

# Staying positive in this economic outlook?

*For businesses to survive in today's economic climate, positive feedback has become a 'must'. Neuroscience research offers a compelling case as to why seeing the good side, and talking about it, matters to business.*

**Austerity. Can we make our numbers? Belt tightening. Will we survive? Do more with less. Push harder.**

In almost every office I enter I hear these words again and again. In a business environment where everyone is giving their all to stay in the game, saying something positive has never been so important. But it is not always easy. Business life has become conditioned to the neutral, often with a focus on what is not working. Changing that focus can, however, drive significant changes in our performance. Neuroscience research offers a compelling case as to why seeing the good side, and talking about it, matters to the business.

## Staying creative and finding solutions

In difficult times, most of us feel under threat. Many of us are doing what feels like four people's jobs, putting out fires, and calming raw nerves. When we are working in this type of environment, our brain's limbic system, or amygdala, is working at full steam. Our body starts to go into 'fight or flight' to deal with the perceived threat: it pulls resources from the part of the brain (the prefrontal cortex) that is typically able to think creatively, plan or relate to others. As a result, we start to react on impulse. We lose our ability to control our emotions or think through different alternatives. We also stop learning. In short, we move into a negative spiral.

So how to break out of this vicious circle? According to Barbara Fredrickson, a leading researcher in positive psychology, '... unlike negative emotions, which narrow people's ideas about possible actions, positive emotions do the opposite: they broaden people's ideas about possible actions, opening their awareness to a wider range of thoughts and actions than is typical.'<sup>(1)</sup> Not only that, but research has shown that if we concentrate on looking for the positive, we actually build new connections in our brain, which helps us to create a virtuous circle of seeing the positive more easily and staying creative to find solutions and drive performance.

## Concentrating on the goal

Talking about the goal focuses the brain on where we want to go. It builds connections in the brain that open new possibilities for getting there. Talking only about what we need to fix keeps us focused on what is broken, builds our stress level, and can keep us from being at our best creatively. Both approaches seek improvement; the difference lies in how you achieve it.

The same can happen on an individual level. When someone is constantly telling an employee what they are doing wrong, both employee and manager are building connections in their brains that focus their attention on the problem. The problem takes on increasing significance and can pull energy away from building a more positive improvement. If this is balanced by also telling him what he is doing well, then he can focus his energy on building and broadening his strengths. Drawing a picture for him of what good performance looks like is more likely to help him than constantly telling him what he is doing wrong.

## Positivity builds trust

Researchers have also shown that with positivity comes trust and as trust builds, people increase their positivity. If we are expecting leaders to think out of the box and take the necessary risks that will lead to reward in this difficult environment, then creating an environment where they are not keeping their heads low out of fear is critical.

It is hard to have trust if leaders aren't being authentic, and it's hard to be 'real' if we are never pointing out areas for improvement. The key is in the balance between the two. Researchers seem to agree that to get the maximum benefit, our positive comments should outnumber our critical ones by at least three to one. This leaves room for improvement for many of us.

Trust also makes leaders more impactful and efficient. We keep an open mind when we listen to leaders we trust. We value their feedback more. We have fewer misunderstandings because we have more open communication. When things get stressful, these are the relationships that help us through and keep us in a place where we can continue to think calmly and move forward.

## Expectations matter

Numerous research studies have shown that our expectations matter; most notably in looking at how placebos can improve health because we believe they will. A well-known study also showed that teachers who believe they are teaching the brightest children will translate their positive images of the class to the students, who are in turn motivated to work harder<sup>(2)</sup>.

The manager who believes she will get the best from her employee by being 'on his back' and pushing harder may not only set off an unproductive 'fight or flight' response, but may also be sending the message that she is worried about his performance.

The leader who sets the vision, who has communicated her belief that her colleagues can achieve the goal and has shown that she will be there to support work as needed, has a much better chance of raising the bar to gain optimal performance. Thus, a vicious circle is converted into a virtuous one.

So the next time you think or hear, 'Why should I tell her she was doing a good job when she was just doing what I expected?'... think again. Building an environment that feels more like a virtuous circle – noticing the positive, building trust, staying creative and productive - in this economic climate is not easy. But it may be imperative. We need risk taking and creative solutions to remain competitive; we need our people to learn quickly to adapt to constant change; we must retain the people who are winning the business. If this is to happen, we need to build relationships of trust and concentrate on the positive image of success. Telling them what they are doing well might be the most important first step to achieving this aim.

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- (1) See Fredrickson's book in Further Reading pg. 21
- (2) See Cooperrider's article in Further Reading referencing these studies.

## Further Reading

Cooperrider, David 2001, **Reprinted with permission from:** *Appreciative Inquiry: An Emerging Direction for Organization Development*, David L. Cooperrider, Peter F. Sorensen, Jr., Therese F. Yaeger, and Diana Whitney, editors. Champaign IL: Stipes Publishing L.L.C., 2001. Copyright 2001 by Stipes Publishing L.L.C. **This document:** <http://www.stipes.com/aichap2.htm> **Referring document: Home page:** <http://www.stipes.com> **Posted:** 9/20/01

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