



# Profit from the Positive

Proven Leadership Strategies to Boost Productivity and Transform Your Business

Margaret Greenberg and Senia Maymin  
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## Focus

► **Leadership & Management**  
Strategy  
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Small Business  
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Industries  
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## Take-Aways

- “Positive Psychology” is not about feel-good exercises or fake harmony.
- Positivity is a business construct than can drive engagement and productivity.
- Leaders have a disproportionate impact on workplace positivity and negativity.
- Be optimistic and spread optimism throughout your teams. Suppress your bad moods, which are as “infectious” as your good moods.
- People can learn positivity. Put setbacks and failures in context as opportunities to build “resilience” and practice techniques for improving your optimism.
- To create a positive workforce, align employees’ work to their individual strengths.
- Reinforce positivity by regularly and specifically recognizing the efforts of your staff.
- Hire people for their optimism, cultural fit and positive reasons for working. Skills, experience and knowledge are secondary.
- Start and finish meetings on a positive note; shorten or eliminate them where possible.
- Change performance reviews to focus on strengths that people can leverage rather than weaknesses they must correct.

## Rating (10 is best)

Overall  
**7**

Applicability  
**8**

Innovation  
**6**

Style  
**7**

## Relevance

### What You Will Learn

In this summary, you will learn: 1) How to apply positive psychology at work; and 2) How to benefit from positivity and think differently about your moods, outlooks and perspectives.

### Recommendation

Executive coaches Margaret Greenberg and Senia Maymin describe direct actions leaders can take to boost their employees' performance, commitment and productivity. The book offers at least 30 tools managers can implement quickly at little or no cost, including advice on how to improve meetings and revamp your performance-review process. The authors offer common sense and simple, yet powerful, ideas based on small changes that can make a profound difference. *getAbstract* recommends this easy and engaging book to leaders who seek practical, inexpensive ways to improve their results dramatically.

## Summary

### “Positive Psychology”

Positive psychology is not a New Age, feel-good philosophy. Instead, it is a practical, easily applied business approach you can use to spur higher performance and greater results in your organization by emphasizing the positive – especially in leadership and team building.

### Positive Time and Task Management

To become a better leader, examine how you work and interact with your team. Organize your time and tasks before jumping into projects or significant tasks. Don't “multitask.” Time lost switching between tasks and ramping back up each time is greater than any benefit you might otherwise realize. The more you plan your day precisely and with great specificity, the more likely you are to use your plan. “To-do lists” work better when you assign a time slot to each task. Avoid the pursuit of perfection – an impossible standard that only causes delay.

Use simple but effective techniques to boost your productivity. People remember more about tasks they're prevented from completing than those they finish. Leave a job slightly incomplete so you can dive back into it the next morning. This provides a running start – and it means that you are productive as soon as you arrive, thus paving the way for higher output all day.

People are more productive when they believe they have a head start. A car wash issued stamped cards reading, “buy eight, get the next wash free” to half its customers and “buy ten, get the next wash free” cards to the other half – with two stamps already in place – making the cards equal. Only 19% of the first group completed its cards and earned a free car wash, compared to 32% of the second group. People are more motivated when they think that some tasks are already done.

Break large tasks down into manageable steps. No matter how busy you are, accomplish something – even something small – whenever you have a few minutes. Practice these techniques so they become “habit.” Soon, you won't have to think about it; you'll “just do

*“Positive psychology is not positive thinking. It is not about saying a gratitude mantra while turning lemons into lemonade.”*

*“Focus on what you can learn from your next challenge. When we reframe challenging assignments as opportunities to learn, this increases our effort.”*

*"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."*

*"The more we let employees control their own work, the more productive they will be."*

*"The more tasks we can outsource to the automatic side of our brains, the more productive we will be and the more time we will have to focus our conscious thought on what's important to us."*

*"Americans, on average, work eight hours more per week than their German counterparts, yet...are no more productive."*

it." Consider whether you're spending too much time at work. You might achieve better results and higher productivity by working less. Why? Thinking and reflecting on your work often sparks greater creativity. Working less may help you avoid stress, burnout or even depression – all of which take heavy tolls on productivity.

## Resilience

Failures, setbacks and the accompanying stress are normal aspects of all careers, especially successful ones. You can't avoid pain forever. Embrace it, because pain often leads to breakthroughs and success. Don't let failure discourage or stop you. View setbacks as learning opportunities, so you can bounce back, try again and succeed. Even truly bad experiences and trauma can lead to positive growth. In many cases, "Post Traumatic Stress Disorder" in soldiers leads to "Post-Traumatic Growth" – when people experience terrible things and afterward become even stronger and more capable.

Approach tough, unwelcome challenges as opportunities to learn something new. Adopting this viewpoint when you confront a task that seems difficult and stressful will make you likely to look forward to and even enjoy the job. Help others by positioning projects and tasks as opportunities for them to grow and "sharpen their minds."

When something goes wrong, apply the "Me-Always-Everything" framework. Look at the setback and ask yourself if it was entirely your fault – that's the "me" of the formula. Ask if such problems "always" happen to you. Are setbacks normal in "every" aspect of your life? The answer is probably no to all three questions. That conclusion should put the current setback into perspective and help you feel positive about your ability to deal with it. Ask yourself if you've overcome similar setbacks in the past and how big a deal this one will appear to be in 20 years. Will you or anyone else remember it?

When you worry that you can't do something, state your pessimistic conclusion deliberately and then "dispute" it. First, tell yourself you are incompetent or incapable of performing a certain task or assignment. Then, argue back, using past examples of your achievements in equally challenging situations. If someone you lead is discouraged, walk him or her through this exercise.

## "Role Model" Positivity

Those in authority tend to downplay the impact of poor leadership. That's why "toxic" bosses endure. They persist because their superiors value their technical skills and downplay their leadership flaws.

A leader's style must motivate and inspire others, and that requires positivity. As a leader, you're under near-constant surveillance by your employees. They watch what you do, gauge your moods and reflect what they see. If only one of every five people in a workplace conveys a positive mood, that sense of well-being can rapidly "infect" everyone else, including customers. As a leader, your mood is doubly "contagious" and directly affects productivity.

You can't always be in a good mood, but you can mask and shorten your spells of negativity. Start by admitting when you feel down, thus reducing the intensity of your discouragement. Practice meditation techniques, like deep breathing. Never wallow in a bad mood. Get up, go for a walk and get outside if you can. As a last resort, "fake it." Forcing yourself into a more positive disposition and making yourself smile or laugh can actually alter your mood. Practice self-awareness, know your moods and use these techniques to get out of bad moods faster.

*"In a Corporate Leadership Council study of over 20,000 employees in 29 countries, researchers found that focusing on employee strengths during reviews led to a 36% improvement in performance."*

*"Sometimes our current situation may seem daunting. But if we take a moment to reflect, we may find that we have faced and overcome other challenges in the past."*

*"Streamlining, overhauling or eliminating meetings altogether could save your company a bundle."*

*"Multitasking has become associated with being more productive, but this couldn't be further from the truth."*

Whatever your mood, don't tell your employees how to do their jobs. Coach and develop them so they grow and "control their own work." This will reduce their stress, engage them to a higher degree and help them become more productive. If you have to deliver ill tidings, heed the "Prospect Theory," which says that the negative impact of bad news is stronger than the positive impact of good news. Reveal your bad news all at once and get it over with. Stretch good news out over several days to gain maximum benefit.

### **Focus on Strengths**

Look for strengths and positives to shape your leadership style. The "strengths-based leader" duplicates what's working well by focusing on people's best abilities rather than only on solving problems. Identify what's right, find and correct what's wrong, and plug any holes. Instead of performing the typical "SWOT Analysis" of "Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats," use an alternative: Undertake a "SOAR Analysis" of "Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations and Results." Don't ignore weaknesses and threats, but focus more on opportunities to inspire people rather than discourage them.

To organize work so you and your team members focus on tasks that utilize your strengths, identify your own and your team's strengths. Use free or inexpensive online strength-assessment tools such as the VIA Inventory of Strengths Survey or books like Tom Rath's *StrengthsFinder 2.0*.

### **Positive Hiring**

Avoid common hiring mistakes, such as conducting an interview before you've really reviewed a candidate's résumé. Listen attentively – encourage the applicant to do most of the talking. Don't make "technical skills" and experience your hiring priorities. Focus first on cultural fit. Investigate the candidate's suitability to your organization, your team and the job. Look for personality and behavioral traits compatible with your culture and the work. What is the applicant's motivation for working? Does the applicant see your position as a job, a career or a "calling?" Hire people who want to build a career or fulfill a calling; they will show up for more than a paycheck. Determine fit, traits and motivation by asking situational questions that prompt candidates to talk about things they've done in previous jobs. Ask how they overcame challenges, influenced others or solved problems. Ask for real examples and avoid hypothetical situations.

Look for "optimism," especially for positions in sales, where rejection and setbacks occur daily. MetLife once hired 1,129 salespersons in one year. 1,000 of them did well on the usual industry test designed to match candidates' attributes to the profile of a successful insurance salesperson. The remaining 129 did badly in the test, but performed exceptionally well on an assessment of optimism. And they produced 27% more sales.

Don't let convention constrain your hiring process. Rackspace, a web services company, keeps candidates on-site all day in order to get to know them and to let them get to know the company. The typical one-hour interview doesn't provide sufficient time to assess job or cultural fit.

### **Engage the Workforce**

Engagement measures workers' commitment to the firm and their enthusiasm for their work. When you align people's work to their strengths, you'll see, on average, a 50% improvement in performance. Discover strengths as a team, so your employees learn about their abilities and their colleagues' abilities. A lot of employee engagement comes

*“People react much more strongly to losing a \$20 bill from their wallets than to finding a \$20 bill on the street.”*

*“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.”*

*“Perfection is the enemy of productivity.”*

from entering “the flow” because people get lost in their work when they are hyper-engaged. Flow means intense concentration that sheds distractions. When people apply their strengths at work, they experience flow.

As a leader, you can drive your employees’ engagement with “Frequent Recognition and Encouragement” (FRE). Look for work that’s going right and salute it generously. Honor people sincerely and specifically. Address the recipient directly. Rather than just saying “good job,” describe what the employee did well, and outline how he or she overcame significant challenges.

Encourage employees to recognize each other. At Zappos, employees give each other up to \$50 bonuses each month to recognize exceptional performance. Involving employees creates a productive culture of recognition.

### **Better “Performance Reviews”**

People usually dread performance reviews. They are time-consuming, mostly negative, often meaningless and frequently “inaccurate.” Improve your performance-review system or eliminate it. Typical reviews gloss over employees’ accomplishments and address only weaknesses they must repair. Flip this dynamic – not to ignore weaknesses, but to spend time discussing strengths and aligning employees’ tasks with their strengths.

Create specifically challenging “stretch goals.” Easy or vague goals don’t motivate people. Use reviews to “preview” a great year ahead – much as sports psychologists ask athletes to visualize success on the field. Rather than wait until the end of the year, provide regular informal feedback – good and bad – throughout the year. This leads to more constructive formal reviews because you’ll face fewer surprises and everyone will feel less stress. Consider leveraging your peer-to-peer recognition system into performance evaluations. Recognition from peers and managers is often the best indicator of performance.

### **Rethink Meetings**

Do you need all those meetings? Do you need all the people you typically invite? Do meetings have to last an hour or more? Researchers in the US attribute about \$37 billion of wasted time annually to meetings. Most of the participants in your meetings are not even paying attention. Try kicking off meetings with good news. Recognize someone for an accomplishment, or ask the group to “Tell me the best thing that’s happened to you since we met last week.” This sets the right tone for the meeting and lets you gauge your team’s mood. High-performing teams tend to be three times as positive in their comments as poor performers.

### **Putting Positivity to Work**

Expect resistance to your change efforts. Work first with those people who are the most welcoming. “Start small” with a few actions or initiatives. Avoid using technical or scientific terms, including “positive psychology,” to describe your changes. Talk straight and be positive.

## **About the Authors**

**Margaret Greenberg** is a coach, consultant and former HR executive. Psychologist **Senia Maymin** is a coach, entrepreneur and former finance executive.