

Positive leadership yields performance and profitability

Effective organizations develop their strengths

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Want to improve your bowling score? Which might be more helpful, having others tell you what you're doing wrong, or being told what you're doing right?

In a fascinating experiment, Dr Daniel Kirschenbaum, a sports psychologist at the University of Wisconsin, videotaped groups of bowlers (Kirschenbaum, 1984). He then edited the tapes, creating two different versions. In one version, he deleted any examples of poor bowling performance, leaving only images of proper bowling techniques. In the second version of the tape, he deleted any examples of good performance, leaving only images of poor bowling style.

He then used the tapes to give lessons to the same groups of bowlers. Some groups viewed an edited tape showing only examples of proper bowling techniques. The lessons emphasized repeating what had worked for them. Other groups viewed an edited tape, seeing only examples of poor bowling. Their lessons focused on not repeating prior mistakes.

Which group of bowlers improved their bowling performance, those who learned from their mistakes or those who learned from successful performance?

Interestingly, those bowlers who viewed examples of proper bowling techniques showed as much as 100 percent improvement in bowling scores, far more than the other groups! Studies involving other activities have shown similar results. We learn better, and are able to improve task performance, when we focus on our successes rather than our mistakes.

The problem with our focus on problems: deficit-based management

How is this relevant to the workplace? The idea of learning from the positive aspects of performance seems at odds with traditional management techniques found in corporate America. Often, managers see themselves as problem-solvers whose job is to "fix what's broken" in the organization, not learn from what is working.

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This focus on problems in the workplace has unfortunate consequences for both managers and employees. It often creates a work environment where defensiveness and finger pointing are common, creativity and innovation are stifled, resistance to change is high, and employee commitment and motivation are low. Morale, energy and performance dwindle as going to work every day means nothing more than confronting one problem after another.

An atmosphere of negativity can adversely impact business outcomes. Recent research examined the communication patterns of business unit management teams engaged in strategic planning (Losada and Heaphy, 2004). Results showed the single most important factor in predicting business unit profitability and customer satisfaction – a factor four times more powerful in predicting team success than any other factor – was the ratio of positive comments to negative comments among team members. Positive comments are those that show support, helpfulness, or appreciation. Negative comments express disapproval, blame or criticism. The researchers concluded, "we need to have teams within organizations that are able to tap into the liberating and creative power of positivity."

So how do we create a work environment that produces the outcomes we actually seek – an energized and inspired workforce, open to learning, growth and positive change? We shift the emphasis from the negative to the positive. Like the bowlers who learned more from studying their past successes, we focus on what's working in our organizations, creating a "strengths-based" culture.

Strong organizations need positive leadership

The development of a strengths-based, positive organizational culture begins with strong, positive leadership. Unfortunately, there is little in the popular business literature to guide the manager interested in the development of positive leadership skills. While there are many books (a recent search on Amazon.com using the keyword "leadership" returned over 57,000 book titles!), most rely on outdated theories, militaristic role models, or even fictional characters. For example, anyone can easily learn the leadership secrets of Attila the Hun, Santa Claus, Star Trek's Captain Picard, Navy Seals, Army Rangers, or the Knights of the Round Table! What you will learn, however, are skills and techniques based on the traditional, and largely unsuccessful, problem-solving model of management.

Positive leaders must move beyond worn out military models or fictional characters, developing new skills and traits that support a strengths-based organizational culture. Many of these skills or traits have typically been overlooked in traditional management and leadership development training. Yet, exciting new research shows their relevance to the workplace. For example, two important traits that leaders can and should develop are optimism and emotional intelligence.

Recent studies show that optimism is clearly related to job performance. Optimistic leaders are more likely to see problems as challenges, exert greater effort for longer periods to reach their goals, and seek out and appreciate the positive aspects of difficult situations. Similarly, research shows that successful leaders have high levels of emotional intelligence, or the ability to understand and deal with their own emotions as well as the emotions of others. Leaders high in emotional intelligence are more flexible and adaptive in their response to stress and change, and better able to develop strong working relationships that promote trust and fairness.

Looking for the root causes of success

Overall, "positive leaders" must develop the skills necessary to create and support a culture that emphasizes possibilities rather than problems. Outdated change management methodologies that rely on problem-solving techniques should be replaced with approaches that identify and build on the root causes of organizational success. One such approach, called "appreciative inquiry", is gaining in popularity and showing tremendous results. Appreciative inquiry is a four-step process that allows the workforce to identify sources of strength and success. Workers at all levels then build on those examples of success to redefine or create new, improved business plans and procedures.

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Can this emphasis on the positive truly be successful in today's competitive business environment? There is strong evidence to suggest that positive leadership, a strengths-based organizational culture, and appropriate change management practices such as appreciative inquiry can help companies meet their business goals. In a recent discussion of innovative ideas for management, *Harvard Business Review* editor Bronwyn Fryer noted the difficulties associated with the traditional problem-solving management approaches and the growing interest in creating positive, strengths-based organizational environments. He argued that “companies where the focus is on amplifying positive attributes such as loyalty, resilience, trustworthiness, humility and compassion – rather than combating the negatives – perform better, financially and otherwise.” Fryer concluded that “a positive workplace atmosphere is worth developing . . . and it may be the foundation of true organizational success” (Fryer, 2004).

Consider these case examples:

- Financially successful Southwest Airlines has an established track record of excellent organizational performance as well as high employee and customer service satisfaction. It remains the envy of the airline industry in large part because of its leadership's commitment to family-style values, sense of community, meaningful work, humor, and team spirit.
- Cosmetics mainstay Avon shifted its focus from sexual harassment training to identifying positive examples of men and women successfully working together. Their efforts resulted in greater numbers of qualified women assuming leadership positions, increased profits, and an award for improving gender relationships in the workplace.
- Trucking giant Roadway Express took a strengths-based approach to building employee involvement and increasing workflow efficiency. Self-organized employee project teams identified the company's core capabilities and used these to develop ideas resulting in savings of over \$10,000 per month.
- Lovelace Hospital, in Albuquerque, New Mexico, suffered from short staffing, poor teamwork and skyrocketing recruiting costs for nurses. Rather than bemoan their “turnover problems”, management took a positive approach, attempting to identify why nurses enjoyed working at the hospital. New policies and procedures were implemented that better reflected the strengths of the hospital and its workforce. As a result, the hospital experienced a 13 percent reduction in turnover the first year, a 30 percent reduction in the overall nurse vacancy rate, improved morale among nurses, and increased patient satisfaction ratings.

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American workers need new, more effective leadership development training in their organizations. They need a positive, yet realistic approach to leadership that overcomes the economic and psychological uncertainty in today's business environment. Today's leaders must focus on strengths and successes, learning how to identify and amplify what is working in an organization and build on it.

References

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