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# Accentuate the Positive and Eliminate the Negative: You Really Can Change the Workplace Environment

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**H**ave you ever heard the lyrics of an old song that chant, "You've got to accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative"? Have you ever tried dancing through the hallways at work, singing this song? Probably not, but why? If there's a place many of us need a little more accent on the positive, it's probably at work!

Imagine a positive work environment. What would that be like? Productivity would improve, costs would go down, communication would be better and everyone would generally be happier. It sounds like a winning combination for the employer and the employees.

But how do you create a more positive work environment? Maybe a memo from upper management, demanding people "work together" would do it. Perhaps if you take your department out to lunch, they'll start to feel like a team. Give employees a turkey at Thanksgiving, and they'll love you forever, right? Well, maybe not!

Considering the sheer volume of interactions in any given organization on any given day, how can we make these encounters consistently positive? The answer is to demonstrate behaviors that set a positive tone for all of these interpersonal interactions.

Implementing a strategy to instill six key behaviors was the solution for a mid-sized manufacturing facility where I was responsible for the training, implementation and facilitation of this new philosophy. By using widely accepted best-management practices based on the work of Dr. W. Edwards Deming, and demonstrating these six key behaviors, we put the accent on the positive and created an environment where people felt empowered, respected and encouraged to put their ideas for improvement into action.

## These Six Key Behaviors are:

1. Use positive reinforcement.
2. Ask for questions, problems and concerns, and ask how you can help.

3. Provide information and feedback in a timely manner.
4. Ask for input prior to decision making.
5. Don't over-manage or under-manage.
6. Treat people with respect.

## 1) Use positive reinforcement

It is basic Pavlovian theory: reward people for specific behaviors, and the frequency of those behaviors will increase. The trick is knowing what each of your employees defines as rewarding.

People work for two reasons—the first is money, in order to get the necessities of life such as food, clothing and shelter; the second is self-gratification. They want to feel needed, accomplished and successful, with a sense of camaraderie. The latter are the job satisfiers, but companies tend to focus on the job dissatisfiers instead. Those are the wages, benefits and working conditions often negotiated for in union contracts. When employees have poor working conditions or are not compensated fairly, they feel dissatisfied. However, when the wages, benefits, and working conditions are adequate, it will not make employees feel satisfied—it will merely not make them feel dissatisfied. Satisfaction comes from emotional compensation and self-esteem. It's human nature to want to be recognized positively, and most people will do what is necessary to get that recognition.

The great thing about focusing on job satisfiers instead of dissatisfiers is that there is an unending supply of the satisfiers. It may not be in your authority or in the budget to grant a big bonus, spruce up the office space or get a better employee dental plan, but there is no end to the "free" kudos and pats on the back you can hand out.

When you give someone positive reinforcement, you are not only complimenting, you are conveying your priorities and values. You recognize success, which instills a sense of pride and well-being. That makes for a more satisfied employee and helps lay the foundation for a more positive work environment.

So, do we ignore performances that should not be rewarded? Definitely not! If you are going to encourage positive actions, you must equally discourage negative actions. A positive environment creates a climate of accountability. The more employees are recognized for their successes, the more open they will be to correcting their errors—and an atmosphere of never-ending improvement is born.

### ***Guidelines for Using Positive Reinforcement***

1. Positive reinforcement should follow the behavior as soon as possible. A thank you for helping another department complete a mass mailing spoken the next morning is more effective than a thank you at the performance review six months down the line.

2. Make sure your view of positive reinforcement is perceived by the recipient as positive. Lunch with the boss is nice, but not to the employee that wants to go home at noon. An extra day off isn't much reward to the workaholic that always carries over vacation time.

3. Positive reinforcement reinforces what has been done. It is not a pep talk. Don't use this opportunity to praise as a coaching session. "You did great, but..." doesn't belong here. Separate the two.

### **2) Ask for Questions, Problems, and Concerns, and Ask How You Can Help**

Of course you're a great manager. You have an open-door policy. Your employees can come to you with a problem any time. And you want them to because you need to know what's going on and you are a skilled problem solver. But, did you know that most of the time they won't come to you?

There are several reasons an open-door policy can work against you. When an employee first notices a problem, it is often small. He or she won't want to bother you, may not feel it is "worth it" to take the time to find you and explain the situation and/or doesn't want to look foolish or petty. It's not that important. After all, they want to be perceived as flexible and competent. Have you ever wonder why you are always fighting fires, or why all of the problems happen on third shift? A minor issue gets pushed off to another time or another

shift until it finally becomes a crisis. When you proactively go out and ask people how they are doing, you are saying that you value the information they have. You hold them accountable for reporting on their progress. When you ask how you can help, you indicate your willingness to assist them in overcoming the barriers preventing them from performing optimally. Your ability to solve problems (before they become catastrophic) improves because you have better information sooner, making you a better manager. Your employee feels valued for the information he or she provides, and everyone's self-esteem is raised a notch, increasing job satisfaction.

### ***Guidelines for Asking for Questions, Problems and Concerns, and Asking How You Can Help***

1. Establish visibility in your department. Speak with people individually. Instead of "How's it going?," you might have to ask more specific questions such as, "How is the Smith project going?" to draw out some employees.

2. Be approachable. Be sure your body language and tone of voice indicate a genuine interest. If your voice says, "Stop and talk to me" but your body says, "I can't wait to move on," your message will do more damage than good.

3. Don't be defensive. Make it clear your goal is to learn more about what is going on so you can manage it more effectively. If it turns into a gripe session, suggest you meet with the person at some other time to hear ideas. Turn it into an opportunity for improvement.

### **3) Provide Information and Feedback in a Timely Manner.**

People need information to do their jobs. People want information to understand how the organization is doing and how their performance is being perceived. In the absence of information rest assure it will be created. Wouldn't you prefer to provide the facts than let the grapevine fill in who knows what sort of details?

My experience has been that frustration often sets in because

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two people often have different perceptions of what “a timely manner” means. When I need to select a meeting location so I can get back to committee members, “timely” means in two hours. But, when the meeting planner is setting up three symposiums, two spring meetings and seeing a new vendor that afternoon, “timely” means next week. But, if the meeting planner and I agree to a specific date and/or time deadline based on both of our needs, we can both reach our goals. How much time have you spent following up with people because they didn't get back to you when you needed them to? How did it make you feel? Was your expectation clear and reasonable? When you don't get back to someone, it can be the equivalent of saying, “You, your work and your needs are not important to me,” which can lead to employee self-esteem and motivation problems. It's a matter of respect—but we'll get to that item later.

### *Guidelines for Providing Information and Feedback in a Timely Manner*

1. Overcome your personal blocks to timely feedback. A bad memory or a hectic schedule is no excuse. Keep a list, prioritize, set your palm pilot or mark it on your calendar. Answer as many inquiries as possible when they occur, and let the person know if your feedback is going to take longer than expected.
2. Don't feel threatened by information you cannot provide. If you don't know the answer or the information is not available, say so. Offer to help find the person or resource that may have the answer. If the information is confidential, say so. Let people know you appreciate their question, even if you cannot provide an answer.
3. Give honest answers. People appreciate honesty. You may fool them once, but once the truth comes out (and it usually does), they will forever mistrust you.

4. Ask for Input Prior to Decision Making. This one probably scares you. You're thinking, “but I AM the decision maker,” right? Yes, you are still the decision maker, but soliciting input from those who will be directly impacted by the decision is the best way to make a decision.

No matter how well you may think you know a process, the real experts are those people who are directly involved in the process every day. The more you know, the more effectively you can weigh the impact of a potential decision and the more likely your final decision will be sound.

By soliciting their advice and knowledge, you are telling people they are valued. When people feel valued, they are more satisfied with their job (we just can't get away from that, can we?). Additionally, by including people in the decision-making process, you are more apt to get their buy-in to the final decision. Their buy-in is important if any change is going to be successfully implemented.

### *Guidelines for Asking for Input Prior to Decision Making*

1. Soliciting input is not the same as seeking consensus. You can do that if you want, but your goal is to get the most inclusive information possible so you can make a better decision. The decision is still yours to make.
2. Recognize that yours are not the only good ideas. Different people have different viewpoints. Employee participation in the process enhances ownership of the change.
3. Don't seek input when you don't intend to use it. Don't ask for ideas when the decision has already been made. The next time you ask, no one will respond. Most employees would rather you be honest, and even exclude them,

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than patronize them by asking without any intention of actually considering their opinion. You might need to provide feedback on a decision so you can explain why certain ideas were not implemented, even though they were considered.

5. Don't over-manage or under-manage. You have your own certain "management style," right? That management style is the most effective way to manage each and every one of your employees, right?

Wrong! An under-manager fails to provide employees with the guidelines they need. Under-managers distance themselves, avoiding decisions and are generally being uninvolved, so they can claim ignorance when a crisis erupts. They fear getting involved because it means they will have to make a decision. An over-manager fails to provide employees with the authority to demonstrate their competencies. Over managers dominate employees and usurp their power, rendering them to feel helpless, distrusted and inept. Ironically, both types of managers are essentially trying to abdicate responsibility for failure.

### *Guidelines for Not Over-managing or Under-managing*

1. Recognize where your tendency lies. While your style may slant towards one or the other, over-or under-managing is also situational. We tend to over-manage processes that are familiar or enjoyable, and we under-manage those that are unfamiliar or uncomfortable.

2. If you think you tend to under-manage, try to focus your attention on Key Behaviors 2, 3 and 4.

3. If you think you tend to over-manage, try to focus your attention on Key Behaviors 1, 4 and 6.

### **Treat People with Respect**

Let's face it. The other five key behaviors are really ways to demonstrate respect for people. So maybe we can winnow down the list to just one key behavior that brings another old song to mind: "All I'm asking is for a little R-E-S-P-E-C-T."

You know what I've found, though? When asked, nearly everyone is certain they treat other people with respect. Yet ask those other people if they are always treated respectfully, and they will undoubtedly come up with an example of when they weren't. Why the discrepancy? What does it really mean to treat people with respect? We discovered some everyday examples.

Do you show up for meetings late? That's disrespectful of those who were there on time and it implies your time is more important than theirs. Do you have your assignment completed? If not, that delays your team's progress and indicates you devalued the work.

Did you thank your volunteers for their time? Did you ask someone if they could stay late to handle a last minute assignment, or did you just dump it on the person's desk at 4:30 on your way out the door? When you pass others in the hall, do you say "hello" and use people's names? Do you think all of this is petty? Rest assured these are the types of interchanges that either put a smile on someone's face or have them griping to anyone that will listen.

It's not the golden rule: do unto others as you would have others do unto you. That puts your own personal preferences in the forefront. What if you are a shy person and prefer to be left alone? Does that mean you withdraw from everyone else? What if you like your day filled with excitement and crises, where someone else prefers a more methodical, pre-planned day? You have to try to see the situation from their point of view.

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Treating people with respect provides a guideline to use in all of your interpersonal exchanges, verbal and nonverbal, day after day.

### *Guidelines for Treating People with Respect*

1. Reward in public, reprimand in private. 'Nuf said.
2. You may not be able to control your feelings, but you can control your behavior. Regardless of how you feel, you are responsible for your actions. Smile, even when it hurts.
3. Consider the perception, not the intention. Your intentions may have been admirable but are invisible to others. How would others perceive your actions?

### **Wrap Up**

Does practicing these six key behaviors sound like common sense—I hope so! It worked at our manufacturing facility.

Turnover decreased and improvement ideas saved over \$130,000 the first year. It doesn't take any extra time—in fact, it often saves time! You can do these whether you have many direct reports or no direct reports and at any level of the company. You will find that you work more effectively with others, and enjoy a positive environment that fosters teamwork and continuous improvement.

Next time a problem comes up with someone at work, consider whether using one of the six key behaviors might have prevented it. Hindsight may be 20/20, but with these behaviors in your future, you just might see the way to “eliminate the negative, latch on to the affirmative” and, maybe more importantly, stop messing with “Mister In-Between.” □

## **Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done**

“The book that shows how to get things done and deliver results ... Whether you're running an entire company or in your first management job.”

Written by Larry Bossidy (of GE, AlliedSignal and Honeywell fame) and Ram Charan (legendary advisor to senior executives and boards of directors), this book is a tremendous hands-on practical guide to successfully getting things done.

The authors show that great companies are run by people that understand that execution is their job.

The book focuses on the three core processes of getting things done:

1. The people process
2. The strategy process
3. The operations process

We will use this book as the cornerstone of the Annual Meeting Session, “The Discipline of Getting Things Done.” We will discuss:

- The Leaders 7 Essential Behaviors
- Creating the Framework for Cultural Change
- Having the Right People in the Right Place
- Linking strategy, operations and people

Actuaries who have been successful in both actuarial and non-traditional roles will discuss their real life experiences in getting things done.

Join us for a discussion that could change the way you get things done!

