

A quarterly publication service  
produced by  
LIVE Consultants Inc.

October 2009  
Number 134



# Leadership

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## From the Editor

Karen Kaiser Clark is a Motivational Speaker who wrote a book titled, *Life Is Change — Growth Is Optional*. The title makes a couple of assumptions. First that change is pervasive; it defines the world in which we live. Our lives are dynamic, they shift, they morph. Given that in the early 1990s, Stephen wrote a book titled, *Change Is*, and that so much of our work is helping individuals and organizations change, who can argue?

The second assumption is that we have a choice whether or not we grow as a result of the changes we are presented with or the changes we make. I suppose we do. However, it is often difficult to live and learn (and as a result) grow at the speed of change.

Part of what we do as an organization is help organizations and individuals understand the changes they want to make and must make. And then we work with them to determine how to use the change to grow.

*Marilyn Baetz, editor*

## About the Author and the Article

Typical situations are often easily dealt with. There are routine and frequently useful ways to handle something that we have seen many times before.

The more difficult challenge is to know what to do with situations that you don't see so often but if dealt with poorly can be costly. One such predicament happens when employees set up managers and leaders to fail. As Stephen observes, "it does happen often enough to merit some reflection about why and what can be done."

After describing how fast and firm impressions can create a downward spiral for newly-appointed leaders, Stephen makes 5 suggestions for dealing with this rare situation.

Stephen is a partner with LIVE Consultants Inc., the organization which sponsors this publication.



*Stephen Baetz*

# In the First Five Days

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In workshops, seminars, and coaching, I often ask, “If you had a chance to do it over again what would you do differently?” The intent of the question is to prompt reflection and turn experience into education. Of course the questions you ask others are often the ones worth asking yourself. And being who I am, I started to think about the big picture: If I had a chance *in my life* to do some things over, what would they be? Here are a few of the more immediate answers I came up with: Learn French (I took Latin instead), take piano lessons longer than I did (I’d like to make music, not just enjoy it), spend more time talking to my grandparents about their life (family legacies and patterns interest me), and pay more attention in math.

I should be more specific about the last one. I wish I knew more about central tendency and standard deviation. Why? I am fascinated by what’s a norm and what’s an exception. It helps when formulating positions, problem solving, and making decisions to have figured that out.

Looking at how information comes at us, it isn’t always easy to sort out what’s the rule and what’s the exception. If you read the titles of books in the business section you could come to the conclusion that most bosses are scoundrels, bullies, idiots, and rogues: *A Survival Guide for Working With Bad Bosses: Dealing With Bullies, Idiots, Back-Stabbers, and Other Managers From Hell, Tame Your Terrible Office Tyrant: How to Manage Childish Boss Behavior and Thrive in Your Job, Is Your Boss Mad?* There’s very few that point to how to support an outstanding leader.

And if you did any reading in the area of employee engagement, you might come to the conclusion that all employees are competent, motivated, and if managed half-decently, will be star performers.

The reality? I suspect the majority of either managers or employees are capable and well-intentioned, there are some who aren’t that, and there are a few who are incompetent and destructive.

That having been said, I want to focus in this article on an exceptional circumstance: why do

*some* employees (wittingly or unwittingly) set their managers and leaders up for failure? Although it doesn’t happen regularly, it does happen often enough to merit some reflection about why and what can be done.

## Fast and Firm Impressions

The appointment of a new manager or leader inevitably creates some angst as individuals assess whether or not they are likely to survive and thrive with that individual. How long does it take for an impression to be formed?

According to research, the impression happens within the first 5 days. That’s fast. You can anticipate how it goes from there. The impression acts as a lens through which the leader is observed and then the evidence is gathered which confirms what was first observed. It’s the old story that we see what we believe. The impression becomes firm.

That first, fast impression can be influenced by a variety of factors:

- how the person has been managed or, for that matter, mismanaged in the past,
- the perception that the individual has about why the leader was selected and what their mandate is,
- the history that the organization has for moving managers in and out (e.g. why engage in a positive way with a leader who is only temporary and really is not interested in our growth and development),
- an assumed reputation that the leader has brought with them from the last organization or team they were with (e.g. if you worked there you have to be hard-nosed and aggressive),
- an inadvertent oversight that the new leader made in the early days (e.g. a failure to include someone in a meeting or thank someone for a contribution),
- the skinny that has been offered on the informal social networks,
- the beliefs that individuals have about how secure their job or role is in the organization, and
- the confidence the individual has in their own abilities.

These factors work in different ways on different individuals. Some may see a leader as driven and others see the leader as obsessive, some may see self-confidence and others see arrogance, some see empathy and others see clueless. And so on.

As I noted earlier, whatever the impression, evidence is gathered and people solidify their point of view — which may be okay if the impression includes driven, self-confident, and empathic but not so okay if the impression includes obsessive, arrogant, and clueless. And once a point of view becomes entrenched, people act on the basis of truth as they understand it. The most frequent reciprocal responses are defensiveness, denial, disengagement, and cynicism. And the downward spiral continues.

### What Employees Own

The factors which can shape and influence the initial impression (the ones listed on the previous page) are a combination of what an individual brings (i.e. their intrapersonal baggage of worries, frets, and insecurities) and what an organization communicates (by how it behaves). Because the organization is part of shaping the impression, it would be hard to argue that it is employees and employees alone that set their managers and leaders up for failure.

However, when employees fail to change their point of view or even entertain the possibility that there is more than one way to look at someone's behaviour, they can set the manager or leader up for failure.

What everyone can do, therefore, is give new managers and leaders a bit of slack. Tag first impressions as just that: first but not final. And then examine how we look at and label behaviour. For example, is asking specific questions a desire to be informed or is it micromanaging? Is imposing performance metrics evidence of a disciplined approach to business or proof that the leader is a control freak? Is making suggestions helpful or interfering? Is limiting social interactions being productive or being unapproachable?

### Worth Considering

So what can a leader do to ensure that in a new job or a new assignment they get off on the right foot and avoid some of the negative outcomes I've described?

One, understand the legacy you are inheriting. Determine how the previous leader acted and anticipate what the reaction would be of the individuals on the team to that leadership legacy. From there, develop a leadership approach that either supports that legacy (given that it is positive and appropriate) or contrasts with the legacy (given that the legacy is not appropriate). Of course, if you choose not to follow in the steps of your predecessor, do so in a way that is respectful.

Two, understand what your mandate is and what urgency is attached to that mandate. Give yourself some reasonable time to understand the team and the challenges it faces and then determine what the best way is to deal with those challenges.

Three, give the members of your team some slack. Avoid fast and firm impressions of who they are and what they can or cannot do. Be as objective as you can be about the behaviour you observe and select the best possible view of what they are saying or doing.

Four, keep in the present. Focus on what needs to be done here and now and avoid telling endless stories of where you were and how you did things there. That wears thin on members of the existing team and delivers a message that you'd rather be where you were rather than where you are.

Five, avoid any language which defines who's in and who's out, who's going to be successful and who's not, who's a super performer and who's not. Early drawing of lines, labelling, and quick categorization of people is divisive.

### Of course ...

You can do all this and still have people on the team who may wittingly or unwittingly set you up for failure. When you see it, talk about it. As well, understand that the behaviour you can control is your own, not theirs.

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