

STYBEL PEABODY & ASSOCIATES



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COVID VIRUS CAN CONTAMINATE OTHERS AT WORK.

EMOTIONS (POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE) ALSO CAN CONTAMINATE YOUR
TEAM MEMBERS: HOW TO MANAGE EMOTIONAL CONTAMINATION.

Leadership vs Finding and Correcting Errors.

The nature of work these days is typically one in which time is spent seeking and correcting errors. Over time, negative emotions emanating from leaders contaminate team members. Ultimately it creates a negative corporate culture.

Psychologists Robert Emmons and Michael McCullough were interested in researching emotional contamination. Does expressing gratitude “cause” people to feel happy or is it only that happy people are grateful?

To test this question, 192 adults were randomly distributed into three groups.

In the experimental group, participants were asked to write down five things in their life that they were grateful for during the past seven days. A second group was asked to write down five negative things that had bothered them during the past week. And a third group was simply instructed to write something in a weekly journal.

These gratitude or hassle reports were completed once a week for nine weeks. The groups were monitored for physical symptoms and overall satisfaction with life. At the conclusion of the nine weeks, there was a statistically significant difference between the two groups. The group induced to express gratitude (whether genuine or not) had an overall more positive outlook on life and reported fewer physical symptoms. They also spent significantly more time exercising than those in the hassle conditions.

The authors' conclusions:

“Manipulated expressions of gratitude per se may help to boost positive affect.”

In other words, you can fake gratitude and you will become truly grateful.

A second study was conducted with a different group. This time the outcome measure was observer reports submitted by spouses or significant others. Those in the gratitude group were rated as showing significantly higher levels of positive attitude towards life.

In other words, positive emotions “contaminated” relationships in a positive way.

Implications for Leaders.

One implication of this research: "act" grateful and the mere acting infects you to become grateful. Positive and negative emotions are contagious. Why not manage positive emotions to your benefit?

There is an iPhone app that can be purchased on iTunes called the Gratitude Journal. On Android devices a similar app is called Attitudes of Gratitude. Happier is another app that accomplishes the same objectives and is available for both devices. Every day, you write down 3-5 things that you are grateful for, however trivial it might seem to you. The basic idea is to focus thoughts on the asset enhancement components of your life. The impact of the Emmons and McCullough research suggests that the mere exercise of writing down things you are grateful for will change your outlook on life. And that change will infect others to view you more positively.

Thank You for Doing Your Job.

In Agatha Christie's book, *A Caribbean Mystery*, a waiter serves a female hotel guest. She says to the waiter, "Thank you." Her husband remarks, "Do not thank the waiter. He is just doing his job." Now think about your organization. How common is it that leaders refrain from praising team members on the grounds that nobody deserves gratitude for "just doing the job?"

If positive emotions are contagious, then expressions of gratitude to employees for performing what you consider to be basic job functions may reward these employees to perform at higher levels in the future. The best feedback is face-to-face. The second best is online or on the phone.

Use emails only as a last resort.

Start Your Meetings with Expressions of Gratitude.

We have taken part in numerous Board meetings. These meetings typically begin with a neutral approval of the minutes of the last meeting and then descend into problems the organization is having.

Is this the best way to start if you wish to contaminate others with positive emotions?

We recommend that the minutes be sent electronically to members in advance and approval be requested electronically. The Chair can then begin the meeting with an expression of gratitude. For example, "One of the reasons I am proud to be part of this physician practice group is that we are the ones who are defining quality care in our field. I am proud that Dr. Smith's pioneering work has been mentioned in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. Dr. Smith is the type of physician who inspires me to be a better physician."

In a team meeting one can say the following, "Before we begin I'd like to take this opportunity to thank Jane for taking the initiative and getting Ron's organization to agree to work with us. This is the kind of initiative that makes me proud of being part of this team."

Your mission is to infect your team with positive emotions.

Yes, it would be nice if you truly "feel" grateful. It doesn't matter. Simply "expressing" gratitude without necessarily feeling the emotion will be sufficient for the infection to take hold.

Pollyanna Leadership?

Pollyanna is an early 20th century book by Eleanor Porter that became a popular Walt Disney movie. Pollyanna is incurably optimistic in the face of grim reality. We are not proposing Pollyanna Leadership.

The world is dangerous. And the world is full of beautiful possibilities. Both possibilities need to be confronted. The choice for leaders is what to focus on first.

References.

Emmons, R. A., & McCullough, M. E. (2003). Counting blessings versus burdens: an experimental investigation of gratitude and subjective well-being in daily life. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 82,2, 377-384.

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Business leaders wishing a free 30-minute consultation can contact:

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