

■ Let's Get Real

The Case for Being Consciously Authentic

by Tom Terez

Everything is just great. It's hunky-dory. It's peachy. It's fantastic, a-ok, marvelous. It couldn't be better.

I know someone who talks like this all the time. He's Mr. Positive, whatever the situation. You could put him in a war zone with bullets flying everywhere, and he'd remark that "things are looking up."

I've seen Mr. Positive in action in the workplace, where he gives upbeat responses to anything and everything:

"How are you doing?" Excellent!

"How's the project going?" Fantastic!

"What's your take on the latest analysis?" Lookin' good!

"Does this strategic approach make sense?" Sure does!

So what's the problem with Mr. Positive? He's too positive, that's what. He shines with such sunny, glaring optimism that he can't see reality.

What's so bad about that? For starters, his colleagues have tuned him out because they feel he's genetically incapable of giving honest input and feedback. When they want a quick fix of praise, they head straight for Mr. Positive. But when they want straight talk from someone who's grounded in the real world, they go elsewhere.

More seriously, Mr. Positive is a potential risk to the organization. Perhaps the strategic approach really does make sense, as he says. Then again, maybe it's way off – and Mr. Positive can't see or say so. In times of big decision, a stiff breeze of reality is more useful than sunny optimism.

He also can be contagious, especially if he's the boss. If you've ever spent time with a Mr. or Ms. Positive, you know what I'm talking about. Your more realistic appraisals and responses to situations can seem downright negative by comparison. So you start doing some self-censorship, sharing only the good news while putting a sunny spin on everything else. After a while, this con-

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scious behavior becomes a reflex, and it starts defining the relationship.

If enough people follow suit, it can even shape the workplace culture. Yes, entire workplaces can be in denial. I recently heard from an employee at a manufacturing plant whose Mr. Positive plant manager seemed to keep people from saying anything even remotely critical. The employee and some of his front-line colleagues had serious safety

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To contact the author, write to Tom@BetterWorkplaceNow.com, or call 614-571-9529.

Tom Terez
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■ Let's Get Real *continued*

concerns – but they felt that they'd never get a fair hearing from their “everything's fine” manager. So they stayed silent and tried to work around the safety risk.

Mr. Positive might even be a danger to himself. Perhaps you've known people whose chronic cheerfulness keeps them from expressing a full range emotions. They seem unable to give constructive voice to frustration, doubt, anger, regret, and so on.

I know one Mr. Positive who was nudged into early retirement. He loved his work and his many workplace relationships, so the separation must have been painful – yet he spoke about early retirement in excessively glowing terms. Then it happened. One month after his last day after 43 years at the company, he developed a serious internal infection. The doctors couldn't explain it; the infection just appeared, they said. I had a different theory: His internalized grief over the job loss had finally erupted.

So what about you? Are you all or nearly all positive? If so, you need to get realistic real fast. I'm *not* suggesting that you morph into Mr. or Ms. Negative; an incessant whiner drags everyone down. But a good life goal for all of us is to evolve into Mr. or Ms. Authentic.

My youngest daughter recently brought home her latest kindergarten project – a cardboard device called a How-I-Feel Wheel. It's the size of a record album, with a window slot that can show one printed emotion at a time. Turn it one way and the wheel reveals: I am happy. Turn it again and it says something different: I am worried. There are eight emotions in all.

My daughter has already used it. After a fight

with her older sister, she barricaded herself in a bedroom. A minute later, the How-I-Feel Wheel came flying out from under the door. The message: I am mad.

Don't worry, I'm not calling for the mass production of How-I-Feel Wheels! But it's a great metaphor for the need to be thoughtful when responding to situations. The challenge is to go from being reflexively positive to being consciously authentic. Here's how it might sound:

“How are you doing?” Well, to be honest, this is turning into a tough day. Want to hear why?

“How's the project going?” Good overall, but there's an area where we still need a lot of work.

“What's your take on the latest analysis?” Let's schedule some time to talk about it in detail.

“Does this strategic approach make sense?” It does, and I'm genuinely excited about the customer-service initiative because....

Of course, you won't become Mr. or Ms. Authentic simply by saying the right words. But saying the right words is a good place to start. So why don't you?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tom Terez is a speaker, workshop leader, and author of *22 Keys to Creating a Meaningful Workplace*. His Web site, BetterWorkplaceNow.com, is filled with tools for building a great work environment. Write to Tom@BetterWorkplaceNow.com or call 614-571-9529.

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