborative conversation and who's going to own the action plan.
- Too much air time -- more than 25% of the talking -- we use the acronym WAIT -- Why Am I Talking as a reminder for the coach to ask powerful questions to expand the conversation.
- Offering advice way too early in the conversation – training or mentoring is about giving advice. Coaching is about drawing out insights and actions from the coachee.
- Not exploring multiple alternatives – research shows that when conversations push for at least three options much higher quality solutions emerge.
- Failing to determine commitment to change – this leads directly to the manager trap "how's my solution working for you."

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HOW AM I DOING? ASKING FOR COACHING FEEDBACK

Surveys show that when we're asked to rate our own driving skills, over 75% of us score ourselves as above average. Similar self-assessment distortions show up when managers are asked to rate their own coaching effectiveness.

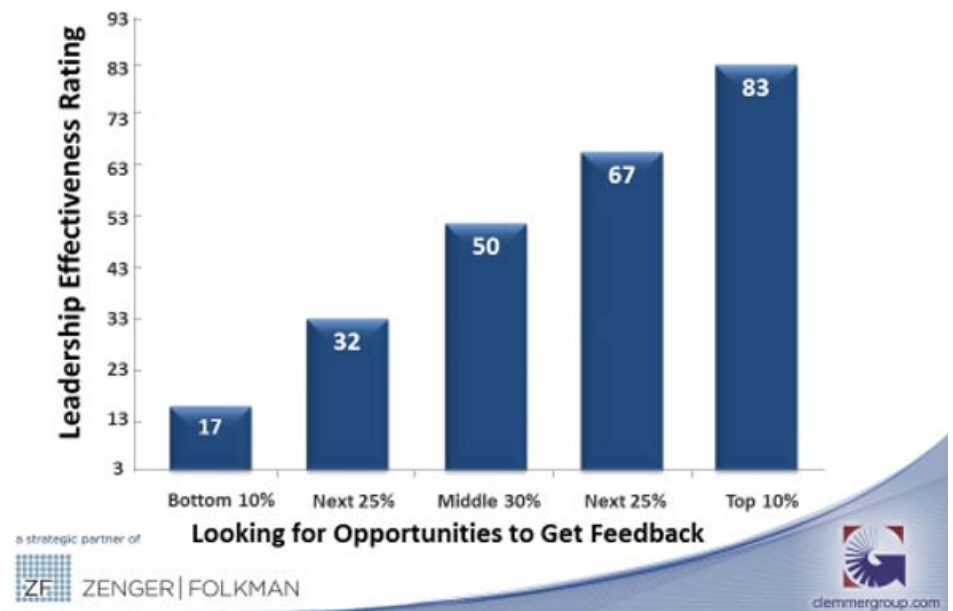


In researching and developing [The Extraordinary Coach](#) development system, Zenger Folkman identified four powerful reasons for asking coachees for their feedback on the coach's effectiveness:

1. Asking for input significantly changes the nature of the relationship from parent-child to adults talking with each other.
2. Being asked for input changes the coachee's feelings of being in control and having power.
3. The feedback changes the coach's behavior.
4. Being asked for input changes the coachee's attitude toward and ratings of the coach's effectiveness.

That last point on perceptions of the coach or leader's effectiveness is clearly illustrated in this data from our data base of 50,000 leaders being assessed by over 500,000 raters:

Looking for Feedback and Leadership Effectiveness



You can start your coaching effectiveness feedback with our [Coaching Attributes and Perspectives Assessment](#).

Happy motoring and good coaching!

DO YOU AGREE ON WHAT CUSTOMER SERVICE OR QUALITY IS?

Customer service and quality is one of today's most talked about and least understood concepts. Service/quality is a very slippery concept. It's exasperatingly difficult to define and a source of great confusion to many managers. There's a wide range of differences in premises, concepts, and even in the meanings of key words.



Definitions of "service/quality" depend heavily on the mind-set of servers/producers, their support groups, management, and especially on the culture of the organization. In some organizations, just showing up for work every day, in never mind how snarly a mood, is considered a good performance. A receptionist under siege on the switchboard might consider connecting the caller to the right department, regardless of how long they've been holding, as good service/quality.

High sales and marketing costs are an organization's tax for low levels of service and quality. As Ted Levitt, former professor at Harvard Business School and author of the classic book, *The Marketing Imagination*, points out *"The organization must learn to think of itself not as producing goods and services but buying customers, as doing those things that will make people want to do business with it."* Where's the customer's view in your definition of service/quality? Do you know (with facts and data) what your key internal partners and/or external customers expect from your team/organization? Is their definition of service/quality your starting point?

Organizations need a clear, well understood, consistent -- and customer-centered -- agreement on what service/quality means and how to deliver it. If people throughout your organization can't consistently define service/quality, how can you measure it? And if you can't measure it, how can you achieve it? Most managers and team members want to improve service/quality, but they are not all reading the same road map. But then again, they're not even all heading to the same place. How about you and your team?

Further Reading:

- Click [Customer Service blog posts](#) for further blogs and a series on our Three Rings of Perceived Value model defining service/quality from the outside in.
- [Firing on All Cylinders: The Service/Quality System for High-Powered Corporate Performance](#)

ARE YOU USING YOUR CUSTOMER'S YARDSTICK?

It's all about perception. Eons ago the ancient Greek Philosopher, Epictetus, mused *"What concerns me is not the way things are, but rather the way people think things are."* We so easily mouth the words "perception is reality." But do we seek out and work from our customers' reality? Or do we tend to dismiss key internal partner or external customer expectations as "unrealistic." Or "that's not reality, that's just their perception."



In high service/quality organizations there's little doubt or debate. Service/quality is defined by the customer. Period.

A major driver of the enduring service/quality leadership and success of the Four Seasons international hotel chain has been their definition of service/quality through the eyes of the customers they serve. One of their senior executives explains, *"Customers don't buy a product, they buy what the product does for them. Quality in product or service is not what we think it is. It's what our customers perceive it is -- and what they need and want. If we don't give customers what they expect, they'll perceive our service as poor. If we give them what they expect they'll perceive it as good. If we give them more than they expect they'll perceive it as excellent. Perception is largely a matter of expectation."*

All too often we've found that the features, attributes, or service/quality expectations of the customer are out of sync with what the organization considers to be important and is focused upon delivering. As customers, we have all dealt with organizations that have done an outstanding job delivering a service or product feature we could care less about. So as the salesperson prattles on about that "wonderful" feature, or the company heavily promotes some "unique" service, we're being driven crazy by the lack of attention to some other feature or service that the company obviously considers trivial or much less important.

One reason for customer and organization perceptions of value to be out of sync is that customer expectations are changing so quickly today. Teams/organizations not tuned into their customers often miss these shifts -- until someone else bursts onto the scene with more customer-responsive products or services. We must continuously improve and change our service/quality levels in step with those we serve or we risk being changed.

CANADIAN AND AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE: BUSTING BARRIERS

This month we celebrated Canada Day (July 1) and American Independence Day (July 4). Both are national examples of breaking free from restrictive and colonial powers. In some ways our countries overcame learned helplessness and broke through The Pike Syndrome.



Since the mid-sixties, there have been a large number of experiments with animals and people revealing that helplessness can be a conditioned or learned response. An early experiment with learned helplessness was demonstrated with rats. When they were put directly in ice water, they could swim around for forty to sixty hours. But if the rats were held until they stopped struggling and then placed into the ice water, they gave up immediately and drowned.

In another case, scientists put a pike in a large aquarium with smaller fish that it feeds upon. However, the pike was separated from its tasty meals by a layer of glass. At first, the pike continuously smashed its head against the glass to reach its prey. Eventually it abandoned the painful and futile attempts. It sank to the bottom of the tank and just lay there. At that point, the scientists removed the glass partition. But the pike now ignored the smaller fish, even when they swam right next to it. Eventually, the pike starved to death, despite its meals being right in front of its pointy nose. This behavior came to be known as "The Pike Syndrome."

Many wallowing people, teams, and sometimes entire organizations choose to become victims of The Pike Syndrome. Here are common examples:

Personal Helplessness

- That's just the way I am...
- There's nothing I can do...
- He/she makes me so mad...
- They won't allow it...
- Nobody ever listens to me...
- I am no good at....

Collective Helplessness

- Forget it! We tried that before...
- The collective agreement won't let us...
- Management/staff/head office/customers/operations/sales ... don't listen to us...
- The systems/policies won't let us....
- It's deeply ingrained in our culture...

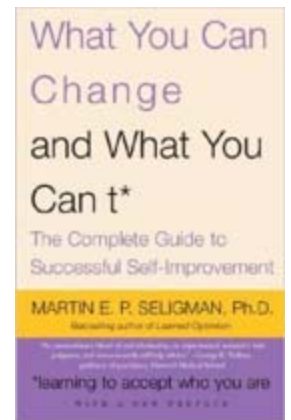
Statements like these are sometimes a legitimate, healthy acceptance of barriers or limitations blocking the way. We may be better off to just drop it and move on to something else. But in most cases, statements like these are just excuses to give up. Generally, these permanent, pervasive, and personal explanations are conditioned responses from past failures or setbacks. Like the pike, we may have smashed our noses against the glass ceiling or wall a few times and stopped trying. When conditions change and those barriers are removed or reduced, pessimistic people and teams still wallow helplessly and give up.

Leadership is an action, not a position. Leaders refuse to be victims or spend much time wallowing in negative situations. Let's use this month's celebrations of the founding of our countries to reflect on our own independence.

BOOK REVIEW: "WHAT WE CAN CHANGE AND WHAT WE CAN'T"

BY MARTIN SELIGMAN

From its beginning in the 1960s, cognitive psychology has developed science/evidence-based approaches that have proven more effective than drugs and other methods in treating people with depression, phobias, obsessions, addictions, eating disorders, and other life-disrupting problems. University of Pennsylvania professor of psychology, Martin Seligman, established a successful track record researching, developing, and documenting treatment techniques.



In the late 1980s, he and his colleagues began exploring how they could build a science-based wellness model to help people who are doing fine elevate their lives to a higher state of well-being. Seligman's 1990 book, *Learned Optimism* (highly recommended), laid the foundation for the now fast-growing field of positive psychology.

A cornerstone of positive psychology leading to higher well-being is building on our strengths. As we get ever deeper into helping our Clients implement [strengths-based leadership development](#) I've been tracing back the foundations of these powerful approaches.

[What You Can Change...And What You Can't](#) was published a few years before Seligman's presidency at the American Psychology Association and his subsequent founding of the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania. Part of the book's subtlety is "learning to accept who you are." This resonates very strongly with authentic leadership and playing to your strengths rather than fixing weaknesses. A key exception is a weakness that's so large people can't see past it to a leader's strengths.

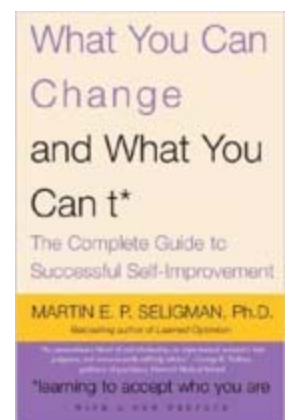
Seligman cites research that half of our personality is genetic. He goes on to conclude, *"the other half of personality comes from what you do and from what happens to you -- and this opens the door for therapy and self-improvement."* That's what this book focuses on.

What You Can Change... covers a very wide swath of personal growth with focusing on changes to emotional life such as anger, depression, anxiety, and stress, as well as changing habits like dieting (which he argues is largely useless) or alcohol, and shedding the skins of childhood. Seligman tells us that research shows *"there are some things about ourselves that can be changed, others that cannot, and some that can be changed only with extreme difficulty."*

I found the book very useful in understanding the origins of the closely aligned new fields of positive psychology and strengths-based leadership development. It's an insightful book for readers interested in the history of these areas or struggling with the topics covered. Otherwise I'd recommend you skip this book and read Seligman's other books, *Learned Optimism*, *Authentic Happiness*, or *Flourish*.

THOUGHTS THAT MAKE YOU GO HMMM ON... WHAT YOU CAN CHANGE...AND WHAT YOU CAN'T

"The knowledge of the difference between what we can change and what we must accept in ourselves is the beginning of real change. With this knowledge, we can use our precious time to make the many rewarding changes that are possible. We can live with less self-reproach and less remorse. We can live with greater confidence. This knowledge is a new understanding of who we are and where we are going."



"Much of successful living consists of learning to make the best of a bad situation."

"The main skill of optimistic thinking is disputing. This is a skill everyone has, but we normally use it only when others accuse us wrongly. If a jealous friend tells you what a lousy executive or bad mother you are, you can marshal evidence against the accusation and spit it back in his or her face."

"Once you acquire the skills of optimism, they stay... Disputing your own negative thoughts, in contrast, is fun. Once you are good at it, it makes you feel better instantly. Once you start doing it well, you want to keep doing it. If you

have a low mood almost every day, you can choose to change the way you think. When you do so, you will find that your life is more worth living."

"Failure, frustration, or sheer boredom can be marvelously productive in thrusting you from one stage to the next. Either way, the upheaval comes. You slowly and subtly stop doing what you used to do, stop being what you used to be, stop salivating to the old stimuli..."

"Childhood events -- even childhood trauma -- and childrearing appear to have only weak effects on adult life. Childhood, contrary to popular belief, does not seem, empirically, to be particularly formative. So, contrary to popular belief, we are not prisoners of our past."

"The other clearest finding of the whole therapeutic endeavor, however, is that change is within our grasp, almost routine, throughout adult life. So even if why we are what we are is a mystery, how to change ourselves is not."

TWEET READING: RECOMMENDED ONLINE RESOURCES

This section summarizes last month's LinkedIn Updates and Twitter Tweets about online articles or blog posts that I've flagged as worth reading. These are usually posted on weekends when I am doing much of my reading for research, learning, or leisure.



My original tweet commenting on the article precedes each title and descriptor from the original source:

The items in each month's issue of *The Leader Letter* are first published in my twice weekly [blog](#) during the previous month.

If you read each blog post (or issue of *The Leader Letter*) as it's published over twelve months you'll have read the equivalent of a leadership book. And you'll pick up a few practical leadership tips that help you use time more strategically and tame your E-Beast!

These steps are well supported by positive psychology and strengths-based leadership development research.

["7 Things Remarkably Happy People Do Often"](#) -- Jeff Haden, Inc.com
<http://www.inc.com>

"Happiness can be a choice -- especially when you take the right actions."

On Father's Day this study provides insight on one of the many ways a father's leadership can influence daughters.

["Dads who do housework have more ambitious daughters"](#) -- Emily Chung
<http://www.cbc.ca>

"When a father performs a greater share of traditionally female household chores such as cooking, cleaning and childcare, his school-aged daughter is less likely to say she wants to pursue a stereotypical female career...."

We're really looking forward to attending this rare and powerful Summit. Hope you can join us and the ZF team.

[Zenger Folkman - Extraordinary Leadership Summit](#)

"Experience Zenger Folkman's groundbreaking, strengths-based Leadership Development Programs and learn from today's top talent development experts -- from some of the world's most successful companies -- during this premier event."

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@clemmergroup.com or connect with me on [LinkedIn](#), [Twitter](#), [FaceBook](#), or my [blog](#)!

May the Force (of strengths) be with you!

Jim





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