



by Greg Berry

“If it bleeds, it leads,” so the saying goes in the media industry. News agencies are for-profit organizations, and they know that grim stories get the most attention.

This negative fixation stems from a character trait we all have, negativity bias. Overall, [negativity](#) bias causes us to give more thought and consideration to negative emotions, feedback, and outcomes over positive ones. It’s why we gossip, remember insults from years ago, and give more attention to negative feedback.

For those of us that served, consider your last performance review or NCOER/OER. Did you spend more time thinking about your successes or areas of improvement? Each year I sit in my annual civilian job review, appreciative of positive feedback. However, behind the

scenes, I'm more attentive when the meeting shifts to my shortcomings.

Counseling's can be positive or negative, but we tend to assume they are a result of reprimand or warning.

Why is this? Are we just cynical?

Origin

The short answer is no. And it's not just humans that suffer from this affliction. Intelligent life, in general, is guilty of this pessimistic viewpoint.

Since the concept of predator vs. prey and general physical risk emerged, earthly beings have formed a [negative](#) bias for self-preservation. We collect sounds, sights, and smells that relate to danger for quick reference in the future.

Fortunately for us, natural threats became minimized as humankind moved out of the wilderness and into shelters and cities. Still, our negativity bias remained. Fast forward to modern times in organizations such as civilian workplaces, schools, and the military, we see it daily.

We owe a debt of gratitude to negativity bias for our progress, but how does it impact our professional lives? Furthermore, how does it affect our ability to lead?

Positivity Bias

On the opposite side of the spectrum, there is a positivity bias called the "[Pollyanna Principle](#)." The name originates from the children's book [Pollyanna](#) by Eleanor H. Porter. The story tells the tale of a young girl always looking on the bright side.

According to [Webster](#), a Pollyanna is "an excessively cheerful or optimistic person." However, it's not a good trait to be excessively optimistic either, as we lose sight of reality. Approaching training and operations with an attitude that suggests "it'll all work out" won't do anyone any favors. This may be equally or more detrimental to development than working with a negativity bias.

Consequences of Excessive Negativity Bias

If maintaining a negative bias is a safety measure, then what is the problem?

[Studies](#) show that constantly filtering information negatively may affect our behavior and health. Particularly, paying more attention to negativity can lead to increased depression and anxiety. [Research](#) also shows retaining an overly active negativity bias may limit our willingness to take healthy risks. A negative mindset may assume hazards will be more likely to arise over rewards.

Maintaining a healthy level of negative bias offers caution. However, we can't ignore all threats and beliefs for the sake of being positive. It's not realistic.

For example, if you don't clean your weapon, you'll put your team in danger. If software updates aren't 100%, systems can't communicate.

We need these reminders to guide behavior. The problem is, many of us focus primarily on unfavorable outcomes in leadership and goal setting.

Unfortunately, we've viewed positivity as a weakness in many respects due to our egos. Historically, we've accepted that managers and leaders are to be feared as they hold the power to punish. It's why we seek to avoid punishment over gaining praise.

Balanced Team Building

Negativity bias may protect us in the short term, but it's hindering us in the long term.

So, how can we balance our bias in leadership?

Highlighting positive reinforcement in feedback and goal setting can improve team building. In recent years, this methodology has seen increased attention. However, it often comes across as disingenuous as we sometimes force generic "good jobs" to check a box.

Style of praise must be tailored to the individual leader, just as the feedback should be unique to the recipient. Positive feedback doesn't have to be verbal. If you have the power to issue small rewards, take advantage of it. Surprising the team with an afternoon off for breaking a training record can work wonders. Additionally, those less outspoken can send a quick team or individual email that tells people their achievements are noticed.

Always expecting negative reinforcement trickles down to the team level: no news is good news. If my phone rings on a Saturday afternoon and it's my boss, it's probably not an invitation to their family barbecue.

Leaders can praise subordinates in training and the workplace, but developing a positive

bias goes beyond that.

To gain long-term insight and development into our teams, we must create goals with reasonings that seek a positive outcome. Not to avoid reprimand or poor performance.

I've heard leaders in various settings explain jobs or goals with the same reasoning that a parent might tell their kid they can't spend the night at a friend's house; "because I said so."

Teams can't reinforce the purpose of the mission if they don't know the point. Buy-in is the key, pass down the 'why' with the 'what' to pass positive motivation down to the lowest level.

In the End

Failing to build individuals properly ultimately breaks down the organization. Maintaining a negative mindset by focusing on weaknesses over strengths hinders team building and can impact our health - although it's important to highlight we still need to issue punishment as needed.

Setting goals without including positive reasoning limits cooperation, however, we must apply "need to know" restrictions where appropriate.

No PowerPoint or animated web training will unwind millions of years of evolution. After all, we do need negativity bias to continue our survival - it's a balancing act. Still, simply gaining awareness of negativity bias within our daily execution may help us improve not only our leadership skills but ultimately our long term health.

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