

THE LEADER LETTER

Leading with *STRENGTH*

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MAY 2013, ISSUE 122

The founder of MacDonald's hamburger chain, Ray Kroc, was well known for his motto *"when you're green you're growing, when you're ripe you rot."* May is a great time for us in the Northern Hemisphere to **reflect on whether we're greening ourselves with new growth or stagnating and decaying.**



Once again this spring I'll be in the garden looking for and nurturing green growth. But **my big personal growth over the past year resulted in a very different view of how we most effectively grow leadership skills.**

For decades my writing, workshops, and consulting work has been focused around the traditional approach that has been widely assumed by most of us in the field of leadership development; growth and development involves finding and fixing weaknesses. Since partnering with Zenger Folkman in using a strengths-based leadership development approach **I now realize how limiting and less effective those common and unconscious assumptions are.**

The perennial flowers in my garden have a wide variety of characteristics. Some like lots of sun, others prefer shade, and some thrive in either. In wet soil some plants grow vigorously while others rot. Some plants like to be crowded together while others need their space. Some plants need lots of nutrients while others do quite well in depleted soil.

A weakness-based gardening approach would be to "develop" perennials by training and pushing them to

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overcome their "deficiencies" and learn how to live in the conditions opposite to what is built into their nature. At best, some of these plants might survive and produce a few flowers. More likely they'll decline, die, and rot.

The first article in this issue is on finding our Leadership Sweet Spot. This is a prime example of using a **strengths-based approach to build and develop natural skills, preferences, and abilities. Overlaying a key strength with the leader's passion and the organizational need for his or her role will produce 2 - 3 times more growth and development than trying to fix weaknesses.**

Many of the other topics in this issue lead to personal, team, or organizational growth. We'll see how **using feedback grows leadership effectiveness, and how increasing our Likability Index cultivates our leadership effectiveness.** And many leaders will be relieved to learn they **don't need to remake themselves into something they're not (like a sunflower trying to be a rose) and become charismatic to be an inspirational leader.** We'll also see how **preparing for and adapting to unforeseen change is key to growth.** And like fertilizer, **recognition can burn and brown or nurture and grow.**

May you be ever green and growing!

LEADERSHIP SWEET SPOT: STRENGTHS, PASSION, AND ORGANIZATIONAL NEEDS

Most leadership development workshops provide **short term inspiration that quickly dies out.** That's usually because participants are encouraged to focus their improvement efforts on weaker areas.



As outlined in my [Double Learner Motivation with Strengths-Based Leadership](#) webinar, **focusing on strengths is much more effective and lasting.** Direct reports, bosses, peers, and others assessing overall leadership skills 12 - 18 months later **rated strengths-focused leaders 2 - 3 times higher than leaders who took the traditional route and focused on improving weaknesses.**

A key step in strengths-based leadership development is choosing what strength to work on. We've found the **intersection of these three vital areas leads to those higher rates of follow through and noticeable increases in leadership skill development:**



This starts with **identifying areas of leadership competence as identified by the leader's direct reports, boss, peers, and others** he or she works with. **360 feedback from others is critical since we've found time and again self-assessment is only half as accurate.** We're looking for those competencies or leadership skills that are perceived to be around the 75th percentile. This is a strength or good leadership skill that could be pushed to the 90th percentile.

Once a leader has had his or her leadership strengths identified by those he or she is leading, **the next step is assessing the levels of their passion to work on and improve any one of these strengths.** The higher their passion, the greater their energy levels to leverage a strength from good to great. This is **critical in transforming the development effort** from being a chore we take on with gritted teeth like we might do with a New Year's resolution.

Finally, a leader needs to look for **alignment of his or her strengths and passions with those most needed by the organization for his or her role.** Again **360 feedback from others is vital.** Raters are asked to identify four of the sixteen key **leadership competencies or skills that are most important to the leader's position.**

A senior executive who recently went through our *Extraordinary Leader* process found this exercise particularly useful. It not only helped him decide what strength to develop, he **used it in career coaching discussions with people in his organization.**

Our June 18 [Extraordinary Leader public workshop](#) in Toronto is **a rare opportunity** (we run most sessions inside organizations) to **get strengths-based feedback and be coached through personal development planning** exercises like this. I'd love to help you find and develop your leadership sweet spot!

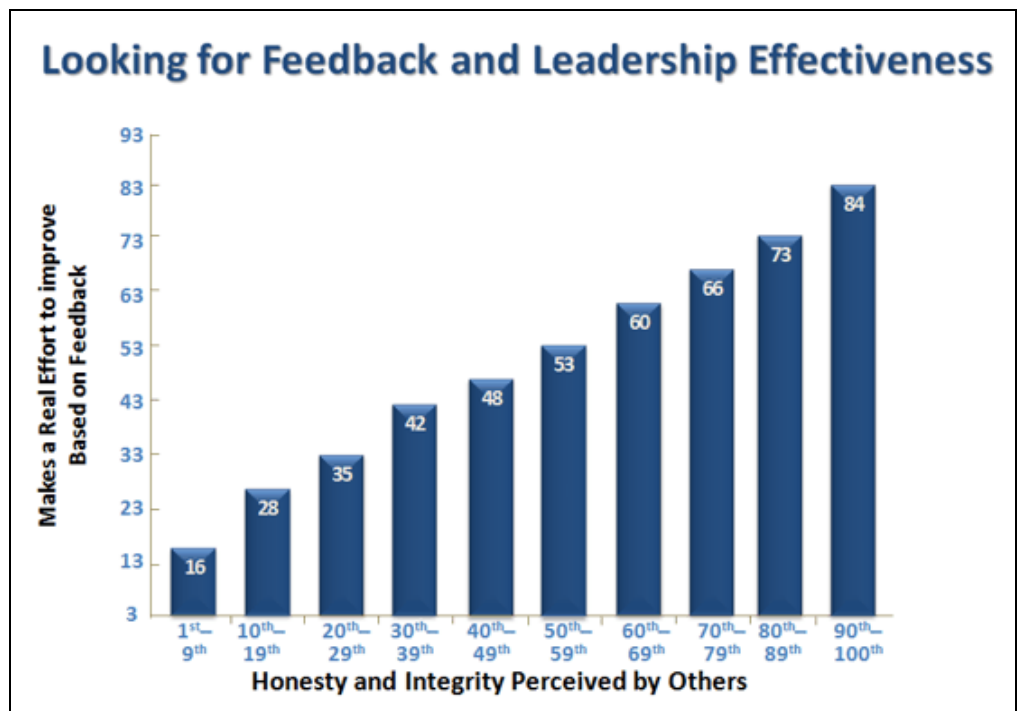
FEEDBACK'S HUGE IMPACT ON PERCEIVED HONESTY AND INTEGRITY

Last month's review of, and excerpts from, [Joe Folkman's book *The Power of Feedback*](#) drew very positive reader responses. One wrote, *"I'd like to give you a little feedback' really does send a shiver up my spine! Eeek! I am going to read this book because I need to change my mindset."*



The reader went on to talk about building courage and growing personal influence regardless of position or authority. **It takes courage to seek out and build on feedback.** Zenger Folkman's research shows that **when leaders do that their perceived leadership jumps dramatically.**

What's especially fascinating and full of deep implications for leaders is **our research showing how making a real effort to improve based on feedback impacts perceived honesty and integrity.** As outlined in their book, [How to Be Exceptional: Drive Leadership Success by Magnifying Your Strengths](#), **leaders who asked for and acted on feedback about their leadership behaviors were rated much higher in honesty and integrity.**



How to Be Exceptional: Drive Leadership Success by Magnifying Your Strengths, by Jack Zenger and Joe Folkman, page 128

This huge range of difference shows that **a feedback-deaf leader is seen as over 4 times less honest** than counterparts who continually seek out and act on feedback. A low scoring leader could write this off as "that's just their perception, that's not who I really am." But even if he or she was straight-arrow honest and never lied, cheated, or stole anything in his or her life, **perception is all there is.**

Seeking and acting on 360 feedback provides the clearest and most accurate picture of our leadership effectiveness. Since **self-assessments have been proven only half as accurate as assessment from others**, we **can't increase our perceived honesty and integrity or magnify other leadership strengths unless we get feedback.**

A rare opportunity (these sessions are generally only offered internally) to get feedback and build a strengths-based personal development plan is at our [Extraordinary Leader public workshop](#) in Toronto on June 18.

DISPELLING COMMON MYTHS ABOUT LIKABILITY AND LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS

"I don't care about being liked, I just want to be respected," is a statement repeated by many less than extraordinary leaders. **Trapped in either/or thinking, these narrowly-focused leaders often push hard for results while leaving a trail of damaged relationships and enervated people** scattered behind them.



Facebook COO, Sheryl Sandberg, is perpetuating a related gender myth in her new book, *Lean In*. She relates the story of a woman leader telling her five year-old-daughter that when Daddy does better at work, more people like him. But when Mommy does better at work, fewer people like her. Instead of protesting how unfair that is, the little girl tells her mother she'd try to be less successful so more people would like her. Sandberg cites research, "that success and likability are positively correlated for men and negatively correlated for women."

But **that's not what our research shows.** In their *Harvard Business Review* blog, "[New Research Shows Success Doesn't Make Women Less Likable](#)," Jack Zenger and Joe Folkman report:

"While, certainly, some individual women may find themselves disliked as they move up the organization, our aggregate data show the opposite is more common -- that **male leaders are perceived more negatively as they rise, whereas women generally maintain their popularity throughout their entire careers.**"

The blog displays a graph showing that as men and women move from supervisor to middle manager to senior and top management, both men and women see a small likability drop initially. But as they move into middle and senior management roles, women recover their likability somewhat while men do not.

For this study, Zenger Folkman developed a **Likability Index** that started with "Builds Relationships." **Go to the [blog](#) for a link to the ZF 10-item index and come up with your own Likability score.**

Being liked *and* delivering results defines extraordinary leaders consistently rated in the top 10% of our database (now comprised of over 500,000 assessments of 50,000 leaders). **Exceptional leaders are very likable. He or she delivers outstanding results *and* highly engaged employees.**

Jack and Joe conclude:

"In order to be an inspiring leader and increase employee satisfaction and engagement a key factor is to be a "likable" leader. **Being "likable" isn't decided by your looks, personality, race, or even gender**, it is something that every individual has control over."

Our June 18 [Extraordinary Leader public workshop](#) in Toronto is **a rare opportunity** (we run most sessions inside organizations) to **assess your leadership effectiveness and build a strengths-based personal improvement plan.**

CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP IS VASTLY OVERRATED

With last month's death of the "Iron Lady," former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, many world leaders and commentators looked back on her forceful and charismatic personality. **Charismatic leadership is a popular media stereotype of strong leadership.** As much as I've enjoyed reading *Fortune* magazine for the past few decades, they keep adding to this misguided leadership view by continually putting larger-than-life CEOs, politicians, and other leaders on their covers and featuring stories on their forceful personalities.



Numerous studies have shown that **charisma isn't one of the key qualities of many highly effective leaders.** In *Good to Great*, Jim Collins' deeply researched book on leadership and organizational effectiveness, he writes:

" ... those of you with a strong, charismatic personality, it is worthwhile to consider the idea that **charisma can be as much a liability as an asset. Your strength of personality can sow the seeds of problems**, when people filter the brutal facts from you. **You can overcome the liabilities of having charisma**, but it does require conscious attention."

A European study just published in *Sloan Management Review* this spring under the title, "Why Good Leaders Don't Need Charisma," reports on "The Downside of Charisma" with this conclusion:

"We found that **leaders of the higher-performing companies were often not charismatic** -- and were, in fact, less likely to be charismatic than the leaders of the lower-performing companies. The problem with charismatic leaders is that **exceptional powers of persuasion make it easy for them to overcome resistance and opposition to their chosen course of action.**"

Zenger Folkman's *Extraordinary Leader* research base identified **16 competencies that most clearly differentiate the best from the worst leaders** as measured by employee engagement, productivity, customer service, quality, safety, turnover, and profitability. **Charisma isn't one of the differentiating leadership competencies.**

The most requested leadership skill among the 500,000 direct reports, managers, peers, and others in the database is **Inspiring and Motivating Others to High Performance**. Zenger Folkman's research shows **there are at least six approaches to inspiring leadership. Only one involves what might be considered charisma**. The other five are equally effective -- and in some cultures superior -- to strong and charismatic leadership.

Our research shows that **many roads lead to extraordinary leadership performance. There is no one right or best path**. The **key is leveraging and building on a leader's perceived strengths as seen by those he or she is leading**.

The Extraordinary Leader workshop is an excellent chance to get feedback on perceived leadership strengths and develop a plan for building them further. *The Extraordinary Coach* workshop provides vital skills to grow and develop others. **I'll be delivering both sessions on June 18 and 19. [Click here for details and to register.](#)**

SKIP THE FORECASTS AND BUILD CHANGE ADAPTIVE ORGANIZATIONS

An interview in this month's *Harvard Business Review* looked at **yet more research showing the folly of expert forecasting**. "Experts' Who Beat the Odds Are Probably Just Lucky" discusses a study by Warwick Business School's Jerker Denrell who worked with Christina Fang of the Stern School of Business. They analyzed years of experts' quarterly forecasts for interest rates and inflation published in *The Wall Street Journal*.



What's especially fascinating is their finding that the experts "*who successfully foresee an unusual event tend to be wrong about the future over the long run ... in our study an ability to call many extreme events correctly was an indication of poor judgment. In fact, the analyst with the largest number of accurate extreme forecasts had the worst forecasting record by far.*"

This is consistent with the work of Philip Tetlock, professor of psychology, business, and political science at University of California Berkeley, as reported by Dan Gardner in his book, *Future Babble: Why Expert Predictions Fail -- and Why We Believe Them Anyway*. One of Tetlock's many studies on forecasting inaccuracies involved **using Google searches to determine the fame of each of 284 experts. He then correlated their level of fame to the accuracy of their forecast. His finding: "the more famous the expert, the worse he did."**

Yet it's impossible to escape expert forecasts on any radio or TV news around a breaking news story. Whether it's terrorism, gun violence, natural disasters, political wrangling, or economic data, experts are asked to prognosticate, opine, and forecast. And **the better the expert articulates his or her arguments in forceful and crisp sound bites, the greater likelihood they're totally wrong.**

If we treat expert forecasts like astrology or fortune cookies they can be entertaining and fairly harmless. I change channels or flip the page. **The big leadership danger is building strategic plans and budgets around forecasts.** But many organizational leaders are as addicted to forecasts as the Commanding General who said he was aware that long term weather forecasts were totally useless but "I need them for planning purposes."

Expert forecasts have increased as our need for certainty in a very uncertain world keeps growing. **The real key is building teams and organizations that are built to change. That calls for developing leadership skills to building highly flexible and rapidly adaptive organizations.**

RECOGNITION PROGRAMS OFTEN SEND NEGATIVE MESSAGES THAT TURN PEOPLE OFF

Whether training your dog, rats in a lab, or a killer whale at Sea World, treats, praise, and pats on the head are very effective. It's a **classic master-pet manipulation.**



Way too many recognition programs are built on this same paternalistic premise. "Be a really good little employee and we'll give you lots of 'atta boys' and treats." This is **not how we build highly engaged teams who feel emotional connections and partnership with each other and their leaders.**

Another in a long line of studies on this key leadership and culture issue was just published on *Harvard Business Review's* Working Knowledge website. In [How to Demotivate Your Best Employees](#) professor Ian Larkin reports on how an attendance program decreased overall productivity by 1.4 percent! A big part of this decrease was from "*stellar employees who previously had excellent attendance and were highly productive ended up suffering a 6 to 8 percent productivity decrease.*"

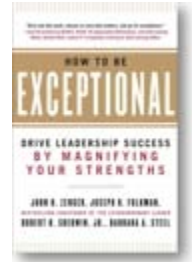
How to effectively use rewards and recognition is **an issue that cuts to core leadership values and assumptions.** The big differences with reward and recognition approaches have to do with **how they're used.** Making them manipulative will **swing attention away from the meaningful issues of principles and purpose, and move to self-interest and selfishness.** You can read more about that and a personal experience I had with **team members pushing back and teaching me how to treat them as partners** at [Reward and Recognition Reinforce Paternalism or Partnerships.](#)

As I outlined in [Weak Leaders Try to Use Money as a Motivator](#), **traditional management approaches use rewards and recognition to manipulate, control, and direct behavior.** Managers are **looking to push motivational buttons with paternalistic pats on the head.** Their underlying assumptions are that most employees like to slack off and take shortcuts and need to be "motivated" to perform. **Strong and effective leaders with highly engaged teams use rewards and recognition to follow up or reinforce high performance.** Leaders *work with* (rather than *doing to*) team members in **adult-to-adult participative and respectful partnerships.** Leaders recognize that **performance problems are often rooted on team dynamics, leadership behaviors, and organizational issues like structure, processes, and systems.**

I've written book chapters, articles, and blogs on this critical leadership issue. You can peruse my articles at [Recognition, Celebration, and Appreciation](#). [My past blogs on this topic](#) include a recent one on the Positivity Ratio for peak performance and Thoughts That Make You Go Hmmm on...Recognition, Appreciation, and Celebration.

HOW TO BE EXCEPTIONAL SUMMARY NOW AVAILABLE

Soundview Executive Book Summaries has **released a summary of Zenger Folkman's new book, *How to Be Exceptional: Drive Leadership Success by Magnifying Your Strengths***. The summary covers:



- How to pinpoint your best leadership traits and choose the right development target for yourself.
- How to use feedback and action learning on the job to elevate your strengths.
- How to apply Zenger Folkman's revolutionary cross-training method to escalate your leadership competencies into the top 90th percentile.
- How to ensure that your fully developed strengths are sustainable by building follow-through into your development plan.

To learn more and order the summary in digital, print, or CD format go to http://www.summary.com/book-summaries/_/How-to-Be-Exceptional-summary.

This is **a groundbreaking book bringing together all the latest research and how-to methodology on revolutionary Strengths-Based Leadership Development**. Click on [How to Be Exceptional: Drive Leadership Success by Magnifying Your Strengths](#) for my review of this outstanding book.

[Thoughts That Make You Go Hmmm on...How to Be Exceptional](#) provides a few excerpts. You can also access [a free e-book drawn from the first chapter of How to Be Exceptional](#) featuring video clips of Jack Zenger and Joe Folkman.

When the new book was introduced last fall I did a [Strengths-Based Leadership Development webcast](#) with Jack Zenger and Joe Folkman that's now in our archive.

The Globe & Mail ranked *How to Be Exceptional* in their top ten business books of 2012. You can read Harvey Schachter's review at "[Counterintuitive tips on how to be exceptional](#)." Read HR executive and consultant, Dave Crisp's, review at "[Some books deserve a long life: The next Good to Great?](#)"

Our [Extraordinary Leader workshop](#) is both drawn from and provides updated research from *How to Be Exceptional* (a copy is included for each participant). The May session in Toronto has been sold out. We've **just scheduled an additional session of The Extraordinary Leader on June 18 and The Extraordinary Coach on June 19 right by Toronto's international airport.** [Click here](#) for more information, download a brochure, and to register.

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 more we work with cross-training in strengths-based leadership development the more power we see in this unique evidence-based approach.

["How Leadership Cross-Training Works"](#) - Jack Zenger
www.Trainingmag.com

"A profound strength is created by taking one competency that has moderately good scores and combining that skill with another competency ... creates an effect that is greater than the effect of either skill individually."

In our culture development consulting we help Clients blend and build on past values/strengths with what needs to change for future growth.

["Your Company's History as a Leadership Tool"](#) - John T. Seaman Jr. and George David Smith, *Harvard Business Review*
www.hbr.org

"Leaders with no patience for history are missing a vital truth: A sophisticated understanding of the past is one of the most powerful tools we have for shaping the future."

This learnable leadership skill is most correlated with exceptional leaders, most desired of leaders, and the biggest driver of employee engagement.

["No, There's Not an App for That." - Bob Sherwin](#)
www.zengerfolkman.wordpress.com

"In looking at our data set of over 300,000 360 survey reports, our research found that this competency is #1 in three critical areas for leaders."

Zenger Folkman's likability index shows that extraordinary leaders drive for results AND build relationships -- regardless of gender.

["Does Sheryl Sandberg's 'Likability-Penalty' Really Exist?" - Jack Zenger](#)
www.forbes.com

"Our data indicates that the 'success-likability penalty' for women that Sandberg is concerned about does not exist ... there is no male 'success-likability bonus.'"

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

May the Force (of strengths) be with you!

Jim





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The CLEMMER Group
10 Pioneer Drive, Suite 105, Kitchener ON N2P 2A4
Phone: (519) 748-1044 ~ Fax: (519) 748-5813
E-mail: service@clemmer.net
<http://www.clemmergroup.com>