

NW High Performance Enterprise Consortium



April 2005

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NWHPEC
C/O ESCO Corporation
2141 NW 25th Ave.
Portland, OR 97210-2578

The Power of Negative Thinking:

By: *Phil Lowe, reprinted from Kaizen-Tips Newsletter*

One thing that seems to drive ordinary mortals mad about management consultants is our relentless capacity for "reframing." This, for the uninitiated, means choosing to reinterpret anything that happens to you as positive. In other words, make every half empty glass appear half full.

Daily reframing can become a kind of religious ritual. I don't feel my day is complete without pondering on the new opportunities afforded to me by a cancelled train ("Hooray, the next one will be packed and I can enjoy a group hug with my fellow humans"), or a meteorite landing on my house ("Hooray, God has chosen me out of everyone on earth. I'm special!").

There is, however, one thing consultants need to reframe in the other direction: our relentlessly optimistic expectation that the rest of humanity is as well disposed towards reframing as we are.

I had an early warning of this several years ago. When our children were small, my wife and I attempted, like most other parents, to survive on two hours' sleep a night. I'd just finished writing a book chapter on the topic of positive thinking. Keen to put it into practice, I got into the habit of thinking of myself as someone for whom two hours was more than enough. In a spirit of charity, I thought I would introduce my wife to the benefits of reframing. One day, as she was wholeheartedly expressing

her despair at another broken night, I ventured: "There's a technique that could help you with this."

"Really?"

"Yes. All you need to do is get into the habit of saying to yourself: I'm the kind of person who doesn't need a lot of sleep."

"Why would I say that?"

"Because then you'll feel better."

"But it's not true."

"No, I know, but you would make it true through repetition."

"No I wouldn't. I know that I need a lot of sleep."

"Yes, but if you suggest the opposite..."

"Then I'd be wasting my time."

I'm skipping about twenty minutes of the conversation, but you get the idea. Twelve years' later, after similar conversations with workshop participants, I have had to admit to myself the fact that cannot be reframed: most humans prefer fatalism to positive thinking. There are, I've no doubt, complex psycho-neurological reasons for this, none of which are much help when you're trying to feel positive about banging your head against a brick wall ("Hooray, a chance for me to explore the existential nature of frustration!")

There is a serious point to this. The average leader spends large amounts of his or her time driving through change of one kind or another. And change, by its very nature, is hard for

the individual on the receiving end to reframe.

So the typical change initiative will inspire much wailing, gnashing of teeth, and unbridled negativity from those who perceive themselves as having no ownership or control over the situation. You, the leader, see a wave of emotional energy racing towards you, about to break over your head. In the workplace (and especially in Britain) our impulse is to try and put a lid on emotional outbursts. But why not reframe this - what if you take the view that all energy is positive? How might you engage with that energy, channel it? Pursuing the wave metaphor, what if instead of a sea wall you build a wave farm?

One positive thing you can say about negative thinking is that it seems to energize people. If I ask a group of workshop participants to write down what they're good at, I get a lot of furrowed brows and embarrassed glances around the room. But if I ask for a list of what they're useless at, the room comes to life and most people ask for a second sheet of paper.

In the same way, a lot of people find it hard to think "creatively" about change because classic brainstorming guidelines ban you from being negative. Like all rules, it was made for a good reason - a critical atmosphere tends to deter people from contributing. But, like all rules, it was made to be broken. After all, if it's human nature to be negative, why not use it productively?

Let me give you an example of this. I was working with senior managers from a merchant bank, who were pondering the results of their latest employee survey. The foghorn message was that motivation was at an all time low. The situation was

serious enough to convince the managers that something needed to be done. They asked me, as managers do, what the secret is to motivating your staff. Since the best answer I've ever been able to come up with is "it depends," I deflected the question and suggested we had a idea generating session on this topic.

But such an activity is fraught with difficulty. A successful idea generation session depends on two things: fluidity (keeping the ideas flowing) and flexibility (having a sufficient range of ideas; a law of requisite variety, as it was). A group of fatalistic managers feeling completely lost in a problem no one seems to have solved before were not really in a receptive state for sticking post-it notes on the wall or picking words out of a dictionary.

Creative thinking requires some faith in the process; the only faith these individuals had was in the hopelessness of their situation. If we were going to get anywhere I had to tap into the negative energy that was blocking their search for an answer.

I did two things. First, I created a process based around competitive physical activity to help release the energy (for example, setting up flipcharts at opposite ends of the room, and having an "ideas relay race" between two teams (next person can't start before previous person has recorded an idea). The spirit of competition deflected attention from the usual blocking point, where ideas don't get written up because they are not considered "good" enough.

The second thing I did was abandon any attempt to think positively. Instead, I asked for ideas around the question: "How might we demotivate staff beyond all possible hope of redemption?" You would not

believe how much laughter and positive energy we created in the room, as everyone aimed to outdo their colleagues for a world-class method for de-motivating staff. Giving permission to be "negative" opened the flood gates.

We ended up with several flipchart sheets of paper with ideas for destroying morale. Then we went through them and turned them upside down again to see what useful ideas might emerge for improving employee motivation. The one that seemed to excite most interest was rather succinct: "talk to them."

Now, if you had hired me to tell you how to motivate your staff and I told you all you needed to do was talk to them, I doubt you would hire me again. But if your team of managers had come to this idea themselves and was engaged by its simplicity and the fact that actually, it was doable, what then?

There was much discussion around talking versus listening, how much talking was enough, and so on, but the important thing was that not only the exercise, but the energy in the room, had been turned upside down. I would lay money that the next employee survey shows a marked improvement.

So what are lessons for leaders? I would give the moral of the story in one sentence: Don't block negative energy. Ask instead: "How might I use this for a positive outcome?" In other words, use it or lose it.

This is not the same as sanctioning negativity: at no stage are you suggesting that people are right to be negative. What you are doing is giving them permission to let that energy out; that's when the creative alchemy happens.

Upcoming Events: May

5/4 – 5/6

**7:30-4:30 at Skutt Ceramic Products,
Portland**

Set-Up Reduction Kaizen Event

This three-day event will focus on Set-Up Reduction. On the first day, you'll spend half of the day learning about Set-Up Reduction and practicing using an interactive simulation. The balance of the three days is spent on the shop floor working through Set-Up Reduction issues. Completion of Principles of Lean Mfg. is a pre-requisite for this event.

5/6

**7:30-4:30 at Silver Eagle,
Portland**

Principles of Lean Mfg.

See previous course description.

5/9 – 5/11

**7:30-4:30 at Gamblin Artists Colors,
Portland**

Value Stream Mapping

This is a 3-day event, but well worth the resource commitment because worker's spend a day learning and practicing Value Stream Mapping skills, one day mapping a host company's existing product flow, and the last day envisioning a real future state and creating a live implementation plan. Completion of Principles of Lean Mfg. is a pre-requisite for this event.

5/12 – 5/13

**7:30-4:30 at Vanguard-EMS,
Beaverton**

Lean Office

This is a 2-day event. Day 1 is spent learning how Lean is incorporated into the office and reviewing a case study. Day 2 is spent value stream mapping; creating a current state, future state, and implementation plan for an office flow! Completion of Principles of Lean Mfg. is a pre-requisite for this event.

May Events Continued

5/13

**7:30-4:30 at Silver Eagle,
Portland**

Principles of Lean Mfg.

See previous course description.

5/17

**7:30-4:30 at Sure Power,
Tualatin**

Principles of Lean Mfg.

See previous course description.

5/19 – 5/23

12:30-4:30 and 7:30 – 4:30

Bushwacker, Portland

***Lean ESL for Russian/Ukrainian
Speakers***

The first day, 5/19 is a half day classroom sessions where the attendees will learn Lean principles and methodologies in English as a Second Language (ESL) format. Interpreters are provided to assist the English instructor only when necessary.

The next two days, 5/20 & 5/23, are full day classes with the Principles of Lean Mfg. class taught by OMEP. This last day reinforces what the attendees have previously learned in class and uses an interactive simulation to apply the Lean principles.

5/24

**Learning Tour at Nike IHM
Beaverton**

Time and Agenda: TBA

5/30

Memorial Day Holiday