

Put Positive Leadership into Action

Executive coaches and leadership consultants who encourage positive thinking often encounter cynical, hard-driving executives with a close eye on the bottom line.

But positivity coaches have come a long way since author Norman Vincent Peale preached his positive philosophy of faith and miracles. Today's positive-psychology movement is founded on empirical evidence. Social scientists have documented the benefits of optimism, emotional intelligence and happiness in multiple work settings, including the executive suite and diverse corporate departments.

Positive leadership is no longer seen as a feel-good ideal with little bearing on business results. Mounting evidence reveals that leaders who focus on their people's positive contributions, while concomitantly achieving tough goals through measurable tasks, enjoy higher performance outcomes.

While positive leadership is gaining traction among CEOs and executive teams, it's often poorly understood and implemented. University of Michigan management professor Kim S. Cameron, PhD, offers a cogent definition of the term in his new book, *Practicing Positive Leadership: Tools and Techniques That Create Extraordinary Results* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2013):

“Positive leadership refers to the implementation of multiple positive practices that help individuals and organizations achieve their highest potential, flourish at work, experience elevating energy and achieve levels of effectiveness difficult to attain otherwise.”

As you'll soon see, positive leadership is a bit more complex than expressing a positive attitude, celebrating progress, encouraging team spirit, fostering positive relationships and espousing inspirational values.

A Message from Nancy...

I have a couple of questions to ask you:

1. Is your business as successful as you think it should be?
2. Are you and your team able to pinpoint the solutions necessary to create positive changes to get where you need to go?



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The Problem-Focused Outlook

Unfortunately, positive practices are truly rare in today's businesses and organizations. Two key factors explain our natural resistance to them:

1. **Physiologically speaking, our brains have a built-in negativity bias.** We're hardwired to pay more attention to issues that threaten our survival (negative trumps positive). Crises and problems dominate work agendas. Managers' daily tasks necessitate solving problems.
2. **Leadership pressures steal attention from positive practices, in spite of our best intentions.** Successful leaders must override the tendency to focus on problems. Only then can they experience the high performance that positivity can unleash.

While positive executives are perceived to be better leaders, they're nonetheless in the minority in today's competitive business environment.

Finding the Right Feedback Ratio

A wave of research reveals that "soft"-sounding positive management practices – including conversations focused on dreams, strengths and possibilities – motivate people to achieve higher performance levels. In fact, the more positive the message, the better the outcome.

But managers are charged with pointing out what's not working and solving real problems – a mandate that presents a potentially frustrating leadership dilemma: How can you focus on the positive when continually forced to make corrections?

Richard Boyatzis, PhD, a professor of organizational behavior at the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, offers a pragmatic solution: "You need the negative focus to survive, but a positive one to thrive. You need both, but in the right ratio."

Let's quantify this ratio. Effective leaders should provide 3-5 positive messages for every negative message they deliver. Your communication must skew heavily toward the positive, without sounding incongruent or inauthentic.

If you fail to "accentuate the positive" (to borrow a World War II-era song title), you remain stuck in negative feedback patterns that demotivate your staff.

Positive Benefits

Barbara L. Frederickson, PhD, a psychologist at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, has found that positive feelings expand our awareness of a wider range of possibilities. Instead of looking at what needs to be fixed, we learn to focus on what's right and needs to be reinforced. When we emphasize positive deeds, using positive language, achievement builds upon itself.

From a neurological standpoint, positivity activates reward centers in the brain, triggering the release of mood-elevating neurotransmitters like dopamine. As we experience positive feelings, we begin to crave even more of them. This cascade propels us to chip away at the small steps needed to achieve our larger goals and ultimately sets the stage for success.

Indeed, Dr. Frederickson's psychology research shows that a positive focus bestows greater attentiveness, more flexible problem-solving, enhanced creativity and improved teamwork.

Two Opposing Brain Functions

When we're involved in technical conversations or analytical tasks, the brain's frontal lobe is engaged. When conversations shift to people, feelings and social considerations, the inner brain – which controls emotions and memories – is activated.

Neurological imaging confirms that results-focused leaders give their frontal lobes a greater workout, while socially minded leaders exercise their inner brains more diligently.

In general, organizations tend to promote leaders for their technical prowess – not their social skills. Surveys show that goal-oriented bosses have a 14% chance of being perceived as great leaders by their employees. The number drops to 12% for socially skilled bosses.

But when bosses are both socially and technically adept, they have a 72% chance of being viewed as great leaders. The bad news? Only 1% of bosses excel at both skills in the real world.

A Trickle-Down Process

Positivity is a principle, not a concrete process like Six Sigma or TQM. Successful implementation therefore requires clearly defined action steps.

Think of positive leadership as a funnel. It starts with the organization and its overarching mission

and values; permeates leadership teams through the expression of positive values and goals; helps managers implement and track progress; and ensures individuals know what needs to be done to ensure rewards.

Organizational Positivity

You can identify companies that have implemented positive practices throughout history and compare their mission statements with those of their less successful counterparts.

Positivity clearly appears in mission statements that value societal contributions over the desire to be No. 1:

- **Ford Motor Company:** democratize the auto (1900s)
- **Boeing:** bring the world into the jet age (1950s)
- **Sony:** obliterate the image of poor-quality Japanese goods (1960s)
- **Apple:** one person, one computer (1980s)

Compare those mission statements with the following:

- **GE:** be No. 1 or 2 in every market we serve
- **Walmart:** become the first trillion-dollar company
- **Philip Morris:** knock off R.J. Reynolds as the No. 1 tobacco company
- **Nike:** crush Adidas
- **Honda:** destroy Yamaha

Improving your leadership positivity starts with your organization's mission statement. Ask "why" you and your organization are here; then, ask yourself and your colleagues what you/they want on a deeper level:

- Which values merit coming to work each day to give your best?
- How will you inspire staff and customers to make contributions that benefit the world?

The Language of Positive Conversations

Begin to transform your team by attaching everything you say and do to higher goals and values. Leaders, managers and staff become more positive when they

pay attention to the language they use. Rephrase statements in a more positive way, without sacrificing honesty or reality.

If you're in a management position, everything you say – or don't say – is magnified, making it even more important to boost your positive/negative ratio. Aim for a least a 3:1 (ideally, a 5:1) ratio of positive to negative statements. When you adopt this approach, others will follow suit.

Show Frequent Appreciation

Instead of seizing on what your people do wrong, start to verbally acknowledge what they're doing right. Track and recognize progress. Most people perform better when they know they're appreciated.

This doesn't mean you should suppress bad news. Instead, learn to deliver it in ways that are less likely to provoke defensiveness. Your execution will improve with practice. You'll gain respect and better performance outcomes – whether you're participating in official performance reviews or simply engaging in casual conversations with employees.

In Search of Best Practices

If we want to staff our organizations with executives who can deliver results and demonstrate superior social skills, we need to start identifying them during the hiring and promotion processes.

Hard-driving, results-oriented executives can learn to improve their social skills by retaining an experienced executive coach. Additionally, organizations can improve their effectiveness by:

1. Hiring for both technical and social skills
2. Training equally for social skills and technical savvy
3. Rewarding goal attainment and displays of social skill
4. Promoting those who demonstrate social prowess

CEOs and upper management must realize that rewarding achievement alone has its limits. Organizations must provide incentives for behaviors, even when people take risks and "fail up."

Leaders are most effective when they demonstrate social intelligence. Luckily, they can be trained, coached and rewarded for improving their facility in this arena.

In Search of Best Practices, con't.

Specific areas for leadership coaching should include:

1. Day-to-day conversations
2. Performance reviews and feedback
3. Incentives, rewards and pay
4. Connecting mission to values

Identify and implement action steps on multiple fronts, from the seemingly simple communication efforts to the more complex ones. Changes at the individual level will begin to transform your working environment into a finely oiled machine that values both results and social relationships.

Employing positive leadership practices will allow employees at all levels to flourish at work, sustain energy and reach peak performance. Conversations that highlight people's strengths, desires and dreams generate emotions and energy that drive us to work harder. The more positive the discussion, the more positive the outcome.

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