

The Dispatch

September 2021: Positive Thinking and Your Life

Last year we explored the topic of compliments and the way that affirming another's behavior could actually yield rich results in the family business. We decided to pick up on that theme and develop it in this issue by speaking of how "positivity" can be a strong ally for you in your work and life. Bill gives a historical overview of the way that the concept of positivity/positive thinking has evolved in American history, while Davon focuses on the compelling work of a recent author on the subject. Lance, lucky him, is on sabbatical this month! Let us know your reactions.

Positive Thinking and American History

[Bill Long](#)

It has taken America a long time to embrace positivity as a philosophy of life. I define positivity not simply as thinking good thoughts, but as trying to incorporate in one's life and thoughts an affirming attitude towards people, one's current situation and one's future. It is more difficult to do this than we might imagine at first. In fact, psychologists tell us that up to 70 percent of group conversations end up focusing on the negatives, or complaints, about people and life.

One of the reasons that negativity might be hard-wired into so many of us is because of deep thought traditions in this country where God is imagined primarily as a Stern Judge or even a sort of Vindictive Tyrant. Many people can tell stories of the fear they felt in earlier days at disappointing God, and being held eternally liable for bad thoughts or deeds. When the most prominent theologian in American history, Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), is still primarily known today for his 1741 sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," we see that this is stuff we can't easily ignore.

But the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw a concerted effort to try to leave a rather dour Puritanism behind us. Fueled by the new field of psychology, and then popularized by commanding religious figures such as Norman Vincent Peale and Robert Schuller in the twentieth century, a new message started to develop: that success in life was primarily rooted in one's positive mental attitude rather than in trying to please an unpredictable, and possibly vengeful, God. In this philosophy, God was seen as a benign presence affirming our thoughts and aspirations rather than as a strict judge.

Most will admit that the Peale-Schuller approach also has its drawbacks, especially in its portrayal of a genial God who just wants to affirm everything that makes us feel good. But the core of this philosophy is behind much of the philosophy of employee motivation, or even theories of parenting, in our society today. Davon's article skillfully presents a contemporary author on the issue.

Try this. Next time you hear a group conversation turn negative, pause and redirect it. Try affirming good in people. It can be very hard to do, but it may just be what you need in our difficult days.

Broadcasting Positivity

[Davon Cook](#)

We tend to think of compliments as directed at a specific person or group. But what about "complimenting" our current situation—also known as broadcasting positivity into our daily life? In her book [Broadcasting Happiness](#),

Michelle Gielan presents data showing how positive words, stories, and mindsets actually *change* business, educational, and health *outcomes*. By using many academic studies and business stories, she explains the power of positivity.

We are all broadcasters, whether we are CEO or the power washer in the hog barn. Are we broadcasting positive outlook or gloom and doom? I think of this in my personal life. I want my kids to be aware of world affairs, so I'm often seeding discussions over dinner. Unfortunately, these discussions lead to me sharing how sad I am about the plight of the people in the hot-topic country of the week and perhaps getting teary-eyed. My daughter internalizes this as her generation being doomed to all sorts of bad things. That's what I'm broadcasting!

From her work as a reporter, Gielan shares the concept of a "power lead" —the positive, optimistic, and inspiring beginning to a conversation or email or meeting that sets the tone for the interaction that follows. Those first impressions prime us to react a certain way. A power lead can be as simple as adapting the "Hi, how are you?" rote answer of "ok" to "I'm grateful for sunshine today. What are you grateful for?" Or starting the team meeting by sharing two things that went well last week.

Word choice is also impactful on physical and mental realities. Researchers asked one group of twenty-year-old college students to work on a word puzzle including this set of words: bingo, wrinkle, Florida, wise, gray—all associated with age. Another set of college students worked on a word puzzle with a neutral set of words. The participants from the "elderly" group were caught on camera walking slower than the participants from the neutral group when leaving the room! What words are you using in your morning harvest meeting? "Today will be *hard*", "I'm *tired*", "Let's *push through*"? Or "Today's an *opportunity* to set a record", "We have a great *team*", "I'm *grateful* we have so much *success* from our work this year."

The concept of Appreciative Inquiry involves asking questions that shift the focus from fixing what's wrong to building on what's right. "What is working well right now that we need to do more of?" Or coaching a team member by asking, "When are you at your best?" Recently at a peer group meeting, farmers were sharing goals for the next year. One stressed that they need to talk not *only* about goals for the future, but also take time to *celebrate* success and progress of the past year—that is broadcasting positivity.

Consider that every interaction you have broadcasts a message, and positive messages result in more positive outcomes.