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Laurence Stybel, Ed.D., and Maryanne Peabody, MBA, founded Stybel Peabody Associates, Inc.

THE SECRET SAUCE OF LEADERSHIP: Mastering Emotional Contagion.

Can a positive mindset reduce physical infection? A New Zealand team recruited 37 patients suffering from HIV infection. Twenty participants were randomly put into the experimental group. They were instructed to write for thirty minutes each day for four consecutive days. They could write about anything they felt emotional about. The idea was to not keep emotions inside. Vomit it out on paper or on the screen in the form of a diary. Participants wrote about sexual identity (36%), relationships (31%), disease worries (16%), family problems (11%), and fears about death (6%). Seventeen participants were placed in a control group.

Both the experimental and control groups had their HIV viral loads measured before the experiment. Four days later, measured HIV viral load dropped significantly in the experimental group and increased slightly in the control group. The authors concluded that “emotional writing may provide benefits for patients with HIV infection.” (Petrie et al, 2004).

It is important to remember that this experiment only lasted four days yet had a powerful impact. In an earlier Psychology Today blog, we spoke about the power of writing diaries. (Stybel Peabody, 2011).

Managing Emotional Contagion Between Others

In 2015, Coca-Cola produced a commercial called “Happiness Starts with a Smile.” An actor was hired to enter a crowded subway train, take out an iPad, and start laughing. During this process, hidden cameras captured the impact on subway riders.

The actor is not looking at something amusing. Nor is the actor necessarily happy. He is a professional hired to appear amused.

If you click the link below you can see the impact of this stage-managed happiness on subway riders. You can also do a search on “Happiness Starts with a Smile.” Nearly 5 million downloads of this video testify to its powerful message: Positive emotions contaminate even if the initial positive emotions are fabricated.

<https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=happiness+starts+with+a+smile+coca&qpv=1&FORM=VDRE>

A more scientific experiment was conducted by Ye-Ping Chang and colleagues. One hundred seventy-four college students at the National Taiwan University were taking the same course. They were divided into 18 teams of 8-11 students per team. They had no prior experience with each other. Every week for one semester this group would meet for 1.5 hours to discuss course content.

Using an instrument to measure student predisposition to express gratitude, they found a positive correlation between individual students’ expression of gratitude and peer satisfaction with other students in the group.

Once again, this is a demonstration of the power of positive emotions to contaminate those around you. The authors describe this emotional contamination as “upstream reciprocity.” (Chang, et al 2012).

Implications for Leaders

Viruses are contagious and so are emotions. Find ways to go out of your way to express gratitude to team members, peers, and bosses.

In an ideal world, it would be nice if your expressions of gratitude were genuine. The research suggests, however, that even inauthentic expressions of gratitude have a positive impact.

How gratitude is expressed is important. Based on our earlier framework about media selection, we recommend using face-to-face in real time. If that is not possible, try face-to-face online. If you do not have the time for it, try the phone and have a conversation. If that is impossible, leave a voice mail message. Avoid emails and texts. (Stybel & Peabody, 2020)

Every day prior to sleep, give yourself 15-20 minutes to write down your day in a diary. Schedule diary writing with something you normally would do every night. For example, get in the habit of writing your diary and then brushing your teeth.

Allow yourself to focus on both the positives and the negatives of the day. Vomit out your negative feelings.

The research suggests that writing such a diary might have value for you in the present. The diary might also have value for you in the future. We are living in historic times. Your future grandchildren might cherish knowing what you were going through during the pandemic of 2021.

The diary you write today might be a source of inspiration for those you love in the future.

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For a free 30-minute consult, contact:

Maryanne Peabody

Stybel Peabody Associates, Inc.

peabody@stybelpeabody.com

stybelpeabody.com

boardoptions.com