

Accentuate the Positive

Written by Administrator

Monday, 21 February 2011 16:09 - Last Updated Friday, 25 March 2011 16:03

Are you managing in a gloomy atmosphere? If the answer is 'yes', you won't be alone. A Work Foundation survey found 30 per cent of the working population felt negative or indifferent towards their work. That's an awful lot of negativity. Managers can easily compound this negativity by their policies and actions, and find it difficult to break out of this bleak pattern.

In business today performance management, assessment centre activity and training and development interventions tend to focus on what is failing: identifying individual and collective areas for development and forming an action plan around the steps to take to improve these. In this article the authors argue for accentuating the positive, placing more weight on identifying and building on personal strengths as a way of enhancing performance. They outline why and how this need can be addressed.

Having the ability to look on the bright side in a grounded way can help managers and colleagues to have well-founded confidence to:

- Regard change as an opportunity
- Be more creative and flexible
- Take responsibility, and not unduly blame others
- Treat 'failure' and blockages as a temporary state
- Differentiate one unsuccessful situation from a pattern of continuous failure
- Deal with customers cheerfully and helpfully

People who are positive are often good to be with and breed a state of confidence and energy around them - people want to be with them, and this atmosphere is good for business.

A climate that focuses on weaknesses

Let us first take a short litmus test on the positivity in your organization. Which part of these pairs of statements comes closest to your organization?

We're quick to home in on mistakes or
Even when the going gets tough, we usually stay positive

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A lot of blaming and finger pointing goes on or
There is lots of positive energy around

We often seem to be anxious that we're not going to make it or
On the whole, we're very successful

When a crisis hits, we tend to be restricted to only a few ways out or
When something is important, we find many pathways forward

Whatever we do, it never seems good enough or
We feel confident to tackle what issues the business throws up

Many companies take as read the importance of celebrating success, accentuating the positive, rewarding the good, using the carrot and avoiding excessive use of the stick. They have had this reinforced by countless motivational gurus and management articles. John Lewis makes a clear and sincere statement to every new entrant to its business: 'We want Partners to enjoy every minute of working at John Lewis. A big part of this involves recognising, celebrating and sharing in each others success.' However, the experience in many other companies is out of tune with this well-worn conventional wisdom. In practice, people typically find in every aspect of their working lives that the negative is likely to be stressed; for example during performance appraisals it is well-proven that a manager and their appraisee are likely to spend more time looking at the few areas of weakness, the reasons for these and how to correct them, whilst neglecting the majority of the job which is done well or competently and how to build on this success.

The traditional formats of assessment centres or training and development interventions conclude with activities where individuals are asked to identify and agree actions that can be taken to develop their areas of weaknesses. The same amount of emphasis is not given to how an individual can build on their strengths and take steps to maximise these in a work environment.

Why is this? It is arguable that these roots go deep and are ingrained into our culture, that at

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school mistakes are frequently highlighted, failure is made public and often humiliating: more often than not correction means identifying areas of failure and homing in on those. Young children growing up are told not to do this or that. As a result, some people find it embarrassing to receive motivational feedback; they feel uncomfortable, not worthy and try and brush away praise.

For many, even more embarrassing is giving praise; we find that many managers do not compliment and recognise effort and achievement. They have the notion that 'it is part of the person's job anyway', so why mention satisfactory work? Typically we find that these managers themselves have not been subject to praise. Their strengths have not been highlighted and they do not see the merit in doing this for others. Thus it becomes a vicious circle where lack of praise leads to lack of motivation to praise others.

Today's systems of measurement exacerbate the tendency to pick up mistakes. For example in reporting by exception when targets or KPIs have not been met.

Increasing Self Awareness: Why identifying strengths is important

In our experience increasing self awareness is a key step in developing potential whether the person is a leader, manager, front line or support employee. It is just as important for the individual to know what they do well and where their strengths lie as their areas for improvement. Recognising strengths is a means of developing a person's confidence, just as developmental feedback can help develop competence. Yet how often do we receive balanced feedback?

Self-development workshops can help individuals to recognise their strengths and potential in a non-threatening atmosphere. We have conducted many such workshops, which give participants a much wider perspective on their transferrable skills, inside work and outside it. For example, even teaching your child to ride a bike can illustrate unrecognised skills which could be transferred to work situations.

To get the best out of people, we advocate a balanced approach to performance management. This means that the manager takes time to provide motivational feedback to employees as well as developmental feedback where this is due. This balance of support to the individual as well as challenge has been proven to encourage high performance in individuals.

Lack of Effective Feedback Skills

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One of the problems that we find working with managers in a variety of industry sectors is that the quality of feedback that they provide is very poor. It can be subjective, based on impressions and not behaviour and untimely ? left to performance reviews rather than a day to day occurrence. Where behaviour is discussed, often people forget to state the consequence or effect of the behaviour. The manager ends up telling the team member what they need to do differently rather than gaining the individual?s buy-in to change.

Creating a culture where strengths are highlighted and built upon

What can be done to build a more rounded approach?

The first thing to do is to examine the underlying philosophy in your organization. If you want high performance, do your organisation's visions and values support a culture that recognises the positives as well as striving for improvement? The next stage is to look at the practices which support company values, these are both formal such as pay schemes, recognition schemes, appraisals and targets. There also informal systems at work. For example, how often does your boss find fault with your work? When was the last time he or she criticised you? When was the last time he praised you? Was this done in public or private?

One organization we work with has an explicit set of managerial competencies based around recognising effort and achievement, encouraging continuous improvement, openness and honesty. This list is a good indication of how all managers need to operate in the business environment if they are to manage positively and skilfully.

The next stage is to engage with your team in an open discussion. The Sunday Times research into the "Best Companies to Work For" identified a key characteristic of effective companies is that bosses pay attention to what their employees have to say.

Ask employees how you could make the environment more positive, hopefully more enjoyable and more rewarding. Listen carefully to the answers: if this is a rare event, almost certainly some of the answers you get back will be unpalatable, they may criticise your style, cite particular instances when they felt you did not support them and, if they're honest, ways you could do more for them and see things more through their eyes. It is easy at this stage to feel defensive - after all, you're doing your best, you may feel overworked and perhaps under-appreciated yourself.

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Some personal reflection is then called for. How much in your day-to-day living are you inclined to see the negative? Does this extend outside work? Do friends and family find that you're likely to criticise them and overlook or take for granted the good points? Can you identify what lies behind that? Whilst not wishing to go too deep, a measure of insecurity and habit may be at work here. So how can you break that habit particularly if it is ingrained and has been practised for a long time? We don't claim it'll be easy for anyone used to working in an established, overly critical work pattern but here are some suggestions from Julian Richer, of Richer Sounds. He has considerable knowledge of building a positive and motivational climate. He believes it can be summed up in five steps:

1. Make the workplace fun
2. Provide copious and specific recognition for the work which staff
3. Offer frequent and targeted rewards
4. Make communication regular and all pervasive
5. Reward employee loyalty

Richer Sounds has featured over many years as a beacon of best practice in recognising achievement and giving praise. The results are clear to see: according to the Guinness Book of Records, for the last 15 years Richer Sounds has achieved the highest sales per sq. ft of any retailer in the world.

Building on the Richer principles, we recommend the following actions:

- Make a point of looking out consciously for things going well and commenting on it - don't just keep it to yourself, catch someone doing something right. When things are not going well, look at the performance, avoid generalising about the person or judging them, otherwise they will not take on board what you have said.
- Set goals; give feedback regularly, quickly and positively. Consciously make an attempt during personal reviews to give a balanced view of someone's performance. For example, if it is 90 per cent positive make sure you spend that amount of time reinforcing what is being done well. This will hone your skills of analysis and the insight into what exactly it is that someone is doing well, and also for their help you to be clear and about the eeriest that need improvement. This will help to build a more trusting and less defensive climate. After all, if you know you're going to be

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criticised your most likely reaction is to be defensive to justify, to become aggressive or silent. This will not encourage the development of a jointly agreed solution.

- Discuss how people can build on their strengths and how they can use a strength to overcome an area of weakness. Having an awareness of what your strengths are helps individuals develop coping strategies to improve their personal effectiveness. So, for example, if I know my facilitation skills are strong but I am not an engaging presenter, when designing a briefing session, I may focus strongly on group discussions or ask a participant to present part of the session.

There is a school of thought that it is far easier to build on a strength than it is to overcome a weakness. However, as a manager, be conscious of the person's degree of strength and provide feedback if the strength is overdone. So for example, if someone appears over-confident and hogs the airtime, the impact may be that others find them overpowering, dominant or even arrogant. Likewise, someone who overdoes the strength of being considered and thoughtful, may be seen by others as quiet, unforthcoming and reserved. In our view, discussion needs to take place about the degree of a strength that is demonstrated and how to use this strength appropriately.

- Look at how each individual's strengths can be used to help the overall performance of the team. Someone who has strong administrative skills for example, may be a good foil for another team member who is great at innovating and coming up with new ideas.

- Re-examine how you celebrate as a team and as an organization. How often does it happen? And what form does it take? What are people's honest feelings about these celebrations? Does it feel contrived, stilted and constrained? Whilst celebrating success is an attitude of mind, there is also conscious strategy that can be deployed successfully. The key is choosing the right approaches. Here are some suggestions to celebrate success which have worked for different organizations: For a big success, think big. For example, Deloitte placed a 10 ft banner in reception to announce a thank you that it was placed in the Best Companies award. Encourage top management involvement-one of the ways that employees will look for veracity is to check that senior management have endorsed any success. Award a keepsake as a regular reminder - sometimes a small, valued memento can act as a regular reminder of successes. Think socially, announce successes not just at formal events but informal ones.

- Look at how learning and development interventions are structured. Do they provide equal

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opportunity to develop existing skills as well as learn new ones? One organisation we work with invites delegates to record the strengths that have been identified as part of the learning and how they can be built upon, as well as the areas they need to practise and improve.

- Practise what you preach. Managers rewarding themselves perks denied to others, being slack on time-keeping yourself, whilst being strict with others, are examples of how saying one thing, doing another breeds resentment and an uncomfortable distance. One employee of a major blue-chip business commented: "In this brave new world we are "empowered" to do things", then my manager takes it back and says, "Are you sure you've got the cost right??".

- Communicate thoroughly, two-ways. Most companies do not do nearly enough in this area, communicating in ways people do not fully understand and is irrelevant to their situation. Use all available communication methods to get positive messages across -emails, newsletters, company intranet, for example, but remember face-to-face praise and recognition will count for a lot. Ensure clear, regular messages and keep the messages consistent -no mixed messages- and regular, not once in a blue moon. If managers appear unapproachable and aloof, it is hardly surprising that they receive little feedback from team members.

When Greg Dyke joined the BBC as Director General, he found a deeply unhappy organization which he was determined to change. He set an example of approachability and respect for others, however low down the ladder. His philosophy: "People perform better when they are trusted and encouraged". He instituted Just Imagine sessions for all employees, where "instead of moaning, people talked about their proudest and most successful moments" and they came up with thousands of ideas and suggestions. Find out about your employees and what makes them tick. Relate to them on an emotional as well as a rational level.

- Listen to your employees: Find out what frustrates them, what hinders them doing their job. Is there unnecessary red tape? Are there processes which are cumbersome?

- Establish a track record of valuing employees through thick and thin. In practice, do your employees feel they are genuinely valued? Are your practices based on employees as commodities?

- Re-appraise your reward and recognition methods. Have they stayed the same for too long?

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Are they rewarding the right things? Consider the full range "from a pat on the back, a letter of recognition, pay to prizes, an offer to take a team out to lunch, holding a party". Broadcast externally to show pride: consider press releases, putting successes on the company website, in customer newsletters and annual reports.

- Finally, consider your recruitment and selection methodologies. Are you recruiting with a positive attitude in mind? Southwest Airlines believes the right attitude is paramount, skills can be added later, given the right potential. Former England rugby coach Clive Woodward adopted a philosophy of encouraging what he called energisers and weeding out what he termed energy sappers, who brought morale down.

Playing to ones strengths

Employee engagement and commitment is most likely to be achieved when people have the opportunity to fully utilise and feel good about their strengths. Charles Handy, the management guru, has a philosophy in life that people should find what they do best and do it. We believe that a realistic appraisal and focus on strengths will help people be more confident and fulfilled as individuals as well as in their business roles.

Be clear, we are not describing a happy-happy club, which encourages an overly rosy view of situations, possessing little sense of reality and functioning in a state of denial, refusing to be critical of themselves and believing nothing is impossible regardless of the odds! We are, however, advocating a better balance of motivational and developmental feedback and fostering a culture of high energy and positive performance.

WL Gore & Associates (Gore-Tex)

The 2006 overall winner of The Sunday Times "Best Companies to Work For" award takes an unusual approach to the firm's internal structures. Employees are all associates, not directors, secretaries or managers, and teamwork is so important that colleague's rating of each other is one of the things pay is based on. John Kennedy, a man whose business card bears no job title, but who is responsible for all UK associates, thinks what differentiates Gore from everyone else is its culture. "It's belief in the individual. We try to let people do things they are good at as opposed to forcing them into things they are not good at. A lot of why we have been successful is down to the way we treat people and how people react to that. It works for us and makes us a good place to work and a very productive place to work."

Gore's success is convincing. It ranks first in five of all eight categories that make up the

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Sunday Times survey. The eight factors are:

- Leadership: how employees feel about the head of the company and senior managers;
- Wellbeing: how staff feel about stress, pressure and the balance between their work and home duties;
- My manager: people's feelings towards their immediate boss and their day-to-day managers;
- My team: people's feelings about their immediate colleagues;
- Fair deal: how happy the workforce is with their pay and benefits;
- Giving something back: how much companies are thought by their staff to put back into society, and the local community in particular;
- My company: feelings about the company people work for as opposed to the people they work with;
- Personal growth: to what extent staff feel they are stretched and challenged by their job.

Checklist for a Positive Organizational Climate

Here is an action checklist to get started on promoting a positive organizational climate

- Set achievable as well as stretching targets and recognise meeting them
- Give and receive ample feedback
- Consciously take the lead in fostering optimism
- Set expectations clearly
- Encourage personal ownership
- Make a point of thanking others
- Identify each person's strengths and make use of them
- Give each person a clear sense of their personal importance to the business
- Foster two-way communication
- Listen and act on suggestions, opinions and views
- Develop a sociable, people-friendly atmosphere
- Maintain momentum to avoid getting into a rut
- Celebrate team successes, big and small

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