FOREWORD BY TOM RATH

the #1 New York Times bestselling author of StrengthsFinder 2.0

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THE CONTAGIOUS LEADER: Control Your Emotions, Not Your Employees

George arrives at the office at 7:45 sharp every day. Two of his employees, Rachel and Mike, like to get in at around 7:15 so that they can grab a cup of coffee, catch up on emails, and get ready for the day ahead. Every morning they look up from their desks as George walks in. Rachel and Mike have an inside joke:

"We can tell what kind of day it's going to be around here by the way George walks in each morning. If he smiles and says, 'Good morning,'we know it's going to be a good day and we can get on with our work. If his head is down and he doesn't even acknowledge us, we know it's going to be a bad day and we'd better be ready to jump at a moment's notice. When our teammates arrive at around eight, they stop by our desks and ask us, 'So what kind of day is it going to be?' and believe me, they're not talking about the weather."

Unfortunately, you may have worked for a toxic boss like George at some point in your career. He may have humiliated you in front of others, micromanaged you to death, ranted and raved when things went wrong, or been a Scrooge who took all the fun out of work.

Chances are that you no longer work for him because you couldn't stand it any longer and transferred to another department or found another job. If you see a little of yourself in George or if he reminds you of someone you know, read on.

Toxic or abrasive bosses like George are often tolerated for much too long for three reasons: we overvalue technical competence and short-term results, we underestimate the negative effect, and we are afraid to speak up.

We overvalue technical competence. Many company decision makers overvalue the boss's technical competence and believe he is indispensible. We call this the "but she's really bright" syndrome. Although technical competence is important, we often undervalue emotional competence. In a study of 358 managers at Johnson & Johnson, researchers found that the managers who had the highest performance had significantly more emotional competence such as self-awareness, self-management, and social skills.

We underestimate the negative effect. The toxic boss's boss and sometimes even the human resources department are unaware, choose to ignore, or underestimate the negative effect he has on employees. Frequent resignations within the same department are viewed as isolated incidents. As long as the toxic boss continues to achieve results, regardless of his methods, he is left alone.

We are afraid to speak up. Toxic bosses are masters of creating an environment of fear in which workers don't dare to speak up. Imagine if the toxic boss is also the owner of the company. An employee may think her only option is to quit.

In this chapter, we offer an alternative to the toxic boss. We call it the *contagious leader*. We'll share evidence on how your moods, good or bad, affect your employees' productivity. You'll learn simple, proven techniques to neutralize a negative mood if you need to do that. We'll also show you how to manage the control freak tendencies that many of us have that can get in the way of not only your own productivity but also that of your team.

1. RECOGNIZE THE ACHOO! EFFECT

Germs and colds aren't the only things we spread in the workplace. Our emotions, both positive and negative, are just as contagious. Have you ever walked into an office or a meeting and felt so much tension that you became tense too? This spreading of emotions from one person to another is what psychologists call social contagion. We call it the *Achoo! effect*. Here's how it works.

Human beings are hardwired to mimic the facial expressions and moods of the people they come in contact with. Sigal Barsade, a professor at the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania, claims that we can unconsciously catch both good and bad moods. Barsade studied this ripple effect and found that it takes only one group member out of five to "infect" the rest of the group with a positive or negative mood. Similarly, it has been found that bank tellers in a positive mood can transmit these emotions to their customers, which leads to greater customer satisfaction.

In another study, researchers observed over 200 customer service interactions at a coffee shop. What did they learn? The degree to which the employee smiled predicted the degree to which the customer smiled (above and beyond the customer's disposition when he or she entered the shop). When customers later rated their satisfaction with the service they received, the more employees smiled, the higher the rating was. In fact, neuroscientists point to "mirror neurons" in our brains that are wired to mimic other people's facial expressions. Ever notice that when you smile at an infant, the infant will smile back? The same is true for adults.

Bosses Are More Contagious

This Achoo! effect also has a status component: people higher up the ladder are more likely to transmit their moods to those lower in the company than vice versa. Think of it this way: when you're in a bad mood, it's like spreading a cold. When you have a cold or flu you feel lousy, and your productivity suffers as a result. The good news? Your positive moods are just as contagious. Think infectious like laughter. Think a YouTube video that has gone viral.

Researchers have also found that a leader's positive or negative mood can spread in as little as seven minutes and can impact a team's performance. In one study, teams were told that they would have 15 minutes to set up a tent while blindfolded. Separately, the leaders were given instructions on how to assemble the tent and then watched a video. Some leaders watched a David Letterman video to put them into a positive mood, while others watched a video about social injustice to instigate a negative mood. What happened? Even though the team couldn't see the leader while he was giving instructions, they caught the leader's mood (positive or negative). Secondly, observers reported that the teams led by the "positive mood" leaders exhibited a higher degree of coordination. Okay, so moods are contagious. So what? The degree of coordination in assembling a tent is one thing, but what about performance in the workplace? In a study of 53 sales managers who led teams of four to nine people, leaders in more positive moods had greater sales.

Unfortunately, the reverse is true when the boss is in a foul mood: bad moods are just as contagious. Cindi Bigelow, president of Bigelow Tea, sums it up this way: "Leaders cannot afford the luxury of a negative mood." Bigelow acknowledges that leaders must get results and move the company forward but emphasizes that what matters is *how* it's done. She says, "When you are sincere ..., you will get so much more from people.... You've got to admit when you make a mistake. You've got to admit when you need somebody's help. And you have to admit what you don't know. Then when you're true to yourself, [other people are] going to be there for you...."

Our client David shared with us the anonymous feedback he received from one direct report in a 360-degree review. The employee's feedback practically mirrored Bigelow's comment about a leader's positive demeanor: "David has a passion and believes in what we do. That passion is contagious, and we all come to work feeling good about what we're doing. This is an invaluable quality."

The 411 on Delivering Bad News

As business leaders, we sometimes have difficult messages to deliver, such as poor quarterly results, the loss of a key account, layoffs, or unexpected delays in a project. These discussions can often be energy-draining just when we need people's creative juices to flow. What's a leader to do? When you have bad news, aggregate it before you deliver it and deliver it like ripping off a Band-Aid. How do you feel when you lose something such as your house key? Pretty bad, right? How do you feel when you find something such as an extra key to the house? Okay, but researchers have found that the good is often not as strong as the bad. What is happening is that you are swayed—as are we all—by prospect theory.

Prospect theory is an intriguing behavioral economics concept that states that losses are more painful than gains are enjoyable. For this reason, if you have good news, spread it out over a day or a week, but if you have bad news, aggregate it all at once so that it is not as painful to hear: separate gains and aggregate losses.

Jason Fried, CEO of 37signals, is well aware of this dynamic. 37signals is an innovative company that creates software tools for individuals and small businesses. Fried says, "A side note about delivering news, bad and good: When bad news comes, get it all out in the open at once. Good news, on the other hand, should be trickled out slowly. If you can prolong the good vibes, do it."

2. TAME YOUR OSCAR THE GROUCH IF YOU NEED TO

After reading the previous section, you may be thinking that we are expecting you to be in a good mood no matter what comes your way. We are not. We're all too familiar with the downsides of business: laying off good workers, losing a big account, missing an important deadline. Bad things happen, and we wouldn't be human if we didn't feel disappointed, angry, or frustrated at times. Unfortunately, most of us were never trained in how to quickly get out of a bad mood. If you played high school or college sports, maybe you were lucky enough to have a coach who instructed you to "shake it off." Or maybe you had a mom who told you, "This, too, shall pass." But we'd be surprised if you told us you learned how to manage your moods as part of a leadership or manager training curriculum. Instead, you probably learned how to improve employee productivity by analyzing performance metrics. Surprisingly, researchers are now finding that productivity may be related to the number of scowls and smiles.

What MRIs, Deep Breathing, Getting off Your Tush, and Faking It Have in Common

There are four demonstrated techniques to get yourself out of a negative mood, and none of them requires a lot of time or money. The first is to *label it*.

If you've ever had to slide yourself into an MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) machine, you know what stress can do to your body. Although the procedure is said to be painless, being strapped inside a sewerlike tunnel surrounded by a deafening thump, thump, thumping is anything but painless. Remaining completely still for a few seconds or minutes can seem like eons. But the burgeoning field of neuroscience has found that when patients tell the technician how they are feeling, saying things such as, "I'm anxious," the negative emotion dissipates more quickly than it does if they keep these feelings to themselves. The next time you find yourself in a lousy mood, try labeling it and notice what happens. The very act of naming what you are experiencing can minimize the negative emotion. Another way to get out of a bad mood is to *take long, deep breaths*. Researchers have found that slow rhythmic breathing produces an immediate calming effect, allowing you to recover more quickly from everyday stressors.

Still another way to shrug off that negative mood is to *get off your tush*. When we're stuck in a negative mental state, the worst thing we can do is just sit at our desks or take it out on the next person who walks into our office. We often go on a "walk and talk" with our clients to help them let off steam, which then allows them to focus on what's really important. Notice what happens when you get up from your desk and walk around your office or down the halls of your building. If you can get outside, even better. Being in nature has also been found to reduce stress.

When all else fails, do what psychologists call embodiment. We call it *fake it till you make it*. Embodiment entails putting your *physical* body into a stance that then changes your *psychological* state. For example, standing with your shoulders back, your head up, and your legs firmly planted hip distance apart has been shown to make you feel more powerful. One of the most famous and ear-liest studies of embodiment is the pen smile study. Researchers told two groups of participants to hold a pen in their mouths under the guise that they were studying motor coordination. One group was instructed to hold the pen between their *teeth*. This pose is similar to the position our mouths take when we are smiling. The other group was told to hold the pen in the participants to smile. (A third group was told to hold the pen in the nondominant hand).

While holding the pen, all three groups of participants read four *The Far Side* cartoons and then were asked to rate how funny they were. Those holding the pen with their teeth (and inadvertently activating the smiling muscles) reported the cartoons as being funnier than did the ones holding a pen in their nondominant hand, who in turn reported the cartoons as funnier than those who couldn't smile because they were holding the pen with their lips. Mothers everywhere will be glad to know there's some science now behind their sage advice to "put on a happy face."



Pen Smiling Study: Lips Holding Pen and Teeth Holding Pen

Sometimes you need to fake it until you make it. You can put your body into a strong posture and smile *before* you feel like it. These simple physical manipulations can actually get you out of a funk and into a more positive mental state. And if you want to snap someone else out of a foul mood, let's not forget the power of humor. As our University of Pennsylvania classmate and comedian Yakov Smirnoff recently told us, "I think it's common sense more than science. If you can make someone laugh, it releases the tension."

Just Notice

Before you walk into work, notice what kind of mood you're in. If you're in a good mood, great. Go ahead and spread the cheer. But there are times when you may be feeling nervous, annoyed, or impatient like our client George whom you met at the beginning of this chapter.

George's wife had recently lost her job when we met him. His mind was racing: "How will my wife find another job in this economy? How will we pay for our son's college tuition? How can we possibly live on one income?" George was feeling anxious, angry, and afraid—all very understandable under the circumstances.

But George also leads a team of people. We explained the Achoo! effect and told him that he cannot afford to let his foul mood affect the productivity of the people around him. George is a smart guy. He got it and began practicing the four techniques to tame his Oscar the Grouch.

However, a few weeks later, George came to a coaching call somewhat exasperated. "Sometimes getting yourself out of a negative mood seems impossible," he said.

George went on to explain that the day before, he had had a terrible phone call with his boss. His boss, being the toxic guy he was, laid into him about the poor quarterly call with investors. When the call ended, George had five minutes before the start of his weekly staff meeting.

"I tried taking a few long, deep breaths on my way to the conference room, but I couldn't shake my lousy mood." George went on to explain that as he entered the conference room, he noticed that the friendly banter ended abruptly. "I guess my team could read my body language. They knew something was up and it wasn't good. They probably thought I was about to announce layoffs or something."

"So it sounds like everyone in the conference room was on edge. It seems they caught your mood, George. What did you do then?" we asked. "I decided to be up front. I told the team I was feeling a bit distracted, but if we dove into the agenda, it would probably help me get back on track. And guess what? It did." George had labeled his emotion without even thinking about it.

Negative moods are inevitable, but successful leaders know how to get out of them quickly so that they don't negatively affect their employees' productivity or their own. Now that you know what to do, there's only one thing you must *not* do to be a positive, contagious leader: don't be a control freak!

3. DON'T BE A CONTROL FREAK

One of our clients, Sarah, who heads a new provider network, landed a really big account. We wanted to know how she explained her success. "Do you believe your success is due to your hard work and perseverance?" we asked. "Or do you believe you signed this big account because the economy turned around?"

"Oh, my team and I worked really hard over the last three months to get this account. And right before our last client presentation, do you know what we did? We role-played every imaginable objection we could think of," Sarah replied. "We are definitely positioned to come out on top this quarter." This was her belief.

Psychologists can code such beliefs by their *locus of control*. Sarah has a strong *internal* locus of control. She believes she directly contributed to landing the big account and believes she can shape future outcomes. If Sarah had attributed landing the big account to the improved economy, we would say she has a strong *external* locus of control. We like to think of locus of control as a continuum. Consider where on the continuum you most often fall when something good happens. Now think about where the members of your team may fall on this locus of control continuum. We contend that your employees will feel more energized and empowered to do their jobs when they have a higher *internal* locus of control. Over 30 years of research on locus of control has repeatedly shown a strong correlation between how much control an employee feels at work and that employee's degree of performance, effort, motivation, and satisfaction. In addition, researchers have found that a greater sense of control serves as a buffer against other situations that stress people out at work.

However, what gets in the way of employees having a sense of control over their work is often their manager. Twenty-plus years ago a manager's role was often described as consisting of three activities: planning, organizing, and controlling. For many a control freak that last descriptor was interpreted as permission to micromanage. Today we know that the more we let employees control their own work, the more productive they will be.

Control Freak Downsides Autonor

- Employees stop taking initiative and only do what they are told.
- Employees are afraid to take risks.
- Employees remain idle until they get the next set of instructions.

Autonomy Freak Upsides

- Employees find ways to improve how work is performed.
- Employees are willing to take calculated risks.
- Employees are able to continue their work even in your absence.

You may be familiar with the business mantra "do, delegate, defer, or drop." Everything on your to-do list can be sorted into one of these four categories. Unfortunately, the hardest one for many managers is delegate, even though we know that delegating is an effective way to manage our workload and develop others. You probably already are aware if you have control freak proclivities at work because they tend to show up at home too.

For many business leaders, giving up control or letting go can be difficult, as it was for our client Tim. By age 29, Tim had taken the helm of a company with \$70 million in revenues. He got to that position because he showed leadership ability and produced great results. Tim liked being in control, but knew he needed to get out of the weeds and let go of some pet projects if he was truly going to lead the company.

If an Employee Seems Checked Out, Check Your Own Behavior First

Other business leaders have a hard time letting go because they are perfectionists, and we now know that perfectionism is the enemy of productivity (see Chapter 1).

"If you want something done right, you have to do it yourself," our client Mia, who runs a large design firm, told us.

However, insisting on doing things her way was beginning to cost her dearly. Deadlines were missed, and quality was slipping. She came to us for coaching because she was frustrated with her employees. "They just don't take initiative. And when they do, look what I get back," she said, sliding a PowerPoint presentation covered in red across the desk.

After interviewing her employees, we had to deliver the hard truth: "They've stopped taking initiative because they know whatever they produce will never be good enough because it's not exactly the way you would do things." Mia wasn't buying it. "I like things done my way. Isn't that why employees are called subordinates?"

"Getting your employees to do things your way may satisfy the perfectionist in you, but over time, good employees will become disengaged or, worse yet, may leave and go to a competitor," we said.

"Actually, I have noticed that one of my employees, Jason, seems checked out. When I first hired him, I thought he had such potential. Now he responds to my requests with is 'Whatever you want, boss.' He only does what he is asked and rarely takes initiative anymore. I'm at a loss," Mia said as she sank back in her chair.

We asked Mia to look inward and consider how she might be contributing to Jason's drop in performance. Mia had what we like to call an *aha moment*. Her control freak tendencies were creating the very behaviors she abhorred in others.

We left her with one other little piece of advice: "And by the way, get rid of that red pen. It reminds people of their evil English teacher."

The next time you find yourself in a similar situation, talk to your employee and find out what you can do differently, the way Mia did.

"I've noticed that you don't seem to enjoy your work as much as you used to," Mia observed in her next one-on-one with Jason. "Maybe I've been micromanaging. What can I do differently?"

"Why don't you try giving me the assignment with a specific due date and trust that I'll give it my best thinking and will ask you if I need help?" Jason replied.

Mia agreed to his request: "Okay, I'm going to delegate this piece of work to you. Here's what I'm looking for as an outcome. How you get it done is up to you. I trust you will ask me if you need any help." Before Mia ended the meeting, she asked for some help herself. She knew a lifetime of micromanaging wasn't going to change in a day, a week, or even a month. She knew she needed a way to get real-time feedback so that she didn't slip back into old behaviors.

"If I start to angle my way in and try to take over, what's a code word or phrase you can say to remind me to back off?" she asked.

"How about 'freak off'?" Jason asked with a smile.

If you find it difficult to think of work you could let go of, simply ask your employees. You'll be surprised at how many tasks or projects you can delegate.

Although you may think you will be able to get more done by micromanaging, it will backfire. Employees work best when they have some sense of control over their work. Provide the training and coaching they need and then get out of their way so that they can shape the way they do their work.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

You have more influence on your employees' productivity than you may realize. From the moment you walk into work, the kind of mood you're in matters. Because your moods are more contagious than those of your employees, you need to be mindful of what you're transmitting. Infect your department, team, or office with positive emotions and keep your negative emotions at bay. Specifically, do the following:

• Recognize the Achoo! effect. Remember, your moods are contagious. You can't afford to stay in a bad mood for very long because it adversely affects not only your own productivity but that of your employees.

- Tame your Oscar the Grouch if you need to. We'd like to think we can model a positive mood all the time, but that's not always possible. When you find yourself in a foul mood, remember that a number of techniques have been proven to be effective to get you out of it: label your emotion, take a few deep breaths, get off your tush, and when all else fails, fake it till you make it
- Don't be a control freak. If you suffer from control freak tendencies, your results and those of your team will suffer too. Instead, delegate and then get out of the way so that your employees can do their jobs.

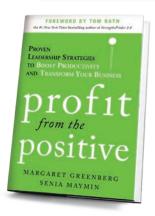
• • REFLECTION QUESTIONS • • •

After reading this chapter, ask yourself these questions:

- 1. What am I already doing right to be a contagious, positive leader?
- 2. What triggers my negative moods, and how can I neutralize them?
- 3. Which of the four techniques for taming my Oscar the Grouch works best for me?
- 4. Whom do I trust to give me honest feedback about how I am perceived by others?
- 5. Under what circumstances do I tend to micromanage, and what can I do to combat this tendency?
- 6. What is one small change I can make that will help me better manage my emotions and create a more positive, productive workplace?

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> —Foreword by Tom Rath, the New York Times bestselling author of StrengthsFinder 2.0 and How Full Is Your Bucket?



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