How and Why Positive Leaders Transform Teams and Organizations and Change the World

The Power of Positive Leadership

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To Ken Blanchard, for teaching me and showing me how a true positive leader lives and leads. Your example and support changed my life and I am forever grateful.
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Chapter 1

From Negative to Positive

Being positive doesn’t just make you better; it makes everyone around you better.
I'm not naturally a positive person. People think I am because of my books and talks, but the truth is that I have to work hard to be positive. It doesn't come naturally to me. In fact, I find it ironic that I would write a book like this—and that my life's work centers on the importance of positivity. It's true that we teach what we need to learn. I know that my quest to become a more positive person and better leader has made me a better teacher.

I grew up in Long Island, New York, in a Jewish-Italian family; with a lot of food and a lot of guilt; a lot of wine and a lot of whining. My parents were very loving but they were not the most positive people in the world. My dad was a New York City police officer who worked in undercover narcotics. He fought crime every day and wasn't a big fan of positivity. I remember waking up in the morning and saying, "Good morning, Dad." He would say in his thick New York accent, "What's so good about it?" My dad was Al Bundy before Al Bundy was Al Bundy.

By the age of 31, I was a fearful, negative, stressed-out, and miserable husband and father to two young children. My wife had had enough. She gave me an ultimatum: Change or our marriage was over. I knew she was right that I needed to change. I knew that I was allowing the stress of life and the fear
of not being able to provide for my family to get the best of me. I told my wife I would change and began researching ways I could be more positive. At the time, positive psychology was an emerging field, and I read everything I could about it. I began to practice positivity and write about the things I was doing. I met Ken Blanchard, who became my role model. I began taking “thank you” walks to practice gratitude, enjoy the outdoors, and feel grateful instead of stressed. This was a life-changing practice that not only energized me physically, emotionally, and spiritually, but also provided time for many profound insights and ideas to come to me.

One of these ideas was *The Energy Bus*. In case you haven’t read it, it’s about a guy named George who is miserable and negative. His team at work is in disarray and he has problems at home. George was easy for me to write about because he was based on me and my struggle with negativity and adversity. George wakes up one Monday morning to discover his car has a flat tire and he has to take the bus to work. On the bus, he meets Joy the bus driver, who, along with a cast of characters, teaches George the 10 rules for the *ride of his life*. Their advice not only helps him become a more positive person, but also a better father, husband, and leader at work. On one level, George demonstrates that positivity is a difference maker in business, education, life, and sports. On another level, George represents the fact that every one of us will have to overcome negativity, adversity, and challenges to ultimately define ourselves and our team’s success.

Since *The Energy Bus* was published in 2007, I’ve had the opportunity to work with many Fortune 500 companies, businesses, professional and college sports teams, hospitals, schools,
and nonprofits that have utilized the book. I’ve met many amazing positive leaders and have witnessed firsthand the power of positive leadership. I’ve seen how they have led, inspired, and transformed their teams and organizations. I’ve observed the impact they have had and the results they have achieved. I’ve also researched many positive leaders throughout history and learned about their paths to success. There is indeed a power associated with positive leadership, and my goal with this book is twofold. First, I aim to explain how and why positive leaders make a difference. Second, I intend to provide a simple framework filled with practical ideas that will help anyone become a positive leader. It’s one of the most important things a person can do because one positive leader will inspire many others to become positive leaders as well. My daughter wrote her college admission essay last year and it said, “When I was young my mom struggled with her health and my dad struggled with himself. But over the years I watched my dad work to become a more positive person. Then he started writing and speaking about it and sharing his message with others. I saw people change for the better and I know that if he can change, and they can change, the world can change.” Her words brought tears to my eyes because I realized that my one decision to be a positive leader not only impacted my life but also my marriage, my children, my team at work, and everyone around me. My hope is that you too will discover the power of positive leadership in your own life. I know that being a positive leader doesn’t just make you better; it makes everyone around you better. You can start today!

From Negative to Positive
Chapter 2

Real Positive

We are not positive because life is easy.
We are positive because life can be hard.
It takes a lot of work to create a world-class organization. It’s hard to develop a successful team. It’s not easy to build a great culture. It’s challenging to work toward a vision and create a positive future. It’s difficult to change the world. As a leader, you will face all kinds of challenges, adversity, negativity, and tests. There will be times when it seems as if everything in the world is conspiring against you. There will be moments you’ll want to give up. There will be days when your vision seems more like a fantasy than a reality. That’s why positive leadership is so essential. When some people hear the term positive leadership they roll their eyes because they think I’m talking about Pollyanna positivity, where life is full of unicorns and rainbows. But the truth is that we are not positive because life is easy. We are positive because life can be hard. Positive leadership is not about fake positivity. It is the real stuff that makes great leaders great. Pessimists don’t change the world. Critics write words but they don’t write the future. Naysayers talk about problems but they don’t solve them. Throughout history we see that it’s the optimists, the believers, the dreamers, the doers, and the positive leaders who change the world. The future belongs to those who believe in it
and have the belief, resilience, positivity, and optimism to overcome all the challenges in order to create it.

Research by Manju Puri and David Robinson, business professors at Duke University, shows that optimistic people work harder, get paid more, are elected to office more often, and win at sports more regularly.¹ Research by psychologist Martin Seligman also shows that optimistic salespeople perform better than their pessimistic counterparts.² And psychologist Barbara Fredrickson’s research demonstrates that people who experience more positive emotions than negative ones are more likely to see the bigger picture, build relationships, and thrive in their work and career, whereas people who experience mostly negative emotions are more likely to have a narrower perspective and tend to focus more on problems.³ Daniel Goleman’s research demonstrates that positive teams perform at higher levels than negative teams.⁴ John Gottman’s pioneering research on relationships found that marriages are much more likely to succeed when the couple experiences a five-to-one ratio of positive to negative interactions; when the ratio approaches a one-to-one ratio, marriages are more likely to end in divorce.⁵ Additional research also shows that workgroups with positive-to-negative interaction ratios greater than three to one are significantly more productive than teams that do not reach this ratio. Teams with more negative interactions are more likely to be stagnant and unproductive. The positive energy you share with your team is significant. According to Wayne Baker, the research he and Robert Cross conducted shows that “the more you energize people in your workplace, the higher your work performance.” Baker says that this occurs because people want to be around you. You attract talent and

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people are more likely to devote their discretionary time to your projects. They’ll offer new ideas, information, and opportunities to you before others.

Baker adds that the opposite is also true. If you de-energize others, people won’t go out of their way to work with or help you.6 Gallup estimates that negativity costs the economy $250–$300 billion a year and affects the morale, performance, and productivity of teams.

The research is clear. Positivity is about more than having a positive state of mind. It’s also a life changer and gives people a competitive advantage in business, sports, and politics. While the pessimists are complaining about the future, the energy vampires are sabotaging it, and the realists are talking about it, the optimists are working hard with others to create it. Puri and Robinson’s research shows that our attitude helps create a self-fulfilling prophecy. Because optimists believe in a positive future, they actually delude themselves into working more to make it possible. Their belief makes them willing to take actions to achieve it. As a result, positive leaders invest their time and energy in driving a positive culture. They create and share the vision for the road ahead. They lead with optimism and belief and address and transform the negativity that too often sabotages teams and organizations. They take on the battle, overcome the negativity, face the adversity, and keep moving forward. They devote all their energy and effort to uniting and connecting their organization and invest in relationships that truly build great teams. They believe in their principles. They believe in their people. They believe in teamwork. They believe in the future. They believe in what’s
possible, so they act and do, connect and create, build and transform their team and organization—and change the world.

In the following chapters I’m going to take you through a simple, powerful model and framework you can utilize and implement to enhance your leadership capabilities and put your positive leadership into action.

**The Framework**

Positive Leaders Drive Positive Cultures
Positive Leaders Create and Share a Positive Vision
Positive Leaders Lead with Optimism, Positivity, and Belief
Positive Leaders Confront, Transform, and Remove Negativity
Positive Leaders Create United and Connected Teams
Positive Leaders Build Great Relationships and Teams
Positive Leaders Pursue Excellence
Positive Leaders Lead with Purpose
Positive Leaders Have Grit
How and Why Positive Leaders Transform Teams and Organizations and Change the World

THE
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