



Leading in Trying Times Essays

A collection of essays for those interested in making a positive difference within their workplace or community in the wake of trauma and crisis. We hope these essays provide new insights, clarify thoughts, and foster plans of action for leaders, employees, and contributors at all levels. The essay below is one of more than a dozen works available at www.centerforpos.org, under the Writings tab.

Leading With Positive Emotions

By Barbara L. Fredrickson

In the wake of the attacks of September 11th, Americans and others remain afraid, angry and profoundly sad. At first blush, positive emotions seem out of place - even inappropriate - during these trying times. For the moment, perhaps we should forget about feeling good altogether, and simply find ways to cope. Yet scientific research on positive emotions suggests that feeling good is far more important than many people suspect. Experiencing positive emotions—like joy, gratitude, hope or peace—is a sign that a person is, at that moment, not experiencing fear, anger or sadness. Yet positive emotions do much more than merely signal well-being. Positive emotions also improve coping and produce well-being. They do so not just in the present, pleasant moment, but over the long term as well. Positive emotions also can have profound social and organizational repercussions. This document provides a brief summary of theory and research that underscores the relevance of leading with positive emotions during trying times.

Positive Emotions Undo Negative Emotions

Negative emotions have important functions. Anxiety promotes vigilance. Anger promotes seeking justice. Yet negative emotions often linger on beyond their usefulness, producing unnecessary irritability and increases in heart rate and blood pressure. Laboratory experiments have demonstrated that evoking positive emotions in these circumstances is the most efficient way to quell or "undo" the lingering aftereffects of negative emotions. Cultivating positive emotions speeds the return to cardiovascular normalcy. This undoing effect of positive emotions has been shown both for energized positive emotions like joy and amusement, and for tranquil positive emotions, like serenity and appreciation. The ability to cultivate positive emotions is thus an important skill for regulating negative emotions.

Positive Emotions Fuel Resilience

In part because positive emotions speed recovery from negative emotions they also fuel resilient coping. Resilient people, studies show, experience more positive emotions in the midst of adversity compared to those who are less resilient. These greater positive emotions, in turn, help resilient people bounce back to pre-crisis levels of functioning. Such findings suggest the timely cultivation of positive emotions is one way that people use emotions intelligently.

Positive Emotions Broaden Thinking and Build Resources

Positive emotions have important functions beyond alleviating negative emotions and fueling resilient coping, functions that have long been overlooked by scientists studying emotions. I spotlight these additional functions in my broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions.¹ Unlike negative emotions, which narrow people's ideas about action (e.g., fight or flight), the broaden-and-build theory posits that positive emotions broaden people's mindsets, encouraging them to discover novel lines of thought or action. Joy, for instance, creates the urge to play, interest the urge to explore, and so on. A key, incidental outcome of these broadened mindsets is an increase in personal resources: As individuals discover new ideas and actions, they build their physical, intellectual, social and psychological resources. Play, for instance, builds physical, socio-emotional and intellectual skills, and fuels brain development. Similarly, exploration increases knowledge and psychological complexity. So by broadening people's mindsets, positive emotions build durable personal resources that function as reserves to be drawn on during later trying times.

Positive Emotions Trigger Upward Spirals Toward Optimal Functioning

Because positive emotions broaden thinking and build enduring psychological resources like resilience, they also trigger upward spirals toward enhanced emotional well-being. Put differently, any positive emotion you experience today not only feels good now, but also increases the likelihood you will feel good in the future. Studies that track the same individuals over time have documented this phenomenon.² The study of depression had already documented a downward spiral in which depressed mood and the narrowed, pessimistic thinking it brings, influence one another reciprocally, leading to ever worsening functioning and moods, and even clinical levels of depression. In contrast, the broaden-and-build theory predicts a comparable upward spiral in which positive emotions and the broadened thinking they bring also influence one another reciprocally, leading to appreciable increases in functioning and well-being.

Positive Emotions May Produce Optimal Functioning in Organizations

The benefits of positive emotions do not end with changes within individuals. Because one individual's experience of positive emotion can reverberate through other organizational members and across interpersonal transactions with customers, positive emotions may fuel optimal organizational functioning, helping organizations to thrive and prosper. Take the example of helpful or compassionate actions. Decades of experiments show that people are more likely to help others when feeling positive emotions. But good deeds not only spring from positive emotions, they also produce them. Those receiving good deeds feel grateful, those witnessing good deeds feel elevated and those doing good deeds feel pride. Strikingly, each of these very different positive emotions functions to increase the likelihood of further compassionate acts, creating a chain of increasing organizational impact.³

Leaders' Positive Emotions are Especially Contagious

Positive emotions produce organizational transformation because each person's emotions reverberate through other organizational members. In part, this is because emotions are contagious. Experimental studies have shown that one person's expression of positive emotion, through processes of facial mimicry, can produce experiences of positive emotion in those with whom they interact. Perhaps because they communicate to a broad range of individuals, organizational leaders' positive emotions are especially contagious. Studies have shown, for instance, that a leader's positive emotions predict the performance of their entire group.⁴

Leaders Can Cultivate Positive Emotions by Finding Positive Meaning

If positive emotions have so many beneficial repercussions, and leaders have amplified opportunities to spread positive emotions, what is the best way for leaders to do cultivate positive emotions, especially in trying times like these? The use of humor, laughter and other direct attempts to stimulate positive emotions seem poor choices. My advice would be to cultivate positive emotions indirectly by finding positive meaning in current circumstances.⁵ Positive meaning can be obtained by finding benefits within adversity, by infusing ordinary events with meaning and by effective problem-solving. Leaders can find benefits in these trying times by focusing on the newfound strengths and resolve of their organizational members. They can infuse ordinary events with meaning by expressing appreciation for jobs well done. And as Dutton and colleagues describe, they can find positive meaning through problem-solving by supporting compassionate acts within their organizations. So although the active ingredient within resilience and growth may be positive emotions, the leverage point is positive meaning.

In our fast-paced society, the pursuit of meaningful positive emotions is often neglected. Yet the latest research on positive emotions underscores that positive emotions are not trivial luxuries, but instead may be critical necessities for optimal functioning, especially in these trying times. The bottom line is that finding ways to cultivate meaningful positive emotions in your organization is an investment in your and your employees' development as well as in your organization's future.

Examples of "Leading with Positive Emotions"

Emotional Rescue

A sergeant major working at ground zero came to the armory to find a violinist playing. Recognizing the opportunity that this presented to foster positive, healing emotions in his subordinates, he asked the violinist to stay and play for them. The effect was so positive that they presented the violinist with the coin of the regiment. For more information, see the following Web site: <http://www.salon.com/mwt/feature/2001/09/25/violinist/index.html>

The Laugh Lab at Carnegie Hall

This is the story of a fundraising event in which many of America's well-known comedians participated. It shows leadership in light of positive emotions because the comedians got the people of New York to laugh, and many had not since the events of September 11. Although some comedians hit close to home with sarcasm and jokes about the tragedy, the majority of the night's events allowed people to let go of their worries for a night and just laugh. This event accomplished more than a good laugh, it raised \$500 to \$2,500 per person going to relief for families of the victims. For more information, please see the following Web site (NOTE: Registration required for access): <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/10/arts/theater/10COMI.html?todayshdlines>

¹ From B. L. Fredrickson (2001). "The role of positive emotions in positive psychology: The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions." *American Psychologist*, 56, 218-226.

² From B. L. Fredrickson & T. Joiner (in press). "Positive emotions trigger upward spirals toward emotional well-being" *Psychological Science*. See also B. M. Staw, R. I. Sutton, & L. H. Pellod, (1994). "Employee positive emotion and favorable outcomes at the workplace" *Organizational Science*, 5, 51-71.

³ From B. L. Fredrickson (2000) "Why positive emotions matter in organizations: Lessons from the broaden-and-build theory." *The Psychologist-Manager Journal* 4, 131-142.

⁴ See J. M. George (1995) "Leader positive mood and group performance: The case of customer service" *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 25, 778-794.

⁵ See B. L. Fredrickson (2000) "Cultivating positive emotions to optimize health and well-being." *Prevention and Treatment*, 3. Available on the World Wide Web: <http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/index.aspx> .