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The Case for Positive Energy

By Jon Gordon



Positive Energy....It's a term being talked about a lot more frequently in classrooms, board rooms and locker rooms. After all, when business legend Jack Welch says that great leaders have loads and loads of positive energy and Pete Carroll, coach of USC football credits positive energy as a key ingredient to winning two national championships, people listen, take notice and start asking questions. What is positive energy? How do I develop it as a leader? How can I infuse my team with it?

And with questions come answers; lots of them. You would have to live on another planet not to notice the new plethora of books and articles discussing the importance of positive leadership, positive cultures and positive relationships. From books such as *The Power of Nice*, *What Happy Companies Know* and *How Full is your Bucket* to an abundance of new research, from researchers such as Daniel Goleman and Barbara Fredrickson, demonstrating that positive people, positive interactions and positive work cultures produce positive results, there is a growing sentiment that positive energy is the cure for the ailing business, the suffering stock price, the battered leader, the negative leadership team and the "sick" and "tired" morale and culture. It is as University of Michigan Professor Kim S. Cameron described it, the holy grail of business.

Yet, while I agree with this research and sentiment, there is a bigger, deeper question that is often overlooked when we discuss positive energy. That is why when I speak to CEO's and executives I ask them a simple question. "If positive energy is so important, and we all agree that the research demonstrates it works, then why aren't more companies more positive?" Why are there not more people skipping through the halls, smiling at their co-workers and loving their job? Why do more people die Monday morning at 9am than any other time? If positive energy is so important and leaders know it, then why does negativity cost companies 300 billion dollars a year according to the Gallup Organization. And why do so many companies have morale and productivity challenges with 42% of workers suffering from burnout according to a recent Harris Interactive survey?

The answer is simply because positive energy doesn't happen by osmosis and it clearly doesn't happen by sitting around, holding hands and singing Kumbaya. Successful, positive companies with positive employees and positive cultures are created like anything else. Through a set of principles, processes, systems and habits that are ingrained in the corporate culture and each individual employee. Positive companies aren't born. They are developed. When it comes to corporate families there is no such debate about nature versus nurture. It's all about nurture.

Positive Leaders are required

In order to build a positive company, then, it is essential that there is not only a positive leader but a positive leadership executive team who believes in nurturing and developing a culture of positive energy. Too many times I have been brought to speak to a company to infuse the employees with positive energy and 2 minutes after my talk an employee will come up to me and say, "this all makes so much sense but the leaders who need to hear this are not here and that's the problem." They are right. To build a positive company fueled by positive energy you'll need to first get the executive team

on the energy bus because, while positive energy trickles up and sideways through an organization, it flows powerfully from the top down; from leaders, to managers, to employees to customers. If you have positive energy trickling up the organization but your leaders and managers are causing negativity to flow down, the positive energy gets surrounded like the sun on a dark, cloudy day, creating a negative culture.

Nurture the Root

Building a positive, successful company also requires leaders to have a long term vision and an understanding that too many of their counterparts focus on the fruit of the tree—stock price, profits, costs, etc. and ignore the root—the culture, trust, people and positive energy of the company. Leaders who run successful, positive companies know that when you take care of the root of the tree you will always be pleased with the fruit it supplies. If you ignore the root, eventually the tree will dry up and so will the fruit. To nurture the root of your company you'll want to feed it lots of positive energy. And this is done by leaders who believe in the benefits of positive energy, urgently invest in it, nurture employees with it, and as Pete Carroll said, "ingrain it in everything they do."

To fuel your business and growth with positive energy and ingrain it in everything you do, here are a few best practices and strategies that will get you and your team on the energy bus and moving in the right direction.

Hire Positive People

Sure everyone knows this. But the question you must ask yourself is do you have rigorous systems in place that screen out negativity and ensure that you hire positive people. It's obviously a lot easier to create a positive culture with people who are naturally more positive and this starts at the hiring process. Pat Riley said, "you don't have to yell at someone who wants the same things you do." When you have positive people on the bus you're more likely to have a positive ride.

Enhance Communication

Peter Druecker says that 60% of management problems are the result of faulty communication. This is because an organization is like a communication network or web of energy pipes and where there is a void or gap in communication, negative energy will always fill it. When people feel fearful or uncertain or unheard they start thinking the worst and act accordingly. And as negative energy fills more voids and grows in these gaps, the positive energy can't flow through the organization. By designing systems that enhance communication you eliminate the gaps and allow positive energy to flow through the company. One example of this practice is PPR International, a healthcare recruiting company, that holds a weekly Monday morning 8:30am meeting. The meeting lasts 10 minutes and everyone in the company is briefed on everything each department will be working on that week. Consider it a company's version of the football huddle. Another example is Google's office layout that rejects cubicles in favor of wide open work spaces and meeting rooms that foster better communication and idea collaboration.

Fill the Void with Positive Energy—constantly and systematically

Once you have a healthy communication system in place you'll want to make sure you fill the energy pipes and communication network with positive energy. If positive energy is always flowing through the organization then negativity can't breed or take hold. The key is to implement systems that foster more positive interactions, positive feelings, and a positive culture. One example is Ken Blanchard, who is not only a leadership guru for many companies but his own as well. Ken's title is Chief Spiritual Officer and each day he holds an all employee call where he shares an inspirational message. Another example is First Transit whose bus drivers at one of their many airport shuttle operations were low in morale, high in negativity and poor in performance. A turn around team was put in place

and immediately they instituted a system designed to enhance positive interactions and feedback. Every time a supervisor noticed a bus driver doing something positive they praised the driver and also wrote their observation on a specially designed sheet of paper that was submitted to the general manager. The next day the general manager would personally hand the sheet of paper to each driver and again praise them. That meant the bus drivers received two positive interactions for every one positive action. Not surprisingly performance soared, morale improved dramatically, absenteeism decreased and profits grew. Positive energy only takes root if it is ingrained in a system and process.

Eliminate Energy Vampires

Not with stakes or garlic, but with pink slips. Post a sign that says “No energy vampires allowed” and eliminate anyone that sucks the energy and life out of your organization. It may not sound positive but it’s essential to create a positive culture and positive outcome. Too many leaders know who their negative employees are but they don’t know what to do with them, so they do nothing which leads to dangerous consequences. As Philadelphia Eagles Quarterback Donovan McNab said about Terrell Owens, “One guy can’t make a team but one guy can break a team.” Like a cancer, one energy vampire can spread negativity throughout a team and organization. While you should give them a chance to get on the energy bus and contribute to your positive culture, if they don’t make the necessary changes, then you’ll have to let them off the bus. The success of your ride depends on it.

Drive with a Shared Vision and Purpose

Howard Shultz, founder of Starbucks told his people from the beginning that we are not in the coffee business serving people but in the people business serving coffee. He not only shared his vision for where Starbucks was going but he inspired people with a sense of purpose to make a difference and enjoy the ride. Vision helps everyone in the organization see the road ahead and focus on the goals that will lead to their destination while purpose inspires them to work longer, harder and more passionately. It doesn’t matter how many meetings and positive interactions you have within your company, if everyone in your company is not driving in the same direction with a deeper sense of purpose, then you’ll never be as powerful, positive and successful as you could be. Vision and purpose not only keeps people on the bus but it causes them to get out and push when the engine breaks down. Vision and purpose inspire individuals and teams to navigate the short term obstacles, adversities, and potholes that so often sabotage individual and team success, because they see and understand the long term vision for a better and brighter future. To share this vision and purpose Howard Shultz held frequent town hall meetings where he invited everyone on his bus for what we now know has been an amazing ride.

It’s important to know that positive energy is not the cure all for every business ailment. You’ll always need to hire smart, intelligent, hardworking, insightful people that deliver results. You’ll still need to get the right people on the bus that have the right vision, map and plans for the road ahead. But without positive energy and the fuel to drive the bus forward, even the best and smartest drivers will be left at a standstill while the competition drives positively past them. Positive energy is more than just a term. It is a power source that will fuel your business and profits if you cultivate it within your people and engrain it into your process, systems and culture.

About the author:

Jon Gordon is a leading authority on developing positive, engaged people, leaders, schools, businesses and teams. He is the author of *The Energy Bus: 10 Rules to Fuel your Work, Life and Team with Positive Energy*, *The 10 Minute Energy Solution* and *Energy Addict: 101 Ways to Energize Your Life*. You can learn more about Jon and his work at www.JonGordon.com