Positive Leadership: Success Without Collateral Damage

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"You don't lead by hitting people over the head—that's assault, not leadership." – Dwight Eisenhower

Almost twenty years ago, at the age of 36, I was pursuing my career with a vengeance. It was all about me – about making a name for myself, being recognised, and making an impact. I had the highest standards of performance for myself and my team.

And we were very successful. More successful than any of us had imagined would be possible, given where we started and the barriers we faced. Everyone on the team was smart, dedicated, hardworking, and committed to our common goals. I was proud of myself and my team.

Against this backdrop, I went to an intense leadership development programme where I took a battery of personality tests and a leadership 360 where I solicited feedback from peers, direct reports, my boss and my clients. Upon receiving the feedback at the course, I was pleased – until I saw the results from my boss. On a scale from minus 10 to plus ten, he rated me

in the minus range on a large number of people-related behaviours. I was convinced he had just made a mistake – these results couldn't be right.

I requested a meeting with my boss to discuss my feedback. A week later, we sat down together and I pulled out my feedback report, proudly showing him the ratings from my peers, clients and direct reports. And then I showed him his ratings, asking him why he had given me such low scores. I was shocked by what I heard: "Schon, you have amazing skill, drive and talent and you have been extremely successful. We are all grateful for what you have been able to accomplish. But to get that success, you are beating up your team. You make them feel like they are never good enough. You constantly look for someone to blame when things don't go right. You intimidate them into working long, gruelling hours – and they are afraid to tell you any of this."

I was stunned but still held out hope that he was wrong. However, after talking to my team members one-on-one they confirmed what my boss had told me was true. I was crushed.

The feedback came as an affront to my own identity and my conception of myself as generous, caring, and nurturing of others. I was, quite simply, embarrassed to be me. I was mortified and told my team members so. I then pledged to change my approach, with my boss and my team's coaching and support, so that I could help generate positive, rather than negative relationships with each person on my team. Part of it was purely personal, so I could feel good about myself again. The second reason was performance-related: **leaders who form positive relationships enable higher levels of collective performance**.

Building positive relationships

Talking with my boss and my team members about the situation was the first step in a long journey to turn my negative, overly-critical style into a leadership approach that would continue to pursue the highest standards of performance – without beating up my team.

I quickly realised that I couldn't change what I didn't notice, and my critical, negative approach was something that was so ingrained in me that I didn't even know it was there. The humbling experience of asking others for help, to let me know when I was engaging in destructive behaviour, was the second step.

Third, at the urging of a junior team member, I began to express appreciation in ways that I had never done before. Rather than pointing out the one thing that wasn't perfect, I found the many things that my team members were doing well and let them know how much I appreciated their hard work and their levels of excellence.

Fourth, I stopped talking in terms of "me" and started talking in terms of "we" when it came to success. And when analysing our failures, I started by identifying what I had done wrong before pointing the finger at anyone else. It wasn't an easy journey but with my boss' and my team's support, I was eventually able to create truly positive and generative relationships with my team.

The benefits

The impact on everyone, including me, was remarkable. We were all happier and more satisfied, we had more fun, and we radiated energy that everyone who worked with us picked up on. I didn't know it at the time, but positive relationships, like the ones my team and I built together, are not only satisfying but also provide numerous other positive effects. These include career mobility, power, social capital, longevity, immunity to and recovery from illness, lower heart rate and blood pressure, and protection against stress.

[Positive relationships also enhance individuals' resiliency](#), their ability to adapt and bounce back from different experiences, create stronger self-identity and more accurate self-assessments, greater degrees of creativity, trust, and openness to new ideas, higher levels of commitment to the organisation, higher levels of energy, learning, cooperation, resource utilisation, cost reduction, time savings and human capital development, as well as higher levels of project performance in organisations.

Leadership and Positivity

Even if leaders are highly critical and judgmental, they can create and nurture positive relationships by mindfully engaging in generative practices to create and sustain positive relationships with those around them. Here are just a few simple suggestions:

- Unleash the strengths and the positive energy of others around you by emphasising and building on employees' strengths

- Use deliberate communications to help connect day to day work with a higher purpose that has meaning for your employees
- Praise your employees for specific positive things that they have done
- Take time to encourage your employees and support them when times are stressful
- Offer to help out to ease the load when someone is struggling
- Keep a gratitude log of all of the positive things you are grateful for
- Call or send personalised notes of gratitude on Thanksgiving, New Year's and employees' birthdays
- Be compassionate
- Practice forgiveness with yourself and others
- And, most importantly, take care of yourself, manage your own stress and energy, so that you can be a positive force each and every day no matter what happens around you

Having seen things from my team's perspective, I was able to appreciate, in every fibre of my being, the damage that I did to others, without any awareness at all, until my boss had the courage to tell me the truth that everyone knew – everyone, that is, except for me.

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