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A New Kind of Courage: Being the People We Are and the Leaders We're Waiting For

Becoming the leader you were meant to be

After acknowledging a top leader for having people skills, something that his behavioral profile indicated he possessed, his direct reports howled with laughter. Finally someone said, “If you've got people skills, you've been holding out on us!”

Though this senior vice president of a multinational company laughed good-naturedly, he returned the next day and told the group that the comment had really haunted him. What he recognized was that the person he was at home with his loved ones and friends wasn't in any way similar to the man who came to work each day. He realized that at work he wore a “suit of armor” just to accomplish everything that his +12-hour work days required. He didn't have time to think, laugh or be in relationship; his day consisted of rapid-fire meetings and making and filling requests.

The wake-up call for another leader was more painful. While ramroding his way through a packed meeting agenda he was stopped in his tracks by news that a direct report had just been hospitalized with a heart attack. He was horrified that the messenger had to forcefully slow him down just to hear what had happened. His horror intensified when he recognized that although he personally believed in work-life balance, he had fallen prey to the pace and expectations of the company culture and had knowingly over-burdened this particular man.

Stories like this have become the new norm, especially in our corporate world. While many of our clients are involved in work that energizes them and feels meaningful, overwhelm is a common state. We live in a fast-paced world and our workplaces are often pressurized environments that demand more and more (stressful) hours of our day. It would seem that nearly every company, project and worker, regardless of industry or a person's role, is on an accelerated, highly competitive schedule. From field work to top corporate offices, work-related stress is taking a toll on the quality of people's lives—and many are beginning to question, “for what?”





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My Point of View

As someone who has provided consulting within companies that admittedly employ what they call a pony express mentality—ride a person hard and replace them when they are done—I have too often witnessed the havoc that results. Caring people who are good citizens in their personal lives frequently feel compelled to narrow their vision and check their personal values at the door during their increasingly long work hours to focus almost exclusively on staying competitive, being profitable and achieving business goals. The pain this has produced in our personal lives, families, communities and world is making it clear that clinging to this business paradigm and way of doing business is neither desirable nor sustainable. Whether we are talking about sleepless nights, anxiety attacks, strokes, limited family time, a planet that is being depleted, or a widening gap between the haves and have-nots, it is imperative that we discover together how to bring about change. Re-imagining how we work has the potential to be life changing at every level.

Expanding people's relationship to what's possible and bringing about desired change is JMJ's—and my own—work in the world. While having “successful” businesses in the traditional sense of the word remains immensely important, leaders who seek JMJ's partnership are those who understand that more is possible. They are no longer willing to pay the high cost of narrowly defined success, and they want help in calling up the leadership within their own organizations to bring about the change they know is needed. These leaders want to discover a way for their people to have a shared higher purpose and to innovatively attend to the triple bottom line—people, planet and profit. While many specifically partner with JMJ for outcomes related to creating *Incident and Injury-Free*® workplaces, *High-Performance Teams* or *High-Performance Projects*, among others, they are frequently quite clear that they also understand and count on bringing about the less tangible and harder to measure outcomes that, ultimately, will be what matter most. For some, a catastrophic event has pushed them to this realization; for others a compelling vision has opened their eyes.

How do we bring about profound and positive change through our work? As with the scenarios above, one of the most significant aspects of our work is to repeatedly create environments that are simultaneously:

- Challenging enough to cause people to think deeply and have new access to life- and business-enhancing perspectives, *and*
- Safe enough for them to speak with some amount of vulnerability from both the head and the heart regarding their own experiences and perspectives.





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For the early part of my career I made a conscious decision to work in education, government and non-profits. By the late 1990s, however, it became apparent to me that it is the business sector that has not only advanced our civilizations and created the greatest havoc in our lives and on our planet, but also offers our greatest hope for the future. Along with many others, I began to imagine what might be possible when our businesses have a mission that is greater than, yet includes, their own viability. I find myself now at JMJ, serving as a consultant in its Americas region helping clients to reach beyond their status quo and into new realms of possibility and performance.

Ultimately, this is about helping people at every level within the organization to find a way to take a public stand for what they want in life and business. As first one voice and then the next speaks for creating a reality that does not currently exist (for themselves, their co-workers, stakeholders, and sometimes the planet) there is a recognition that this kind of leadership requires a new kind of courage—the courage to speak openly for what each wants and believes is right. Those who speak up do so despite fear about how others will receive their message or any real concrete knowledge as to how to create the new reality they envision.

Enabling individuals and collectives to do this difficult, paradigm-shifting work is what energizes me and my JMJ colleagues most. While we have an internal language that describes and explains the “transformational magic” we bring to bear in organizations, it shows up in fairly traditional packages—coaching, assessments, workshops, and working with teams. What we find is that when sufficient numbers of people—top leaders and those at the workforce level—get real with each other and take bold stands that they alone cannot deliver upon, the profound and positive change begins. Our job is to help them learn their way forward; not just provide the answers. Our clients learn how to consistently ask the difficult questions, draw upon the breadth of perspectives available to them, engage and enroll others, and courageously take action consistent with their stand.

Until each of us discovers our capacity to be the leaders we are looking for, despite the complexity, the sheer number of people involved, and the pace of today’s business world, nothing will change.

Never am I more satisfied than when I get to the end of a coaching session, workshop, or leadership team meeting in which people have been authentically present and have done the very real work of speaking and acting from their deepest values. Whether the end result is getting people home safely and back again each day, enhancing people’s well-being, or engaging with a community to discover win-win-win solutions, the work is truly “good work.”

About JMJ

JMJ Associates is a global consulting firm specializing in enterprise transformation. If your company seeks to create breakthrough performance, eliminate workplace injury, form more effective teams, enhance leadership, or build a sustainable future while consistently reaching targets, JMJ is prepared to help. We serve clients from offices in Austin, Doha, Durban, London, Perth and Singapore.

