



# Harvard Business Review

REPRINT H05NRO  
PUBLISHED ON HBR.ORG  
JUNE 04, 2020

## **ARTICLE** **CHANGE MANAGEMENT**

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*by Shawn Achor and Michelle Gielan*

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# What Leading with Optimism Really Looks Like

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When there is [negative news](#) everywhere you look and unprecedented financial and logistical challenges facing so many companies, it can be tough to advise people to stay positive. Many leaders we work with worry, especially now during the global pandemic, that trying to emphasize positivity and happiness will make them look out of touch — and rather than helping their people, it will backfire.

The findings from our multi-year research project at a hospital system in Iowa indicate quite the opposite. It's precisely in the midst of a setback or challenging time, that leaders should be actively encouraging positivity because it will help teams weather the storm.

Three years ago, Genesis Health System, which is comprised of five hospitals and a regional health center, was not profitable. This was true for many hospitals, which were experiencing the lowest [profitability](#) since the 2008 financial crisis. Consequently, few leaders at Genesis were talking about happiness at work and Jordan Voigt, president of the largest medical center (Genesis Medical Center-Davenport), was facing a conundrum. He wanted to infuse more positivity into the culture at the medical center, but they were about to undergo two rounds of massive cost reductions and layoffs. In addition, they were asking staff to reduce their hours and take time off with or without PTO.

Still, he felt it was important to focus on the company's culture and hypothesized that positivity could help the center at this crucial time. We worked with the medical center to roll out a series of positive psychology interventions department by department so we could test the effectiveness compared to groups that had not been exposed to the interventions. Each department designed positive changes tailored to their subculture spanning from [gratitude exercises](#), increased praise and recognition from managers, and team-based conscious acts of kindness.

The color "orange" was adopted to symbolize positive changes. For example, in some departments, when people returned from vacation, their colleagues cover their offices with words of appreciation on orange post-it notes. The staff from the organizational behavior department bought caterpillars for every department in the entire hospital and together released the Monarch butterflies after they hatched as a symbol of change. When moms have new babies, the staff give the big brothers and sisters plush orange frogs called baby Sparks as a symbol of the kind character of the department. Employees receive a Spark Award for spreading happiness through a kind act. You can even find orange hair nets and orange oxygen carts in some departments.

In addition, the department leaders and staff were tasked with examining how to change existing work routines to create more happiness at work, like starting their meetings with three positives or adopting [a praise and recognition program](#). We staggered the teams trained so we could effectively test in real time how different departments fared with the setbacks.

As [happiness researchers](#), we expected the departments exposed to the interventions to do better, but even we were surprised by the extent.

For the individuals who had not yet been exposed to the positive intervention, only 23% of the team members reported they were "very expressive of optimism at work." That jumped to 40% after participating in the positive psychology culture training (measured six weeks after the intervention). Even in the midst of the massive organizational changes, the percentage of respondents who reported that they were happy at work went from 43% to 62%. Individuals feeling burned out "often"

dropped from 11% to 6%. Individuals reporting “high stress at work” dropped by 30% after they participated in the workshop on creating positive mindsets on the team. Social connection improved as well. The number of respondents who said “I feel connected at work” went from 68% to 85%. This was after staff reductions where some coworkers and friends were no longer at the organization.

In the parts of the hospital that had not been part of the intervention, only 37% of respondents claimed Genesis was going in the right direction, compared to 63% in the groups who went through the intervention. Imagine if double the number of people on your team felt like the company was going in the right direction, even in the midst of an incredibly challenging time.

Why did this work and what can you learn from it? We have written previously about the efficacy of [positive psychology interventions](#) upon performance, so we won’t rehash that here. But here are four key takeaways for leaders who want to know how to start the conversation.

### **Role model from the top**

Oftentimes leaders give lip service to the value of a positive mindset and people being their greatest asset, but then they don’t bother to attend their own internal positive leadership workshops because they are too busy. This signals to the rest of the organization that a positive culture is in fact a much lower priority than they claimed. As president of the Medical Center, Voigt personally kicked off every workshop. He made sure to follow each round of data collection findings to determine what was working and whether to continue. He affirmed happiness as a priority, which made the topic more salient in the minds of his staff. This is the first step for leaders who want to create positive mindset in the midst of setback: show up and model that mindset yourself.

### **Help employees connect before asking them to change**

People don’t typically make positive changes alone or in isolation. A positive mindset at work is often a collective exercise because the behaviors and attitudes are reinforced when a group does it together. At Genesis, the emphasis in the workshops was on developing positive habits, brainstorming new work routines, and discussing culture together in groups. This allowed participants to take ownership over the new mindsets, routines, and ways of working. They were creating new social scripts in real time and connecting these changes to [purpose](#), verbalizing the significant impact their happiness and positivity can have on their patients. It’s imperative that leaders help people feel connected first and *then* deputize them to make positive change.

### **Make changes part of the routine way of doing work**

As a leader, don’t just tell people “don’t worry, be happy”; work with them to create patterns that reinforce the positive. It’s too hard in the midst of stress to try to invent new ways to be positive, so creating regular patterns as a department can help sustain the positive without having to call on new brain resources. It can be as simple as routinizing celebration. For example, the endoscopy department, which was known to be toxic with a 35% vacancy rate, now has regularly scheduled potluck lunches — and a 0% vacancy rate over six months. Some departments’ leaders set the routine of starting all their staff meetings with each person saying one thing they’re grateful for. Some have

areas where people can post thank yous or pictures of successes so that any staff or patient walking into that department is given a dose of visual positivity.

### **Track outcomes to make the changes sustainable**

If there was no perceived change, or if there was no data justifying the approach, the culture change would not take root as readily. If we don't test what works, we lack the motivation to keep that change permanent or top of mind. Positive interventions in particular get thrown by the wayside in challenging times unless you have a clearly established connection between the energy required to continue the positive change and the desired outcomes. In the end by doing a rolled out, staggered approach, other teams heard about the intervention and the results and were actually demanding the positive intervention for their teams.

All of these changes weren't just good for the hospital staff; they benefited patients too. Patient experience rates nearly doubled within a 12-month period. Following the intervention, Genesis Medical Center-Davenport achieved profitability again and exceeded their operating budget by 35% during the first part of 2019, going from an operating loss of \$2M to a profit of \$8M. The medical center was recognized in 2019 by Press Ganey as one of nation's most improved medical centers for performance and six months into the fiscal year increased total operating revenue by \$15 million or 8.7%, while expenses increased only \$1.9 million or 1.1%. And in October 2019, it achieved a record in the history of the medical center for gross revenue, \$114 million. All of this was happening when so much of the medical industry was financially contracting.

Even in the face of dire circumstances, you can create a positive mindset at your company — one that will help your people *and* your customers. When is the best time to start talking about positivity at work? Maybe right now.

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