POSITIVE LEADERSHIP

STRATEGIES FOR EXTRAORDINARY PERFORMANCE

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an excerpt from

Positive Leadership:
Strategies for Extraordinary Performance

by Kim Cameron
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Preface

P rescriptions for leading organizational success are plentiful, often provided by well-known senior executives, political candidates, and consultants. The objective of this book is different. It aims to explain 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 is based on analyses of organizations that have achieved exceptional levels of success. One such study, for example, chronicles the cleanup and closure of a nuclear weapons production facility (Cameron & Lavine, 2006). The company receiving the contract to dismantle and clean up the Rocky Flats Nuclear Arsenal completed the assignment 60 years ahead of schedule, $30 billion under budget, and 13 times cleaner than required by federal standards. This company's achievement far exceeded every knowledgeable expert's predictions of performance, and it represents what I refer to as positive deviance. Carefully examining organizations such as this one has helped uncover some atypical leadership strategies that enable levels of performance that dramatically exceed expectations and reach extraordinary levels of excellence.

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

These strategies are built on the concept of *positive.* Positive leadership refers to the application of principles arising from the newly emerging fields of positive organizational scholarship, positive psychology, and the positive change literature. The concept of positive has at least three connotations:

(1) A focus on positively deviant performance, or successful performance that dramatically exceeds the norm in a positive direction;

(2) An affirmative bias, or an orientation toward, for example, strengths rather than weaknesses, optimism rather than pessimism, supportive rather than critical communication; and

(3) A focus on virtuousness and eudaemonism, or on the best of the human condition and that which human beings consider to be inherently good (Cameron, 2003).

In this sense, the concept of positive possesses the attributes of the *heliotropic effect*. This effect is defined as the tendency in all living systems toward that which gives life and away from that which depletes life—toward positive energy and away from negative energy. All living systems have an inclination toward the positive—for example, plants lean toward the light, people learn and remember positive information faster and better than negative information, positive words predominate over negative words in all languages, all life forms from bacteria to mammals possess an inclination toward positive energy (e.g., Cameron, 2008; Matlin & Stang, 1978)—so strategies that capitalize on the positive similarly tend to produce life-giving, flourishing outcomes in individuals and organizations. As is demonstrated in this book, a focus on the positive is life-giving for individuals and organizations in the same way that positive energy in nature enhances thriving in living organisms. These four positive strategies, therefore, are among the most important enablers for producing life-giving outcomes and extraordinarily positive performance.

The four strategies include the cultivation of *positive climate*, *positive relationships*, *positive communication*, and *positive meaning*. Each strategy is explained and illustrated, empirical evidence is provided, and specific actionable guidelines are identified. The intent is to provide leaders with validated, implementable strategies that can enable positively deviant performance. In Chapter 6, I describe a proven process whereby these four strategies can be

implemented in organizations, and the final chapter provides a self-assessment instrument and a guide for implementing these four strategies.

A distinctive feature of this book, compared to more common discussions written by celebrated leaders recounting their own experiences or by storytellers reciting inspiring examples, is that these strategies and prescriptions rely on rigorous empirical research for their credibility. A variety of scholarly research studies are cited that support the existence of verifiable associations between these strategies and positively deviant performance. This research helps ensure the legitimacy and integrity of the prescriptions being advocated. Rather than being based on the personal experiences of well-regarded leaders or editorialists—which may or may not be generalizable—this book relies on scholarly research from multiple investigations to substantiate the recommendations for enabling positive leadership.

In preparing this book, I benefited immeasurably from the broad expertise and scholarly experience of valued colleagues. I want to express appreciation to these 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, Jeevan Sivasubramaniam, Gretchen Spreitzer, and David Whetten. The production staff members at Berrett Koehler Publishers have also been outstanding models of professionalism and competence. I am grateful to you all.

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Positive Leadership

T his 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 eudaemonism. Positive leadership refers to the application of positive principles arising from the newly emerging fields of positive organizational scholarship (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003), 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 effective leader?" Applying the principles of positive leadership leads to extraordinary performance.

The vast majority of the tens of thousands of books on leadership currently in print are based on the prescriptions

of celebrated leaders recounting their own experiences or on storytellers' recitations of inspirational examples. This book is different. It explains strategies that have been validated by empirical research with multiple individuals and organizations. It provides an explanation of practical strategies that can help leaders apply principles that have recently emerged through an emphasis on the positive in social science research. These strategies are, for the most part, seldom implemented in organizations.

Positive leadership has three connotations:

(1) It refers to the facilitation of extraordinarily positive performance—that is, *positively deviant performance*. This means outcomes that dramatically exceed common or expected performance. Facilitating positive deviance is not the same as achieving ordinary success in that it represents "intentional behaviors that depart from the norm of a reference group in honorable ways" (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2003: 209). Positive leaders aim to help individuals and organizations attain spectacular levels of achievement.

(2) Positive leadership also refers to an *affirmative bias*—or a focus on strengths and capabilities and on affirming human potential. Its orientation is toward enabling thriving and flourishing rather than toward addressing obstacles and impediments. Without being Pollyannaish, it emphasizes positive communication, optimism, and strengths as well as the value and opportunity embedded in problems and weaknesses. Positive leadership does not ignore negative events but builds on them to develop positive outcomes. It is not the same as merely being nice, charismatic, trust-

worthy, 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 focuses on facilitating the best of the human condition, or on fostering virtuousness (Cameron & Caza, 2004; Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2003). It is based on a eudaemonic assumption; that is, that an in-clination exists in all human systems toward goodness for its intrinsic value (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*; Dutton and So-nenshein, 2007). Whereas there has been some debate re-garding what constitutes goodness and whether universal human virtues can be identified, all societies and cultures possess catalogues of traits that 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" (*Metaphysics XII*: 3). An inherent orientation exists, in other words, toward virtuousness in individuals and organizations.

In sum, *positive leadership* refers to an emphasis on 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 addi-tion to what is problematic or life-depleting), what is expe-rienced 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). Positive leadership means promoting 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.

AN EXAMPLE OF POSITIVE DEVIANCE

An easy way to identify positive leadership is to notice positive deviance. An example of such performance is illustrated by the cleanup and closure of a 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 was on site, and more than 250,000 cubic meters of low-level radioactive waste was being stored in temporary drums on the prairie. Broad public sentiment existed that the facility was a danger to surrounding communities, and demonstrations by multiple groups had been staged from the 1960s through the 1980s in protest of nuclear proliferation. Radioactive pollution levels were deemed 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 to close and clean up the facility would require a minimum of 70 years and cost more than $36 billion. A Denver, Colorado,

engineering and environmental firm—CH2M HILL—won the contract to clean up and close the 6,000-acre site consisting of 800 buildings.

CH2M HILL 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 mayors, and state regulators changed from being adversaries and protestors 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 and positive leadership:

> The leadership from the CH2M HILL organization was very important. . . . They poured their corporate heart into what we were trying to do. They brought some fabulous positive leadership to the site. (U.S. Department of Energy Executive, cited in Cameron & Lavine, 2006: 77)

Of course, for positive leaders to focus on positive deviance does not mean that they ignore non-positive conditions or situations when 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 occurrences. As illustrated by the Rocky Flats example, some of the best of human and organizational attributes are exposed 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 greater impact on humans than positive events.

A comprehensive review of psychological research by Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs (2001: 323) summarized this conclusion by pointing out that "bad is stronger than good." Human beings, they pointed out, *react* more strongly to negative phenomena than to positive phenomena. They learn early in life to be vigilant in responding to the negative and to ignore natural heliotropic tendencies. Thus, achieving positive deviance is not dependent on completely positive conditions, just like languishing and failure are not dependent on constant negative conditions. A role exists for both positive and negative circumstances in producing positive deviance (Bagozzi, 2003), and both conducive and challenging conditions may lead to positive deviance.

Moreover, when organizations should fail but do not, when they bounce back but are supposed to wither, when they remain flexible and agile but ought to become rigid, they also demonstrate a form of positive deviance (Weick, 2003). The cleanup and closure of Rocky Flats was expected to fail; nuclear aircraft carriers in the 1990 Persian Gulf War were not supposed to produce perfect performance (Weick & Roberts, 1993); and the U.S. Olympic hockey team in 1980 was predicted to be annihilated by the Russians. Nonfailure in these circumstances also represents positive deviance.

One way to think about positive deviance is illustrated by a continuum shown in Figure 1.1. The continuum depicts a state of normal or expected performance in the middle, a condition of negatively deviant performance on the left, and a state of positively deviant performance on the right. Negative and positive deviance depict aberrations from normal functioning, problematic on one end and virtuous on the other end.

At the individual level, the figure shows a condition of physiological and psychological illness on the left and healthy functioning in the middle (i.e., the absence of illness). On the right side is positive deviance, which may be illustrated by high levels of physical vitality (e.g., Olympic fitness levels) or psychological flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Fredrickson, 2001). At the organizational level, the figure portrays conditions ranging from ineffective, inefficient, and error-prone performance on the left side, to effective, efficient, and reliable performance in the middle. On

FIGURE 1.1 A Deviance Continuum

	Negative Deviance	Normal	Positive Deviance
Individual:			
Physiological	Illness	Health	Vitality
Psychological	Illness	Health	Flow
Organizational:			
Economics	Unprofitable	Profitable	Generous
Effectiveness	Ineffective	Effective	Excellent
Efficiency	Inefficient	Efficient	Extraordinary
Quality	Error-prone	Reliable	Perfect
Ethics	Unethical	Ethical	Benevolent
Relationships	Harmful	Helpful	Honoring
Adaptation	Threat-rigidity	Coping	Flourishing

(SOURCE: Cameron, 2003)

the right side is extraordinarily positive, virtuous, or extraordinary organizational performance. The extreme right and left points on the continuum are qualitatively distinct from the center point. They do not merely represent a greater or lesser quantity of the middle attributes.

For the most part, organizations are designed to foster stability, steadiness, and predictability (March & Simon, 1958; Parsons, 1951; Weber, 1992)—that is, to remain in the middle of the Figure 1.1 continuum. Investors are quick to flee from companies that are deviant or unpredictable

in their performance (Marcus, 2005). Consequently, organizations formalize expectations, reporting relationships, goals and targets, organizational rules, processes and procedures, strategies, and structures—all intended to reduce variation, uncertainty, and deviance. Most organizations, and most leaders, focus on maintaining performance at the center of the continuum, so most performance is neither positively nor negatively deviant (Quinn, 2004; Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2003). Success is traditionally represented as effective performance at the center of the continuum— predictable trends, reliable functioning, profitable operations.

On the other hand, a few organizations perform in extraordinary ways—at the right end of the continuum—but they are the exception, not the rule. They are positively deviant, and this implies more than just being profitable. Positive deviance almost always entails more than merely earning more revenue than the industry average for a certain number of years (as in Collins, 2001). It involves thriving, flourishing, even virtuous performance, or achieving the best of the human condition. Of course, no single leader can account for this kind of spectacular success, but certain leadership strategies have been found to enable organizational thriving, flourishing, and extraordinarily positive performance. This book highlights four of these enabling strategies and provides the empirical evidence that supports their validity.

AN EXAMPLE OF LEADERSHIP THAT ENABLES POSITIVE DEVIANCE

One example of leadership that led to positive deviance occurred in a New England health-care facility—Griffin Hospital—which faced a crisis when the popular vice president of operations, Patrick Charmel, was forced to resign by the board of directors (Cameron & Caza, 2002). Most employees viewed him as the most innovative and effective administrator in the hospital and as the chief exemplar of positive energy and hope for the future. Upon his resignation, the organization was thrown into turmoil. Conflict, backbiting, criticism, and adversarial feelings permeated the system. Eventually, a group of employees formally appealed to the board of directors to replace the current president and CEO with Charmel. Little confidence was expressed in the current leadership, and the hospital's performance was deteriorating. The group's lobbying efforts were eventually successful in that the president and CEO resigned under pressure, and Charmel was hired back to fill those two roles.

Within six months of his return, however, the decimated financial circumstances at the hospital necessitated a downsizing initiative aimed at reducing the workforce by at least 10 percent. The hospital faced millions of dollars in losses. Charmel had to eliminate the jobs of some of the very same people who supported his return. The most likely consequences of this action would normally be an escalation in the negative effects of downsizing (Cameron,

1994); for example, loss of loyalty and morale, perceptions of injustice and duplicity, blaming and accusations, and cynicism and anger. Based on research on the effects of downsizing, a continuation of the tumultuous, antagonistic climate was almost guaranteed (Cameron, 1998; Cameron, Kim, & Whetten, 1987).

Instead, the opposite results occurred. Upon his return, Charmel made a concerted effort to implement strategies that enabled positively deviant change rather than to merely manage the problems. He focused on fostering a positive climate rather than allowing a negative one to develop, where strong relationships, open and honest communication, and meaningfulness of work were emphasized. The organization institutionalized forgiveness, optimism, trust, and integrity as expected behaviors. Throughout the organization, stories of compassion and acts of kindness and virtuousness were almost daily fare. One typical example involved a nurse who was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Respondents reported that when word spread of the man's illness, doctors and staff members from every area in the hospital donated vacation days and personal leave time so that he would continue to collect a salary even though he could not work. Fortuitously, the pool of days expired just before the nurse died, so he was never terminated, and he received a salary right up to his last day of life.

Employees reported that the personal and organizational damage done by the announced downsizing—friends losing jobs, budgets being cut—were forgiven, employees released grudges and resentment, and, instead, an optimistic future was emphasized. One indicator was the language

used throughout the organization, which commonly included words such as love, hope, compassion, forgiveness, and humility, especially in reference to the leadership that announced the downsizing actions.

> We are in a very competitive health care market, so we have differentiated ourselves through our compassionate and caring culture. . . . I know it sounds trite, but we really do love our patients. . . . People love working here, and our employees' family members love us too. . . . Even when we downsized, Pat maintained the highest levels of integrity. He told the truth, and he shared everything. He got the support of everyone by his genuineness and personal concern. . . . It wasn't hard to forgive" (representative response in a focus group interview of employees, cited in Cameron, 2003: 56).

Employees indicated that the climate of positivity established by Charmel was the key to their recovery and thriving. For example, the maternity ward installed double beds (which had to be newly designed) so the fathers could sleep with the mothers rather than sitting in a chair through the night. The hospital created numerous communal rooms for family and friend gatherings and carpeted hallways and floors. Volunteer pets were brought in to comfort and cheer up patients. Original paintings on walls displayed optimistic and inspiring themes. Nurses' stations were all within eyesight of patient's beds. Jacuzzis were installed in the maternity ward. Since then, Griffin has been listed in the "Top 25 Best Places to Work" by *Fortune* for

FIGURE 1.2   Financial Performance after a Leadership
Intervention

Fiscal Year Ended

Intervention
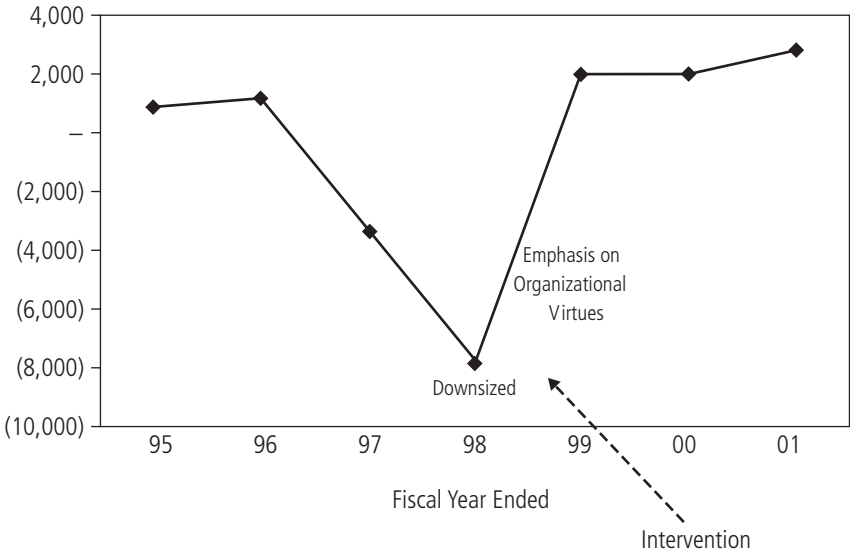
more than five years and is ranked 12th nationwide in the
"Top 100 Quality Award." Figure 1.2 illustrates the financial
turnaround associated with Charmel's leadership.

Positive leaders focus on organizational flourishing, en-
abling the best of the human condition, and creating ex-
ceptionally positive outcomes, not merely on resolving
problems, overcoming obstacles, increasing competitive-
ness, or even attaining profitability. These outcomes may
be achieved in difficult circumstances—as in the case of
Griffin Hospital—as well as in benevolent circumstances.
The key is a focus on the positive.

FIGURE 1.3 Four Leadership Strategies that Enable Positive Deviance
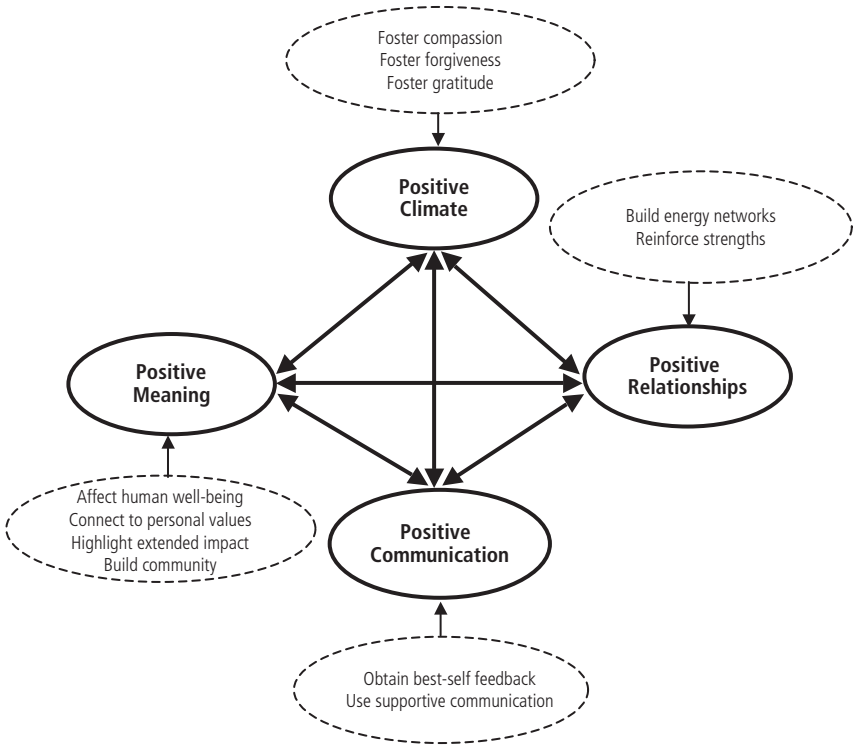
POSITIVE LEADERSHIP

Each of the chapters that follow discusses a key positive leadership strategy that differentiates positively deviant organizations from normal organizations. These strategies do not represent a comprehensive or exclusive list, of course, but observation and empirical evidence from a number of investigations suggest that they are among the most

important enablers of positively deviant performance, yet they are too seldom practiced. These four leadership strategies are interrelated and mutually reinforcing. As illustrated in Figure 1.3, enhancing one of these strategies tends to positively impact the other three. In addition to reviewing why each strategy is important and how it is related to positively deviant performance, each chapter includes a brief description of some practical activities that can enable the implementation of the positive strategy, some diagnostic questions for leaders, and some references to the validating research.

An integrating chapter is also provided (Chapter 6) in which I explain a process for implementing these four strategies in an organization. This process is called the Personal Management Interview program. Empirical evidence is persuasive that by implementing this process, and by employing these four strategies, marked improvement in individual and organizational performance can occur. The concluding chapter summarizes the principles of positive leadership and provides a process to help leaders begin to implement the most personally relevant leadership behaviors.

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