

“You Gotta Accent the Positive to Eliminate the Negative” by Mike Mastandrea

Ever wonder how killer whales, the most fierce predators in the ocean, are trained to jump through hoops, over ropes, and swim with trainers on their backs? “That’s easy”, you reply, “give them food”. Not so fast! Imagine the patience you would have to have to place a rope above the water and wait, hours, days, weeks, and probably years for the whale to just magically leap out of the water and jump over the rope. The truth is, it would never happen. “How then, do you train killer whales?” you query. The answer is simple: by rewarding progress. As the expert trainers at Sea World would explain, you place the rope under the water. When the whale crosses it, you give him positive feedback. In this case, since you cannot verbally communicate with the whale at this point, he will best respond to fish. As he repeats this behavior pattern, he continues to receive positive affirmation. In the process, you gradually keep raising the rope. Soon, it is totally out of the water and the whale is leaping happily over it!

How does this Sea World phenomenon relate to people? Ken Blanchard’s book, “Whale Done”, says, in so many ways, that training killer whales and working with people are one in the same. To get the behavior you want, you must always accent the positive and redirect the negative. Notice that you do not ignore the negative. The point is that you do not dwell upon negative behavior. You address it with the intention of rechanneling that energy into a positive result.

According to Mr. Blanchard, to achieve maximum results, you must not be afraid to praise progress...it is a moving target. You do not have to wait until someone does a job perfectly to give recognition and praise. On the contrary, this approach will allow you fewer chances to give positive reinforcement. Instead, give praise and support for progress along the way and you will see amazing results!

How does this approach really work in everyday life? When people act or behave, there are 4 types of responses that can be elicited: a) no response b) negative response c) redirection and d) positive response. Unfortunately, most of us use the no response or negative response all too often. If someone is performing well or exhibiting desired behavior, we likely issue no response. That is why so many of us have adopted the adage, “no news is good news”. You are probably wondering if this “Pollyanna” approach suggests that you ignore bad behavior or mistakes. The answer is no, just do not dwell upon it. As a matter of fact, utilize the following approach:

1. Describe the error quickly, but refrain from expressing undue blame.
2. Show the error or behavior’s negative impact.
3. Where possible, try to shoulder some of the blame for the error or bad behavior by not making the task clear or not providing adequate support.
4. Go over the task again or desired behavior pattern in detail until it is clearly understood.
5. Foremost, express continued trust, support, and confidence in the person.

This process is called “redirection”. Do not dwell upon the negative. After the mistake or bad behavior has been addressed, let it go and try to convert that negative energy into positive results.

Begin to consciously look for things and ways to compliment others. It is easy to be what Mr. Blanchard refers to as a “Gotcha Person” whether this is a boss, teacher, manager, spouse, sibling, or friend. Just how hard is it to lay back and wait until someone makes a mistake so that you can pounce on him/her like a lion on its prey? You probably know people just like this. You never hear any feedback unless you have made a mistake. It begins to seem like you can never do anything right and your self-worth continues in a tailspin. It is much more difficult to find things that will allow you to praise and reward people. Truthfully, at first, you will have to retrain your thinking process and your actions. Soon, sincerely praising other people’s work and behavior patterns will become a habit and the results will be staggering.

Remember what it was like when you first fell in love? All you could see were the terrific qualities in your mate. You remained blind to his/her faults. You “accentuated the positive and eliminated the negative”. Wasn’t life beautiful then? All that positive energy flowing and creating a wonderful environment for living. Think back to when your children, nieces or nephews were learning how to walk. Remember encouraging and applauding their every little step. Weren’t they quick to get back up after falling down to try again and again? Finally, in no time at all, they were walking and running all over the house.

In short, focusing upon the positive should produce positive results. Giving praise and rewarding progress for desired behavior is referred to as giving “Whale Dones”. When adopting this “Whale Done” philosophy, it is important to realize that you must always be sincere and you must determine what different people respond to best in terms of motivation. Most of us probably thought that fish would be the only incentive for killer whales. If that were true, the only time they could perform shows at Sea World would be the whales were hungry. The truth is, whales are gregarious creatures. Thus, they respond well with other killer whales in the tank and with their trainers who they have learned to trust. So, being isolated during a show is undesirable for a whale. At Sea World during a performance, if a whale is not behaving, by isolating him from the others in an off-stage tank, the whale will soon be ready to return and perform.

Motivation for people comes in various forms as well. For many workers, financial bonuses or raises are most important. For others, public recognition or more job responsibility is valued even more highly than money. The same principles apply in the classroom, practice field, or at home. It is incumbent upon you to discover what is the best approach to motivate an individual realizing that everyone responds to stimuli differently. Once you discover the key for motivating an individual, great things can happen.

At this point, you are probably thinking how this could be applied to your life. The answer is easy. It works in every situation—teacher to student, mother to daughter,

boss to employee, brother to sister, and list goes on. If you want to see the power of positive energy, try the following exercise:

In your classroom, have all of the students stand and introduce themselves to the people right around them. They should pretend that they have a lot more important things on their mind and are just going through the motions of courtesy and respect.

Now, have them repeat this exercise only this time the scene is like a high school ten-year reunion. They are excited to see everyone and hear all about their lives.

Notice the obvious difference in energy level. It was probably hard to get their attention back in the second scenario since they were so engrossed in one another's lives. This same positive energy is characteristic of the "Whale Done" approach. When you are sincere in your efforts to provide positive feedback to others and are consciences about recognizing their progress (even if it is slight), they will soon respond in that same positive manner.

FUN EXERCISES

Below are some simulated situations/conversations you might encounter with students that cover a variety of topics. For fun, you provide a brief conversation for each that might address the situation and still utilize the “Whale Done” philosophy. An even better way to address these issues would be to role-play.

1. Situation: Student always tardy to class or rehearsal.
2. Situation: A student seems to be disinterested when you are teaching class.
3. Situation: Your teenage brother always wants to play practical jokes on you in front of your friends.
4. Situation: You are teaching your officers a routine and one girl cannot seem to get it.
5. Situation: Your children never help around the house. Their rooms are always filthy and they never clean up after themselves or their friends.
6. Situation: One of your co-workers just cannot handle the current job he/she is doing. You are considering reassigning him to another position.
7. Situation: One of your officers or section leaders is not carrying his/her weight. You are considering replacing the officer.
8. Situation: You are trying to conduct a rehearsal/practice and the same group of students continues to talk during instruction.
9. Situation: It is a constant squabble every night among the children watching television programs.
10. Situation: The first lieutenants on the dance team are still upset about not being named captain and continue to thwart your efforts as captain with the team.