Profit from the Positive
Proven Leadership Strategies to Boost Productivity and Transform Your Business
by Margaret Greenberg and Senia Maymin

What’s Going Right?
Get the best from your team by focusing on and replicating the positive.

QUICK OVERVIEW
If the term “positive psychology” feels a bit too sugary or soft, it may be the result of misguided media coverage. The science behind this field, say authors Margaret Greenberg and Senia Maymin, is about much more than chanting cheerful affirmations or simply “thinking positive.” And, when applied correctly to your business, they contend that positive psychology can help you get the best from your team—and yourself.

In a neatly organized fashion, Greenberg and Maymin offer advice on how to become a more effective leader and inspire your team members. They draw on research and real-life stories from their coaching experience to make their points. Most importantly, the practical advice you’ll find in Profit from the Positive can be immediately implemented.

APPLY AND ACHIEVE
The authors explain that when you feel overwhelmed with a project, it can pay to trick yourself into working on it. The next time you face a task that seems too large, ask: What can I accomplish in five minutes that would move me toward my goal? Incremental steps can help you break through procrastination tactics and build momentum—once a project has begun it often feels less daunting.

Need to inspire your team members to action? Coach them to try this technique. Ask: What can you do in just five to fifteen minutes a day? Once they answer, encourage accountability by asking when and where they will accomplish that small task. Planning a time and setting triggers a mental reminder to get to work when the appointment rolls around.

SUCCESS Points
This book will teach you how to:
• Improve results by examining best practices
• Become a strengths-based leader
• Find time to make steps toward your goals
• Boost your team members’ performance
• Sneak in positive changes in a change-resistant culture
Positive psychology is the study of what constitutes excellence in individuals, communities, and workplaces. It incorporates the study of productivity, resilience, motivation, emotions, strengths, team dynamics, and more.

Despite its long evolution, people usually date the Internet back to 1995. Similarly, even though its roots go at least as far back as Aristotle’s writings about the good life, positive psychology was officially launched in 1998 when Martin Seligman took the helm of the American Psychological Association (APA). Yes, this field is younger than the Internet.

Since Seligman and his colleagues launched the field, over 10,000 research papers have been written. In academia, that’s an astounding amount of research in a short period. The media took notice of this research explosion and started running stories that sometimes included inaccurate sound bites. This is important: positive psychology is not positive thinking. It is not about saying a gratitude mantra while turning lemons into lemonade. Positive psychology researchers seek answers to questions every business leader wrestles with:

- How do I increase productivity without adding to staff?
- How do I get my team to collaborate or step up its game?
- How do I motivate people to perform at their very best?

Whether you lead 3 employees or 3,000, Profit from the Positive is for business leaders who are looking for tested methods to grow, improve, and transform their companies. Even if you don’t manage or lead others but are instead an individual contributor or coach who must rely on influence, you will find the following advice highly relevant and easy to implement.

**THE STRENGTHS-BASED LEADER: CAPITALIZE ON WHAT’S RIGHT**

Imagine that you’re an architect who designs bridges. How would you learn about the best bridges to build? Would you study all the bridges that have collapsed or all the bridges that have withstood the test of time? You probably would study both. However, too often we focus only on the bridges that have collapsed. Similarly, leaders often study and try to fix only what’s broken. In contrast, strengths-based leaders focus more of their attention on what’s going right and then replicate those best practices in other areas. Strengths-based leaders don’t ignore problems; rather, they recognize that solving problems and shoring up weaknesses are only part of the results equation.

Strengths-based leaders also focus more of their attention on what people do well (their strengths) rather than on what they don’t do so well (their weaknesses).

Being a strengths-based leader may sound easy enough, but there are four obstacles to actually becoming one: we hate managing others, we love to solve problems, we treat employees as problems, and our brains are hardwired to the negative.

**Strengths-based leaders focus more of their attention on what’s going right and then replicate those best practices in other areas.**

**We hate managing others.** Okay, maybe not hate, but some of us really don’t like it. Why? Because many of us were promoted to management positions as a reward for excelling at our jobs. We were the best salesperson, the best technician, or the best analyst. Although managing others may not have played to our strengths or even desires, we accepted the management role because of the lure of more pay, more perks, and more prestige. Consequently, for some of us, leading others actually removes us from the work we most enjoy. It takes a courageous leader to admit to himself and his boss that he may be happier to return to the work he finds most satisfying.

**We love to solve problems.** “My role is to analyze problems and then find solutions,” says one of our clients, a woman who manages a team of testers. “Isn’t that what I’m paid to do?”

**We treat employees as problems.** Although solving problems may be the primary focus of many roles, the trouble comes when this fix-it mindset spills over into the way managers view employees. Some subscribe to the notion that employees must be fixed, motivated, or watched every minute in order to get them to perform.

**Our brains are hardwired to the negative.** Even if we love managing people and view our jobs as more than solving problems, becoming a strengths-based leader may still be a challenge. Some
researchers argue that there is an evolutionary component to why we focus more on what’s wrong than on what’s right. For early humans to survive, they had to keep their eyes peeled for danger, not for a beautiful sunset. In their journal article “Bad Is Stronger Than Good,” Baumeister and his colleagues refer to this phenomenon as negativity bias. People react much more strongly to losing a $20 bill from their wallets than to finding a $20 bill on the street. People ruminate on a negative comment from a friend for much longer than they bask in a compliment. And customers tell 13 people on average when they have a bad experience with a company but tell only 5 people when they receive stellar service.

Regardless of how natural becoming a strengths-based leader is for you, the following advice shows you how to add to your arsenal of problem-solving skills by mining your own company for what’s going right. We also demonstrate how you can increase your team’s performance by nearly 40 percent simply by the way you react to bad news.

Stop Asking the Wrong Questions

Most of us are fairly adept at studying what’s wrong. We are trained to analyze problems, identify root causes, brainstorm possible solutions, and then implement the best approach. Most consulting has traditionally relied on this problem-solving model. We improve results by removing one problem after another. This is crucial for companies to do and do well. Although this problem-solving method works, there is another way to improve results that we often neglect.

We don’t apply the same rigor to studying and capitalizing on what’s going right. Imagine that you have a department, location, or region that gets exceptional results compared with others. Imagine analyzing what specifically it does so that you can replicate those practices in other areas. We often take this approach when studying our competitors, but we fail to apply this “what’s working” analysis to our own company. And even if we do, when we try to implement these best practices in other areas, we are often met with resistance, or what we call the “that won’t work here” syndrome.

Research by New York University psychology professor Tory Higgins and his colleagues found that people tend to be in one of two mental states: either excited about moving toward a wanted and desirable outcome or cautious about avoiding an unwanted and undesirable result. This cautious mindset is highly effective for maintaining the status quo and avoiding risk. However, if you’re like most companies, you have challenging goals to meet. You will probably need many of your people to be in an excited and moving forward state. Higgins and his colleagues found that when people focus on what they most desire and remind themselves of their ideals and aspirations, they are more energized to make changes and take action. When you evaluate exceptional results, you are more likely to make changes than you are when you evaluate problems and areas of caution.

Find Solutions, Not Faults

We are not advocating that you focus only on what’s going right. We know that people can
always learn from their mistakes. However, the way you respond to your employees when they come to you with problems really does matter. Flying off the handle will do nothing to get you out of the mess you’re in.

In a research study Margaret conducted with our University of Pennsylvania classmate Dana Arakawa, we asked over 80 IT employees how their manager reacts when a problem crops up. The participants indicated their agreement with statements such as, “My project manager is able to put it in perspective for me,” and “My project manager is able to help me come up with solutions.”

Their responses to these and other statements were then compared with the performance of the projects they worked on. Project performance was measured by how well these projects met budget, schedule, and quality standards. Margaret and Dana found that managers who scored in the top quartile for brainstorming solutions with their employees while keeping their cool saw a 39 percent increase in project performance compared with managers who scored in the bottom quartile.

Some managers, in an effort to avoid problems from being dumped on their desks, tell employees, “Don’t come to me with a problem unless you can propose a solution.” This is flawed logic. Sometimes employees need to talk through some potential solutions with you. If you expect your employees to always have the answer, you may learn about problems much too late to do anything about them, as this system analyst in our study explained:

“My project manager tends to overreact initially and then calms down once the situation is fully explained. Because of this, my team and I tend not to go to him about a problem unless we have some kind of idea of the solution already or unless the problem is very important.”

If you’re frustrated that you chronically hear about bad news too late to do anything about it, it may be because your employees are afraid to come to you. Instead, help your employees explore other perspectives and find solutions.

ENGAGING EMPLOYEES: BRING OUT THE BEST VERSUS GET THE MOST

Clients often ask us, “How can I get the most out of my people?” We suggest that they ask themselves a somewhat different question that doesn’t conjure up images of sucking every last ounce of energy out of employees. We propose that they consider the following: “How can I get people to perform at their best?”

The answer is simple: by identifying, cultivating, and using their strengths every day. Improving productivity by using a strengths approach results in an energy-producing work environment where employees want to do their very best and will go that extra mile to accomplish their work and more.

Asking your employees to read a book or take an assessment to identify their strengths is only the first step. The really powerful next step is to talk to your employees about their strengths and how they can use them even more. Most of us can recall a manager who said, “Here, read this book,” but then never took the time to discuss its contents. We were left wondering what specifically we were supposed to do with this newfound knowledge, and the manager was left wondering why people weren’t implementing the book’s advice. Don’t fall into this trap.

Introducing strengths to your employees is an exercise in self-discovery. Your job is to guide the discussion. There are no right or wrong answers. What you’re trying to do is deepen your employees’ understanding of their strengths and then help them think of ways to use those strengths even more.

Questions to Bring Out Your Employees’ Best

In coaching hundreds of business leaders, we have found the following questions helpful in assessing how well employees’ strengths fit with their current jobs. See which questions you can use to guide discussions with your employees:

• Tell me the kind of work that really energizes you—work you can’t wait to dive into.
• Tell me the kind of work that drains you.
• How could you use your strengths in a new way at work?
• Name one task or activity that you don’t like to do. How could you use one or more of your strengths to increase your enjoyment of this task? Is there someone else on the team who might enjoy this?
task more? If not, should we consider rotating this task so that no one person gets stuck with it?
• What’s the smallest change you could make that could have the biggest positive impact on your work?

DON’T RESIST RESISTANCE

When we try to introduce something new, whether at work, at home, or in our community, our ideas are sometimes met with resistance. Naysayers and skeptics are everywhere; remember negativity bias? However, both our clients and we believe that resistance is a promising sign of change. When the people in our lives resist our ideas, it typically means that their pain points need to be addressed. Don’t resist resistance; be empathic and address it.

Sometimes in our zeal to introduce a new way of doing things, we throw out all that came before. Sometimes we lose sight of what we’re trying to accomplish: to continually improve results. When it comes to influencing your colleagues, your boss, and your company, we offer an alternative that creates much less resistance. We call it the back door approach.

The back door approach simply means integrating change into your day-to-day business without any fanfare. You don’t need a big announcement. You don’t need a PowerPoint presentation. You don’t need any capital. You don’t even need any permission. What you do need is the courage to try something new. We’ve removed the risks since all of our tools are backed up by science and have been tested with our clients and other business leaders.

But you don’t have to prove anything as you implement these changes. Your results will speak for themselves. As you and your team produce better outcomes, your customer satisfaction scores will go up, your projects will be delivered on time and on budget, and your work environment surveys will begin to outpace those of other departments.

If people become curious, be gracious and share what you’ve learned. Be open to coaching others on how they too can implement the tools in Profit from the Positive.

Just Plan It

Psychologist Peter Gollwitzer of Columbia University wanted to learn what moves people to action. He recruited university students to participate in an experiment. Half the students were simply told to write a report about how they spent their Christmas Eve and send it in to the researchers by December 27. The other half were given the same assignment, but in addition, Gollwitzer asked them to identify exactly when and where they would write the report. Students picked a specific time (such as after breakfast) and a certain place (such as the quiet corner of the living room). In effect, these students had set what we call a triggering event.

What happened? Seventy-one percent of the students who identified up front when and where they would write the report mailed it in by the due date. A meager 32 percent of the other group turned the report in on time. Gollwitzer’s study has been replicated about 100 times in dozens of settings.

The bottom line? You may be twice as likely to accomplish your work if you decide up front when and where you will do it.
Action Steps

Get more out of this SUCCESS Book Summary by applying what you’ve learned. Here are a few questions, thoughts and activities to get you started.

1. What are you doing right as a strengths-based leader?

2. Where is your team achieving its best results? What can you learn from those results?

3. How do you react to bad news? What do you need to change?

4. What one small change can you make this week to become more of a strengths-based leader?

5. What are you already doing to bring out the best in your team members or employees?

6. What are three recent individual or team accomplishments? How can you recognize those people?

7. What three actions will you take today? When and where will you do these activities? (Read the summary sidebar “Just Plan It.”)

Recommended Reading

If you enjoyed the summary of Profit from the Positive, check out:

- Give and Take by Adam Grant
- Love 2.0 by Barbara Fredrickson
- Wellbeing by Tom Rath

About the Authors

Margaret Greenberg is founder of The Greenberg Group and has a background in human resources. She is recognized by the International Coach Federation as a Professional Certified Coach. She writes a column for Positive Psychology News Daily.

Senia Maymin is an executive coach and is the featured coach on PBS’s This Emotional Life. She leads a coaches’ network, Positive Coaches, and is the founder and editor in chief of a research news site: Positive Psychology News.