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Positive Leadership: 3 Steps to Real Results

The No. 1 reason why most Americans leave their jobs is the feeling they're not appreciated. In fact, 65% of people surveyed said they received no recognition for good work in a previous year, according to Tom Rath and Donald O. Clifton, authors of *How Full Is Your Bucket? Positive Strategies for Work and Life* (2004).

According to newer Gallup research, what employees want most — along with competitive pay — is quality management. When they feel unappreciated and disapprove of their managers, they leave or stop trying.

Almost 25% of U.S. employees would fire their bosses if given the chance, and about 50% of actively disengaged workers would follow suit.

A Gallup Management Journal survey found that, of all 24.7 million U.S. workers, roughly 18% are actively disengaged. Gallup estimates the lower productivity of actively disengaged workers costs the U.S. economy about \$382 billion (<http://gmj.gallup.com/content/28867/Many-Employees-Would-Fire-Their-Boss.aspx>).

Because of current economic realities, people may not be leaving their jobs. Instead, they join the ranks of the disengaged and become “missing in action.” It rests upon managers to learn better ways of interacting with the people on whom they depend.

3 Steps to Positive Leadership

In 2005, results of a Gallup research study concluded managers play a crucial role in employee well-being and engagement.

Five years later, most leaders are acutely aware of the costs and benefits of engaging their workforce at all levels. Active employee engagement has strong linkages to key business outcomes, including retention, productivity, profitability, customer retention and safety.

But the Gallup research didn't study what managers did (their specific behaviors) to elicit positive responses from employees.

That's why Margaret Greenberg and Dana Arakawa put the theory of positive leadership to the test. Greenberg is president of The Greenberg Group, an executive coaching/consulting practice in Andover, CT. Arakawa is a pro-



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gram associate at the John Templeton Foundation of West Conshohocken, PA. Both are graduates of the Master of Applied Positive Psychology program at the University of Pennsylvania.

Greenberg and Arakawa wanted to know if managers who apply positive leadership practices have teams with higher project performance and employee engagement, as compared to teams led by managers who don't apply these practices.

Based on a great deal of previous research, positive managers practice these three leadership behaviors:

- ▶ 1. Use a strengths-based approach
- ▶ 2. Provide frequent recognition and encouragement
- ▶ 3. Maintain a positive perspective when difficulties arise

Past studies have shown these practices have a direct effect on employee engagement, and each is an observable and testable behavior.

None of these characteristics are innate, but all can be learned. Very few executives intuitively know:

- ▶ 1. How to work with people's strengths
- ▶ 2. How to automatically give frequent credit where due
- ▶ 3. How to respond with your best game face when the going gets rough

A Strengths-Based Approach

There's a reason why managers' focus on strengths and weaknesses is so important. Most organizations are obsessed with fixing weaknesses. They consequently conduct performance reviews, 360-degree assessments and they like to evaluate how well employees and managers are measuring up to pre-defined goals and competencies.

Managers are instructed to look at an employee's assessed gap and coach for greater performance in areas of weakness. The goal is to raise awareness of deficiencies and encourage progress toward a set standard, building strength where it is lacking. An executive coach, an offsite training program and in-house learning programs may be assigned.

Such assessments, however, usually pay only cursory attention to an employee's strengths. The assessment, performance review and subsequent remedial programs focus instead almost exclusively on gaps or weaknesses.

Focus on What Works

Too many managers assume that employees need to be good at many things, rather than excellent in key areas — a decidedly negative view of human capital.

More recent studies in behavioral sciences and organizational performance have firmly established that focusing on what works, followed by a program to scale it to greater levels, is a more practical and efficient approach to developing people and performance.

Managers who take a strengths-based approach help employees identify strengths and align talents with their work. These managers don't ignore employee weaknesses, but fixing them isn't their primary focus.

Instead, positive managers focus more on the areas in which an employee excels and how his or her strengths can be leveraged to benefit the employee, team and organization.

Greenberg and Arakawa measured the degree to which managers used strength-based behaviors by asking employees to rate their level of agreement with a series of statements, such as:

“My project manager matches my talents to the tasks that need to be accomplished.”

“My project manager encourages high performance by building on my strengths.”

They found that managers who focused on strengths enjoyed superior team performance, as opposed to managers who focused on weaknesses.

Their study surveyed more than 100 information technology professionals in different managerial roles at The Hanover Insurance Group. Managers were asked about how well projects met budget, schedule and quality standards.

Using the employee responses, Greenberg and Arakawa ranked the extent to which managers focused on strengths and found that those in the top quartile had much higher project performance results.

Based on retrospective project performance results from 2005, managers in the top quartile achieved an average project performance score of 10.6 on a 20-point scale, while managers in the bottom quartile achieved an average score of 7.09. In 2006, the average score for top-quartile managers was 17.91, compared to an average score of 11.55 for managers in the bottom quartile.

Good managers won't be surprised to find a correlation between their behavior and employee performance. But even Hanover's leaders were surprised at how much the two factors correlated.

The Problem-Seeking Mindset

A second important factor in positive leadership behaviors is giving frequent praise and recognition. In 90% of workplaces, this doesn't happen enough, nor is praise delivered in a way that can be heard or received for maximum effect.

It's not enough to wait for annual performance reviews or project completion to deliver feedback. Praise must be frequent, ongoing and specific to current behaviors — not vague or general.

Why is it so difficult to provide frequent, positive feedback? Because, in truth, we're predisposed to look for the negative: in ourselves, in others and for external events. We rarely scan our environment and ask:

- ▶ "What's working right now... and how can we do more of it?"
- ▶ Instead, we look around and ask: "What's broken — and how can we fix it?"

The problem-seeking mindset is one of the brain's shortcomings, while also serving as a protective device to spare us from danger and making mistakes. Psychologists have studied our predilection for the negative, with astonishing results.

The Brain Power of Negativity

In *Switch* (2010), authors Dan and Chip Heath write about "finding the bright spots" in our work and lives. After extensive research, the two business school professors have documented myriad cases that prove how hard it is to overcome negativity's pull.

In one study, for example, scientists analyzed 558 words in the English language that denote emotions, and they found that 62% were negative (versus the 38% positive).

Across the board, no matter the situation or domain, we are wired to focus on bad over good.

- ▶ **Example A:** People who were shown photos of good and bad events spent more time viewing the latter.
- ▶ **Example B:** When people hear something bad about someone else, they pay more attention to it, reflect on it more, remember it longer and weigh it more when assessing that person. This tendency is called "positive-negative asymmetry."
- ▶ **Example C:** A researcher reviewed 17 studies of how people interpret and explain events in their lives, such as how fans interpret sporting events or how students describe their days in a journal. Across multiple domains — work, politics, sports, relationships — people were

more likely to spontaneously bring up negative versus positive events.

"Bad is stronger than good," the Heaths conclude. It's no wonder performance reviews and feedback are usually aimed at what's not working. Yet, individuals can override this brain tendency and focus on the positive, at least enough to create successful relationships both at work and home.

John Gottman, a psychologist who studies extensive marital conversations, finds that couples who sustain long-term marriages use language that reflects five times more positive statements than negative ones. In fact, he calls this "the magic ratio" and claims it will accurately predict if a marriage will last.

He urges managers to use a ratio of 5:1 positive statements in conversations with employees. Ask yourself: "What percentage of time do I spend solving problems in relation to the time I spend scaling successes?"

Given the advantages of a solution mindset, it's surprising that more managers fail to gain a foothold in this managerial style. Remember: You can't give praise and recognition if you see only the negative and focus on what's broken.

When Things Go Wrong

Managing long-term, multimillion-dollar projects that involve dozens of people and several workgroups is a complex challenge, and things are bound to go wrong. How managers respond to problems has a direct and measurable impact on both the employees and the project.

Researchers Greenberg and Arakawa asked employees:

- ▶ "When a problem crops up on my project, is my project manager able to help me come up with solutions?"
- ▶ "What steps does your project manager take when such a problem arises?"

Here's what they found:

- ▶ Managers who maintain a positive perspective don't turn setbacks into catastrophes.
- ▶ They don't fly off the handle; they control their emotions.
- ▶ They recognize what's within their sphere of influence (and what's not).
- ▶ They see and discuss the problem as an opportunity.
- ▶ They provide a solution-oriented perspective.

In other words, they make themselves part of the solution rather than the problem, which frees up employees to tackle the challenge.

Positive Results

Greenberg and Arakawa also discovered that managers who maintained a positive perspective when things went awry experienced greater project performance. Managers who scored in the top quartile for positive perspective (as reported by their employees, not self-report) had significantly higher project performance than those in the bottom quartile.

Of course, unrealistic optimism and inauthentic happy faces do not bode well for any manager or employee. Honesty is critically important, especially in uncertain times. Luckily, managers can moderate their emotional responses in ways that reassure people, without denying the reality of harsh situations.

In their paper, Greenberg and Arakawa wrote:

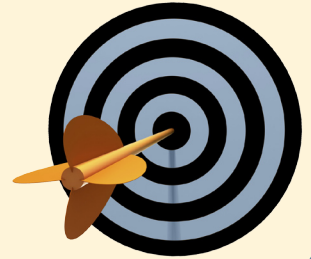
“In today’s rapidly changing and uncertain business environment, managers and employees need optimism more than ever before to not only cope, but to innovate and flourish.

“Managers have more influence than perhaps they realize on the employees’ engagement, optimism, and performance, and can consciously use this influence to benefit these employees and the organization as a whole.

“We have employed a strengths-based performance perspective in our technology organization for the past few years,” says Hanover’s Tranter. “Clearly, the outcomes of this study will continue to have a greater influence on how we recruit, interview, select, and hire managers and for our organization.”

Reflect on how you as a manager and leader can implement positive leadership by practicing these behaviors:

- ▶ 1. Focus on and work with people’s strengths.
- ▶ 2. Improve the frequency with which you give praise and recognition.
- ▶ 3. Respond with your best game face when the going gets rough.



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