

The Positivity Ratio

"Whether you think you can or whether you think you can't, you're right." Henry Ford

Over the past two decades, the Positive Psychology Movement has paralleled and informed the growth of professional coaching and facilitation. And though research on "the positivity ratio" continues, evidence is growing that when couples, friends, colleagues and teams experience a minimum of a 3:1 behavioral ratio of positive to negative interactions, people flourish and learn better.

Our ability to scan for differences has helped us to survive. When they woke up and started running, our ancestors lived with two primary questions that informed their behavior: "Can I eat that? And," well, you can probably guess their second question. In the interest of survival, they were focused on the short-term and driven by habit. In too many places around the world, human beings still face a chronic version of those two questions wherever their organizational structures are unpredictable, unaccountable, excessive, inept, evil or absent.

When people who don't live under life-and-death circumstances still react habitually with the same physiological and behavioral readiness (heart rate, sweat glands, shallow breathing), safety and trust, and thus learning suffer. The boss says, *"I'd like you to be at that meeting,"* and the worker reacts involuntarily from the same state as a human facing a predator (fight: *"Again?!"* Or flight: *Looking down at their phone, "I'll try to be there."*).

In other words, chronic vigilance is just as harmful as acute vigilance is beneficial.

The bottom line: We human beings don't engage in sustainable learning and development until we believe we are safe enough. The Positivity Ratio is about shifting behaviors and focus. It's about finding greater resilience.

Through four decades of research at the University of Washington, Drs John and Julie Gottman have noticed the corrosive role of negative behaviors in couple relationship. They can predict the future of a relationship based on the appearance of "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Criticism: Defensiveness, contempt and stonewalling." When those behaviors are in an even slightly balanced ratio to positive behaviors (i.e. "bids for connection"), there is trouble ahead.

More recently, the thought leaders of the Positive Psychology movement—including thousands of accomplished coaches, are finding a similar ratio. But it's a little different. As coaches and leaders, we train our attention on our client's strengths, virtue, possibilities, learning, connections, effort, resilience and positive stories. It's not that we ignore their negatives (obstacles, fears, past injuries, growing edges, performance gaps and structural challenges), it's just a matter of focus and leverage.

Life is tough. Our hearts get broken. We become exes and victims and sometimes we hurt other people. Sometimes we have to protect ourselves. In our own lives and in our work as coaches and leaders, the goal is never the elimination of risk, or the indulgence of our grievances, or the creation of life-long emotional bubble wrap, warning labels and dependency. The goal is leverage. Just as resistance against a rower's oar helps to move a racing shell, negative events, reactions and emotions dealt with well, move us to greater range and resilience and depth. Our job isn't to try to eliminate the negative—that wouldn't be real or possible. There's no

human emotion that needs to be forever shunned. But when negative behaviors are chronically in the lead, relationships deteriorate into bitterness, impatience and dysfunction.

Our job is to help our client to use resistance to their advantage. The negatives might wake us up and challenge us, but the positives make sustainable change possible. Either one is contagious.

The positivity ratio simply predicts that when people living in safe-enough conditions cultivate a habit of behaving in a voluntarily calm and connected way in at least a 3:1 ratio (5:1 is even better) to an involuntarily reactive way, relationships thrive. And at work, where we spend the majority of our adult waking hours, there is a clear ROI when positive behaviors are clear and measurable:

- When we turn towards colleagues and engage with kindness and generosity.
- When we are accessible and responsive in communication.
- When effort and character are acknowledged systemically.
- When our ability to advocate is balanced with our ability to inquire.
- When we cultivate the trust required to disagree with respect and clarity.

Positivity and “Your Way”

At this point in your life you’ve learned some things about how to weather storms. You’re not chronically offended. You know that healthy emotional immunity stands up well to sorrow and adversity. You’re resilient, and as a friend of mine says, “You’re probably either up or getting up.” You’ve got a big heart, but you also know that trying to offer too much sympathy or support can result in what one presidential speech writer called “the soft bigotry of low expectations.”

With that said, think about the positive part of the ratio: What lands as a net-gain for you in your interactions with others? How do you offer positive behaviors in your words, gestures, expressions and decisions? And how do you bring value and motivation through the use of your own temperament—doing positivity in your own way?

- How do you take in satisfaction?
- How do you reflect and recharge?
- How do you express gratitude, kindness and respect?
- How do you invite trust and allow others to know you?

And when it comes to negative part of the ratio: Do you have ways of quickly noticing resistance, conflict, even the need to create a boundary? And when you do, can you find a way to get better at:

- Continuing to breathe in the face of difficult emotions in yourself and others?
- Staying connected, inviting more conversation about others’ underlying assumptions and experiences?
- Can you be separate and connected at the same time?
- And when you’re the one who needs to apologize and reconnect, can you to repair the damage?

Positive Psychology explores what works, maybe what has always worked in safe-enough human systems and societies. And whatever your temperament or background, you already know how the behaviors that work best given how we humans are wired.

Leaders and teams that commit to “positivity agreements” will also create the predictable and righteous organizational structures to support them.

With the application of positivity, any good assessment will give you clues about how you can start thinking about the positivity ratio in your style. Whether your heart is breaking or you’re filled with gratitude for your life, there are opportunities for you to decide: Will you operate in your home-base strength and energy? Or maybe to shift to a new strategy?

We’ll talk more about the application of Positivity when we get to *Appreciative Inquiry* (p.89) in a few weeks.

Further Reading on Positivity

[John Gottman at the University of Washington](#)

[An interview with the Gottmans in The Atlantic](#)

[Barbara Fredrickson at the University of North Carolina](#)

[Positivity](#) by Barbara Fredrickson

[Barbara Fredrickson’s overview on Youtube](#)

And a related article in Forbes, [“Seven Crippling Parenting Behaviors that Keep Children from Growing Into Leaders.”](#)

HBR on [The Neurochemistry of Positive Conversations](#)

[The Advantage](#) by Patrick Lencioni