

The Role of Positivity and Connectivity in the Performance of Business Teams

A brief summary of recent, groundbreaking research by Marcial Losada and Emily Heaphy¹.

The researchers took 60 business teams and ranked them in terms of performance, as measured by profit and loss statements, customer satisfaction surveys, and 360 reviews by superiors, peers, and subordinates to the teams. After grouping the High, Medium, and Low performing teams, they analyzed three aspects of the teams' conversations: positivity vs. negativity (P:N), inquiry vs. advocacy (I:A) and other vs. self comments (O:S).

Conversations were coded as "positive" if the person speaking showed support, encouragement, or appreciation, and were coded as "negative" if the person speaking showed disapproval, sarcasm, or cynicism. Interactions were coded as "inquiry" if they involved a question aimed at exploring and examining a position and as "advocacy" if they involved arguing in favor of the speaker's viewpoint. And speech was coded as "self" if it referred to the person speaking or to the group present or to the company the person belonged, and it was coded as "other" if the reference was to a person or group outside the company to which the person speaking belonged.

The results were provocative, to say the least.

- High performing teams had an average P:N ratio of 5.8 to 1 and were balanced (1:1) in I:A and O:S.
- Medium performing teams were only slightly more positive than negative (P:N = 1.8 to 1) and slightly weighted towards both advocacy (2:3) and self-oriented conversation (2:3).
- Low performing teams were highly negative (P:N = 1 to 20), more advocacy oriented (I:A = 1 to 3), and very self-oriented in their interactions (O:S = 1 to 30).

Further, the study demonstrated that the P:N ratio was the key driver in influencing the other two ratios. In other words, both a healthy 1:1 balance in internal focus on team deliberation and external environmental scanning, and a healthy 1:1 balance of questioning each other to understand and asserting one's opinions and positions, *resulted from* a disproportionate emphasis on positivity over negativity. The positivity in the high performing teams created expansive emotional spaces that revealed a variety of possible actions. The negativity in other teams created restricted emotional spaces that closed possibilities for action. This supports the work of Fredrickson² that shows how positive emotions broaden thought-action repertoires and build durable physical, intellectual, and social resources.

So transforming the day-to-day interactions in teams to be more positive than negative is a means to achieving a productive balance between the team's focus on itself and its environment, between seeking understanding and asserting authentic beliefs and opinions. This shift in the pattern of discourse, in turn, leads to measurable success and value added for the organization.

¹ Losada, M. and Heaphy, E. "The Role of Positivity and Connectivity in Performance of Business Teams: A Nonlinear Dynamic Model," in *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 47, No. 6, 2004, pp. 740-765

² Fredrickson, B. L. "What Good Are Positive Emotions?" in *Review of General Psychology*, Vol. 2, No. 3, 1998, pp. 300-319