

# THE LEADER LETTER

Leading with *STRENGTH*

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## OCTOBER 2013, ISSUE 127

I was recently asked to deliver a presentation next April at a healthcare leadership conference. The conference theme is focused on the courage to bring authenticity to action.

A couple of my books have chapters on authenticity as one of seven core leadership principles.

In light of our work over the past 18 months with Zenger Folkman's strengths-based leadership development system, I was excited to put together a presentation showing the strong links between these two core concepts.

Most leadership development approaches and competency models focus on improving weaker areas. Needs assessments and performance evaluations look for gaps and design training or build improvement plans to fix weaknesses. A key reason for the high failure rate of this typical approach stems from attempts to change a leader's stripes. Much deeper authenticity -- and much higher success -- comes from building a leader's natural strengths.

"Finding my voice" is a phrase frequently used by artists, writers, musicians, and other creative people to describe the often difficult process of learning from other artists' styles and, from these, developing the style that most truly represents you. This applies not just to artists, but to people in just about any walk of life. Each of us learns from what surrounds us -- for example, the expectations and value systems of parents, society, institutions, friends, peers, our boss, or our organization. But then we have to ask ourselves whether these things



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really reflect our own personal values. And if they don't, we need to move beyond them to find what does. This takes a lot of work -- and even more courage.

In *Learning to Lead*, Warren Bennis and Joan Goldsmith wrote, "*To be authentic is literally to be your own author (the words derive from the same Greek root), to discover your native energies and desires, and then find your own way of acting on them. When you have done that, you are not existing simply to live up to an image posed by the culture or by family tradition or some other authority. When you write your own life, you have played the game that was natural for you to play. You have kept covenant with your own promise.*"

A key exercise in [The Extraordinary Leader](#) workshop is choosing which leadership competency to develop further. Finding [The Leadership Sweet Spot: Strengths, Passion, and Organizational Need](#) is a search for authentic leadership. This calls for a leader understanding his or her innate values and passions, having the courage to hear how others perceive their actions through feedback, and melding these with what leadership the team/organization needs.

A continuing focus of many of my blog posts and articles is understanding what strengths others see in me and building those from good to great. In this issue, "Building Leadership Strengths is 2 - 3 Times More Effective Than Fixing Weaknesses," shows the results of a series of pre- and post- studies in which Zenger Folkman examined the impact of leaders choosing to fix weaknesses versus building on existing strengths. 12 to 18 months later the leaders who magnified their existing strengths showed two - three times more improvement in leadership effectiveness than leaders who worked on fixing their weaknesses.

### OCT 8 WEBINAR ON DEVELOPING EXTRAORDINARY LEADERS AND COACHES

We're now planning our fall series of webinars, briefings, and public workshops. You can see what we've got planned in our [Coming Events](#) section.

I am currently pulling together, updating, and condensing our research, workshop materials, and key learning from *The Extraordinary Leader* and *The Extraordinary Coach* development systems into a 60 minute complimentary [webinar](#) on October 8. To provide this executive summary of two powerful new approaches I've boiled down 5 keys to strengths-based leadership development and 6 steps to building a coaching culture with exceptional leaders.

**11 Keys to Building Extraordinary Leaders and Coaches**  
Free Webcast with Jim Clemmer  
Oct 8 - 1PM EDT  
Click to REGISTER NOW!

In this webcast I'll cover:

- The key leadership competencies that cause leaders and their team/organizations to flounder or flourish.
- The dramatic impact and performance differences between "good" and "extraordinary" leaders.
- Why building on natural leadership strengths is up to three times more effective than fixing weaknesses.
- How developing just three existing strengths can catapult a leader's effectiveness from the 34th to the 80th percentile.
- The Companion Competencies, cross-training, and non-linear approaches that move a leader from strong to exceptional.
- How to correct the problem of many 360 feedback tools and coaching.
- How much difference does coaching really make? (Hint: eight times higher levels of employee engagement and commitment is the first point ...).
- The Coaching Skills Gap -- why most managers believe they are providing coaching but most employees disagree.
- Development distinctions between Training, Mentoring, and Coaching.
- Six keys to building a coaching culture with exceptional leaders.

There's no charge for joining us but we do have limited connections. You can get more information and register at [11 Keys to Building Extraordinary Leaders and Coaches](#). I hope to see you online!

## **BUILDING LEADERSHIP STRENGTHS 2 - 3 TIMES MORE EFFECTIVE THAN FIXING WEAKNESSES**

In a chapter entitled "Making Strength Productive" in his 1967 book *The Effective Executive*, the "father of modern management," Peter Drucker, writes, "You cannot build performance on weaknesses. You can build only on strengths. To focus on weakness is not only foolish; it is irresponsible. It is a misuse of a human resource as what a person cannot do is a limitation and nothing else."



It has taken decades for leadership research to catch up to Drucker's leading-edge thinking. Pioneering organizations like Zenger Folkman now have a research body of assessments on over 50,000 leaders by more than 500,000 direct reports, managers, peers, and others who work directly with them. As first documented in their groundbreaking book, [The Extraordinary Leader: Turning Good Managers into Great Leaders](#) and updated last year in [How to Be](#)

[Exceptional: Drive Leadership Success by Magnifying Your Strengths](#)

strengths-based approaches are 2 - 3 times more effective than our traditional focus on weaknesses.

Here's an example of data from one of Zenger Folkman's studies showing the ratings of leadership effectiveness first using one set of 360 feedback assessments to form either weakness or strengths-based personal development plans, followed by a second 360 assessment to gauge each group's level of increased leadership effectiveness:



*\* Fixing weaknesses excludes those fixing fatal flaws*

About a decade ago General Mills was one of the early pioneers working with Zenger Folkman to use a strengths-based approach in their leadership development. In his Foreword to [How to Be Exceptional](#), Kevin Wilde, VP, Organization Effectiveness and Chief Learning Officer at General Mills wrote of the meeting he had with his skeptical CEO when they were considering this new strengths-based leadership development approach. He won over the CEO with this argument; "While some need to concentrate on fatal flaws, most of our leaders would be wasting their time making small, incremental improvements on a few, below-average scores that may not matter in the long run ... if we concentrate all our efforts getting everyone to average, that is what we will achieve -- a company of average leaders ... we needed exceptional leaders with profound strengths that matter."

Learn more about strengths-based leadership (and developing coaching skills) at my complimentary [October 8 webinar](#) or [November 7 morning briefing](#) in Mississauga. Click on [Coming Events](#) for details and to register.



## OPTIMISTIC LEADERS ARE 4 TIMES MORE EFFECTIVE: 8 STEPS TO GET YOU THERE

Eleanor Roosevelt, American diplomat, writer, and U.S. First Lady once said, *"In the long run, we shape our lives, and we shape ourselves. The process never ends until we die. And the choices we make are ultimately our own responsibility."*



My book, *Growing @ the Speed of Change*, was built around the fundamental choices of leading, following, or wallowing. [Click here](#) and scroll to the bottom of the page to see its core model contrasting these three choices.

The basic foundation of leading is optimism. Wallowing is rooted in pessimism. A rapidly multiplying body of research clearly shows the pay-offs of developing the habits and skills of optimism are massive.

Here's a few studies showing just the tip of a very deep research iceberg:

- Teaching 10 year old children the skills of optimistic thinking cut depression during puberty in half.
- Optimistic insurance salespeople had 56% higher sales.
- Positive support rooted in optimism dramatically increased the chance that married couples won't be divorced.
- The Mayo Clinic found that optimists had much higher levels of physical and mental functioning.
- Optimists lived up to 19% longer than pessimists (and enjoyed the extra time a lot more!)
- Optimistic men had up to half as many heart attacks as pessimists.

Having studied, applied, delivered workshops, and written about the power of optimism for decades I was delighted to see Joe Folkman's recent leadership research on optimism. In his *Forbes* column, [The Plague of the Pessimist Leader: 8 Tips to Make You More Optimistic Today](#), he shows a sharp contrast in leadership effectiveness between leaders perceived as pessimists and those viewed as optimists. Leaders seen to be the most optimistic (top 10%) were rated over four times higher in their effectiveness as the most pessimistic (bottom 10%).

Many of my [books](#) have focused on building the optimistic skills of personal, team, and organization leadership. Joe's eight tips to increase optimism align very well with the rapidly growing body of research on Positive Psychology:

- Make mistakes momentary.
- Seek to find solutions rather than place blame.

- Accentuate the positive.
- Value different perspectives.
- Emphasize long term goals.
- Push and pull.
- Be open to negative feedback and criticism.
- Give honest feedback in a constructive way.

It's been said that we can't direct the wind, but we can adjust our sails. The wallower curses the wind, the follower waits for it to change, and the leader adjusts the sails. Optimism won't guarantee smooth sailing but leaders who have developed their optimism skills lead everyone through life's storms much more successfully.

## LEAD YOUR BOSS TO BUILD SUPPORT FOR YOUR DEVELOPMENT

A highly productive component of [The Extraordinary Leader](#) development approach is the Importance Ratings section of the feedback report. This is where each set of raters -- including the participant being assessed -- are asked to identify the four most important competencies (of the [16 Differentiating Competencies](#)) for their role. What's especially useful is comparing the four chosen by the participant to those chosen by his or her manager.



It's unusual for both the leader and his or her manager to align exactly on all four of the most important competencies for that person's leadership role. When that happens, further probing usually shows that both of them engage in regular career and performance coaching sessions.

Often there's alignment on 2 or 3 of the four competency importance ratings. Further discussions with that *Extraordinary Leader* participant often shows he or she have occasional career and/or performance discussions.

Too often, there's complete misalignment; none of the four competency importance ratings match at all. In almost every one of those situations, there's been little to no career or performance discussions between the leader and his or her manager.

In his latest *Forbes* column, [Personal Development Isn't Personal: 3 Tips for Getting Your Manager Involved](#), Jack Zenger shows powerful data from a study on the impact of management support on development. Participants with very supportive managers reported over twice as much improvement as those with unsupportive managers (74% versus 33%).

The key thrust of Jack's column is that responsibility for building management support rests with the participant. He or she needs to ask for and focus the needed support from his or her manager.

Jack is right on. Strong leaders who haven't won the boss lottery and end up with an overworked boss or one with poor coaching skills have to take the initiative and coach their boss on how to coach them. I've written a fair bit about Upward Leadership, such as ["Bad Boss: Learn How to Manage Your Manager"](#) and other articles listed in the topic area of [Serving, Influencing, and Leading Upward](#).

Gaining your manager's support for your ongoing coaching and development is a prime example of the "taking initiative" advice I love to leave with my audiences. From American writer Elbert Hubbard: "People who want milk should not seat themselves on a stool in the middle of a field and wait for a cow to back up to them."

## **A LEADERSHIP COMBINATION FOR 10 TIMES HIGHER EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT**

Boss A cares about your issues and concerns, leads by example, gives honest and helpful feedback, coaches and develops you, and builds teamwork and trust. Boss B has high standards of excellence, pushes and stretches you and your team beyond what you thought was possible, relentlessly focuses on top priorities and goals, and drives hard for continuous improvement to achieve ever higher targets.



Which boss would you rather work for? Which boss are you? Which boss describes most leaders in your organization? Which boss has the highest level of employee engagement?

In their latest *Harvard Business Review* blog, Jack Zenger and Joe Folkman report on their study of commitment or engagement levels of 160,576 employees working for 30,661 leaders at hundreds of companies around the world. They report that employees of "Drivers" (Boss B) rated their engagement levels slightly higher than those working for "Enhancers" (Boss A).

In ["Nice or Tough: Which Approach Engages Employees Most?"](#) Jack and Joe show that either approach on its own produces a paltry 6.7% (working for Enhancers) and 8.9% (working for Drivers) of employees rating themselves as highly engaged.

Where employee engagement really soars is with Boss C; a combination of both approaches. Jack and Joe conclude *"it's better to*

*be nice and tough ... both are needed to make real headway in increasing employee engagement. In fact, fully 68% of the employees working for leaders they rated as both effective enhancers and drivers scored in the top 10% on overall satisfaction and engagement with the organization."*

Doesn't a powerful combination of **both** Enhancing and Driving describe the best bosses you've known? It certainly aligns with plenty of other leadership research. We thrive under caring, nurturing, honest leaders who drive, inspire, expect, and accept nothing but the highest standards, continually pushing and stretching everyone to peak performance. When we're treated like trusted partners on the grow, making a significant difference, and achieving outstanding results, we're highly engaged and highly effective. Customer service, quality, safety, productivity, and profits soar. Extraordinary leaders pull **and** push.

#### **Further Reading:**

- "[Thoughts That Make You Go Hmm on...Synergistic Opposites](#)"
- "[7 Steps to Higher Likability -- and Results](#)"
- "[Are the Most Effective Leaders Loved or Feared?](#)"
- "[Powerful Combinations: Drive for Results and Builds Relationships](#)"
- "[A Balanced Approach for Highly Engaged Employees](#)"
- "[Demanding Leaders Are Much More Effective -- and More Likable](#)"

#### **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:

A great example of the power of building a positive culture that infuses an organization with high performance energy.

["Great job! How Yum Brands uses recognition to build teams & get results"](#) - Geoff Colvin, *Fortune* magazine  
[www.money.cnn.com](http://www.money.cnn.com)

CEO David Novak has a formula for developing effective leaders. Now other companies are seeking his secret sauce.



We've found that teaching supervisors how to have "courageous conversations" and improve their coaching skills has dramatic results.

["Hard Evidence Of Feedback Reducing Injuries And Altering Organizational Culture"](#) - Sebastian Bailey  
[www.forbes.com](http://www.forbes.com)

*"Everyday conversation makes the difference -- it's the little chats supervisors have with their employees every day that affect perceived priorities, not the big, sporadic 'leadership' communications."*

More on the power of connecting what we love to do -- our passions -- with what we do best -- our strengths.

["5 Profound Insights On Success From A Wharton Professor"](#) - Mark C. Crowley  
[www.fastcompany.com](http://www.fastcompany.com)

*"When Wharton Business School Professor Richard Shell was faced with a life-threatening illness, he was forced to think about the big picture. What was success to him? Since then, Shell has dedicated his life to helping folks find true meaning in their own lives and work."*

### **READ THE LEADER LETTER IN TWICE WEEKLY INSTALLMENTS**

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 one of my books. And you'll pick up a few practical leadership tips that help you use time more strategically and tame your E-Beast!

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

May the Force (of strengths) be with you!

Jim



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