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GENESIS

What Leading with Optimism Really Looks Like

In the midst of a setback, creating a positive mindset can be timely and contagious when you establish four conditions.

We all know it is important to create positive leadership. But as a leader, how can you cultivate a positive mindset in your team

when you're experiencing something negative or a setback? Many leaders wait until the team is again nailing performance goals to talk about the positive, which means in hard times there is a dearth of positive leadership. **So, WHEN is the best time for a company or leader to talk about happiness at work?** Based upon a new multi-year research project at a hospital system in Iowa, the best time to lay the groundwork for a positive culture might be right in the midst of challenge or setback.

Three years ago, Genesis Medical Center – Davenport, like many hospitals in the US, was experiencing financial challenges. Hospital profitability is actually lower than it's been ever since the financial crisis. Consequently, few leaders were talking about happiness.

Jordan Voigt, President of Genesis Medical Center-Davenport, knew that he needed to infuse positivity into the culture at Genesis, but he also knew they were about to undergo some very painful changes consisting of two massive rounds of cost reductions and position eliminations. In addition, they were asking staff to flex down and take time off with or without PTO more than ever before.

Instead of abandoning the positive, Genesis adopted a series of positive psychology interventions which they rolled out department by department so they could test the effectiveness compared to groups that had not been exposed to positive intervention. These interventions included gratitude exercises, increased praise and recognition, and team-based conscious acts of kindness, as well as an examination of how to change existing work routines to create more happiness at work. We staggered the teams trained so we could effectively test real time how different departments fared with the setbacks. The results were stunning.

Expression of optimism is a critical component of culture change and adoption. Pre-intervention only 23% were “very expressive of optimism at work.” That jumped to 40% after creating positive work routines in the departments. **In the midst of massive organizational change, the percentage of respondents who reported that they were happy at work went from 43% to 62%.** Individuals feeling **burned out “often” dropped from 11% to 6%.** Individuals reporting “high stress at work” dropped by 30% after the workshop designed to create positive mindsets on the team. Social connection improved as well. **“I feel connected at work” went from 68% to 85%.** This is after staff reductions where some co-workers and friends were no longer at the organization. Something stunning was happening here.

Amongst the parts of the hospital that had not been part of the intervention, only 37% of respondents claimed Genesis was going in the right direction. However, for the groups who went through the intervention, 63% felt Genesis was going in the right direction. Imagine if that was your team and your company where almost double the number of people felt like the company was going in the right direction, even in the midst of challenge.

So, why did this work and what can you learn from it? We have written previously about the efficacy of positive psychology interventions upon performance, so I won't rehash those here. But here are four key takeaways for leaders who want to know how to start the conversation.

First, **positive role modeling was key.** I believe these positive results are based in part upon positive role modeling by senior leadership.

Oftentimes leaders give lip service to the value of a positive mindset and people being their greatest asset, but then they don't attend their own internal positive leadership workshops because they are too busy or high level...which signals to the rest of the organization that a positive culture is a much lower priority than they claimed. As President of the Medical Center, Voigt personally kicked-off every workshop. He set the agenda and was interested in the data. He affirmed happiness as a priority, which made the topic important and more salient in the minds of his staff. So, if you want to create positive mindset in the midst of setback, you need to show up and model that mindset first if you want buy-in.

Second, **you must create connection before mindset change can happen.** Whatever positive changes you are trying to make at work, you need to make sure people are not doing it alone and in isolation. In this case, the workshop format facilitated doing positive habits, brainstorming new work routines, and discussing culture together instead of alone. This experiential approach facilitated group belief-shifting and allowed participants to begin to verbalize the significant impact their happiness and positivity can have on their patients. It is important to note that this is not the facilitator prompting this discussion; it is coming from staff themselves, because they are creating new social scripts in real time. This means moving from a “self-help” model of leadership to first helping people feel connected and then deputizing teams to make positive change. Furthermore, because of its psychological association with positivity and warmth, Genesis adopted the color orange as symbolic of its journey to create a warm positive and connected culture.

Third, **the changes must become routine and visible or they die.** Some of the Genesis departments adopted a routine where when people return from vacation, they often find their offices covered with notes of appreciation on orange post it notes. The OB staff brought caterpillars of Monarch butterflies for every department in the entire hospital and released them together as an orange symbol of change. There are potlucks in the endoscopy department now, which is amazing because this department used to be toxic (and had a 35% vacancy rate), but staff has a new outlook ever since creating the positive work routines (and now a 0% vacancy rate over the past 6 months). An anesthesiologist actively carries a stuffed orange frog in his scrub jacket which prompts questions from the patient, and which allows him to explain his team's belief that optimism drives better health outcomes. This anesthesiologist is ranked in the 99th percentile of patient experience. At another hospital system, Orlando Health Systems, leaders start all their staff meetings with one thing each person in the meeting is grateful for. As a leader, don't just tell people "don't worry, be happy"; work with them to create patterns that reinforce the positive.

Fourth, **tracking the outcomes was key for establishing sustainability.** If there was no perceived change, or if there was no data justifying the approach, the culture change would not take root. By doing a rolled out, staggered approach, teams who heard about the intervention and the outcomes were eventually demanding the positive intervention for their teams.

Despite making the very difficult decision to

lower operating expense by nearly \$32 million within 14 months through cost reductions, which included management re-structuring, productivity enhancements, care management re-design, and supply reduction strategies, Genesis patient experience rates nearly doubled within 12-months. Furthermore, the medical center was recognized in 2019 by Press Ganey as one of nation's most improved medical centers for performance. Genesis Medical Center-Davenport is also achieving significant financial records during their current Fiscal Year 2020 (July 2019 – June 2020):

- Six months into the fiscal year (December YTD), Genesis increased total operating revenue by \$15 million or 8.7% while expenses increased only \$1.9 million or 1.1%.
- In October 2019, Genesis achieved a record in the history of the medical center for gross revenue: \$114 million.
- Genesis also achieved record market growth in key services lines of orthopedic surgery, inpatient rehabilitation, psychiatry, and obstetrics.

Finally, in addition to great gains in colleague engagement, patient satisfaction and profitability, Genesis Medical Center – Davenport for the first time has been recognized by the prestigious national Healthgrades Award as a 2020 Top 250 Hospital based on quality outcomes.

You too can create a positive mindset even in the midst of challenge. So, when is a good time to start talking about positive mindset at work? Maybe today.