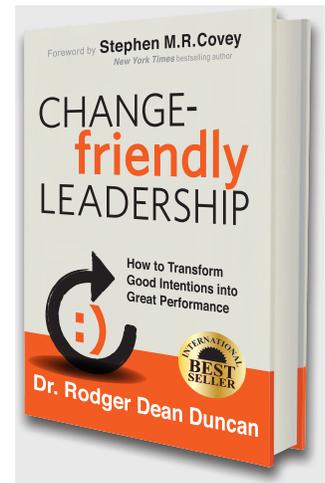


Section TWO

BONUS•POINTS



How Positive Thinking Can Produce Negative Results

By Dr. Rodger Dean Duncan

Affirmation is a good thing. Most people like to be complimented. They appreciate being appreciated. They enjoy encouragement. As the old saying goes, it's easier to attract bees with honey than with vinegar.

Trouble is, an overdose of positive thinking can produce negative results.

What! you say? Too much positive thinking? How is that possible?

We live in a society that places enormous value on self esteem. Scores of books are written about self esteem. Seminars and workshops are devoted to self esteem. School districts and civil libertarians sometimes place more emphasis on self esteem than on self discipline. Lawsuits are filed when someone allegedly has his or her self esteem violated. Anemic self esteem is used as an excuse for poor behavior and even as a defense for some crimes.

We live in a society that worships at the altar of "motivation." We have "motivational" speakers. We have "motivational" books and tapes. We have "motivational" seminars and workshops and even "motivational" cruises and summer camps.

I'd be the last to suggest that positive thinking is a downer. In most any good news/bad news scenario, I prefer hearing the good news first.

But in the real world, the good news is often not *all* the news. And operating with only part of the news can be as dangerous as an air traffic controller trying to direct an airplane while looking at only half the radar screen.

So where do we get all this good news that—with-

out the leavening of other data—can produce negative results?

In their book entitled *The 10 Dumbest Mistakes Smart People Make*, Arthur Freeman and Rose DeWolf say we get this sometimes misleading plethora of positive strokes from a range of "press agents" who either ignore or discount data that – although less comfortable than good news – can actually help us be better and do better.

Who are these press agents?

They could be our mothers.

Moms tend to tell us how wonderful we are. That's part of their job description. That's one reason moms themselves are so wonderful. But some moms—how shall I say—exaggerate. I know some adults who've apparently grown up believing they can do no wrong. Nothing's ever their fault. When something goes awry, it's always someone else's fault. The notion of personal accountability is simply foreign to them



They could be our friends.

After all, aren't friends expected to flatter and praise? That's part of what makes friendship so comfortable.

But sometimes flattery can be dangerous. When it obscures important reality, it can even be deadly. Singer John Denver decided to pilot a small aircraft that did not meet safety standards. His friends assured him he was skilled enough to overcome the aircraft's deficiencies. He apparently believed he was invulnerable. He wasn't. Listening to his press agents cost him his life.

They could be people we lead.

In the old story "The Emperor's New Clothes," the emperor struts around naked while his attendants tell him how wonderful he looks in his new outfit. It takes a little boy—to whom the emperor is just another adult—to blurt out that he's wearing nothing. Real life is often like that. We may be sending silent signals that we really don't care to hear the naked truth. By doing so, we deny ourselves the opportunity to improve.

They could be people who lead us.

In an ideal world, we could receive accurate feedback on our performance with no special effort. In the real world, however, many people so dislike being the bearers of "negative" news that they completely duck the responsibility. They endure less-than-good performance as long as they can, then they arrange to transfer the poor performer to another assignment. People are served best when they are properly trained, then held accountable for excellence.

They could be the voice of entitlement.

One of my consulting clients is undergoing an overhaul of its culture, with special emphasis on performance. People at every level will be expected to perform at higher standards. One woman in the organization was recently heard to say: "I'm not concerned by anything management says about performance. I have a graduate degree, I have tenure and I'm female. They can't touch me." In a single statement she managed both to insult her gender and to underscore the danger of being insulated from meaningful feedback.

They could be people who want only to "motivate" us.

The rah-rah crowd seems to be everywhere. Many people apparently think they do others a favor by

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cheerleading in a random, unfocused way. A teacher may say "You can be anything you want to be." (Can a clumsy five-footer plausibly aspire to play professional basketball?) Well-intended advisers may claim that if you just say: "I can do it," you will do it. It's certainly true that believing you can do something is more likely to inspire you to make an honest attempt than believing you can't. But merely inflating yourself with positive thoughts alone can be dangerous. The student who says "I can do it" and then skips class and refuses to study is headed for failure.

So how can you help ensure that positive thinking produces positive results?

When you're on the receiving end of affirmation, accept it graciously. Then ask questions such as "What could I be doing better?" "How can I be even more useful?" "In what ways can my contribution bring even greater value?" "What might I do differently that would help?"

At first you'll likely get a response like "Oh, don't worry about it. Everything's fine." That's because most people are not accustomed to offering a meaningful critique. Besides, they often equate coaching or correcting with something "negative" or even unappreciative. In their desire to be "positive" and upbeat, they miss opportunities to help make good things even better. So they're not very skilled at it. But you should persist. Ask the questions again. When your genuine desire to learn and improve becomes apparent, others will give you better feedback. Listen to it carefully. Even if you disagree with it, resist the temptation to explain or argue or justify. Explaining, arguing or justifying are guaranteed to turn off the spigot of feedback. Just listen. Express thanks for the candor, then resolve to learn and improve.

When you're on the giving end of affirmation, make



sure it is targeted and specific. Nothing seems more hollow than a one-size-fits-all compliment. Call the person by name. Point out a specific behavior or act that you find helpful. It might be as simple as “I notice you always take notes in our meetings. That no doubt plays a role in the great questions you ask.” Or “When you participate in our meetings, your enthusiasm is contagious. You obviously make an effort to ‘connect’ with the other team members, and this seems to encourage some of the quieter folks to speak up. Thanks for making such a positive difference.”

And when someone needs coaching or correcting, it should be done privately in a spirit of friendliness and in a straightforward manner.

My wife Rean was asked to teach a class. She was apprehensive about a particular member of the class. He was a man who found it amusing to toss in extraneous comments that added little and in fact sometimes threw the instructor off pace. Rean went to the man privately and expressed her appreciation for his thought processes. She sincerely complimented him for his service to others in the organization. And she told him she wanted to do a great job in teaching the class but that his comical comments short-circuited the flow of class participation. She boldly and respectfully asked him to stop. He did. From that day forward he invested his energy in class participation that invited thoughtful dialogue and contributed to the benefit of all.

Again, affirmation is a good thing. But when “good news” completely overshadows the existence of “other news,” nobody has the benefit of a reality check. Performance plateaus. Opportunities are missed. Potential is squandered.

One of my clients perennially makes Fortune magazine’s list of the best places to work. The company is

famous for its “family feel” and the friendliness of its culture. In assessing the company’s culture I identified one of the unwritten rules that people were living by. It went something like this: “We are friends. It’s not nice to hold your friends accountable.”

Despite all the good things going on in their culture, this misapplied notion of “friendship” was hurting performance. I pointed out that it’s not nice *not* to hold your friends accountable. When we let our friends stumble along, oblivious to the need for change that could make them better or even great, we contribute to their lack of improvement. The “nice” thing, the “positive” thing is to offer information that might be in their blind spot. Sometimes I find it helpful to begin with something like “May I have your permission to offer some feedback that could be useful to you?”

Positive thinking can do much good. But like any other good medicine, it produces negative results when taken in overdose.

