

The Power of Positive Mentoring

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Recent research in the field of neuroscience has yielded exciting and insightful research into the dramatic results healthy and positive relationships such as mentoring can produce. Research findings will be shared from recent works published by Harvard University, Mayo Clinic, and other leading experts and applications will be made to the field of mentoring. Special attention will be given to the area of neural plasticity; the ability of the brain to continue to rewire and grow under the right conditions. The findings will be applicable to protégés of all ages. The following paper explores these results and discusses five specific strategic actions mentor leaders can engage in to enhance the mentoring experience.

Only recently have scientists finally had the technology to peek inside our brains and see what is going on when we engage in the one-on-one experience called mentoring. Using Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRIs) researchers now know that our brains can continue to grow and develop at any age as we engage in positive cognitive activities including those involved in effective mentoring. Some of the most rigorous and cutting edge research in neuroscience now has concluded that our brains have built in 'plasticity' and our potential for growth is quite malleable. In other words, by engaging in the right mental strategies we can rewire our brains to be more positive, creative, resilient, and productive. For example, from this research we now can identify and observe in real-time mirror neurons in our brains firing as we smile or are smiled at. This provides an observable, scientifically based explanation for why smiles become contagious, how bonding takes place, and why infants automatically mimic the faces loved ones make. This neurological mechanism behind the concept of mentoring was initially uncovered in the 1990's. Subsequent research has found a complicated set of these mirror neurons in people and has changed the way we think the brain works. In other words, humans don't just passively observe other people and things in action, but in their minds they actively do what they see, actually rewiring their brains (Anchor, 2010). This entire process of brain rewiring is referred to as 'neural plasticity' and has exciting repercussions for those of us engaged in mentoring (Dobbs, 2006). If we can develop in ourselves and those we mentor a growth mindset versus a fixed mindset we can continuously improve our thinking as well as that of the people we mentor. By our positive actions we can shape an experience that will be beneficial for all involved. We now know scientifically how and why mentoring works.

Another lesson we can draw from the research is that mentors and protégés must both learn to monitor and manage their one-on-one experiences to make sure they are positive in nature. An extensive array of studies done at Oxford, Harvard, the University of Pennsylvania and Mayo Clinic using both Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRIs) and blood testing have shown that experiencing positive interactions such as those involved in effective mentoring increases a person's dopamine, serotonin and endorphin levels, thus enhancing learning and memory as well as the sense of well-being. Positive experiences also have a significant impact on raising oxytocin levels (the hormone involved in bonding) while decreasing stress hormones such as cortisol (Kahneman, & Tversky, 1984). Research indicates these chemicals not only make us feel better but "dial up the learning centers of our brains to higher levels. They help us organize new information, keep that information in the brain longer, and retrieve it faster later on. And they enable us to make and sustain more neural connections, which then enable us to think more quickly and creatively, become more skilled at complex analysis and problem solving, and see and invent new ways of doing things" (Mehrabian, 1981). It is a win/win as both those expressing positive exchanges as well as those receiving them benefit from the experience. The key for us as mentors is to be aware of how we are affecting others as we engage them in mentoring relationships. If we want people to quickly assimilate best practices there is no better way to influence a willing protégés brain than a watching a good role model in action. This of course also means the mentor has a critical ethical role to play. Both consciously and unconsciously the mentoring relationship rewires the brain of both the mentor and the protégé.

Based on the findings from neuroscience described above we believe there are five specific actions we can practice to make sure our mentoring produces the most positive and healthy results possible:

1. Learn to Manage and Monitor Our Experiences

The Nobel Prize winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman studied the numerous choices people make during their average day. He found people have over 20,000 discrete experiences, moments or interactions during the normal waking day. Each last only a few seconds. These can be individual thoughts, actual words with another person, physical contact such as touching, interactions such as eye contact or gestures, and so forth. He studied these interactions to determine how individual choice, i.e., how we react to these numerous ongoing daily experiences, shaped our lives. These 20,000 plus experiences can not only be analyzed to see how choices are made, but also to see what percentages are either positive in nature, negative, or neutral. Not surprisingly, the majority of these daily experiences are mostly neutral and quickly forgotten. But the remaining positive and negative experiences are almost always memorable and can have tremendous impact in shaping how a person perceives and lives their life as they go about their daily tasks (Mehrabian, 1981).

By analyzing the nature of these interactions, psychologists have found they can make amazingly accurate predictions about outcomes of relationships and perceptions of life. For example, John Gottman found that by observing newly engaged couples conversations and interactions for just 15 minutes he could predict with 94% accuracy if their marriage would be successful or not ten years later. He did this by analyzing a video of their brief interview and observing the ratio of positive interactions to negative or neutral experiences. He found that a ratio of 5 to 1 positive interactions to negative was the predictor. Anything meeting or exceeding this ratio led to a successful experience with marriage. Anything under this ratio predicted an unsatisfactory experience and divorce (Nisbett, 2009; Pryce-Jones, 2010).

Another psychologist, the Brazilian Marcial Losada, studied thousands of people in low and high performing teams for over a decade and came up with a mathematical model of 2.9013 to one. This was the ratio of positive to negative experiences or interactions that make a team successful. It takes about three positive comments, expressions, or experiences to balance out the impact of only one negative experience. “Dip below this tipping point, now known as the Losada line, and workplace performance quickly suffers. Rise above it—ideally the research shows, to a ratio of 6 to 1—and teams produce their very best work.” Determining this positivity ratio through analysis of interactions enabled Losada to make startlingly accurate predictions about turnover, productivity and profitability in organizations of all types. In poor performing organizations he often found the ratio was 1 positive to 3 negative experiences or worse (Losada & Heaphy, 2004). After he instructed team leaders in giving more positive feedback and encouraged more positive interactions, they made giant strides in productivity, improving their performance by as much as 40%.

The conclusion for mentors should be obvious. Carefully observe your interactions with your protégé. What is the positivity ratio of your mentoring relationship? How can you improve it to at least 3 to 1, if not the ideal of 6 to 1? Can you improve the rate and quality of your positive feedback?

2. Try to Encourage Each Other More

In a Gallup study that involved more than 1 million employee interviews across several industries it was found that praise or encouragement is painfully absent in most human interactions. Less than 33% of people could say that they had received at least one experience of recognition or praise in the last seven days! In one large health care organization cited by Gallup, just a 10% improvement in the amount of recognition given resulted in a gain of 11% in patient’s evaluation of their hospital experience. Other evidence from various settings indicates positive changes in the amount of recognition consistently produce 10-20% improvements in productivity and revenue (Rath & Clifton, 2004; Wagner & Harter, 2006).

Because of the power of praise, its ridiculous low cost of implementation and the rarity of its occurrence, offering encouragement to each other is one of the greatest opportunities for improvement in any environment. There is one caveat however. Praise must be given appropriately. Most people think they know how to encourage others, but fall short in practice. We encourage the use of the following simple recipe for providing effective encouragement.

1. Be sincere. If you can’t be sincere say nothing at all!
2. Be specific. Detail exactly what was accomplished.
3. State the benefit. Exactly how what was done help or improve the situation?
4. Shape the praise. Some people like verbal praise, some a pat on the back, others a simple note. Study the person and tailor the praise to the person.
5. Make it as soon as possible. “Catch them while they are still sweating!”

6. Share the praise. Let other people know about good performance.

The six to one ratio of positive to negative is the goal here also. It is interesting to note that in lower socioeconomic status homes, similar to the environments some of our protégés possibly come from, the ratio positive comments or experiences to negative has been found to be 1 to 3 or worse; in other words more negative and discouraging in contrast to encouraging. The Gallup study cited previously also found that people of all ages tend to gravitate toward positive reinforcement. We can only imagine how true this would be for someone used to normally experiencing a preponderance of negative feedback. As mentor leaders this provides us with a great opportunity to impact their lives in a positive direction as they experience positive, sincere and specific praise based on performance.

3. Learn to be More Optimistic

The way we interpret our experiences has a tremendous impact on our health and performance. Does the person view things from an optimistic or pessimistic perspective? Martin Seligman in his classic book *Learned Optimism* (Seligman, 1991, 2011) and most recently in his book *Flourish* has documented the dramatic way optimism can positively influence the way a person responds to illnesses of all sorts, making them less vulnerable to illnesses such as cardiovascular disease, infectious illness, cancer, and many other forms of mortality. Other studies conducted by Seligman and many others have found that people, even pessimists, prefer to work and be around optimists. Optimism, as long as it realistic, seems to rub off on people and help them feel better about themselves and their condition. People who are optimists believe setbacks in their lives are temporary, that they can exert some control over the environment, and that they bounce back quickly from setbacks. Pessimists, on the other hand, believe setbacks are often permanent, that they can exert little control over the environment, and don't bounce back quickly from setbacks. Research on leaders at Oxford, the University of Chicago, at the University of Pennsylvania and elsewhere documents that positive, upbeat, happy but realistic mentors have a significantly powerful impact on productivity and job satisfaction. So how do you learn to be more optimistic?

1. You must recognize that only you control your level of optimism.
2. Optimism is not just happy thoughts; it is taking charge of change & your life to bring about positive outcomes.
3. First step: Know why what you do is important. Make it a calling not just a job! Determine what is the larger purpose of your job? The bigger meaning?
4. Make a gratitude list and update it daily. List as many positive events and elements in your life as you can and focus on them. Research shows this has tremendous impact.
5. Ask: "Where am I allocating my attention?" On only negative things, or on ways to produce more positive outcomes?
6. Change the way you think about yourself, work, and negative events. From hopeless & powerless to hopeful & powerful.
7. Determine your strengths. Develop and deploy (use) them.
8. Take positive actions and document and review results.

Encouraging and coaching such realistic positivity should be one of the main roles of the mentor leader. You must care enough to confront the pessimistic person before they infect others and do harm to themselves. The research strongly indicates that teaching a pessimist to be an optimist can add up to 8-10 years to their lifespan and greatly reduce sick time and absenteeism!

4. Commit to Listen to Each Other Actively and Authentically

Research by Albert Mehrabian (1981) at UCLA in the 1970's on how people communicate produced some startling results that are now commonly accepted, as they were consistently replicated in many other settings. He found that 93% of what we communicate is not dependent on the meaning of our words. Such things as facial expressions, eye contact, body language, gestures, tone of voice all were more important than our actual words. In other words, what we say is less important than how we say it. People believe the expression they see more than the words they hear. Who you are speaks so loudly some times people can't hear the words you speak. Trained actors would say the very same things to similar groups of people, and by just varying one of the several non-verbal cues listed above could completely alter the reception and

retention of the audience. Often overlooked, but of major importance, was the fact that few people have ever experienced being listened to themselves, or even knew how to listen.

When people are actively and authentically listened to it can be a startling and life changing experience. When a person effectively practices active and authentic “laser” listening the other person will learn to trust them. Without trust you can interact well with another. You certainly can’t create a positive mentoring experience without it! What is involved in active and authentic listening?

1. Sincerely and intently listen with your eyes and ears. Lack of attention indicates lack of caring, and kills communication.
2. Always take action as soon as you can. Attention to detail, a sense of urgency and follow through prove that you care and that you heard them.
3. Be careful not to interrupt, unless it is to better understand.
4. Occasionally repeat back what you think is being said by the other person. This helps you to know if you understand, and encourages them to continue. “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.”
5. Clarify when necessary. “Here is what I hear you saying.”
6. Ask questions until both of you clearly understand.
7. Summarize ‘straight forward’ what you think both have said during the conversation. Try to get agreement.

An active, authentic straight forward listener makes the other person feel like no one else exists in the world. Most people are never listened to in such a way. It builds lasting and positive productive mentoring relationships. We always encourage people to listen to the other person as if they are the most important person in the world—because they almost always are to someone!

5. Work Together to Start Setting SMART Goals

One of the most notable differences between people who consider themselves successful high achievers and people who just get by is that the achievers set goals. In the general population it is estimated that only five percent of people set what would be called legitimate long range goals, yet over 90% of high achievers regularly set goals. Why are goals so important? Not only do they provide direction, but their attainment can provide a great sense of achievement that is contagious. They help people be more optimistic. People with good stretch goals seldom have bad attitudes. People who are busy rowing the boat seldom have time to rock the boat!

While most of us would agree from watching any busy preschooler tooling around exploring the environment that we are hard-wired to be industrious, to acquire skills, to accomplish things, something seems to happen to many people. They join the 95% that seem content to drift with no concrete or stretch goals in mind. What happens to produce this situation? Why is the drive to succeed tampered down as we age? How can it be revived?

Neuroscience is only in the beginning stages of explaining the mechanisms in our brains that seem to respond to this drive to succeed that we all know exist, even if just from anecdotal and personal experience. It does appear that that when we feel engaged we experience more activity in the parts, specifically the superior frontal cortex that produces a higher state of energy, fuller concentration, and pleasure. A less rigorous, but much more extensive (at least 200 studies) of management research proves that challenging people to meet goals stimulates higher performance (Urry et al., 2004).

The challenge comes in when you ask people what comprises a legitimate long-range goal. Most people do not have an idea. When people know what good goals look like and how they can benefit from them they usually respond in a positive fashion. One of the best guidelines we have seen calls for SMART goals. The best goals are carefully defined dreams with drop-dead due dates attached and follow this SMART formula!

1. They are Specific. They are concrete in nature and very detailed.
2. They are Measurable. They must be measured to be managed. The key is to pick a few good measures.
3. Attainable. They make you stretch a little and use and develop your strengths, but can be achieved.
4. Relevant. They should help you define a calling for your work—they should help you find a deeper meaning and purpose to why you are doing your work.

5. Timely. They are to be reviewed and accomplished within a time limit.

Research over the years on successful people agrees that the one factor that matters is pursuing with gusto detailed, carefully designed, written goals. Goals are just detailed dreams with drop-dead due dates attached!

The key here is the emphasis not just on setting goals but on finding a calling. Yale psychologist Amy Wrzesniewski (1997) says the mental conception we have of our work or tasks greatly affects performance. She believes that people have one of three mindsets about work. We view our work as a job, a career, or a calling. People who view their work as just a job work because they have to or just for a paycheck. People with a career work out of necessity too, but also see the task as a way to advance or succeed. People with a calling see the task as an end in itself, as a way to contribute to the greater good, a way to use their strengths, and it gives them meaning and purpose. It should be no surprise that people who find their work a calling have higher work satisfaction, work harder and longer, and are much more likely to get ahead. Her most interesting finding is that it doesn't matter what type of job one has, the person can still see it as a calling. As mentor leaders we need to help people change boring job descriptions into inspiring 'calling' descriptions, highlighting the meaning that can be derived from the work. How can their current job tasks be connected to a higher meaning or larger purpose? Each of us should strive to be a goal setter and a goal getter. The best thing you can do for people you mentor is to teach and engage them in the type of goal setting that helps them recognize their work and/or activities as a calling.

The five actions or strategies outlined above can have significant impact on any mentoring relationship. It seems conclusive that the research shows the mentor benefits as much as the protégé from the relationship. The power of positive mentoring can and does change the world, one positive interaction at a time.

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