Sweating, Gritting of Teeth and the “Exercise Face”

by Tricia Jack, MPA, CPPA

Every January, I resolve to go back to the gym, along with almost everyone else on the planet. As I arrive there after work, the parking lot is full, the treadmills are all taken, and there is a 5 minute wait for a particular weight machine. This does not help my motivation, and sometimes I just want to turn around and go home.

"Since I am here," I think to myself, "I might as well do something." As I grit my teeth and curse those calorie-laden Christmas treats, I jump up onto the stepper (the only available machine and the one I hate most in the gym, along with the rowing machine). Let the pain begin! As I step, I think about resistance and failure, because the stepper makes my legs hurt pretty quickly.

It is rough going back to an exercise routine when you have been out of it for a while. Those muscles that were once strong are now weak, and they hurt when they are asked to perform strenuous exercise. It is tempting to work at the lowest level, but if you don't use weights and resistance that cause you to sweat and grit your teeth, you won't build the muscle that you could if you exerted all of your effort into doing this. So, I try and push myself with weights that cause my muscles to eventually fail. Then I walk around in pain for a few days while the muscles build – no pain, no gain, right?

I have also noticed that if I set goals, plan my workouts and keep records of what I achieve, I achieve much more in a shorter space of time.

So how do my gym adventures relate to being a leader? First, becoming a good leader is about developing leadership muscle. This, like developing real muscle, is about pushing against weights, resistance and yes, often requires some sweating and gritting of teeth. (You know what I am talking about – that "exercise face" that is a cross between sheer agony and determination – and it's not pretty). As a leader you will often find yourself pushing against resistance, especially when you try to implement change. While that might be painful, it is developing your leadership muscle.

Second, most of us don’t get to become good leaders without some (muscle) failure. I have failed in my quest to become super-fit many times; usually sometime in mid-February. It’s too easy to give up at the gym when I have to fight the crowds for the treadmill. (I have done that more than once). But what I have noticed is that when I am disciplined and I repeat the exercises over and over even when my muscles fail, the muscles build and I can progressively do more and more. And the irony is that this is how it is supposed to work! If we reach muscle failure, our muscles build as they repair themselves.

Many great leaders have failure before success. What makes them great leaders is that they don’t give up: they pick themselves up, brush themselves off and start over... and over...and over; as many times as it takes until they succeed. In short, they exercise their leadership muscle. Eventually it is strong enough to let them succeed.

So my question to you is this: When have you failed as a leader? And more importantly, what did you learn from that experience that made you a better leader? Exercise your brain and think about that for a minute. Exercise your fingers and write the answer down. Then create a plan. I’m off to work out.