



The Effective Organization

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Curse of the Half-Empty Glass

“What was the primary means of motivation in those days?”

“Fear.”

-- Carl Reiner and Mel Brooks,
The Two Thousand Year Old Man

For the 2000 year old man, fear may have been a very effective motivator: when he saw a lion, he was motivated to run the other way. That, in a nutshell, is the problem with fear. Fear doesn't make someone move toward safety; it makes them move away from danger. Same thing? Not really. In jujitsu, pain can be used to invoke a fear of injury. Someone experiencing that pain, and that fear, will move away from it, even if moving away means running full tilt into the nearest tree.

In business, the same phenomenon occurs. Faced with an unexpected problem or setback, the most common response is to highlight the threat to the organization and all the terrible things that will happen if the threat is not immediately countered. This practice of attempting to motivate people to work harder through fear – fear of competition, loss of market share, job loss, company going out of business, and so forth – may encourage harder work, but not necessarily more effective work.

In the business environment, there are a lot of trees.

While fear gets the adrenaline flowing, it also narrows focus, reduces creativity, and makes it harder for people to recognize and change a losing strategy. This would be fine, except that what is actually needed in most situations is a creative solution, the ability to accurately assess whether or not a strategy is working, and the ability to quickly discard failing strategies. Avoiding premature decision making, no easy task at the best of times, only becomes more difficult. As we all learned in grade school, in the event of a fire, don't rush for the door: proceed slowly and avoid panic. The same is true in business: rushing to a decision is almost guaranteed to lead to a bad decision.

So given that the business needs to get employees focused and energized to meet a potential challenge, how should it go about doing that?

The key is to recognize that the glass is not half empty. It's half full. That makes a difference: instead of focusing on what you lack, focus on what you have going for you. Instead of fear, instill an atmosphere of optimism.

Upcoming Events

Learning through entertainment
January 30th at the [New England Society for Applied Psychology](#)

Corporate Culture and Innovation: A Two-Edged Sword April 15th at the [Infotec Technology Conference](#).

For more information, please visit www.7stepsahead.com.

Publications

[Talent Magnet: The key to attracting the right staff is to look inward](#)

[The Five-step process to making change work](#)

[A good leader shines under pressure](#)



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There are several steps to accomplishing this:

1. Start by defining success. What does it look like? What will your business have accomplished in order to have been successful? Communicate that in a few brief, vibrant, sentences. If you don't know where you're going,

you can waste a lot of time not getting there.

2. Lay out a set of goals that will make the business successful. Include what you'll be doing as well as what you expect others to do.
3. Remind employees of previous challenges that they've successfully overcome. Emphasize the positive: how teams pulled together, how individuals stepped up to the plate, and so forth.
4. Recognize that roadblocks will appear: don't assume everything will go perfectly. The competition may do something unexpected. A critical employee may get the flu. A storm may disrupt travel or power. Make sure you've allowed time to deal with the unexpected so that it doesn't derail you.
5. Present energizing images to use when bad news strikes or setbacks occur: a cyclist passed by an opponent can imagine a rubber band attached to his opponent's back. The rubber band pulls him faster and faster until he passes said opponent. Come up with the

equivalent for your business. Repeat it frequently. If you can't keep a straight face, find a different image.

6. Take the time to brainstorm different solutions to the problems you are facing. Evaluate what you come up with and make sure it will get you to that success state. Rushing off down the wrong path wastes valuable time and, even more important, drains enthusiasm.
7. Periodically review progress and show people how far they've come. Pilots may care more about the runway ahead than the runway behind them, but everyone else is motivated more by how much they've accomplished rather than being constantly reminded of how much more there is to do.
8. Celebrate successes. Short-term reminders increase the sense of progress and make people feel appreciated.

Half empty or half full. A fearful team or an enthusiastic, creative team. It's your choice.

About 7 Steps Ahead



Stephen R. Balzac is a professional speaker and president of 7 Steps Ahead, a consulting firm specializing in increasing individual, team, and organizational performance.

Steve has over twenty years of experience in the high tech industry and is the former Director of Operations for Silicon Genetics, in Redwood City, CA.

He serves on the boards of the New England Society of Applied Psychology (NESAP) and the Society of Professional Consultants (SPC). Steve is a member of the Operations Committee of the American Judo & Jujitsu Federation. No stranger to the challenges of achieving peak performance under competitive and stressful conditions, he holds a fourth degree black belt in jujitsu and is a former nationally ranked competitive fencer. Steve is an adjunct professor of Industrial/Organizational Psychology and has been a guest lecturer at MIT and WPI.

Building effective development organizations, improving team morale, focus, and enthusiasm, developing effective communications between team members, reducing employee turnover, helping businesses identify and attain strategic targets, and applying sport psychology techniques to business have been some of his most successful projects.

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