Why Donâ??t We Prioritize Positive Conversations?

Description

It seems that even after all these years, I still find those â??aha!â?• moments. By that I mean situations in which I suddenly become aware of something and wonder why I did not know it sooner. When this happens, I try to move from â??I should have known this soonerâ?• to â??I am glad I know it nowâ?• as quickly as possible.

Recently I met with Lori Gunther, MS, CPXP, and Melissa Gehl, MSW, CPXP, of Synova. It is a wonderful organization that strives to change how nurse leadership works. Synova aims to shape a diverse work environment that endorses opportunities for both personal and professional growth.

During our conversation, we discussed the many skills a leader needs to be successful. We covered how today we need to be so sensitive to everything thatâ??s on a leaderâ??s already-full plate. We went through the normal list of necessary skills: selection, onboarding of new hires, skill development in employees, scheduling, managing a budget, communication, and much more.

One common skill-building topic that was mentioned is the ability to have crucial conversations. There is even a best-selling book by that title (*Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High*) as well as many other books, articles, videos, etc. I have written and spoken on the topic myself. It is an important skill and one that does not come easily.

As we were talking, it was mentioned that many times, crucial conversations are seen mostly as difficult conversations. Simultaneously, we looked at each other and asked the question, â??Why doesnâ??t the topic of skill-building for positive conversations get the same attention as skill-building for difficult conversations?â?•

There are books written on the importance of a positive attitude. For example, I love the book *Leading with Gratitude: Eight Leadership Practices for Extraordinary Business Results* by Adrian Gostick and Chester Elton. However, is positivity as hardwired in the skill-building offerings as difficult conversations? I donâ??t think so. Could it be that the thought is that positive communication skills are natural so they donâ??t need to be covered?

In my work, I have met with thousands and thousands of employees. I have reviewed reams of employee engagement results. Very seldom have I read or heard, â??I wish my supervisor was better at crucial, difficult, hard conversations.â?• It may come up under the heading of holding people accountable, but itâ??s not something that engages and inspires employees. What my conversations show, and what employee engagement data shows, is there is much greater feedback on items such as a lack of feeling valued on the job.

Employees do talk about good performance not always being recognized. They say, â??I am more likely to hear what is wrong versus what is right.â?• When you hear your supervisor wants to see you, is your first thought, *This will be good!* or, *Oh no*? I think most of us know the answer.

This is not to say there is not awareness of the need to be positive. I often share research that it takes three positive comments for each criticism for an employee to feel good about a leader. This is why I suggest leaders start out most conversations with a positive, ask who should be recognized while doing Relationship Roundingâ?¢, and send thank-you notes. We also need to foster positive coworker relationships. Do we help employees identify what they need from their coworkers and also what they can do to be more positive?

It is so important to master the skill of holding positive conversations. It is a vital part of creating a workplace thatâ??s energizing and enriching, one where people feel valued and cared for, one that creates a true sense of belonging. This is the kind of workplace people increasingly expect, one thatâ??s built around the needs of employees and creates a true sense of well-being.

Here are some tips for holding positive conversations:

1. **Hold up the mirror.**Are you bringing positive energy with you to each situation or sucking energy from others? Pay attention to how people act afterward. Do they seem energized, inspired, and productive? Or do they seem emotionally drained?

2. **Donâ??t guess at how people feel.**When talking with those you lead, be very specific. Ask them if they feel appreciated by you. They will likely say If so, ask what you are doing to make them feel that way. This will help you do more of it going forward. (If they have trouble giving you an answer, it might be time to ask yourself why.)

Also, take time to let people give ideas on times when they felt communication was done in a good manner, and also when communication missed the mark. With the pandemic, especially, it seems communication is veering to what I would call transactional communication versus transformational communication, which builds relationships and inspires and transforms people. Have the group define what works for them.

3. **Make creating positive communication part of every meeting.**For example, start by telling a story that connects people back to mission and shares a win. This will shift the energy in the room and get people engaged right away. Mostly likely youâ??ll get better outcomes.

4. **Watch out for toxic positivity.**What is toxic positivity? Itâ??s a focus on being completely positive, all the time. When we reject negative emotions and pretend challenges donâ??t exist, employees canâ??t relate to us and may not trust us. For sure they wonâ??t feel heard and understood. They wonâ??t speak up about valid concerns (including their own mental health

struggles), and they wonâ??t take risks.

Thereâ??s a difference between optimism and toxic positivity. Optimism is rooted in reality. We can think positively while still acknowledging challenges and hardships.

Never underestimate the impact you can make as a leader.

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Author
quint-studer