

Are We Having Fun, Yet?

Attitude and Peak Performance in the Workplace

By Psychologist, Bruce Christopher

So much of what we consider success in life simply is how we look at things. The story has been told of parents who had two identical twin boys. They were identical in everyway except for their temperaments. One of the boys was a hope filled optimist, “Everything is coming up roses!”, he would always say. The other twin was a sad and hopeless pessimist; in fact, he was so pessimistic, he thought that the guy who invented “Murphy’s Law” (i.e., anything that can go wrong – probably will) was an optimist.

So, the worried parents brought their twin boys to the local psychologist in order to balance out their personalities. “On their next birthday”, the psychologist said to them, “put them in separate rooms to open their gifts. Buy the pessimist the best toys you can possibly afford, but give the optimist a box of manure.”

Well, the parents followed these weird instructions and carefully observed the results. On their next birthday, which fell on the same day – because they were twins of course, the parents opened the door of their pessimist and heard him audibly complaining about the great toys he had received, “I don’t like this game! I’ll betcha this computer will break! I know somebody who’s got a bigger toy car than this!” Tiptoeing across the hallway, the parents opened the door to their little optimist and they saw him laughing and giggling, gleefully taking the manure in his hands and throwing it up into the air! And they heard him say, “Mom and dad, you can’t fool me, where there’s this much crap . . . there’s got to be a pony!”

This story underscores the difference between OPTIMISTS and PESSIMISTS; where most of us would only see a nasty pile of manure, optimists see something else, they see potential “hidden ponies.” As a clinical psychologist and professional speaker, this is what I try to teach people in my audiences whenever I speak – how to find hidden ponies in the trials and negative circumstances of our lives. Optimists know how to do this intuitively, and they practice this skill in their professions and in their interpersonal interactions. When I have the privilege of speaking to a group of professionals in your industry, I always ask them this million dollar question:

Are you an OPTIMIST or a PESSIMIST? The answer to that question may have profound impact on your life, career, and relationships. But what does it really mean to be an optimist? I have a friend and colleague whom I often tease because everything seems to turn out right for him and go his way. Once we were out for lunch and he bumped his iced-tea with his hand, the glass wavered precariously back and forth, the tea sloshing around and coming dangerously close to going all over him. And of course, as is his destiny, not a single drop is spilt. I said to him, “Jeff, what just happened is a metaphor for your life. If that had been me, that drink would have ended up in my lap! Everything just works out for you doesn’t it?” He smiled and looked at me and said, “Yeah, I guess it does.”

Is my friend Jeff an optimist or a pessimist because everything seems to go his way? No, Jeff is just lucky. Optimism has nothing to do with luck, good karma, or how the planets are aligned. Optimism has everything to do with how respond and react when things *don't* go your way. Anyone can be positive when things are going great, but the real test is how do you act when things don't go according to plan.

The Attitude Axiom: The most important thing about you is NOT what happens to you, it is how you talk to yourself about what happens to you. You see, we all talk to ourselves, and this is called thinking; thinking is an internal dialogue that we have going on inside of ourselves all the time, and how we think creates our attitude and approach to life. Your attitude is the most essential skill which you can practice because not only does it energize you, but it energizes those around you as well.

In this brief article, let me share with you two reasons why a positive attitude is vitally important for you. . .

1st. Attitude Predicts Success

In psychology, one of the things we are really interested in are the variables which predict success; our focus used to be on traditional measuring methods like I.Q. or academic performance in school. Those of you who have children in school who might be struggling a little bit, take heart, because there is not a strong link between academic performance and I.Q. with success in life and work.

Psychologists now look at another variable which has been called "Emotional Intelligence" as a primary predictor of success. Emotional intelligence has to do with your attitudes, how well you deal with setbacks and failures, and your ability to interact effectively and empathetically with people.

Many studies and reviews have demonstrated the importance of attitude for success in business. In fact, research reveals that the more you love what you do the better you will do it and the more successful you will be. One longitudinal study underscores this point: researchers followed a group of 1,500 people over a period of 20 years. At the starting point of the study, the group was divided into Group A, 83% of the sample, who had started their career path based upon it's potential for making money in the immediate future in order to do what they really wanted to do later, and Group B, the remaining 17% of the sample, had done the exact opposite. They decided to pursue a career that they loved to do now and worry about the money later.

Check this out: After 20 years, 101 of the original 1,500 had become millionaires. One came from Group A, the other 100 had come from Group B, the people who had chosen to do what they loved! Clearly this points out the dramatic power of attitude; people who do what they love tend to become more successful because they approach what they do with vigor, energy, and vision.

The National Retail Merchants Association conducted a survey to gather data on why businesses lose customers: Competition, moving, or death was only 9%; Lower prices elsewhere, only 9%; Unadjusted complaints, 14%; and poor attitude of the personnel was a significant 68%. Adding the last two figures together indicates that upward of 80% of people who choose to leave “doing business” with your organization, do it because of poor attitudes from the staff.

Dr. Martin Seligman, professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania and author of the best selling book, Learned Optimism, has demonstrated in several experiments that individuals who are highly optimistic, but are not as competent and trained in the techniques of selling as others, significantly outperform those who are more highly trained, but score lower on assessments of optimism. He proposes that perhaps the most predictive factor for successful outcomes in our businesses is NOT our finely tuned technical skills, but rather the intangible importance of our attitudes.

2nd Attitude is contagious

Imagine the power of this concept; that you are a communicable disease. You are infecting all those around you with your own attitude. Why does this happen? It's because there is a psychological principle which is active in our lives which I call The Projection Principle.

The Projection Principle is this: The attitude I GIVE to you, I GET reflected back to me in performance and behavior. I would see this dynamic many times in the counseling office; a father might come in with his teenage son and he would talk to me about his child in a tone of anger and detachment, “This kid is so stubborn and negative!,” he would yell at me, “Can you figure out where he gets this bad attitude from!?” Hmm, I think to myself, I wonder. It seems to me that the father and child are mere reflections of one another; father yells, “Clean your room!” Kid yells back, “No!” They sound just like one another as they mirror each others behavior.

What do you want from your staff? Your customers? Your spouse? Your kids? You first might want to take a look at what you are projecting onto them; because chances are that they are simply reflecting your own attitude back through their performance and behavior. Now, certainly I am not suggesting that we are responsible for the attitude and actions of others, but on the other hand, there is a body of research which demonstrates that emotions are quite contagious and that other people tend to mirror or match the emotional energy that we give off.

In his book, Emotional Intelligence, Dr. Daniel Goleman talks about the subtlety with which emotions pass from one person to another. In a simple experiment, two people fill out a pre-test of their current moods and emotional state in the moment, then simply sat facing each other while the experimenter went out of the room to score their tests. After a few minutes the experimenter returns with another mood checklist and asks them to it out again. The pairs were purposely composed of one person who was highly

expressive of emotion and the other who was deadpan. Invariably, the post-test of emotional state had shown how the mood of the more expressive individual had been transferred to the more passive partner.

Someone once said, "Attitude is everything." And according to the latest research which is being done on the subject, this seems to be the case. When it comes to re-energizing your staff, you must realize that it all starts with you and your own attitude; for the attitude that you project to your staff and your patients will be assimilated by them and reflected back to you in behavior, performance, and actions. Unfortunately, most of us are "blind" to the attitude-projections that we give off to others. Try saying to an explosive person that they are yelling at you, and you may here them say, "I am not yelling at you!!", as they tear your head off with a verbal barrage that makes you cower in fear of what they might do.

Wouldn't it be revealing to have a secret video camera on us as we go through our workday; most of us might not really like what we see. "Who is that?" we might say to ourselves, "I had no idea that I looked so scowl and serious." Don't worry, you don't need a secret video camera on you – just ask your staff, they already know.

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