

THE PERILS OF POSITIVE THINKING

By Estienne de Beer

Something bothered me about the teeth of the consultant who was sitting in front of me, on the other side of the helpdesk. I couldn't identify what it was immediately. I was at my bank's foreign exchange division, hoping to get some advice on an upcoming business trip. As the positive and friendly consultant was talking, I suddenly realized what seemed out of place for me. Embedded in his front tooth was the ultimate symbol of business success - a gold dollar sign! I struggled to concentrate on our conversation. I caught myself in forced contemplation and my curious mind was analyzing why he chose this unique form of expression. I was ambushed by the realization that it was because he was working in foreign exchange. Different strokes for different folks. Some committed corporate employees choose to personalize their car number plates with the company's name, but this consultant chose to add some bite to the bark. I interrogated myself in silence. Was this not taking it a bit too far? Was I a perplexed spectator of misdirected positive thinking?

I'm not sure what the right answer is, but I am convinced that this type of mindset can sometimes lead to eccentric behaviour, to say the least. The wheel starts buckling once we abandon common sense and basic business acumen in the process. Positive thinking without common sense is like operating your computer without anti-virus software. It causes illogical and unnecessary threats to one's career and business that could easily be avoided. Please don't get me wrong! The workplace needs more positive people than ever. No-one can deny the exciting impact that positive attitudes have on the outcome of our strategies and events. The problem is just that positive thinking on its own doesn't pay the bills nor grow market share. Someone once said that zeal without knowledge is deadly. Positive thinking without substance is nothing but a fairytale for adults. Overemphasizing positive thinking at the expense of other critical success factors will only lead to embarrassment and disappointment.

A whole industry has sprung up in recent times to teach us how to radiate a positive image. We get taught to dress professionally and how this will positively influence our companies, careers and credibility. Clients will view us in a new light and the business results will follow. Positive image consultants help us with our colour coding, rearrange our wardrobes and make sure that certain clothing items get the boot. Being in touch with our colours and making our ties and scarves work for us will positively sway opinions around us. We will also feel better about ourselves. To a certain extent this might be true, but what about the elegantly dressed executive who cannot rally her sales force to higher performance? What about the colour coordinated, smartly dressed financial broker who doesn't know the difference between life insurance and a pension fund? Do they perhaps spend too much time in front of the mirror and too little time growing their knowledge, products and people? A young accountant approached her retired mentor one day and asked very expectantly how she managed such a successful career. This answer was surprisingly brief: "Good decisions". In anticipation she launched the next question: "But how can I learn to make good decisions?" The wise mentor paused for a moment and replied: "Through experience!" Again the eager accountant asked: "But how do I gain experience?" Her mentor smiled understandingly: "Through bad decisions!"

Some of the ardent advocates of positive thinking with their new-age message of "I", "me" and "myself" are simply neglecting very important factors in the process. Very often, they do not take into account the importance of experience, teamwork and old-fashioned hard work across the span of a career. It is much easier and profitable to sell

instant solutions to the market place. The problem is just that people are not computers. A rapid reboot doesn't instantly prepare people for a lifetime of growth and success. A quick download from a memory stick doesn't build self-awareness nor instantly delete insecurity. A pair of trendy shoes with matching socks doesn't produce the performance required to get promoted to the next level. I don't know about you, but rather give me a team in denims and t-shirts who can do the job efficiently, caring for the customers and who are real and secure about themselves than people with very little substance. The old cliché still rings true: "don't judge a book by its cover!"

All of us will get discouraged some or other time at work. At times like these, we seek out the support of a trusted colleague or friend. This dejected situation usually unfolds in one of two scenarios. The ideal is when the other person truly listens and empathizes with you during this challenging time. You appreciate the chance to get the problem off your chest and leave the room, ready to face the world again. The second scenario involves the friend or colleague that is a single-minded positive thinker. The more that you try to verbalize the problem in order to feel better, the more you get interrupted with "positive solutions". The more you crave empathy, the more they inject you with the importance of positive thinking. It leaves you feeling even more dejected and riddled with guilt about your inability to think positively during this trying time. Interestingly enough this is not a new phenomenon. An ancient Hebrew proverb already described hundreds and hundreds of years back that this type of approach is like "one who takes off a garment on a cold day, or like vinegar on soda, is he who sings songs to a troubled heart."

Positive thinking on its own cannot and will never be a substitute for getting things done and achieving results. Positive thinking without application of knowledge and skill is nothing but wishful dreaming and fraught with the dangers of disillusionment. A penchant for action is a sure way to move ahead in the workplace. One of the greatest characteristics of all successful people is that they are forever action-oriented. Positive thinking in the absence of all the other factors that contribute to success will never be the magic bullet it is made out to be. And before I forget, the positive thinking consultant from my bank with the gold dollar smile made a positive impression on me, but unfortunately he couldn't solve my query...

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