

HOW TO BE A POSITIVE LEADER

Insights from Leading Thinkers on Positive Organizations



Small Actions, Big **Impact**

Edited by Jane E. Dutton and Gretchen M. Spreitzer

Foreword by Shawn Achor, author of *The Happiness Advantage*

More Praise for *How to Be a Positive Leader*

“Profound, practical, inspirational. Written by the most-respected thought leaders in positive organizational scholarship, the chapter-by-chapter evidence-based recommendations provide a compelling case for immediate practical application. This is a must-read for leaders who wish to broaden and deepen the positive impact they can have on organizations.”

—**Jim Loehr, cofounder and Vice President, Human Performance Institute**

“We need many more positive leaders in our society and in business. Positive leaders create possibility for others. They help us do the right thing and enable us to lead more extraordinary lives. This book is filled with practical advice about how you can become a positive leader. Bravo!”

—**R. Edward Freeman, University Professor, Darden School of Business, University of Virginia**

“This insightful and actionable book beautifully articulates a very relevant and timely set of positive leadership principles. The arrangement of the tools in ‘bite-size’ segments is the perfect format for any leader to present.”

—**Fred Keller, Chairman and CEO, Cascade Engineering**

“Every chapter I read struck a chord and made me rethink an element of my own leadership. This book beautifully combines inspirational ideas with high quality evidence. It is thoughtful, insightful, and brimming with fresh approaches.”

—**Sharon Parker, Winthrop Professor, UWA Business School, University of Western Australia**

“Thirteen insightful essays and about 800 good ideas one can implement for immediate improvement. You’d have to be wildly negative in your worldview not to walk away from reading this book with a wealth of tangible, doable action steps to take your leadership and your organization’s work performance to the next level.”

—**Ari Weinzwieg, Cofounding Partner, Zingerman’s Community of Businesses**

“Every leader and aspiring leader from all sectors of society should enjoy, learn, and be inspired by this practical and highly engaging new volume. Don’t miss this opportunity to learn how to dramatically improve your leadership skills and make a larger positive impact throughout your career.”

—**Stewart I. Donaldson, Dean and Professor of Psychology, Claremont Graduate University**

“The Center for Positive Organizations is a treasure trove of people and knowledge. Now we have the map to their treasure. *How to Be a Positive Leader* gives us a practical path to become better, positive, inspirational leaders.”

—**Rich Sheridan, CEO, Menlo Innovations LLC**

“Jane Dutton and Gretchen Spreitzer have gathered a sterling group of thought leaders to describe what it takes to become a positive leader. Thought-provoking and provocative, it shows the day-to-day actions leaders can take right now to improve the quality of relationships, build the capacity for collaboration, and unlock the resources of innovation. A must-read for any practicing leader or those destined to follow the extraordinary trajectory to positive leadership.”

—**Lynda Gratton, Professor of Management Practice, London Business School**

“Jane Dutton and Gretchen Spreitzer have tapped the greatest minds to provide a one-stop resource for leaders who want to create and maintain a meaningful, purposeful, and positive workplace. The leadership tools and experiences discussed play to the desires of leaders to inspire themselves and others; promote excellence, virtuousness, and high quality connections; and reward positive deviance in the workplace to bring about exponential positive change.”

—**Roger Newton, founder, Executive Chairman, and Chief Scientific Officer, Esperion Therapeutics, Inc.**

“As Gallup polls proclaim that seven in ten American workers are disengaged, this book provides a recipe for change. Simultaneously theoretically rigorous and action oriented, the authors offer concrete actions to recreate yourself and spur others to thrive. As leaders seek to move their organizations to higher levels of excellence, this book provides simple but powerful tools to improve relationships and excitement about the future.”

—**Deborah Ancona, Seley Distinguished Professor of Management and Faculty Director, MIT Leadership Center, MIT Sloan School of Management**

“The book offers distilled and accessible wisdom from many years of solid research. It is a tour de force of positive leadership, written with a deep sense of humanity and providing a plethora of concrete practices to make an impact.”

—**Arne Carlsen, Associate Professor, BI Norwegian Business School**

“‘What do I *do*?’ That’s the biggest question we hear from leaders who want to create positive organizations. This book is the answer. It gives you specific actions, inspiring examples, and even tweets. Apply this book and you will be a positive leader.”

—**Wayne Baker, Professor of Management and Organizations, University of Michigan, and author of *United America***

“Positive organization studies is a burgeoning field of evidence-based management that, enacted in everyday organizational life, makes a real difference. Organizational dysfunctions need remedies, and many can be found in the wisdom assembled in these chapters.”

—**Stewart Clegg, Professor, University of Technology, Sydney**

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SMALL ACTIONS, BIG IMPACT

JANE E. DUTTON and
GRETCHEN M. SPREITZER



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How to Be a Positive Leader

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*To leaders past, present, and future
who call forth the best in people
and in work organizations.*

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Foreword

Shawn Achor

author of *The Happiness Advantage*
and *Before Happiness*

In one of my earliest attempts to bring leadership research into companies, I was invited to Zurich by a large Swiss bank during the economic crisis to give a lecture on Positive Leadership in Uncertain Times. Instead of reading my short bio, a disgruntled senior leader, who had been forced by the Human Resources (HR) Department to introduce my session, came to the front of the room and said, “Hello. As you know, we don’t have bonuses for everyone, but here is a talk on happiness . . . from a guy from America.”

You can imagine the response. There was immediate non-verbal stonewalling from these cool, reserved Swiss bankers. Honestly, I was already nervous for this talk. I was a green, thirty-year-old researcher with massive educational debts about to lecture on leadership to ultra-wealthy, battle-hardened, fifty-year-old managing directors at one of the world’s largest banks. But what happened next was a significant learning moment for me.

About ten minutes into the talk, as I transitioned to explaining the scientific research that had been done on how to create rational optimism and to deepen social support in the midst of crisis, the senior leaders imperceptibly began leaning forward.

Slowly, many began quietly picking up pens and inconspicuously looking for notepads. By the break, ninety minutes into the session, I could not even get to the coffee machine to try one of their fancy espressos because the leaders were flooding me with questions about research that could apply to their team's specific problems. When I finished the three-hour session, I was told by the global head of HR that I would be visiting all of their banking centers in Asia, Europe, and the United States during the banking crisis.

What happened? This book is what happened. The engaged response in Zurich was not about me, it was about the power of positive organizational scholarship. Those Swiss bankers were willing to listen because they respected the rigor with which those researched findings were sought, and they could see the leadership value of those conclusions. Scientifically validated research and focused study of thriving leaders and organizations are the keys to opening minds to real and quantifiable positive change. Without them, we are left with vague motivational statements and a risky reliance on faith in the lecturer rather than in the concepts.

If we want to change the way that organizations work, we need to learn deeply, embrace fully, and communicate effectively this positive research.

Research, of course, is not without error; it is intentionally organic, responding to new findings and rejecting mistaken ones. You will see in this book that these brilliant scholars wrestle with the ideas of their predecessors and contemporaries. But with research comes the ability to extend beyond a single person's ideas to an entire latticework of intrepid scholars seeking to cancel the noise and to find the signal.

It is my belief that there are two major impediments to change. Either we do not know how to change, or we do not

believe change is possible. In this book, we attempt to remove these obstacles by helping individuals overcome both mental and physical barriers to change.

Warning: this is not a normal book. Most books do not need instructions; this one does. Most books neatly lay out one or two ideas, all with the same style and structure, and then pound it home. This book is different. The academic scholars who have contributed to this book hail from various universities throughout the nation, and they focus on their own individual topics. If the goal is to get the best information all at once, in truth, no one person could write this book. The collected nature of this book allows you to go directly to the sources of the research to learn how best to use the findings. Perhaps this approach is comparable to the difference between eating boiled, buttered vegetables—where some of the nutrition is cooked out to make it easy to swallow—and eating raw vegetables. This book is more raw than the average reader might be used to, but perhaps the ideas have a greater potential to create positive change.

So I would suggest reading this book as if you were going through an incredible semester of classes taught by rock-star professors. Note well that they all have different styles, just like your favorite professors did in college. Remember that in some classes, you needed to take diligent notes. In others, you needed to scan quickly for the answers you knew would be asked later. In some, you just need to let the information flow over you and hope to absorb genius by osmosis. The key is to take what you can and to apply it immediately. This research is useless unless it is lived. Do not let this book languish on your shelf. Pull the things you need from this text and champion its overarching conclusions: *your behavior matters, and the more positively you lead, the more successful and happy your organization, family, and community will become.*

I am excited by this book, as you can probably tell; these scholars are at the vanguard of their field. Just think about a leader you know at an organization right now who is faced with a challenge. Maybe they want to know how to respond positively to a disengaged team at a call center, or how to help a hospital deal with changes to regulations, or how to overcome culture chasms between two newly merged airlines. It would be incredible for that person to have an entire brain trust of whip-smart individuals who would spend every waking hour for a decade thinking, discussing, writing, and researching about that very question. You are holding that brain trust. And after reading and digesting this book fully, you will become that brain trust for your organization. For you are what you read.

Since that learning moment in Zurich, I have had the privilege of lecturing in fifty countries and at over a third of the Fortune 100, and I have noticed something interesting. Every company explains to me how they are going through unheard-of change, stress, and workload that differentiates them from every other company or industry. The uniqueness of their situation cannot be the case. And change, stress, and workload are integral parts of work in the modern world; we should not be surprised to find them there.

What I believe *is* different is this: we have reached a unique time where we can no longer increase working hours and workloads expecting to maximize productivity. We have tripped over the top of the time-management curve and now find the old way of leading, that is, “work harder, longer, and faster,” is causing us to work slower, shorter, and more unhappily. We are seeing some of the greatest rates of job dissatisfaction in the history of polling, and younger generations are demanding a change. By immersing yourself in the research in this book,

you can help your organization to navigate to a different place by using a different leadership formula. As I wrote in *Before Happiness*, “the greatest competitive advantage in the modern economy is a positive and engaged brain.” This book is the research basis for how we can get our brains and organizations to move toward both “positive” and “engaged.”

Many of the things that fill the pages of this book could be derived from common sense. But common sense is not common action. Companies and leaders that heed this information will be leading flourishing businesses of the future. A tectonic plate shift is occurring in the nature of how we conceive of work, and those that attempt to reinvent the wheel or do business as usual without a focused, research-based approach to leadership will suffer the fate of the quite fearsome but also quite extinct *T. rex*.

In conclusion, we need you. You are the final ingredient. We need more people finding ways to make this research come alive and to take it beyond the walls of academia into a world that could desperately use it. Information alone will not cause transformation. Sometimes in life, we just do things and they manage to work out. But if you want to truly sustain positive change, you have to understand how to create it well enough to replicate it and to teach it to others.

We hope this book fuels you as you bring this research to life.

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Invitation

*Jane E. Dutton and
Gretchen M. Spreitzer*

Some leaders have developed a special set of capabilities, captured in their ability to see possibilities for greatness in people and their team. Other leaders know that small actions can have tremendous impact. We have become believers in both abilities: the power of seeing possibilities and the awareness that small actions can have great impacts for bringing out the best in people and their organizations.

We did not come to this conclusion easily. We have struggled together with our students of all ages as they experience the limits of applying traditional models of leadership in their own lives. Most of us live in systems with scarce resources, where we increasingly must do more with less. Sometimes we lack courage and settle for results that are just “good enough.” Over time, fueled by the hope for something more—some oxygen for action—we started exploring new pathways for seeing how leaders could make a difference. We became inspired to write this book to collect and to apply some of the best wisdom available on bringing out the best in people and work organizations. If your job affords opportunities to bring out the best in people at work, then this book is for you. Even if your job does not directly afford you these opportunities, but

you care deeply about this goal, this book is for you. Although grounded in strong scholarship and the latest research, we've written this book for you, the leader, not for the researcher.

We have witnessed firsthand the changes made possible when leaders see, know, and act in ways that bring out the best in people and organizations. During the past decade, we have built the Center for Positive Organizations, devoted to understanding how small changes in leaders' actions, particularly if part of "normal practice" in organizations, can be a powerful path toward sustained excellence. Important indicators that an organization and people within it are on this path include meaningful and measurable changes toward increasing greatness. These indicators may be greater task and financial performance, increased thriving and engagement at work, more creativity, greater resilience, and greater overall well-being of individuals and the organization.

A positive leader expects that capacities for excellence can always be expanded. In graphical terms, a positive leader believes in enlarging the zone of possibility for excellence, where today's small actions can change the amount of capacity for excellence inherent in a person or collective over time (see Figure 1). As the figure suggests, "normal" leaders work along the normal path of improving their own or their organization's capacity for excellence. A positive leader believes it is possible to shift the rate and level at which one's own or the organization's capacity for excellence can improve, moving from a normal improvement rate to a more extraordinary improvement rate. The perspectives shared in this book can lift up and accelerate the rate of improvement, increasing the capacity for excellence in significant ways. Expanding the zone of possibility requires new ways of thinking and acting, which are at the heart of positive leadership. *How to Be a Positive Leader* offers a

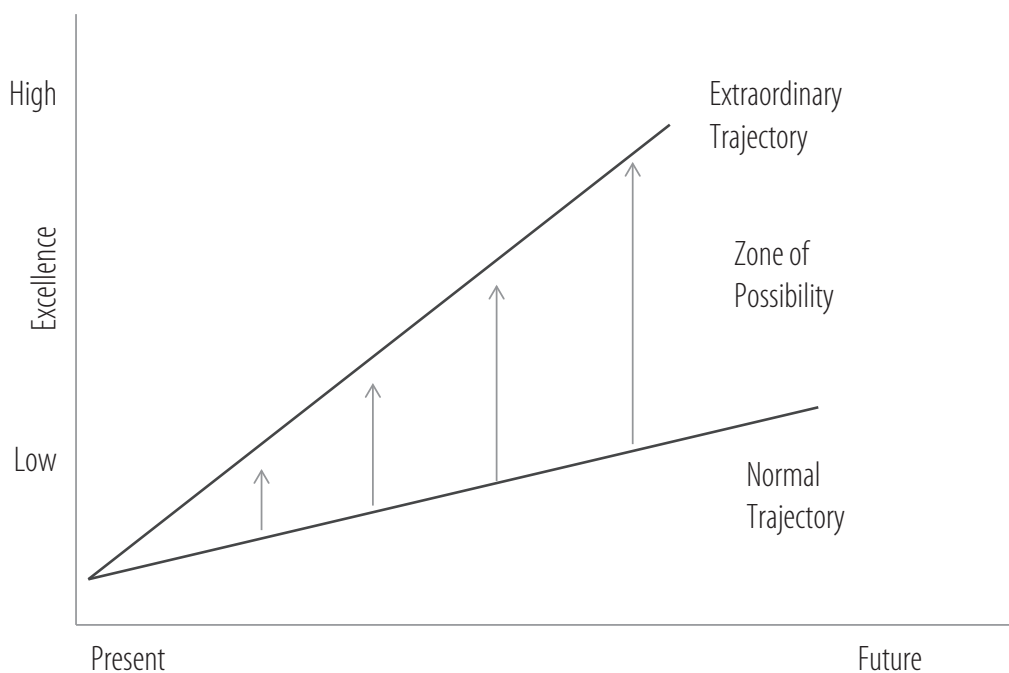


FIGURE 1 Positive leaders increase capacities for excellence.

compelling set of evidence-based perspectives and practices that leaders can embrace, expanding the possibilities for excellence by tapping into the best in people and organizations.

Three features of *How to Be a Positive Leader* are distinctive. First, the book takes the perspective that small actions by leaders can and do have big impact. The authors identify small actions that make a big difference in the potential for enlarging capacities for positive impact. Second, the book uses a dual lens, focusing on what leaders can do to expand their *own* capacities for excellence while they seed directives for sustaining the capacities for excellence through more organizational-level actions. Third, the book is inspirational. It invites leaders to see the possibilities for expanded and improved human capacities enabled by small actions.