

Management By Coaching

Change Your Thoughts And Start Changing Your Results

The power of positive thinking isn't a new idea, but new research is proving that your mom, fifth grade teacher, Norman Vincent Peale, or whoever first introduced you to the concept was on to something. Aided by MRIs and PET scanners, medical scientists are now able to observe the impact our thoughts have on the bodies. Findings clearly show that our thoughts have extraordinary power to influence what goes on in our bodies; from the strength of our immune system to our ability to control pain and even the effectiveness of prescription medicines.

Consider the evidence: A University of Wisconsin study revealed that activating areas of the brain associated with negative emotions appeared to weaken participants' immune response to the flu vaccine. Another university study showed that the mere anticipation of relief from medication was enough for the brain to begin releasing its own natural pain-dousing opiates.

Nowhere is the power of the mind as well-known and accepted as it is in sports. Just ask Tiger Woods, or the 2008 Super Bowl champion New York Giants, or Michael Phelps. They will quickly tell you, skills, training, conditioning and hard work are table stakes. The ability to see yourself making that perfect putt, winning against all the odds or standing on the podium as Olympic gold is placed around your neck is what ultimately separates winners from the "also-rans." The power to succeed begins and ends in our own minds.

How are you using your innate power to create a healthy agency that wins in good times and in the most challenging of times? The one-two punch of a soft market and a slow economy can be draining for even the best of agencies. New business is harder to come by. Insurers are reducing their costs by passing on more of their work to you. You pull out all the stops to win, yet lose accounts due to reckless competition. Even when you do a great job for your client and keep the business, you're probably working harder than ever for less money. Margins are decreasing, while pressures are increasing. It is easy to get caught up in negative thinking.

Now, more than ever, is the time to focus on using your power to infuse as much positive energy in your business as you can. Here are five ideas that you can start putting to work today.

Leverage The Power Of “What’s Right” Thinking

The tendency in most businesses is to set aside what is working in order to remain alert to where they could be vulnerable. As a result, the bulk of time and energy effort is invested in analyzing what’s wrong and fixing it. While this may seem logical, it is a limiting way to work and leads us to fall short of the results we could achieve.

Think about the last time you attended a meeting where you talked about challenges in the agency and what needs to be fixed. How energized did you feel when you walked out the door? When we ask a “what’s wrong” question, it is framed and processed in our rational or analytical mind. Our analytical minds are known to use a deductive reasoning process that depletes our energy. In the insurance industry, we think with our analytical minds most of the time. It is why the business can be so draining.

When we ask a “what’s-working-right” question, our rational mind doesn’t know how to process the question on its own. As a result, “what’s right” questions are deferred to the less assertive, but far more powerful, intuitive mind where they are processed in a manner that generates energy. Our intuition processes between 1,000 and 10,000 times faster than our rational mind.

While there is a time and place for analytical thinking, it is not all the time. When addressing areas like performance improvement, expansion opportunities, managing relationships, or building a vision, try tapping into your intuitive mind by concentrating on these four questions:

- What’s right or what’s working?
- What makes it right, or why does it work?
- What would be ideally right?
- What’s not quite right yet?

In the book Breaking The Rules by Kurt Wright, FedEx founder Fred Smith was quoted as saying that these four questions crystallized the thought process he used to create his company. Whether you are challenging your own thinking or talking to a client, colleague or employee, get in the habit of asking “what’s right” oriented questions.

Develop A “Build-On-Strengths” Mindset

Test the power of this idea for yourself. Take out a piece of paper. Make two columns; label one “strengths” and the other “weaknesses.” In the first column, list your six greatest strengths, and in the other column your six greatest weaknesses. Go back and review your lists. Which of the two lists do you have the strongest feelings about? Note your feelings. Now place a check mark next to the five characteristics you would most like to see change over the next six months. What happens to your energy level when you focus on your strengths and what happens when we focus on our weaknesses?

If you are like most people who do this exercise, your energy level will rise when you focus on your strengths and fall when you focus on weaknesses. Despite the fact that the majority of people feel more energy when they focus on strengths, the five things most people say they want to work on are their weaknesses. When you talk to people, they often tell you that the same five weaknesses have been on their lists for the past 15 years. Clearly our traditional focus on weaknesses is draining energy and having little impact on changing performance.

Build positive energy and improve performance by focusing on strengths, rather than trying to fix the weaknesses.

Keep Track Of What The Agency Is Doing Right

Keep a list. Every day, look for the top three things your agency and your people are doing right. List the items in order of importance and keep the list in front of you. At any time during the day when something new makes the list, place it in its proper order and remove the last item.

You boost the power of your positive energy when you find things to appreciate during the course of the day. When we focus our attention on something – give energy to it – we can be certain it will expand. When we focus our attention on the positive aspects of life, they expand; when we focus on the negatives, they too expand. It is as simple as that.

Just as a flow of electrical energy causes a magnetic field to develop around the flow, energy we use to focus on our weaknesses sets up a powerful magnet-like attraction for problems, mistakes and failures. It attracts the very undesired effect and consequences we are trying to protect ourselves against.

Share your list of what the agency is doing right regularly. Make it your point of emphasis at staff meetings – not just some token good news before you dig into all the problems and things that need to be fixed. The list is a fresh, practical way of creating energy, boosting performance and generating momentum.

Give Constructive Direction Instead Of Constructive Criticism

Regardless of what we've been conditioned to believe, there is no such thing as constructive criticism. All forms of criticism are an attempt to judge others as deficient and are basically destructive. Criticism is deficiency-based and concentrates on judging past events negatively. Let's face it, being judged deficient doesn't feel good. Even when you are tactful, people see through you. It drains their energy, wears them down, and in the long-run, undermines confidence and performance.

Replace constructive criticism with constructive direction. Rather than focusing on what's wrong with the person's behavior, focus on creating a clear picture of your desired end-result. Work with the person to build a shared understanding of what that end result is and plan for how you're going to get there. Stay entirely focused on the present and the future.

Constructive direction addresses the issues that need to be addressed. It succeeds by giving people clear targets to hit instead of dismantling their guns. It gives you a way to practice results-oriented and supportive communication.

Inspire People By Seeing The Absolute Best In Them

No matter how confident we may appear to be, few of us ever see the full extent of our gifts and talents. Like the businesses we work for, our natural tendency is to waste valuable energy tearing ourselves down or feeling defensive about our perceived shortcomings. How you relate to your employees and colleagues can either add to the energy drain or help lift them up.

The most powerful energy boosters are feelings that we all want more of: feelings of appreciation, genuine care, respect and kindness. Find “what’s right” about people – whether it is your client, your co-worker, boss or employee. Identify what you genuinely admire in them and take the time to share it. It can be as simple as “You know I think you take your sense of humor for granted. You are a riot and keep everyone in this office smiling;” or, “I love listening to the way you talk to your clients, you are always so patient and empathetic.”

The traits we admire in others remind us of what we value in life. The more we look for strengths in others, the more we bring out the best in them and in ourselves. Perhaps the most impressive quality that develops from a long-time practice of expressing admiration and appreciation for others is the charisma that draws other people to us because they feel good about themselves when they are around us.

There are two ways to view the world – one is through the lens of what’s wrong. Choose this, and at the end of the day you’ll feel frustrated, depleted and disappointed in yourself and everyone around you. The other is through the lens of what’s right. Choose this perspective, and you will create the continuous flow of positive energy you need to achieve what is most important in your life.

Kimberly Paterson, CEC and Certified Energy Leadership Coach, is President of CIM (www.cim-co.com), a marketing and consulting firm that works with property & casualty insurance agencies and company clients. She can be reached at kpaterson@cim-co.com.