



BEING ALLERGIC TO POINTLESSNESS AND PAYING ATTENTION TO POSITIVITY

Key points:

1. Heightened longing for meaningful work and connection as staff return to the office
2. Allergic reactions to the pointless after months of focusing on the essentials
3. Seeing this as an opportunity to let things die – and create space for the new
4. Consciously directing our attention to the positive
5. Anchoring positive habits in our lives and teams

Heightened sensitivity

Many people coming back to work in offices will be more sensitive. Some will simply be stressed and more in need of rest. Others will still have health concerns and want to ensure boundaries are kept. Others will have gotten used to a much quieter way of working – perhaps with more focused time, but with overall less sensory overload. And others will have been inspired and connected to getting stuff done, feeling effective and useful. What all will share is a heightened allergy to the pointless.

Consciously paying attention to the positive

By addressing what does not work or is pointless, we can begin to make space for the positive. When things are new, difficult, uncertain or stressful we tend to focus on the negative. This makes sense when fleeing from a danger – but not when trying to solve problems, be creative or collaborate well. Our mental resources are reduced when we are highly stressed or exhausted – body resources are directed to muscle tension, breathing, getting ready to flee. Conversely, when we feel positive about something, we have more cognitive resources, we recognise more options and collaborate better.

Feeling positive or negative can be a choice, affected by how we perceive things. On a daily basis we receive upto 200,000 words – this is information overload (USC, 2011-2020). Some data has shown that news sites, Facebook and Instagram, and e-mail traffic is up 20-40% since COVID: we are communicating more and consuming more information (Graham-Cumming, 2020). However, from our evolutionary history we value the negative more than the positive (ignoring the former can kill us, ignoring the latter is just a missed chance). This is problematic in a period of information overload, because we then tend to fill up our window of perception with the negative. And above all, it is NOT realistic. While many so-called realists urge us to pay attention to the negative all the time, they forget this informational bias and thus forget how important the positive is to guide us, motivate us – and how much of it is happening and that we are blind to this reality.

Trust the allergic responses to the pointless

And our organisational life is full of the pointless. We really encourage all to trust the allergic reactions to the pointless – this will be a crucial piece of making the transition work. Many organisations have accrued pointless or overcomplicated processes. In contrast, one thing that many have noticed in virtual work is the positive focus on what is relevant and effective – and the fact that in the key COVID period, many restrictive rules were ignored or put aside. In addition, many people will be longing to reconnect to other humans, will have enjoyed the honesty and intimacy that many experienced in talking to each other from one home to another home – and be turned off by the impersonal, jargon-full corporate speak. People will be longing for meaningful, human interaction and work.

Times of big change have always been the best time to make a big shift in culture since people are more willing to try out new things. Rather than ignoring the pointless and just sighing and shrugging our shoulders, we should really use people's stronger-than-normal reactions to the pointless to look at it. Form a "Pointless task force" to look honestly at the top 20 drivers of frustration and time wasters in your organisational life and, if they are not really critical, just suspend them. You can suspend them for a period of time – especially if there is a heightened crisis – and see if this causes any problems. Experiment with this – have monthly pointlessness voting, for example on pointless processes or empty jargon. Everyone will enjoy this, and it will be just as important as being purposeful.

It is important to do this – we cannot add more purpose and activities if there is no space and we are overloaded with other stuff. Purpose and new energy can arise only if there is attention to making space. The negative reactions of people are important to trust – they point to what does not work and what does not contribute to engagement. And what needs to be let go of.

It is also important to understand that people tend to get obsessed by the negative – and what irritates them – so much so that they do not often have time for the positive. That is why in order to connect to purpose and positivity, one must first really acknowledge the pointless (especially with humour) – this is the precondition for people being able to orient themselves to the positive.

EFFECTS OF HAPPINESS (VS) FEAR AS A DRIVER OF PERFORMANCE



Thus, we perceive more of that which is urgent, problematic, unsolved, dangerous than all the positive helpfulness, resourcefulness, effectiveness and growth that we have witnessed. Simply notice how you scan your e-mail box – or what news you respond to.

SHIFTING WHAT WE ATTEND TO

Focusing on the negative and appreciating the positive

| Area | What | Option 1 | Option 2 |
|------|-----------------------------|----------|----------|
| News | Pandemic headlines | ✗ | |
| | Political tweets | ✗ | |
| | Underlying deep analysis | | ✓ |
| | Positive developments in X | | ✓ |
| Work | Irritating mail from Y | ✗ | |
| | Urgent task | ✗ | ✗ |
| | Positive progress report | | ✓ |
| | Difficult problem in 7 days | ✗ | |
| | List of unfinished tasks | ✗ | |
| | Check-in with colleagues | | ✓ |
| | Feedback | | ✓ |

This drains us, makes us blind to growth and opportunities – and can trap us in repetitive, automatic behaviour. So as we return to the new normal we also need to have a specific focus on what has gone well – what we are proud of and how we have grown – and keep connecting regularly to this individually and as a team in the next weeks and months.

In the one of our previous articles we outlined all the positive aspects of virtual work. These can be brought back into the new normal only if we notice them, name them, appreciate them and take time to reflect how we can anchor them in the new world we are in. There are simple habits you can anchor in your day – both personally and as a team – to help notice the positive.



Habits of positivity in my own life

Personal Habits

Micro practices in the day

Smiling at others

Appreciation of flavours/tastes/food/music

Noticing sensory environment/nature when walking outside or moving

Noticing positive things in working life during the day

Focus on the positive/opportunities rather than problems and stop complaining

Conscious/reflection practices

Three good things – reflecting on three nice things that happened that day. Doing this in the evening alone or with family.

Random acts of kindness – reaching out to others and being helpful

Gratitude reflection – reflect on what you are grateful for, even things that are perhaps painful

Habits of positivity in my team

Habits

Micro practices in our interactions

Smiling at each other often (video on)

Taking time to chat with each other – and express appreciation

Being positive about each other – not gossiping or being negative in how we talk about each other

Focus on the positive/opportunities rather than problems and not complaining

Conscious practices in meetings

Overall positive tone of meetings

Starting with the positive – what went well last week, what are we proud of

Occasionally three good things practice in our time together – what are the three things we enjoyed.

Giving each other constructive feedback in a regular manner

Not blaming or being negative about others

Thanking everyone for their participation in a meeting

Reflecting on what we have learned in this COVID period and how we want to maintain it

So, trust the allergic reaction to the pointlessness and pay attention to the positive. Mindfulness plays a crucial part in this – in being able to notice our response to that which feels pointless, overcoming the negativity bias and paying attention to the positive.

Sources:

- (1) University of Southern California. (2011, February 11). How much information is there in the world? ScienceDaily, www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2011/02/110210141219.htm
- (2) Graham-Cumming, J. (2020, Juni 26). Internet performance during the COVID-19 emergency. The Cloudflare Blog. <https://blog.cloudflare.com/recent-trends-in-internet-traffic/>