

Want to Impress the Board? Break Through It!



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This ought to take you back in time.

"I think I can. I think I can."

Maybe you read it to your little children, or it was read to you when you were young. *The Little Engine That Could*, did! It went chugging up that seemingly impossible mountain... "Up, up, up. Faster and faster and faster"...until it reached the top with a trainload of toys for the children who lived on the other side.



But did you ever think of telling the people responsible for pulling your company up every hill, the very people on whose performance your company depends, to read *The Little Engine That Could*? Probably not, because few members of management acknowledge the need to teach that a positive attitude counts for as much as an encyclopedic knowledge about product and service, competition, and marketplace put together.

Does this mean that without reinforcing "*positive attitudes*", a company's employees won't perform well? No. But does it mean that by focusing on positive attitude, a company will get its people to perform even more productively? Absolutely. There always is room for improvement. (If you don't agree with that statement, there is no reason for you to read any further.)

How To Find Out

But what if you're just not sure? Then ask yourself this: are there people in your company who are working under stress? Maybe the pressure to produce more with fewer resources. Or the spiral of increasing competition and dwindling market share. Or the demands of reorganization. These may start as external pressures, but they turn into internal stress. They lead people to doubt themselves and their abilities. And that has a direct impact on productivity.

People under stress, people with self-doubt, are simply not as good at making decisions. They are not as good at assuming risks. They are not as good at meeting their quotas or taking on new challenges, or hard tasks.

Stanford University's Business Management said: "*Employee attitudes, rather than the cash flow process technology, most affect a company's competitiveness*". General

Electric's CEO Jack Welch went one step further. In last year's Annual Report to stockholders, he wrote of a new awareness about attitudes at G.E., announcing that the corporation "*cannot afford management styles that suppress and intimidate*" employees. In other words, change your attitude, or change your job.

Proving the Point

Rather than citing studies about the connection between positive attitude and peak performance, there is a much easier way to prove the point.

Think about your top performer. It might be a salesperson, it might be a supervisor, it might be a designer.

Ask yourself, what makes this person excel? Is it that he knows everything there is to know about what your company does? Unlikely. That she knows everything there is to know about how we do it? Less likely still. Is it that he follows every rule to the letter, or doesn't spend a penny more on projects than originally planned...or knows every colleague on a first name basis? Of course not. They are important characteristics for success, but not the key.

Is your company's peak performance motivated and persistent? Undoubtedly. Is she willing to take on seemingly impossible tasks? Probably. Is he a self-starter, a problem solver, a leader...someone who exceeds expectations, insists on quality, and works with the attitude, "*If at first you don't succeed, try, try again?*" If not, your "*peak performer*" has hardly "*peaked*".

How To Know Who Can Do It

Now that you have identified your peak performer, there are two more questions to ask: 1) Did the company instill such a positive "*can do*" attitude? If so, great! If not, 2) Can it?

You bet it can. Leadership, self-confidence, persistence, and the rest are not the private reserve of people at the top.

Many, maybe most employees have the potential to acquire these qualities. All they need is someone to empower them, someone to change their attitude, someone to shift their focus from the limits that restrict them to the possibilities that await them. In other words, your peak performers have learned to use these qualities to bolster their performance. Pass them on down through the ranks and you can enhance the performance of the company as a whole.

The trouble is, companies usually teach everything but the quality of positive attitude. Even mid-sized firms spend millions of dollars a year to train new people, yet they focus almost exclusively on specific job skills, such as knowledge of the company's product or service, techniques for dealing with clients and customers, familiarity with the marketplace. Aside from the occasional advice to "*think positive,*" their training courses often ignore the fact that the quality of someone's performance doesn't depend on the skills they've been taught, but on what they think they can do with them.

No, it's not a question of skills versus attitude. It's a matter of recognizing that the two go hand-in-hand.

Remember *The Little Engine That Could?* "*I think I can. I think I can*". If you don't think you can, you can't.

How To Teach It

A training and development firm in Colorado, BreakThroughs, Inc., has created what it calls an "*empowerment technology*" to impart positive attitude and help people realize that they can do things they didn't think they could. The technology is based on the belief that everyone has more potential, more resources, more abilities than they use, or even recognize. The beauty is, it works at any job level. Participants at its programs are given pine boards. Yes, each one gets an inch-thick piece of pine, 12"-by-12". Doesn't sound "corporate?" Read on.

Everyone is asked to write something on the board; their self-imposed limitations, their strongest doubts about achieving success in the job, their worst fears about failure. (*Simply getting your pencil to work on a wooden board without breaking the point is one obstacle to overcome!*)

Then, participants are given an opportunity: if they choose they can break through their boards, symbolic for breaking through their limits and doubts and fears.

They are prepared, of course, on how to position their bodies and hold their hands, but basically, it's a lesson in shifting the mindset: "*I don't think I can break through an inch thick plank of pine with my bare hand. They're telling me I should try. Maybe I can.*"

It doesn't always work the first time. Or the second. But for most who persevere, the boards break. These people have done what any employer would want them to do in the workplace: they have focused their energy, overcome their fear, and taken action toward a goal. They have pulled their inhibitions out of hiding and broken through them.

How to Access It

There may not be anything tangible about the act of breaking through the board itself, although after a BreakThroughs program at the Cleveland Clinic, the Chairman of the Division of Nursing said, "*Everyone who broke a board brought the board back to their office and proudly displayed it as if it were a trophy, and a testimony to their powerful potential and capabilities.*"

Tangible results do come as well. From the President of the Eastern Division of telecommunications giant MCI, now Verizon after a BreakThroughs experience: it "increased the overall quality of performance and increased the productivity of our sales professionals. They are now making or exceeding quotas." From the National Sales Manager of pharmaceutical supplier E-Z-EM, Inc.: "*The impact on our sales staff was phenomenal.*" It "left our sales people empowered with...an overwhelming sense of

confidence." From the Superintendent of Boulder Colorado's Public Schools: *"Few offerings held before or since have matched the positive outcomes generated by that experience."*

Here are some empirical examples from companies that reported back on the ways in which productivity rose after their employees found new sources of self-confidence:

- Sales professionals, who rated their ability to prospect for sales without procrastinating at 57% before the experience, rated it at 88% afterward.
- Managers in companies undergoing reorganization, who rated their ability to overcome fears of uncertainty at 79% before the experience, rate it at 90% afterward.
- Health care professionals, who rated their ability to overcome limits they set for themselves at 54% before the experience, rated it at 92% afterward.

Breaking through the board obviously is not about breaking through boards. It is about focus and concentration. It is about becoming aware that things you once thought were impossible are possible. It is about empowering people to break through barriers they once thought stood in their way.

Most telling, perhaps, are the pre- and post-assessment questionnaires filled out by participants from a Fortune 500 corporation. All were asked beforehand to draw a self-portrait and describe themselves with a single adjective. Generally, the self-portraits ranged from complacent to discouraged. The adjectives ranged from *"wise"* to *"chicken."*

Afterward, each participant was given his or her sheet back. This time, each was asked for a new self-portrait and adjective. Now, the drawings ranged from happy to ambitious. And the adjectives? *"Chicken"* became *"powerful," "tense"* became *"focused," "tightly coiled"* became *"relaxed,"* and *"wise"* was now *"wiser."*

In other words, in your company or any other, anything is possible. But only if everything, by way of training, is available.

Right now, there may be a difference between what you teach your employees so that they can do their jobs, and what you know they need to do them well. Remember, you don't have to choose between job skills and job attitude. You can teach both.

Think of it this way: excellence is no accident. It is attitude. Positive attitude. *"I think I can. I think I can"*.

What's stopping you?