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Does a positive attitude really matter?

An old man sat studying just outside of the gates of an ancient city. A traveler approached him saying “Old man, tell me what are the people like in this city?” The old man looked up from his reading and said “First tell me what the people were like in your home city?” “The people in my home city were a miserable lot, greedy and mean spirited; they are why I left to wander the cruel world. I have vowed never to return to that horrible place.” The old man sadly looked up and said “Sir I am afraid you will find the people in this city to be much the same.” The traveler shook his head in disgust and passed through the city gates.

A few minutes later another traveler approached and bowing to the old man said “Venerable one, may I ask you to tell me of the people in this beautiful place?” Again the old man asked “First tell me what the people were like in your home city?” The young man smiled and said “It is a place much blessed, the people are kind and generous, I look forward to the time when my travels carry me back home so I can tell them of all the wonders I have seen.” The old man smiled and said “Sir I am happy to tell you will find the people in this city to be much the same. Welcome.”

This story, attributed to writer Kahlil Gibran, illustrates the fact that people see the world not as it is, but rather, as they are. Our world view and our personal attitudes form a lens that shapes and colors how we see the people and things we encounter in our lives. By maintaining a positive mental attitude we find ourselves dwelling in a much friendlier environment. People with a more pessimistic outlook, the glass “half empty” crowd, believe this is evidence of self-delusion and a denial of the facts. They think that all this talk of PMA (Positive Mental Attitude) is quite frankly a lot of bunk. Until recently neither side in this dispute had much factual information to back their argument. Recent scientific and psychological research has changed all this. The views of the “glass half full” party have been verified and documented. Of course this is no surprise to the card carrying optimists of the world.

Dr. Martin Seligman is one of the most respected psychologists practicing today. In the 1990’s he realized that virtually all psychological research to that point had been focused on mental illness. Seligman is considered the father of the positive psychology movement. Positive psychology is defined as the branch of psychology that “studies the strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive.” Dr. Seligman believed that in addition to treating mental disease, his profession should help people to develop their

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talents and to enhance the quality of their lives. Positive psychologists began to look into the causes and effects of optimism and the relationship of attitude to the quality of human life.

Researchers in this field found that people who typically “forecast” positive outcomes, i.e. they expect things to turn out well are generally happier than those who forecast negative outcomes. They also discovered that people who are deeply engaged with life, both professionally and privately, and who believe their life has a purpose are much happier than those who don’t. Researcher Barbara Fredrickson found that optimists reap physical as well as psychological benefits. She has identified the “undo effect” which describes how maintaining a positive mental attitude counters the destructive effects of stress. In her laboratory Dr. Fredrickson found that both positive and negative people experienced the physiological effects of stress (increased heart rate, elevated blood sugars, immune suppression etc.) during a traumatic event. She found, however, that individuals who focused on positive emotions quickly returned to baseline readings, while those who did not continued at the harmful levels. She has hypothesized that this is why positive people tend to have fewer and less severe heart attacks. Psychologists define this as “resilience” which is “a dynamic process that allows individuals to exhibit positive behavioral adaptation when they encounter significant adversity or trauma.”

A positive attitude may even help stave off the common cold. A recent study was done with a group of college students. Their blood was tested before and after they were shown a short film. One group was shown a “depressing” film and the other group an “upbeat” film. The first group’s blood showed a marked decline in immune factors and the positive group showed a significant increase in these disease fighting compounds. PMA every day keeps the doctor away.

A positive mental attitude can also make you lucky. Negative people often say that “they’d be happy too if they got all the lucky breaks that so and so gets! I’m just not lucky.” There is an explanation why positive people tend to “luck into” opportunities their sad sack coworkers miss. George Bernard Shaw once said, “Better keep yourself clean and bright: you are the window through which you must see the world.” Positive people, looking through their “clean and bright” windows, simply see many opportunities pessimists miss. Psychologists have named this the “Broaden and Build Theory” and have found that “Positive emotions broaden one’s awareness and encourage novel, varied and exploratory thoughts and actions.” Simply stated positive people see and create opportunities that less positive people miss.

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Our attitude has a direct effect on how others feel and how they react to us. At the turn of the twentieth century master salesman and writer Elbert Hubbard said, “We awaken in others the same attitude we hold toward them.” Human beings are social animals, over tens of thousands of years we have evolved an innate sense about the feelings of others. When we are around happy people we feel happy. Unfortunately the opposite is true as well. Martha Graham said “Misery is a communicable disease,” and a miserable person is much less likely to go along with anything you ask them to do. The development of “Functional MRI’s” which actually allow scientists to watch the human brain in action has discovered why this is. A team of Italian neuroscientists at the University of Parma were studying another problem when they discovered the existence of mirror neurons. These specialized brain cells are “Neurons that fire both when an animal acts and when the animal observes the same action performed by another.” This is why when we see another person smile we somehow feel happier ourselves and why some people literally brighten up a room when they enter. People are more likely to buy when they are in a good mood, this is why upbeat sales people are always more successful.

Abraham Lincoln was fond of saying “People are about as happy as they make their minds up to be.” A positive mental attitude, like anything else of great value, requires regular care and maintenance. Here are a few things to keep your attitude upbeat and positive:

- Make a point of recharging your batteries every day. Read something you find inspirational, listen to motivational CD’s or music, post up positive quotations in your workspace etc.
- Watch your words. The words that pass your lips have a profound effect on how you see the world. Your grandmother was right “If you can’t say anything nice, don’t say anything at all.” This will also have a powerful and positive impact on how other people see you.
- Stay away from negative influences. Listen to just enough news to keep yourself informed, and stay away from negative people. If a coworker likes to hold a daily “pity party” tell them “I’d love to talk but I’m quite busy.” Take Mark Twain’s advice “Keep away from people who belittle your ambitions. Small people always do that, but the really great make you feel that you, too, can become great.”

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- Keep learning; research shows that the more knowledgeable you are about your job, the more confident you will become. Confidence is an important component of happiness.
- Try to see the bright side of every situation. Think about the two salesmen a shoe company sent to a remote island. The first cabled back, “I quit, no one here wears shoes!” but his replacement sent this message, “Ship supply of shoes immediately-urgent need-no one here has shoes.”
- Count your blessings every day, thinking about what is right in your life, instead of dwelling on problems, will make life more enjoyable.
- Take time to relax. Give your brain a rest, find something you enjoy doing and make time for it in your life. It is especially important to spend time with the people who are important in your life.
- Have a laugh; few things can lift you up like a hearty laugh. Read a good joke, watch a good comedy and learn to laugh at yourself (Never at others).

In his memoirs, Winston Churchill said, “I am an optimist, it does not seem too much use in being anything else.” Churchill’s unconquerable optimism inspired the English people to keep fighting when it seemed hopeless to do so. It could be said that it was his positive outlook that won World War II. You may not face the great challenges that Churchill faced, but if you can develop his positive outlook you will also win great victories. A positive mental attitude can add much to anyone’s life, but it is indispensable to those of us who have chosen a sales career. I’ll close with these thoughts from Herm Albright, “A positive attitude may not solve all your problems, but it will annoy enough people to make it worth the effort!” (There is your laugh for today.)

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