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Professional Leadership Results, Inc.

Helping you align your people with your vision



Focus on Your Strengths, Manage Your Weaknesses

By Libby Wagner, Founder of Professional Leadership Results

Welcome to the premier issue of Professional Leadership News. The goal of the newsletter is to offer G.I.F.T.s—Great Ideas for Transformation—to readers and subscribers. I'd like to take this opportunity to express my enthusiasm and commitment for the good work to come in the hopes that many of you will join me on the path to developing our strengths to create more fulfilling futures!

One of my favorite discoveries in the past ten years was the book *Soar with Your Strengths* by Donald Clifton. Clifton, who was dubbed "The Grandfather of Positive Psychology," suggests that if people are focusing on their areas of strength, not only will they be happier, but also they'll be more productive. Other great books of similar theme followed—Marcus Buckingham's *First*, *Break All the Rules* and subsequent *Now, Discover Your Strengths* (co-authored with Clifton) and recently, *How Full is Your Bucket?* by Tom Rath, grandson of the late Clifton.

IDENTIFY TALENTS AND SUPPORT EXCELLENT PERFORMANCE

This seems like good thinking to me—focus on the strengths and manage the weaknesses. In fact, this does not even seem complicated, so why, instead, do many of us focus on our areas of weakness, our deficits and our lesser qualities? Equally as puzzling, why do we do this to each other? In organizations, we focus on trying to fix people rather than identifying what their talents really are and supporting excellent performance. Often, the atmosphere becomes negative and critical and we forget to notice what's going well or how to enhance an environment that focuses on strengths. This isn't just about being nice, either, as negativity and negative work environments cost the U.S. economy an estimated \$300 billion per year! In contrast, organizations that create a positive environment have a lucrative advantage over those where intra-office negativity can scare customers, clients, and good employees away.

IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT BEING POSITIVE

I'd also note that this isn't just about annoyingly positive people who exhaust you with their cheerfulness. It's about sincerity and genuineness. For example, I love my health club. I like going there, I like that they remember my name when I walk in, even though I'm one of 12,000 members. I like that all the staff members—from the pool guy, to the trainers and the barista—are friendly. I like that when I've just about had it on the treadmill, someone comes up and offers me a cup of water or a towel. It makes me happy to go to this place, so I don't mind that I'm paying a little more than I would at a competing health club. And yes, they have innovative programs and lots of classes and an outdoor pool. Even if this is a carefully planned marketing strategy, I don't care. But if they weren't nice to me, I'd pack my gym bag and never look back.

CORE DIMENSIONS

It's not rocket science to figure out that when people are happy at work, they tend to do better. In fact, there is a direct correlation between employee performance and something I'll call environmental delivery of the Core Dimensions—respect, empathy, specificity and genuineness. The way to get at this, to have a profound impact on performance, on the utility of systems and productivity, is to make sure that the people, the individuals, are able to do meaningful work while using their talents.

BE NICE OR LEAVE

In my last office, located atop a tall, ugly building with a sweeping view, I hung a little sign I picked up at a gift shop— "Be Nice or Leave." I laughed initially at the directness, the assertive nature of an expectation I might hold for those who came to see me. But I also knew that I wouldn't ask for something that I wouldn't be able to give myself—and that's my practice—if every human interaction is for better or for worse, I want mine to be good, and that includes the difficult interactions. In 2003, I lost my sister Karen, 36, to breast cancer. There's no way to articulate how this has impacted my life, but it's enough to say that that kind of loss creates a sort of illumination in ones life. I hoped that if I were willing to listen, to watch, to be brave in the face of this monumental change, I might emerge to find myself more purposeful, less neurotic, more solid. We imagine, often, that we have all the time in the world to communicate what we need, or to ask for what we want, but in fact, this is not the case. So, welcome to the newsletter! I'll work hard to offer some worthwhile stuff here— some practical, some inspirational, mostly food for thought, and some ideas to try out. I hope you'll share it and I don't mind if you copy it and offer it up to those you think might enjoy or benefit from it. What are we waiting for? *Let's move forward toward those more fulfilling futures!* ❖

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