

The Power of Positivity

Communicating in the Attention Age

In this Information Age, individuals, teams and organizations have more modes of communication at our disposal than ever before: phone, fax, email, text, instant messaging. Increasingly, leaders are defined by their ability to effectively communicate and process information, at faster and faster rates. As we rapidly enter the Attention Age, we now must incorporate social media into our business lives as well, quickly learning the intricacies and impact of the tweet, status update and the as yet unknown mode of communication that is assuredly on the horizon.

Despite these escalating demands, in all of our roles, we are expected to produce results equal to – and often greater than – those previously generated.

One of these growing demands revolves around communication. Whether through personal interaction, the printed word, or evolving technology, communication is becoming a larger percentage of the actions to be executed by leaders, and it will become imperative for leaders to maximize their positive and minimize their negative instances of communication. This will be the only way to maintain or, optimally, increase our PQ.

The Performance Quotient (PQ) is a representation of organizational capacity, the “ability to execute” positive actions and produce positive outcomes (Above The Line) in relation to negative actions and outcomes.



With demands on both productivity and communication multiplying, leaders face a fundamental question: How can we optimize all of these communication channels to increase our PQ?

Case Study: The Power of Positive Communication

Kim Cameron, chief architect of the Positive Organizational Psychology movement, makes a compelling case for positive communication as a critical tool in the pursuit of high performance and business success.

Cameron sites a 2004 study of 60 top-management teams conducted by Losada & Heaphy in his work “Positive Leadership: Strategies for Extraordinary Performance”.

Based on profitability, customer satisfaction and 360-degree manager evaluations, 15 of the 60 teams were rated as high performing teams, 26 as medium and 19 as low. Trained raters, who were unaware of the ratings, monitored communication patterns for each team.¹

Team Performance

	High	Medium	Low
Positive Statement Ratio (supportive, encouraging, appreciative versus critical dissapproving, contradictory)	5.6 to 1	1.8 to 1	0.36 to 1
Inquiry / Advocacy Ratio (questioning versus asserting)	1.1 to 1	0.67 to 1	0.05 to 1
Others / Self Ratio (external versus internal focus)	0.94 to 1	0.62 to 1	0.03 to 1
Connectivity Average (mutual influence, assistance, interaction)	32	22	18

Source: Losada & Heaphy
Table 4.2 Communication in Top Management Teams

Their conclusion was definitive, with 311% greater occurrence in positive communication by the high performing team vs. the medium performing team:

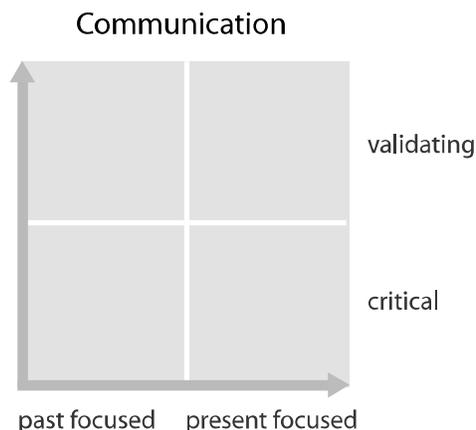
“The single most important factor in predicting organizational performance – which was more than twice as powerful as any factor – was the ratio of positive statements to negative statements.”

Communicating from The Upper Right

Many of us know intuitively that a positive approach to communication is most productive. However, faced with the overwhelming, objective evidence the impact positive communication has on an organization's success, leaders have received a call to action. The time has come to calibrate organizational culture to a point where positive communication is the norm.

We then must answer two fundamental questions:

- What is positive communication?
- How does it work?



What Is Positive Communication?

Though “positive” could be described countless ways – some highlighted in the case study above – we have a term which can be used to describe a positive approach across areas of performance: Upper Right.

Looking at the Communication Quadrants above, we have a straightforward way to assess how positive our communication is: Simply ask, “In my communication, am I being”:

- past focused or present focused?
- critical or validating?

Optimally, we want to communicate consistently from the Upper Right. We want to be present focused, as opposed to past focused. We want to be validating, as opposed to critical. Opposite the Upper Right is the Lower Left, destructive communication that is past focused and critical.

Let's consider this example. A team fails to reach their sales goal, and the Sales Manager addresses their team:

From The Lower Left

We didn't make our numbers last quarter and it better not happen again. I'm not sure what your problem is, but you better solve them and get it done, or else.

From The Upper Right

It's the start of a new quarter. Obviously, we are all disappointed about last quarter's numbers. Considering that experience, what can we do differently to get to our goal? Let's commit to identifying those lessons and getting it done this time.

Though the information conveyed is essentially the same, consider some differences in approach:

"We didn't make our numbers last quarter..."

vs. "It's the start of a new quarter."

Though both communications acknowledge falling short last quarter and the need to improve performance this quarter, the Lower Left approach focuses on the failure of the former while the Upper Right approach highlights the possibility of the latter.

"I'm not sure what your problem is..."

vs. "Let's commit to identifying those lessons..."

Similarly, both acknowledge that there must have been factors which interfered with achieving success. Unfortunately, the Lower Left approach essentially accuses the sales team of *being* the problem. By focusing critical attention on who they are rather than what they do, the Sales manager leaves his people with little to do. If they are incapable of being a good sales team, why even try? And what *could* they try?

By focusing on applying lessons learned, the Upper Right approach validates the ability of the team to make distinctions and improve on their performance. The lessons learned could very well be about their practices, behavior, team culture or individual character. However, the Upper Right Sales Manager communicates a belief that his sales team has the agency to impact any area necessary to get to their goal.

The issue, though, is not the turning of pretty phrases. The issue is performance. Simply put, why does the approach impact performance so profoundly?

What Experience Are You Creating?

Sigal Barsade, a Wharton professor who studies the influence of emotions on the workplace and Donald Gibson of Fairfield University's Dolan School of Business co-authored "Why Does Affect Matter at Work?" Barsade sums up their findings thusly:

Positive people cognitively process more efficiently and more appropriately. If you're in a negative mood, a fair amount of processing is going to that mood. When you're in a positive mood, you're more open to taking in information and handling it effectively.²

Why is positive communication so critical to the success of an organization?

As leaders, our communication continually must move toward the Upper Right; not for the sake of some abstract notion of "being nice," but because who we are being through our communication has a far-reaching impact on critical elements of performance for our colleagues, direct reports and, potentially anyone with whom we come into contact. In an ever-more competitive business environment, we must recognize and manage the impact of what we say, write, transmit or even express non-verbally.

To be sure, it is not possible to absolutely control the outcome of a given dialogue, exchange or communication. Despite our best – and most positive – efforts, we may not make the sale, gain internal support for a given initiative or even positively impact a co-workers mood.

However, a positive approach gives the best odds over time of optimizing the greatest possible percentage of instances where we achieve our desired outcome from a dialogue, exchange or communication. A positive approach makes it most likely that we create and foster a positive culture where "people cognitively process more efficiently and appropriately," to positively impact the PQ of our organization.

A positive approach fosters a high performance culture.

What Experience Are You Having?

But what about us? Do we derive any benefit from moving our communication toward the Upper Right, or from the shift in perspective and thinking that change necessitates? Yes, we do.

First, when our team members derive the benefits outlined in Barasade and Gibson's work, we are, by definition better leaders. Without adding any resources, we have laid the groundwork for the kind of productivity and success that will lead to advancement in a business landscape that often demands leaders "do more with less."

Second, and perhaps more importantly in the long-term, optimizing positive experiences for others, makes it most likely that we will have a consistently positive experience ourselves. By being Upper Right in our approach to communication, we will be "more open to taking in information and handling it effectively.

Combine this impact with the positive action of actually delivering each message from the Upper Right, despite the mode of communication, and we see why this approach makes positive outcomes most likely over time. This increase will only be made more dramatic by the decrease of negative actions and outcomes that follows.

When we communicate from the Upper Right, we increase our own PQ, our team's PQ and, ultimately, our organization's PQ. What is most astounding is that all this is possible based on being validating and present focused.

Endnotes:

¹ "Positive Leadership: Strategies for Extraordinary Performance", 2008, p. 53

² "Why Does Affect Matter in Organizations", Knowledge@Wharton April 18, 2007