POSITIVE LEADERSHIP

STRATEGIES FOR EXTRAORDINARY PERFORMANCE

KIM CAMERON

POSITIVE
LEADERSHIP

Other books by Kim Cameron

Coffin Nails and Corporate Strategies (1982), with Robert H. Miles

Organizational Effectiveness: A Comparison of Multiple Models (1983), with David A. Whetten

Organizational Decline: Conceptual, Empirical, and Normative Foundations (1988), with Robert I. Sutton and David A. Whetten

Paradox and Transformation: Towards a Theory of Change in Organizations (1988), with Robert E. Quinn

Positive Organizational Scholarship: Foundations of a New Discipline (2003), with Jane E. Dutton and Robert E. Quinn

Competing Values Leadership: Creating Value in Organizations (2006), with Robert E. Quinn, Jeff DeGraff, and Anjan V. Thakor

Leading with Values: Positivity, Virtues, and High Performance (2006), with Edward D. Hess

Making the Impossible Possible: Leading Extraordinary Performance—The Rocky Flats Story (2006), with Marc Lavine

The Virtuous Organization: Insights from Some of the World's Leading Management Thinkers (2008), with Charles C. Manz, Karen P. Manz, and Robert D. Marx

Developing Management Skills (8th Edition, 2011), with David A. Whetten

Diagnosing and Changing Organizational Culture: Based on the Competing Values Framework (3rd Edition, 2011), with Robert E. Quinn

Organizational Effectiveness (2011)

Handbook of Positive Organizational Scholarship (2012), with Gretchen M. Spreitzer

POSITIVE LEADERSHIP

Strategies for Extraordinary Performance

Second Edition, Updated and Expanded

Kim Cameron

Positive Leadership

This book is dedicated to the positive leaders in my life and the people who constantly exemplify positively deviant performance:

Maxine Cameron

Melinda Cameron

Katrina and Ned Powley, and Madeleine, Edward, Cameron, Elliot, and William

Tiara Cameron, and India, Jack, and Tate Wartes

Asher and Shauna Cameron, and Arianne, Marissa, Cade, and Ella

Cheyenne and Zack Robertson, Kai, Jacob, and Naiah

Brittany and James Gillingham

Austin Cameron

Cam and Melissa Cameron

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Contents

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Preface

Prescriptions for leading organizational success are plentiful. Scores of books are published each month containing advice from well-known executives, political candidates, consultants, and motivational speakers. This book is different. It explains strategies that can help leaders reach beyond ordinary success to achieve extraordinary effectiveness, spectacular results, and positively deviant performance. It does so by relying on validated findings from empirical research. The book primarily targets leaders of organizations, but these organizations may include families, sports teams, spiritually based organizations, businesses, or community associations. Parents, teachers, and consultants will find this book equally relevant, as will heads of Fortune 500 companies.

The prescriptions for positive leadership in this book emerged from analyses of organizations that have achieved exceptional levels of performance. These include organizations as diverse as a nuclear arsenal, a national health system, financial services organizations, real estate companies, multinational conglomerates, educational institutions, chemical companies, and U.S. Army generals. In each instance these organizations conscientiously implemented practices associated with positive leadership, and evidence of dramatic improvement resulted. Carefully

examining these organizations has helped uncover some atypical leadership strategies. These strategies enable levels of performance that dramatically exceeded expectations and reached extraordinary levels of excellence.

I label these strategies *atypical* because they supplement oft-prescribed mandates that appear frequently in discussions about leadership. These include enhancing teamwork, articulating a vision, encouraging employee participation, fostering trust, treating people with respect, changing the culture, becoming more customer-centric, and establishing stretch goals. Whereas such prescriptions are important, and many have been verified as contributing to organizational effectiveness, examining positively deviant organizations has revealed additional leadership strategies that are less often recognized and prescribed. I explain four of the most important ones in this book.

Critics frequently misunderstand and even give a disapproving label to the concept of *positive*, assuming that it refers to squishy, touchy-feely, saccharine sweet, naïve approaches to reality. They argue that organizational life is not a bed of roses, and that most organizations do not even need leaders if there are no challenges or obstacles to address. The relevance of leadership lies in negative, not positive, occurrences. They sometimes dismiss positive leadership as merely one more new age, self-help approach for encouraging people to feel happy.

It is precisely because organizations are fraught with problems and difficulties, however, and because producing dramatic improvements is so difficult, that positive leadership is needed. This book is careful to discuss the role (and

the necessity) of the negative, of difficulties, of challenges, and of criticism in the pursuit of outstanding performance. The key is not to avoid or eliminate the negative but to transform it into an opportunity for flourishing.

Positive leadership aims not just to create positive emotions in people—to help people feel happy—but to dramatically affect organizational performance for the better. Consequently, this book outlines strategies that document performance improvements in organizations, not merely emotional effects among those who implement these strategies.

The four positive leadership strategies include cultivating *positive climate, positive relationships, positive communication,* and *positive meaning.* In and of themselves, these four categories do not seem unusual or unique at all. The labels have appeared in multiple sources in the past. However, this book's unique contributions include not only the empirical evidence that demonstrates that positive leadership strategies produce extraordinarily positive performance but also practical guidelines for implementing the strategies and assessment instruments that help determine success.

Each chapter explains and illustrates one of the strategies, provides research-based evidence, and identifies specific actionable guidelines in order to provide leaders with validated, implementable activities that can enable positively deviant performance. Chapter 6 describes a proven process whereby these four strategies can be implemented in combination. The final chapter provides a self-assessment instrument and a guide for implementing the strategies.

Positive leadership is heliotropic. This refers to the tendency in all living systems toward positive energy and away from negative energy. From single-cell organisms to complex human systems, everything alive has an inherent inclination toward the positive and away from the negative. The chapters that follow explain how positive leadership unleashes the heliotropic effect in individuals and in organizations. Focusing on the positive gives life to individuals and organizations in the same way that positive energy in nature enhances thriving in living organisms. The research grounding in each chapter helps establish this fact, and the examples, illustrations, and stories help clarify the research findings and link the prescriptions to organizational reality. These four positive strategies, in other words, are among the most important enablers for producing life-giving outcomes and extraordinarily positive performance.

In preparing this book I benefited immeasurably from the broad expertise and scholarly experience of valued colleagues. I want to express appreciation to those individuals who provided critical insights, editorial advice, and helpful observations regarding the contents of this book. They include Jane Dutton, Adam Grant, Steve Piersanti, Robert Quinn, Andrea Richards, Jeevan Sivasubramaniam, Gretchen Spreitzer, and David Whetten. The production staff members at Berrett-Koehler Publishers also have been outstanding models of professionalism and competence. I am grateful to you all.

Positive Leadership

As of this writing, more than 70,000 books on leadership are currently in print. Why would anyone want to produce one more? It is because the vast majority of these leadership books are based on the prescriptions of celebrated leaders recounting their own experiences, convenience samples of people's opinions, or storytellers' recitations of inspirational examples. This book is different. It relies wholly on strategies that have been validated by empirical research. It explains the practical approaches to leadership that have emerged from social science research. Because these strategies are not commonly practiced, this book provides some unusual but pragmatic strategies for leaders who want to markedly improve their effectiveness.

This book introduces the concept of *positive leadership,* or the ways in which leaders enable positively deviant performance, foster an affirmative orientation in organizations, and engender a focus on virtuousness and the best of the human condition. Positive leadership applies positive principles arising from the newly emerging fields of positive organizational scholarship (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003; Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012), positive psychology (Seligman, 1999), and positive change (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). It helps answer the question "So what can I *do* if I want to become a more positive leader?"

Positive leadership emphasizes what elevates individuals and organizations (in addition to what challenges them), what goes right in organizations (in addition to what goes wrong), what is life-giving (in addition to what is problematic or life-depleting), what is experienced as good (in addition to what is objectionable), what is extraordinary (in addition to what is merely effective), and what is inspiring (in addition to what is difficult or arduous). It promotes outcomes such as thriving at work, interpersonal flourishing, virtuous behaviors, positive emotions, and energizing networks. In this book the focus is primarily on the role of positive leaders in enabling positively deviant performance.

To be more specific, positive leadership emphasizes three different orientations:

(1) It stresses the facilitation of *positively deviant performance,* or an emphasis on outcomes that dramatically exceed common or expected performance. Facilitating positive deviance is not the same as achieving ordinary

success (such as profitability or effectiveness); rather, positive deviance represents "intentional behaviors that depart from the norm of a reference group in honorable ways" (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2003: 209). Positive leadership aims to help individuals and organizations attain spectacular levels of achievement.

(2) It emphasizes an *affirmative bias*, or a focus on strengths and capabilities and on affirming human potential (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). Its orientation is toward enabling thriving and flourishing at least as much as addressing obstacles and impediments. Without being Pollyannaish, it stresses positive communication, optimism, and strengths, as well as the value and opportunity embedded in problems and weaknesses.

Positive leadership does not ignore negative events and, in fact, acknowledges the importance of the negative in producing extraordinary outcomes. Difficulties and adverse occurrences often stimulate positive outcomes that would never occur otherwise. Being a positive leader is not the same as merely being nice, charismatic, trustworthy, or a servant leader (Conger, 1989; Greenleaf, 1977). Rather, it incorporates these attributes and supplements them with a focus on strategies that provide strengths-based, positive energy to individuals and organizations.

(3) The third connotation emphasizes facilitating the best of the human condition, or a focus on virtuousness (Cameron & Caza, 2004; Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2003). Positive leadership is based on a eudaemonistic assumption; that is, an inclination exists in all human systems

toward goodness for its intrinsic value (Aristotle, *Metaphysics XII*; Dutton & Sonenshein, 2007). Whereas there has been some debate regarding what constitutes goodness and whether universal human virtues can be identified, all societies and cultures possess catalogs of traits they deem virtuous (Dent, 1984; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Positive leadership is oriented toward developing what Aristotle labeled goods of first intent, or to "that which is good in itself and is to be chosen for its own sake" (Aristotle, *Metaphysics XII*: 3). An orientation exists, in other words, toward fostering virtuousness in individuals and organizations.

CRITICISMS AND CONCERNS

To be fair, some are very skeptical of an emphasis on positive leadership. They claim that a focus on the positive is "saccharine and Pollyannaish," "ethnocentric and representing a Western bias," "ignorant of negative phenomena," "elitist," "mitigates against hard work and invites unpreparedness," "leads to reckless optimism," "represents a narrow moral agenda," and even "produces delusional thinking" (see Ehrenreich, 2009; Fineman, 2006; George, 2004; Hackman, 2008). They imply that it represents a new age opiate in the face of escalating challenges. One author maintains that not only is there little evidence that positivity is beneficial but, in fact, it is harmful to organizations (Ehrenreich, 2009).

    This book aims to provide the evidence that the reverse is actually true. Positive leadership makes a positive differ-

ence. The positive strategies described here are universal across cultures. Cultural differences may alter the manner in which these strategies are implemented, but evidence suggests that the strategies themselves are universal in their effects. They exemplify a heliotropic effect—or an inclination in all living systems toward positive, life-giving forces. They have practical utility in difficult circumstances as much as in benevolent circumstances.

Far from mitigating against hard work or representing soft, simple, and syrupy actions, these strategies require effort, elevated standards, and genuine competence. The strategies represent pragmatic, validated levers available to leaders so that they can achieve positive performance in organizations and in individuals. The empirical evidence presented in the chapters that follow is offered to support this conclusion.

AN EXAMPLE OF POSITIVE DEVIANCE

An easy way to identify positive leadership is to observe positive deviance. An example of such performance is illustrated by the cleanup and closure of the Rocky Flats Nuclear Weapons Production Facility near Denver, Colorado (Cameron & Lavine, 2006). At the time the facility was rife with conflict and antagonism. It had been raided and temporarily closed by the Federal Bureau of Investigation in 1989 for alleged violations of environmental laws, and employee grievances had skyrocketed. More than 100 tons of radioactive plutonium were on site, and more than

250,000 cubic meters of low-level radioactive waste were being stored in temporary drums on the prairie. Broad public sentiment regarded the facility as a danger to surrounding communities, and demonstrations by multiple groups had been staged there from the 1960s through the 1980s in protest of nuclear proliferation and potential radioactive pollution. In fact, radioactive pollution levels were estimated to be so high that a 1994 *ABC Nightline* broadcast labeled two buildings on the site the most dangerous buildings in America.

The Department of Energy estimated that closing and cleaning up the facility would require a minimum of 70 years and cost more than $36 billion. A Denver, Colorado, engineering and environmental firm—CH2MHILL—won the contract to clean up and close the 6,000-acre site consisting of 800 buildings.

CH2MHILL completed the assignment 60 years ahead of schedule, $30 billion under budget, and 13 times cleaner than required by federal standards. Antagonists such as citizen action groups, community councils, and state regulators changed from being adversaries and protesters to advocates, lobbyists, and partners. Labor relations among the three unions (i.e., steelworkers, security guards, building trades) improved from 900 grievances to the best in the steelworker president's work life. A culture of lifelong employment and employee entitlement was replaced by a workforce that enthusiastically worked itself out of a job as quickly as possible. Safety performance exceeded federal standards by twofold and more than 200 technological

innovations were produced in the service of faster and safer performance.

These achievements far exceeded every knowledgeable expert's predictions of performance. They were, in short, a quintessential example of positive deviance achieved by positive leadership. The U.S. Department of Energy attributed positive leadership, in fact, as a key factor in accounting for this dramatic success (see Cameron & Lavine, 2006: 77).

Of course, for positive leaders to focus on positive deviance does not mean that they ignore nonpositive conditions or situations where mistakes, crises, deterioration, or problems are present. Most of the time people and organizations fall short of achieving the best they can be or fail to fulfill their optimal potential. Many positive outcomes are stimulated by trials and difficulties; for example, demonstrated courage, resilience, forgiveness, and compassion are relevant only in the context of negative events. As illustrated by the Rocky Flats example, some of the best of human and organizational attributes are revealed only when confronting obstacles, challenges, or detrimental circumstances. Common human experience, as well as abundant scientific evidence, supports the idea that negativity has a place in human flourishing (Cameron, 2008). Negative news sells more than positive news, people are affected more by negative feedback than positive feedback, and traumatic events have a greater impact on humans than positive events.

A comprehensive review of psychological research by Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, and Vohs (2001: 323)