

How Full Is Your Bucket?

Positive Strategies for Work and Life

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[Fertig Notes]

- In the early 1950s, Don Clifton (author's grandfather) noticed the field of psychology was based almost entirely on the study of *what is wrong* with people. He began to wonder if it would be more important to study *what is right* with people.
- Our lives are shaped by our interactions with others. The results are almost always positive or negative and profoundly affect our lives.
- Following the Korean War, Major (Dr.) William Mayer examined one of the most extreme and perversely effective cases of psychological warfare on record. He discovered a new disease in the POW camps – a disease of extreme hopelessness. Soldiers died simply because they had given up. They had completely surrendered, both mentally and physically. The extreme mental tactics the North Korean captors used were described as the “ultimate weapon” of war. The North Koreans’ objective was to “deny men the emotional support that comes from interpersonal relationships.” There are four primary tactics: informing, self-criticism, breaking loyalty to leadership and country, and withholding all positive emotional support.
- To encourage informing, they gave the prisoners rewards such as cigarettes when they snitched on one another. They were encouraged to dip from their comrades’ buckets every day.
- To promote self-criticism, in groups of 10-12 soldiers, each man was required to stand up in front of the group and confess *all the bad things he had done* – as well as *all the good things he could have done but failed to do so*. The soldiers were not “confessing” to the North Koreans, but to their own peers. Buckets of goodwill were constantly and ruthlessly drained.
- Breaking loyalty to leadership and country was done by slowly and relentlessly undermining a soldier’s allegiance to his superiors. In one case, a colonel instructed one of his men not to drink the water because he knew the organisms in it might kill him. The soldier remarked, “You ain’t no colonel anymore; you’re just a lousy prisoner like me.” The soldier died of dysentery a few days later. Relationships had been broken; soldiers simply didn’t care about each other anymore.
- The tactic of withholding all positive emotional support while inundating soldiers with negative emotions was perhaps *bucket dipping in its purest and most malicious form*. If a soldier received a supportive letter from home, the captors withheld it. All negative letters were delivered to soldiers immediately. The effects were devastating. The North Koreans had put the American soldiers “into a kind of emotional and psychological isolation.”
- If people can be literally destroyed by unrelenting negative reinforcement, can they be uplifted and inspired to a greater degree by similar levels of positivity? In essence, they asked: ***Can positivity have an even stronger impact than negativity?***
- **Everyone has an invisible bucket. We are at our best when our buckets are overflowing – and at our worst when they are empty.**
- **Everyone also has an invisible dipper. In each interaction, we can use our dipper either to fill or to dip from others’ buckets.**
- **Whenever we choose to fill others’ buckets, we in turn fill our own.**
- Individuals who receive regular recognition and praise: increase their individual productivity, increase engagement among their colleagues, are more likely to stay with their organization, receive higher loyalty and satisfaction scores from their customers, and have better safety records and fewer accidents on the job.
- Great recognition and praise can immediately transform a workplace.
- ***The #1 reason people leave their jobs: They don’t feel appreciated.***
- Where productivity is concerned, it would be better for organizations if people who are overly negative stayed home.
- *Praise is rare in most workplaces.*
- Managers and employees who actively spread positive emotions, even in small doses, will see the difference immediately.

- Most of us have grown up in a culture in which it's much easier to tell people what they did wrong instead of praising them when they succeed.
- The majority of young people aren't selected for their first job on the basis of how well their natural talents fit their role.
- *Negative emotions can be harmful to your health and might even shorten your life span. Positive emotions are an essential daily requirement for survival.*
- The *frequency* of small, positive acts is critical.
- Workgroups with positive-to-negative ratios of greater than 3 to 1 are significantly more productive than teams that do not reach this ratio. However, things worsen if the ratio goes higher than 13 to 1. *Positivity must be grounded in reality.* A "Pollyanna" approach, in which the negative is completely ignored, can result in a false optimism that is counterproductive – and sometimes downright annoying.
- Negative emotions might cut more years off of life expectancy than smoking. There's no surgeon general's warning about negative emotions, but there should be.
- *Optimism early in life predicted good health later in life.*
- Never try to teach a pig to sing. It wastes your time and it annoys the pig.
- Strive for greatness in your areas of talent.
- Instead of dwelling on negative or uncontrollable aspects, focus on what *could* be done.
- We don't have to allow ourselves to be defined by our hardships. Our responses to difficult events and our emotional state are much more important. Positive reinforcement about our strengths can buffer us against getting overwhelmed with the negative. And understanding what we do best allows us not only to survive, but grow, in the face of adversity.
- *Recognition is most appreciated and effective when it is individualized, specific and deserved.*
- There are unique and specific ways to fill each person's bucket – and most certainly inappropriate ways as well. Generic, one-size-fits-all awards don't work. Neither does recognition that seems forced or false.
- Some persistently negative or hurtful people simply won't change, despite your best efforts. If serving as example won't help, then steer clear of these kinds of people as much as possible – for your own well-being and emotional health.
- Discover the power of focusing on *what is right*.
- Great relationships lead to a significant increase in life satisfaction. The happiest people have high-quality social relationships. Lonely people suffer psychologically.
- The vast majority of people prefer gifts that are unexpected. It's about the element of surprise. An unexpected gift doesn't have to be tangible either. It can be a gift of trust or responsibility.
- Redefine the Golden Rule. "Do unto others as *they would have you do unto them.*"
- The things that make you unique also determine what really fills your bucket – and vice versa. It's unlikely that the exact same things will mean quite as much to anyone else; some of us prefer tangible rewards or gifts, while others are driven by words and acknowledgement. And while certain people want to receive kind words in front of a crowd, others prefer a quieter, one-to-one commendation or compliment from someone they love, admire or respect.
- It will mean more to the recipient if your praise is specific.
- Everyone is good at something. Try to notice what others are good at.
- How you like your bucket filled may be very different from how someone else likes theirs filled. The only way you can be sure you are right about what fills other peoples' buckets is to ask them. Learning about what fills the buckets of the people around you is a powerful way to transform the culture.