

Positive Business Communication

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"Feelings of worth can flourish only in an atmosphere where individual differences are appreciated, mistakes are tolerated, communication is open, and rules are flexible."

- *Virginia Satir*

The Case for Positive Communications at Work

Global competition is pervasive in all aspects of business putting enormous pressure on workers and leaders to perform. Work environments have increasingly become more complex and advances in technology are constantly changing the landscape of work. As a result, workplace stress and depression rates are rising which make it even more challenging for employers to engage their employees for higher levels of performance (Sheilds, 2006). Improving psychological well-being at work may help lessen the effects of work stress on reduced work activities and offer organizations a means by which to improve employee engagement and ultimately bottom line performance (Park, 2007).

Increasing positive social capital within organizations is one pathway to improving psychological well-being and performance. According to researchers Wayne Baker and Jane Dutton, positive social capital is referred to as resources that are created through networks of relationships such as "knowledge, information, ideas, advice, help, opportunities, contacts, material goods, services, emotional support and goodwill" (Baker & Dutton, 2007, p. 325). This positive social capital extends the work capacity of teams by allowing them to flourish and equipping them with psychological resources that help them achieve their goals (Baker, & Dutton, 2007). They identified high quality connections and reciprocity as organizational practices that create and sustain positive social capital in work organizations. A high quality connection is "...marked by mutual positive regard, trust, and active engagement on both sides.

In a high-quality connection, people feel more engaged, more open, more competent” (Dutton, 2003, pg. 2). As positive psychology practitioners working with organizations for over 16 years, we believe that high quality connections in the workplace are critical for creating high performing teams. Positive business communications are defined as communications that create those high quality connections. For the purposes of this chapter, our definition of positive communications is broader than this. In addition to communication being respectful, trusting and engaging, positive business communication also promotes learning in the workplace, preserves employee self-esteem, strengthens relationships and has the potential to increase energy in the workplace. Positive business communication promotes an environment where people feel safe to explore, learn and be their authentic selves (Kahn, 1990).

There is a great deal of evidence to show that positivity contributes to improvements in worker well-being and has a positive impact on organizational performance (Losada & Heaphy, 2004). Losada and Heaphy also concluded that positive emotions are not just an end state in themselves, but also a means of creating expansive emotional spaces that open possibilities for effective teamwork. Dr. Barbara Fredrickson’s “broaden-and-build” theory suggests that positive emotions broaden people’s minds and stimulate new ways of thinking and acting. These new ways of thinking and acting then build physical, social, intellectual and psychological resources (Fredrickson, 2003).

When people have positive interactions at work, they also share information and knowledge more freely, which accelerates learning and development for higher team productivity (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). Researchers from Harvard University found that CEOs can improve the quality of strategic decisions made by their top managers by nurturing trusting relationships and facilitating learning from failures (Carmeli, Tishler, & Edmondson, 2012).

Studies have shown that a leader's positive emotions can predict the performance of their entire group (George, 1995). Because positive emotions are contagious, every communication has the capacity to transform organizations and help them reach higher levels of excellence (Fredrickson, 2003).

High levels of workplace stress can have a negative impact on employee productivity and performance (Sheilds, 2006). Psychological availability refers to having the psychological resources to engage in required tasks and the individual's ability to cope with work or personal life (Kahn, 1990). Stress impairs psychological availability and acts as a distraction that preoccupies workers, (Kahn, 1990). Neurobiological research can now begin to explain how stress can interfere with our ability to think effectively. According to Amy Arnsten, a professor of neurobiology at Yale University, high levels of stress can impair the higher cognitive centers of the brain that are responsible for managing distractions, planning and organizing effectively (Arnsten, 1998). Arnsten refers to this as cognitive dysfunction, which leaves people with fewer resources with which to engage in tasks at work. There is no doubt that work environments can challenge us psychologically, and organizations that promote positive communications in the workplace will increase social capital and lower employee stress levels. In the following sections we will highlight the work we do in organizations and the tools we have used to promote positive communications in the workplace.

Case Study: Strengths-Based Communication

One aspect of positive communication is to focus on an employee's strengths. In our experience, the most common type of feedback given to employees is deficit-based in order to fix what is wrong with the individual's performance. We teach leaders how to improve

performance by communicating with employees about their strengths and not just communicating about how to fix their weaknesses. We refer to this form of positive communication as ‘strengths-based feedback’. One definition of a strength is: “a pre-existing capacity for a particular way of behaving, thinking, or feeling that is authentic and energizing to the user, and enables optimal functioning, development, and performance” (Linley, 2008, p. 9). The strengths philosophy is founded on the principle that individuals are more likely to succeed in pursuits that build on their greatest talents rather than focusing on improving weaknesses (Clifton & Harter, 2003). In our workshops, we draw upon the work by Dr. Chris Peterson and Dr. Martin E. P. Seligman on character strengths (2004) and the extensive work done by the Gallup Organization with StrengthsFinder 2.0 (Rath, 2007) for talent strengths. By offering two different strengths surveys to our clients, organizations have the opportunity to choose which view of communicating strengths resonates most with them.

The StrengthsFinder test was developed by the Gallup Organization and results in feedback on an employee’s top five talent themes that can be used by leaders and employees alike. Clifton and Harter define a strength as refining a talent with skill and knowledge (2003). In recent years, there has been a groundswell of support in the business community for a strengths-based approach, most likely due to the growing evidence of improved business performance reported by the Gallup Organization (Harter, Schmidt & Keyes, 2002). Marcus Buckingham claims “a weakness is any activity that leaves you feeling weaker after you do it... your strengths – are any activity that make you feel strong” (2009, pp. 41-42). While this definition might seem obvious, leaders are realizing that engaging their workforce requires more than just managing people’s time, it’s about managing people’s energy (Loehr & Schwartz,

2003). And that includes their psychological energy as well. Studies show that a focus on strengths increases employee engagement and results in better business outcomes.

Clifton and Harter have studied the engagement of strengths extensively through the Gallup Organization. In a study of 10,885 work units (308,798 employees) in 51 companies, work units scoring above the median on the statement: “At work, I have the opportunity do what I do best every day” have 44 percent higher probability of success on customer loyalty and employee retention, and 38 percent higher probability of success on productivity measures (Clifton & Harter, 2003, p. 116). Gallup has continued to research the application of strengths development within certain organizations in which individuals were administered the ‘StrengthsFinder’ assessment (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001) and given feedback related to the individual’s top talent themes. Employee engagement and productivity were tested six months later and results indicated the study group grew in productivity by 50 percent more than the control group (Clifton & Harter, 2003). The study went on to show that people who reported that their managers focused on their strengths had only a 1% chance of being actively disengaged (Rath, 2007). This means that not only should employers try to tailor jobs to employee strengths, but also they should actively communicate using a strengths-based lens.

In a fascinating research study, researchers took a group of bowlers and asked them to review their performance after each bowling session (Kirschenbaum, Ordman, Tomarken & Holzbauer, 1982). They divided the group into two sub-groups. Group 1 reviewed only what they did well and were asked to remind themselves to engage more of the proper behavior. Group 2 was asked to review their performance and indicate what they had done poorly and remind themselves to avoid making the same mistakes in the following rounds.

Amazingly, the bowlers who focused on what they did well showed as much as 100 percent improvement in bowling scores when compared to the other group (Kirschenbaum, Ordman, Tomarken, & Holzbauer, 1982). The mechanisms that may be at work here are the positive emotions that are evoked when one reflects on a success which fuels the person to try harder in the next round. This research demonstrates that we learn better and are able to improve task performance to a greater extent when we focus on our successes rather than our failures. As Albert Bandura noted in his work on self-efficacy, performance experiences improve self-efficacy and this type of reflection allows the person to review their positive performance (Maddux, 2002).

Case Study: Leading From Strength

One recent project using StrengthsFinder 2.0 involved doing a workshop called *Leading From Strength* for approximately 70 high performing women directors at a United States financial services company. The organization has not been seeing enough women promoted to higher positions. Traditional performance feedback focuses on what people need to fix and does not build confidence, as we have seen from the Kirchenbaum study. Management wanted to better equip their women's cohort with insight into their strengths and to learn how to leverage their strengths for higher performance.

All women participating in the cohort were asked to complete the StrengthsFinder 2.0 online assessment and bring their report with their top five talent themes to the workshop. During the event the women were provided with an overview of the difference between a talent versus a strength and the women were debriefed in how to interpret their report. In addition, the women were asked to post their top 5 strengths on posters, which were hung around the room. The group then analyzed the results of the cohort as a whole. Then they participated in a job crafting

exercise where they analyzed opportunities in their existing job to use more of their strengths. This was followed by teaching them how to leverage their strengths and the strengths of others to get what they needed including getting feedback from their manager. The session ended with participants developing an action plan for the one thing they will change as a result of attending the workshop.

The women observed that out of the entire group no one had the strength of “Command” yet they had all risen to the director level. This provoked an interesting discussion as to whether that would occur in a cohort of all men. Overwhelmingly, the group agreed that it was highly unlikely for this to occur in a male cohort. Discussion then focused on their number one strength of “Relator” and the number 2 of “Achiever”. Women are most likely using their abilities as relators to motivate their staff and move up in the organization.

Management was very pleased with the workshop and survey responses from participants confirmed this overall impression after the event. Hearing women share stories about how they used a strength or how they observed someone in the room use one was a reaffirming positive experience. They appreciated how the session didn’t imply there was something broken or try to fix the women as many sessions tend to do, but rather gave them tools and insight to be even better than they already are.

One participant said:

“The introspection required for the StrengthsFinder assessment and subsequent discussions with my peers in the session have been enlightening and valuable. I plan to purchase copies of the book to give to my team and supervisor to share the knowledge and create a common language among ourselves in the quest to develop our strengths.”

This participant realized that strengths-based communication could cultivate workplace flourishing. In addition to a switch from communicating with a deficit model to communicating from strengths, we also work with organizations to show how to deliver

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effective feedback based on positive psychology principles. In the next section, we will extend the strengths discussion to delivering feedback that promotes a growth mindset and positive communication that improves relationships .

Mindset and Active Constructive Responding

Fixed vs. Growth Mindset

In addition to a strengths focus being particularly effective when giving feedback, how an employee thinks about their success or failure contributes to their well-being and performance. Dr. Carol Dweck, from Stanford University, has done groundbreaking research delineating two different kinds of mindsets: a fixed mindset and a growth mindset. People with a fixed mindset believe: “You have a certain amount of intelligence, and you can’t really do much to change it” (Dweck, 2006, p. 12). Those with a growth mindset believe: “You can learn new things, and you can change how intelligent you are” (Dweck, 2006, p. 12). Dr. Dweck and her colleagues studied how different forms of praise affect beliefs and shape motivation, behavior, learning style and performance (Dweck, 2002). In her research, enjoyment, persistence and performance all *decreased* when people were given person praise or praise that focused on the inherent qualities of a personality (e.g. you are smart/good/kind). Enjoyment, persistence, and performance all *increased* when one employed process praise or praise which focused on effort (e.g. you worked hard/you studied wisely) (Mueller & Dweck, 1998).

Dweck teamed up with Dr. Mangels, a neuropsychological researcher, and studied the brain differences of people with fixed mindsets and growth mindsets (Mangels, Butterfield, Lamb, Good & Dweck, 2006). They asked study participants who were connected to brain imaging technology to answer questions on a quiz of common knowledge. When the participants responded, they were then given the right answer. Results of the brain scans show

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that those who had a fixed mindset oriented attention internally in order to regulate emotional responses (Mangels, et al., 2006). In other words, they were more concerned with the threat to their self-perception about ability if they were to give the wrong answer. Alternatively, the growth mindset participants oriented attention externally for the purpose of regulating 'sensory or response selection' (Mangels, et al., 2006). This means they were more focused on learning the right answer and not how they were going look. When people are more concerned about how they are going to be perceived in the workplace, they are less available to engage in the task at hand.

In another set of research, mindset was studied in the workplace and managers who adopted a fixed mindset were not as good at recognizing real changes in staff members. They were also less likely to help those they were managing (Heslin, Wanderwalle & Latham, 2006). Managers with a growth mindset changed beliefs and behavior, gave more and better suggestions to employees during appraisals and were more likely to notice improvements (Heslin, Wanderwalle & Latham, 2006). In our work in businesses we discuss traditional feedback and then introduce the concept of mindset. After explaining the ramifications of a fixed mindset, we then have the participants' role-play giving feedback to each other. They use specific behavioral feedback to cultivate a growth mindset in the recipient. In experiencing what it feels like to receive both person praise (which elicits fixed mindset) and process praise (which elicits growth mindset) participants understand on a deeper level the impact of giving this feedback and are eager to adopt a new strategy which can lead to higher team performance.

Active Constructive Responding

How one responds when things go well also offers leaders an opportunity to increase positive communications in the workplace. Dr. Shelly Gable, a researcher from UCLA, realized

that the majority of couple's research had focused on teaching couples to fight better. She decided to approach relationship research with a completely different perspective and ask the questions: How do people respond to good news? Do they capitalize (i.e. savor and share their own positive events with each other)? Do responses from our partners matter for the individual and the relationship? In her diary study she had 155 undergraduates keep a daily experience log on: their most positive event, their most negative event, whether they told others about the positive event, and their positive and negative mood, life satisfaction and feelings of belongingness if their partner helped them capitalize on the positive event (Gable, Reis, Impett, and Asher, 2004). The results showed that capitalization led to increases in positive affect, greater life satisfaction and greater belongingness. There was also a direct relationship between sharing a positive experience and increases in positive affect and life satisfaction. The more people they told, the greater the benefits. In addition, they found that telling enhances memory. Positive experiences that were shared were more likely to be remembered (Gable, Reis, Impett, and Asher, 2004).

Gable and colleagues discovered that there are four possible responses when someone shares good news (i.e. "I just got a new job"). A passive constructive response is ("That's nice.") and cuts off the conversation without letting the person capitalize. Initially, researchers hypothesized that this response would lead to well-being because it was positive. In fact it was one of the most devastating because the sharer didn't get to speak at all about the event. The second response is passive destructive, or changing the subject to something new entirely or to focus on the listener ("Listen to what happened to me"). The third response is active destructive, or actively quashing the other person's good news ("That means more stress. I don't envy you.") The final response was the active constructive response (ACR) where the listener

asked questions and authentically was interested in the sharer’s good news (“That’s great news! Tell me more.”). Below is a graph that delineates the four styles.

<p>Active Constructive</p> <p>Enthusiastic support, drawing out speaker, more capitalizing</p> <p><i>“That’s great news! Tell me more.”</i></p>	<p>Active Destructive</p> <p>Quashing the event</p> <p><i>“That means more stress. I don’t envy you.”</i></p>
<p>Passive Constructive</p> <p>Quiet, low-energy support</p> <p><i>“That’s nice.”</i></p>	<p>Passive Destructive</p> <p>Ignoring the event, changing focus to self</p> <p><i>“Listen to what happened to me.”</i></p>

(Gable, et al., 2004)

Active constructive (and not the other responses) has relationship benefits. If your partner gives ACR it increases satisfaction, intimacy, trust, daily happiness and leads to fewer conflicts. The findings were the same for men and women. Giving ACR wasn’t just beneficial to the sharer. There were benefits to the responder as well. If you give ACR it increases positive affect and life satisfaction. Reis and Shaver (1988) name three components of intimacy: feeling understood, feeling validated, and feeling cared for. ACR cultivates understanding, validation, and caring. Those who felt more understood, validated and cared for by partner had greater relationship quality.

When we teach this in organizations we encourage managers and employees to take the time not just to focus on managing crises but also to capitalize more when someone chooses to share good news with them. It is important to explore internal and external hindrances to giving ACR— strengths (modesty), family of origin, and beliefs about bragging or sharing good news.

It is also important to pay attention to your preferred style of responding. How do you normally respond and with whom? And how does your style affect your relationships at work? We've seen enormous strides in positive communication at work just by teaching this technique.

Maintaining Positive Communications: Managing the Negative

Sometimes even the best relationships are faced with unexpected challenges or conflicts in the workplace. In our experience, most employees prefer to ignore or live with a difficult person at work rather than confront them. When conflict is not resolved quickly and constructively it festers and can snowball into much larger problems. In order to maintain a positive work environment, it is therefore important to teach employees a constructive way to positively confront someone in the workplace to resolve a conflict, address destructive behavior or provide constructive feedback. This type of interaction is similar to a negotiation where one person is advocating for what they need from the working relationship and the other person is influenced to change their behavior to meet that need. This is key for maintaining good social relationships at work, which ultimately has an impact on our stress levels at work.

Our social relationships influence our physiological and behavioral responses to stressful situations at work (Blascovich, Mendes, Hunter, & Salomon, 1999). According to one meta-analysis of 208 studies on stress, tasks that included social-evaluative threat, in which co-workers could judge performance, provoked larger spikes in cortisol than stressors without these particular threats (Dickerson, & Kemeny, 2004). Because individuals are motivated to maintain social status and acceptance, when environments are fraught with blaming, constant negative criticism and backroom gossip, people are not safe to be themselves and they spend an inordinate amount of time protecting their self-image at the expense of productivity. By offering

employees an action-oriented approach to resolving challenging situations, we can reduce stress and improve psychological availability for higher levels of performance.

The method we teach for having challenging conversations is a solution-focused approach to effective negotiations and resolving conflicts and is intended to increase positive emotions (Bannink, 2010). Increasing positive emotions in negotiation have been shown to produce higher joint benefits and the use of fewer negative tactics (Carnevale and Isen, 1986). In addition, people are more cooperative before and during the negotiation, achieve better outcomes, and are more likely to honor the agreement they reached (Forgas 1998). A solution-focused approach does not focus on the behavior or relationship that is not wanted, but rather focuses on the desired future relationship and stimulates empathic thinking for both parties. Empathy stimulates altruistic behavior (Batson et al, 1987) and contributes to long-term relationship satisfaction (Davis & Oathout, 1987). Researchers have found that people are more compassionate and forgiving when they are able to look at things from the other person's perspective (McCullough et al, 1997). Increasing empathy therefore improves the likelihood of both pro-social behaviors and forgiveness both which contribute to maintaining positive relationships after the conflict has been resolved.

Case Study: Managing Challenging Conversations Workshop

The Managing Challenging Conversations workshop is designed to give employees a practical five-step method for approaching difficult conversations with the ultimate goal of reducing employee stress, restoring relationships and increasing positivity in the workplace. This process begins with envisioning what a positive future might look if the conversation were successful. This accomplishes two things: 1) it gives people an approach goal to move towards and 2) it promotes positive emotions as people mentally envision a positive future, void of this

conflict or problem. The next two steps are designed to increase compassion and empathy in the discussion and asks both parties to explore first, what they have contributed to the situation and second, an understanding of the other party's point of view. By raising awareness of both party's contributing behavior and improving understanding of the other party's point of view, people are clearer about the solutions that will improve the situation. The fourth step in the process is to have both parties co-create what the future relationship will look like. When both parties are mutually involved in creating the solution, there is greater buy-in and motivation to maintain what was agreed upon (Kahneman, Slovic & Tversky, 1982). The final stage is to clearly state what the agreement is and put it in writing. Documenting the agreement is important so that both parties have something to refer to should behavior revert back to old tendencies. When people have tools to approach challenging conversations in a positive and constructive manner, they are more likely to engage in fixing what may be wrong in the relationship.

Increasing Well-Being in the Workplace to Reduce Stress

Our work as practitioners of positive psychology has centered on creating and encouraging positive work culture where people can thrive and maintain good psychological health. But our experience implementing evidence-based positive interventions had always been at the individual level. We hypothesized that if teams engaged in well-being enhancing positive interventions as a group, these activities would reduce stress in the workplace and also be a dynamic way to communicate and increase positive emotions. Positive emotions have an 'undoing effect' on our cardiovascular system after experiencing the effects of stress or anxiety. In one study, participants were asked to make a surprise speech that would be reviewed by their peers which caused heart rates and blood pressure to rise and veins and arteries to constrict.

Randomly selected participants who viewed one of two positive video clips after this negative event had the fastest cardiovascular recovery (Fredrickson et al., 2000). Engaging in higher level positive emotions is one pathway to reducing stress.

Gratitude, for example, is well documented as a means to increasing well-being (Emmons & Shelton, 2002; Emmons, & McCullough, 2003) as well as performing random acts of kindness (Lyubomirsky, 2008). Acts of kindness and generosity between two people expand each person's emotional resources and openness to new ideas and influences (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). Plus, when teams communicate in *group* appreciation and kindness activities, teams also have the added benefit of experiencing the positive emotion of elevation by watching co-workers on the receiving end of these uplifting acts (Haidt, 2003). These higher level positive emotions fuel positive relationships in the workplace and can protect workers against stress.

Case Study: Resilience and Stress Reduction Wellness Program

Interventions in positive psychology became the foundation for a 6-week Resilience and Stress Reduction program for a medium-sized rubber manufacturing company in Toronto, Canada. This 6-week program is one module of four wellness modules including Nutrition, Exercise and Disease Prevention. The program is coordinated with the wellness committee at the organization who then communicates to all employees about organized activities and events throughout the 6-week program. The program begins with a keynote address to all participating employees educating them on the basics of positive psychology and the research supporting the activities proposed in the program. Then participants are encouraged to engage in the activities together with team members and incorporate some of the activities into their personal lives as

well. The activities were simple things that would not take too much time away from work tasks and could easily be implemented in the workplace without too much disruption.

Several positive interventions were introduced to the organization over the six-week program but we will focus on two here: Random Acts of Kindness Week and Appreciation and Gratitude Week. In the Random Acts of Kindness week, we gave people several ideas of how they could show kindness to others in the workplace including giving compliments, buying coffee for the person behind you at the cafeteria, and sending secret gifts to each other. People were given a different challenge every day and they chose if they wanted to engage in them or not. One gentleman bought flowers for all of the women and gum for all of the men and placed it on everyone's desk before they came into work that day. Others went out of their way to give whole-hearted compliments to those who were working hard on company initiatives. Most people commented on how good they felt doing something for others, even though they were just small things and these acts of kindness gave them something positive to discuss in the workplace.

In the Appreciation and Gratitude Week, large poster boards were placed in the cafeteria and every employee had a dedicated page posted on it where people could write what they appreciated most about that person. Employees were asked to finish the following statement "What I appreciate most about John Doe is..." and employees were free to write their words of appreciation. After one week, the result was a collection of appreciative sentences about everyone on the team. People loved to read how others appreciated them, but they also loved reading the appreciative words others received. The Information Technology (IT) manager was so happy to receive appreciative words as he normally only receives calls from people when the technology is *not* working. The 6-week program ended with a celebration to reflect on what was

learned and encouraged people to continue to incorporate these habits into their daily lives. These types of interactions were more powerful at energizing people because it induced higher-level positive emotions such as gratitude and elevation.

In order to gauge the effectiveness of these interventions, The Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, Kamarck, and Mermelstein, 1983) was administered to 17 participants both before the 6-week Resilience and Stress Reduction module and immediately following the module. A t-test assessing stress levels demonstrated that participants' experienced less stress subsequent to completing the modules than they did before the modules began ($t(16) = 5.59, p < .001$). Although we can't be completely certain that these results are attributable to the program, because no control group was included, the highly significant results obtained with a small sample suggest that positive psychology interventions in the workplace can be effective at reducing employee stress. As stress affects psychological availability, it is easy to see how reductions in stress can lead to higher levels of employee productivity. We believe that positive interventions increase positive emotions and create upward spirals for work teams and this fuels positive communications and contributes to better business performance.

Summary

What managers and employees communicate and how they communicate creates the organizational culture. At the core of this: Is a team energized or depleted after interacting with each other? Through our practical experience applying these techniques with numerous organizations in North America, we've discovered that when leaders are successful at leveraging positivity and engaging in positive communications on a daily basis, both leaders and employees experience the upward spiral of positive emotion which reduces stress and leads to greater levels of well-being and higher workplace performance. That is not to say that these practices are easy

to implement. Change is difficult. But like learning any new skill, it can be done with patience and practice. And when the outcomes are proven to increase well-being and performance in work and in life, it is not just a worthy endeavour. It is an imperative one.

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