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Positive Leadership: 30 Must-Have Traits and Skills

 08 APR 2019  COURTNEY ACKERMAN  5 COMMENTS

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If you're a leader in any sense

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of the word, you know that it's a difficult job. Leadership is about much more than giving orders, managing employees' time and making schedules, or providing annual performance reviews; it's a task that requires dedication and a wide range of skills.

Leading others can get messy and complicated, but it's a

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vital role—and a vital role to get *right*.

Read on to learn about how you can approach leadership in a positive, effective, and impactful way.

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What is Positive Leadership?

Positive leadership is an area of study within **positive psychology** concerning leadership styles, techniques, and behavior that can be classified as deviant—positively deviant.

Being positively deviant means that the style, technique,

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or behavior the leader engages falls outside of the normal range observed in leadership. Think of a bell curve of leadership behaviors, with negative behaviors on the left and positive behaviors on the right. Most leadership behaviors will fall somewhere within the middle, the thickest part of the bell curve. Bad behaviors will fall in the far left tail, while positive leadership behaviors fall in the far right tail.

We spend a lot of time talking about bad leadership, pointing out what not to do, and trying to get people to shift their behavior from the left side to the middle-right of the bell curve. Positive leadership's aim is to get leaders to shift their behavior from anywhere it may fall on this curve to the far right of the curve.

A Look at the Theory and Model

Positive leadership is a **catch-all term**, an umbrella under which several different leadership theories live.

The most well-known of these theories include:

- Authentic Leadership Development (ALD)
- Transformational Leadership
- Charismatic Leadership
- Servant Leadership
- Spiritual Leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005)

The models employed by these theories differ based on the unique assumptions and relationships in which the theory is grounded, but generally, they all include a few agreed-upon components:

- Positive leadership involves experiencing, modeling, and purposefully enhancing positive emotions.
- A positive leader is interested in his or her employees'

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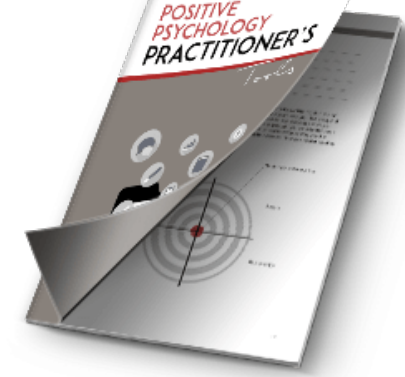
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development as well as the bottom line.

- High self-awareness, optimism, and personal integrity (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).



A Look at Positive Organizational Leadership

Positive organizational leadership is an area of focus within positive organizational psychology that generally takes a broader perspective on the subject, looking at how leaders influence the organization itself.

This subfield of positive leadership explores topics like positive deviance on an **organizational level**, organizational citizenship behaviors (behaviors that indicate loyalty, commitment, and a willingness to go above and beyond), change management (particularly positive-focused change management), and other high-level ways that positive leaders can impact an organization.

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Positive Leadership Styles

There are tons of positive leadership styles out there, and the exact number and description will depend on who you ask.

Ask leadership researchers Bruce Avolio or William Gardner and you'll learn about the popular theory of authentic leadership development. An authentic leadership style is characterized by four factors: **self-awareness**, relational transparency, internalized moral perspective (a sense of **ethics** and **integrity**), and balanced processing (being fair and open-minded; Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2007).

If you ask emotional intelligence expert **Daniel Goleman** or his colleagues, researchers Richard Boyatzis and

Annie McKee, you'll hear about four of them:

1. **Visionary** (or Authoritative) **Leaders** – they have an ambitious vision and they inspire others to pursue it.
2. **Coaching Leaders** – they know how to further development, and get the best out of those around them, and they usually do just that.
3. **Affiliative Leaders** – these leaders are well-versed in applying and enhancing positive affect in the workplace, and they can bring harmony and conflict resolution to a team.
4. **Consensus** (or Democratic) **Leaders** – they thrive on collaboration, bringing together a diverse range of viewpoints to gather information and make decisions (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002).

Talk to a number of organizational leaders and business executives and they'll tell you about Bass' transformational leadership style, which is characterized by:

- **Idealized influence:** the leader is liked and respected by their followers, and serve as a role model.
- **Inspirational motivation:** the leader motivates and inspires their followers.
- **Intellectual stimulation:** the leader promotes creativity and innovation through open-mindedness and non-threatening questioning of ideas.
- **Individualized consideration:** the leader treats each follower as a unique individual with unique strengths, weaknesses, and needs (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

You might also hear about **charismatic leadership**, a subtype of transformational leadership. In charismatic

leadership, the leader checks all four of the boxes outlined above but he or she is also very skilled in communicating with others, especially on a deeper level (Riggio, 2012).

Finally, one of the other popular styles of positive leadership you may hear about is **servant leadership**.

Servant leadership is defined as leadership that embodies three important factors:

- It empowers and develops people.
- It expresses humility, authenticity, interpersonal acceptance, and stewardship.
- It provides direction (van Dierendonck, 2010).

What Does the Research Say?

Although the research is not settled, **positive leadership** is generally linked to better outcomes than negative leadership styles or “plain old leadership” styles.

For example, transformational leadership has been found to contribute significantly to follower performance, job satisfaction, and extra effort expended (Molero, Cuadrado, Navas, & Morales, 2014). Further, servant leadership has been shown to enhance follower development, job satisfaction, and both follower and team performance (van Dierendonck, 2010).

We’ll look at some of the findings from research on positive leadership later in this piece, including ways to implement positive leadership tools and techniques.

6 Examples of Positive Leadership in Action

So what does positive leadership look like in action? It looks like leaders who care, who empower their employees, and who support their employees.

For example, a leader who cares will respond to a rare mistake from their most productive employee with concern and compassion rather than condemnation. A leader who cares will understand that we are all human and each and every one of us will make a mistake at some point. An effective positive leader will also understand that there is probably a reason behind the mistake, and she will talk to the employee to see if he or she is struggling with something that's not immediately obvious.

A leader who empowers his employees is one who gives them as much power and self-determination as possible. A good positive leader does not give orders or answers but provides the guidance and resources necessary for his employees to do their best work.

An empowering leader might delegate projects and large-scale tasks to staff, but allow them to choose how they will go about tackling them. He may also encourage them to choose their own training and development opportunities to ensure they are invested in their own growth.

Finally, a positive leader supports her employees. This entails more than just seeming supportive; being a truly supportive leader requires acting as a backup for your employees and being there for them when they need it the most. This might look like acting as a buffer between his employees and a micromanaging middle manager, or it may manifest as speaking up for an employee in a meeting when he or she is struggling.

The Key Traits and Skills of a Positive Leader

To be a positive leader, there are some important skills and traits that you can develop or improve. Although this

is nowhere near a comprehensive list, a few of the most vital of these traits and skills include:

- **Positive affect**
- **Mindfulness**
- **Hope**
- **Confidence**
- **Self-esteem**
- **Self-efficacy**
- Locus of control
- Emotional stability (Carleton, Barling, & Trivisonno, 2018; Hannah, Woolfolk, & Lord, 2009).

The Role of Resilience in Leadership

In addition to the traits and skills listed above, **resilience** plays a particularly vital role in **leadership**.

Think about how often something goes wrong at work or some unexpected problem crops up. The leaders that have to deal with these issues (and sometimes widespread fallout over such issues) are well-served by a **solid foundation** of resilience; without it, they would crumble at the first sign of trouble.

Resilient leaders are simply better leaders; not only can they handle a crisis better, but they are also generally more socially competent, have better problem-solving skills, and have a better sense of purpose and future (Luthans, 2002).

The Work of Kim Cameron

Kim Cameron is one of the biggest names in the positive leadership realm—you might even call him a “founding father” of positive leadership—and his work has proven to be a significant source of knowledge about positive

leadership.

For example, Cameron's description of positive leadership has been widely used to define the boundaries of the subfield; the three connotations of positive leadership according to Cameron are:

1. It facilitates positively deviant (extraordinarily positive) performance.
2. It features an affirmative bias, meaning that it is oriented towards the positive (strengths instead of weaknesses).
3. It fosters the good in people (e.g., virtuousness, moral integrity; Cameron, 2008).

This simple but comprehensive description of positive leadership perfectly captures what sets it apart from all other types of leadership. Cameron's work has made positive leadership more accessible to everyone as well as adding valuable findings to the literature.

Learn more about Cameron's work in [positive leadership](#).

Implementing Positive Psychology into Leadership

It's easy to say (and believe) that implementing the principles of positive psychology into leadership is a good idea, but it can be difficult to know how to actually implement it.

Below are some practical ways to put the theories into practice.

Positive vs. Negative Leadership

The difference between **positive and negative** leadership is fairly simple once you strip away the technical terms and academic language: positive leadership encourages, empowers, and energizes people, whereas negative leadership drains them, discourages them, and demoralizes them.

At the most basic level, you can determine whether a leadership behavior is positive or negative (or neutral) by asking yourself these questions:

1. Does it encourage or discourage followers?
2. Does it empower or demoralize followers?
3. Does it energize or drain followers?

If the answer is the former (encourage, empower, energize), it is likely a behavior at home in positive leadership. If the answer is the latter (discourage, demoralize, drain), it's probably a negative leadership behavior.

7 Behaviors a Leader Needs to be Effective

To be an effective positive leader, there are seven behaviors that you may want to incorporate into your toolbox:

1. **Self-awareness** (asking for feedback)
2. Relational transparency (having a clear leadership philosophy)
3. Balanced processing (using active listening)
4. Ethical behavior (following through on what you say you will do)
5. **Trustworthiness** (treating others with respect and keeping your word)
6. Supportiveness (giving appreciation and support to

followers)

7. Empowerment (giving your followers freedom and choice; Wong & Cummings, 2009).

Implement these seven positive behaviors in your day-to-day leadership and you will see a marked improvement in follower performance, organizational climate, and morale!

9 Tips on How to Best Model Positive Leadership Behavior

To model positive behavior for your followers, don't just think about the behaviors themselves, think about the **values behind** them. For example, if you go around telling your employees about the importance of collaboration and assigning them to teams, but never work as part of a team yourself, your employees will probably not feel encouraged and inspired.

To ensure you are modeling good leadership behavior, keep these tips in mind:

1. Model your personal values behind the behaviors, not just the behaviors themselves.
2. Promote self-determination in your followers by showing them how it's done.
3. Encourage **positive emotions** and positive social exchanges in the workplace.
4. Set high expectations, and live up to them.
5. Make sure you deliver on the commitments you make.
6. Value your followers (and others) and be sure to nurture **relationships** as well as skills and professional development.
7. Work well with others, and promote (and engage in) teamwork and collaboration.
8. Try to resolve the inevitable conflicts that will arise in

the workplace as quickly and effectively as possible.

9. Be open about your desire and willingness to help, support, and develop others (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Mariama-Arthur, 2014; Woolley, Caza, & Levy, 2011).

6 Ways to Deliver Positive Feedback

Leaders generally find that delivering positive feedback is much easier than delivering negative feedback, but that doesn't mean you can kick back and relax; there are right and wrong ways to do it.

Here are some basic tips on how to deliver positive feedback in the most effective way:

1. Try to identify with the recipient of your feedback and imagine how he or she would feel if they were to receive this feedback.
2. Explain your purpose in giving feedback; is it to simply congratulate them, to help them see where they should focus their efforts, or perhaps to encourage them to build on their existing skills?
3. Focus on the future and help your follower figure out their next steps.
4. Make sure to keep a positive facial expression; avoid expressing judgment and remember to smile and nod!
5. Keep your tone friendly and uplifting.
6. Keep your focus on the positive and avoid slipping into the negative (Porath, 2016).

A Look at Positive Leadership in Project Management

Positive leadership is applicable in all scenarios where leaders exist, and we can always find ways to improve our leadership abilities and become more effective in our

leadership abilities. Project management is one area where such exploration is actively happening; as many of the world's organizations have shifted to a project management perspective, there is greater demand for integrating positive leadership into project management.

What does positive leadership look like in project management? Take it from Frank P. Saladis, an expert in project management and leadership:

“Positive leadership is about establishing relationships, understanding other points of view, not always having the answer (or pretending to have the right answer), and creating an environment of creativity and innovation. The truly effective and positive leader is an observer, a mentor, a change agent, and someone who enables others to succeed” (2015).

Positive leaders are not only more effective as project managers, but they also have the opportunity to create a culture of positive leadership in their project staff.

Essential Leadership Skills Needed in Childcare

Although we tend to think of leadership in organizations and offices, there is a need for leadership in all walks of life. One important area for leadership development and implementation is in childcare and early **childhood education**. Not only is leadership needed for effective care and education, but it is also an excellent role to model for young children.

There is a lot of overlap in the skills needed for more traditional leadership and leadership in childcare, but there are a few skills, abilities, and practices that are unique to or especially important in this area:

1. Identifying and articulating a vision.
2. Ensuring shared understandings, meanings, and goals.
3. Effective communication.
4. Encouraging reflection.
5. Monitoring and assessing practice.
6. Commitment to ongoing professional development.
7. Distributive leadership.
8. Building a learning community and team culture.
9. Encouraging and facilitating genuine family and community partnerships.
0. Striking the balance between leading and managing (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2007, as referenced in Lewis & Hill, 2012).

These skills allow leaders to engage in vital activities like:

- Making children's learning, development and wellbeing the core focus
- Addressing children's rights and honoring diversity of all kinds in positive, constructive, and courageous ways
- Building respectful, trusting, nurturing, and equitable relationships
- Building respectful and genuine connections with families and communities
- Collaboratively developing a culture of ethical inquiry
- Collaboratively creating a community of learners (Lewis & Hill, 2012)

Training Options

There are many opportunities to get some training in

positive leadership. Aside from these 50+ **opportunities**, you can also look into training options from these organizations, among others:

- Positive Psychology Training UK (**Website**)
- Jon Gordon's Power of Positive Leadership Training (more on this later) (**Website**)
- Center for the Advancement of Well-Being at George Mason University (**Website**)
- Performance Management Consultants Workshop/Course (**Website**)

Recommended Articles

For further reading of the academic variety, give these fundamental positive leadership articles a try:

- Authentic leadership development: Getting to the root of positive forms of leadership by Bruce J. Avolio and William L. Gardner (**Access here**)
- Positive leadership: Meaning and application across cultures by Carolyn M. Youssef-Morgan and Fred Luthans (**Access here**)
- Positive global leadership by Carolyn M. Youssef and Fred Luthans (**Access here**)
- Psychological capital: A positive resource for combating employee stress and turnover by James B. Avey, Fred Luthans, and Susan M. Jensen (not publicly available, but check your local library!) (**Access here**)
- Positive leadership and employee well-being by Kevin Kelloway, Heidi Weigand, Margaret McKee, and Hari Das (you can request this article from the authors **here**) (**Access here**)

Recommended Books

If you're looking for a bit lighter reading but you have enough time to dedicate to a whole book, you might find the books below helpful.

The Power of Positive Leadership: How and Why Positive Leaders Transform Teams and Organizations and Change the World

This book from popular author and leadership guru Jon Gordon explores all the ways that being a positive leader makes a positive impact. He defines what positive leadership is (and what it is not), outlines some of the research behind the effectiveness of positive leadership, and describes how you can implement positive leadership in your workplace.

Find it on [Amazon](#).

Positive Leadership: Strategies for Extraordinary Performance

Renowned researcher Kim Cameron provides an excellent introduction to positive leadership in this book. He describes what makes positive leadership so positive — what he terms “*positively deviant performance*” — and notes some of the results that you can expect from such leadership, including impressive gains in productivity and effectiveness.

In this book, you'll learn that positive leaders emphasize strengths over weaknesses, foster virtuous values and actions, encourage positive goals, and enable their followers to find meaning in their work.

Find it on [Amazon](#).

Practicing Positive Leadership: Tools and Techniques That Create Extraordinary Results

Another entry from Kim Cameron, this book goes into more detail on how to actually implement the strategies

and styles from the previous book. The four strategies include: creating a positive organizational climate, building and maintaining positive relationships, fostering positive communication, and encouraging positive meaning in the workplace.

The tactics and techniques in this book are well-described and backed up by meaningful research in the positive leadership literature.

Find it on [Amazon](#).

Positive Academic Leadership

This book was written by author and coach Jeffrey L. Buller, and has earned the praise of multiple experts in positive leadership (including Kim Cameron) for its practical tools, easy-to-understand tips, and lighthearted style. Although Buller cites his sources, providing evidence from research in neuroscience, psychology, management, and organizational behavior—among other disciplines—he does it with a sense of humor and he incorporates real-world examples to make his tactics and tools easy to implement.

Find it on [Amazon](#).

Positive Leadership: The Game Changer at Work

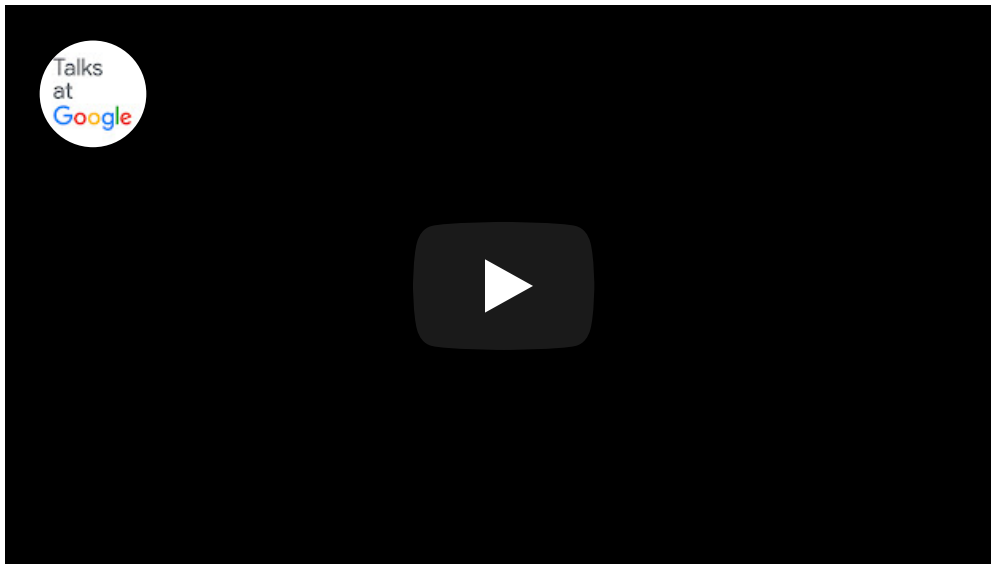
This book from author and executive coach Steve Gladis is another impressively robust entry on the list, with plenty of sources to back up its point. It's split into two sections: "The Concept" covers the research behind positive leadership and why you should care about it, while "The Story" shares a tale of a successful business executive who was brought low in life, even becoming homeless, and his experience climbing back up out of that pit.

Find it on [Amazon](#).

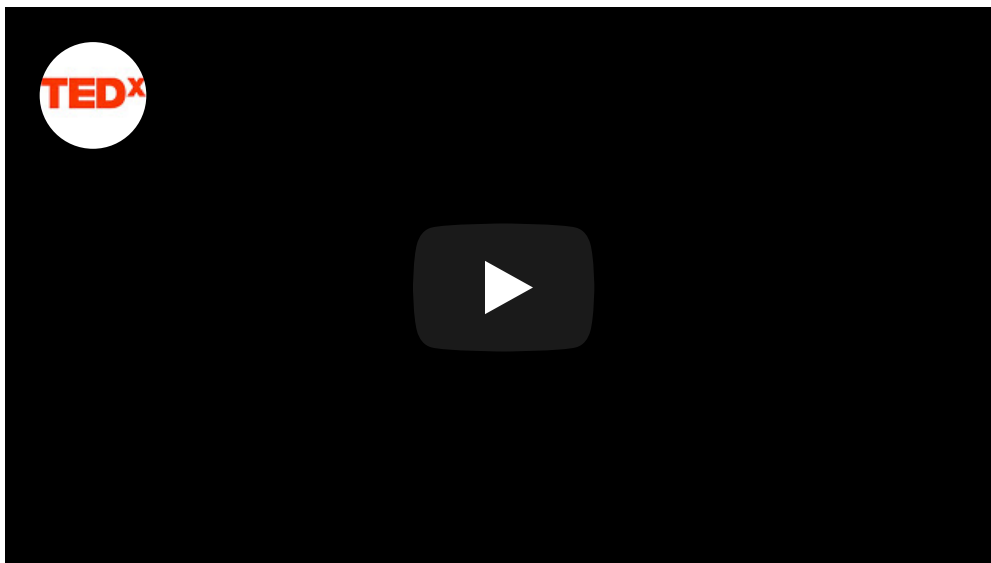
5 YouTube Videos

If you don't have time to read a book on positive leadership, don't worry! There are some excellent videos that can give you at least a basic understanding of positive leadership and related topics. Here are a few to help you get started:

Kim Cameron's Talk at Google – Positive Leadership: Strategies for Extraordinary Performance

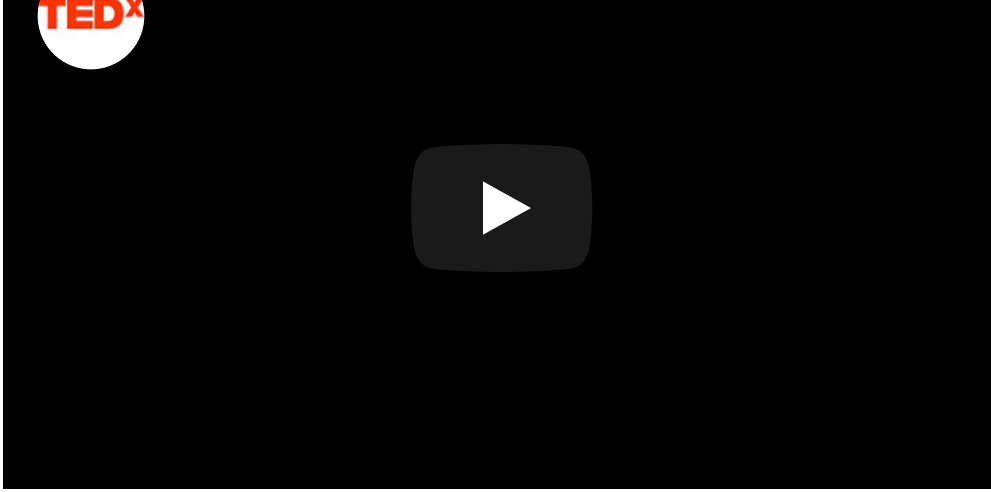


Lars Sudmann's Great Leadership Starts with Self-Leadership TEDx Talk at UCLouvain

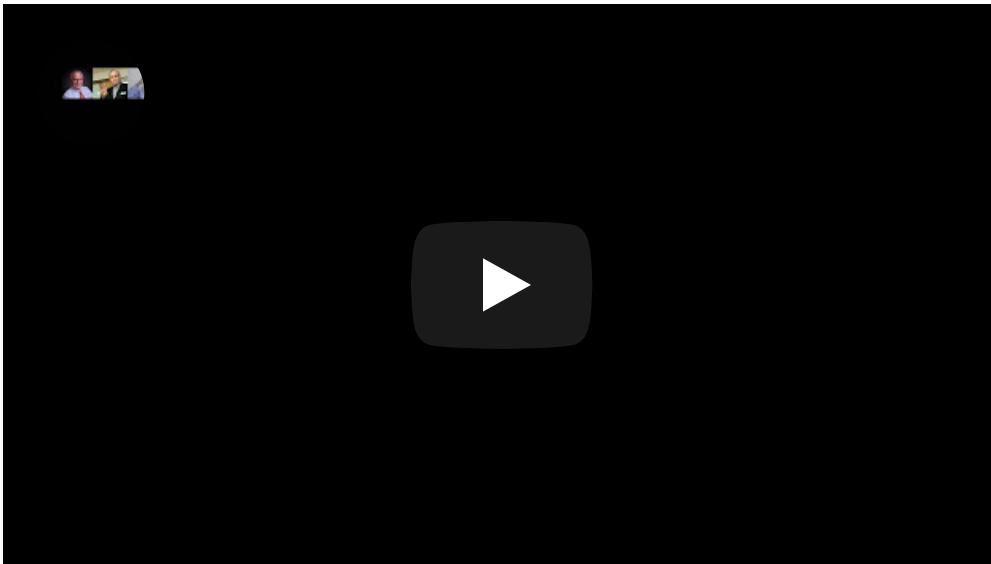


Tom Thibodeau's Positive Power of Servant Leadership TEDx Talk at Gustabus Adolphus College

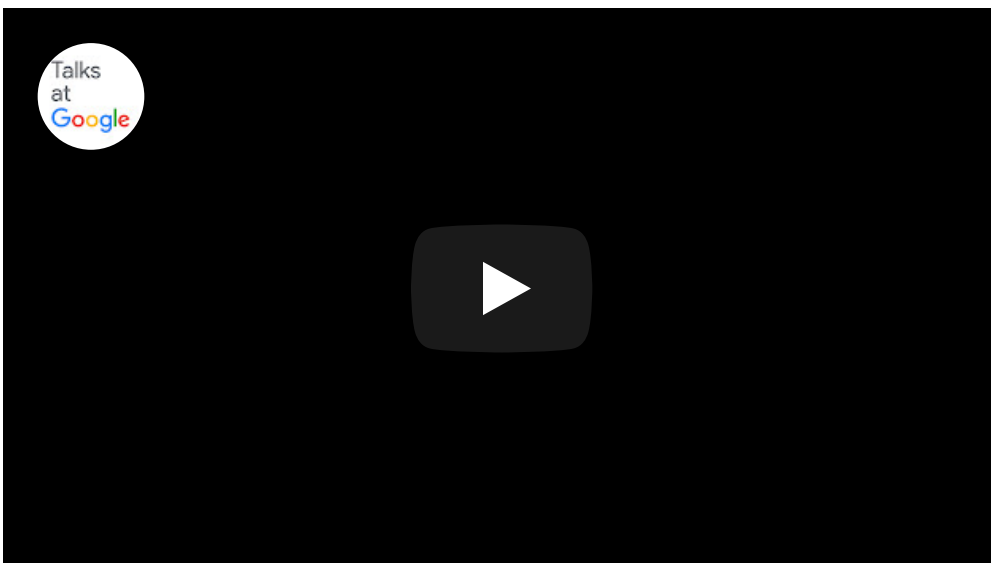




Steve Gladis' Positive Leadership Introduction



Simon Sinek's Why Good Leaders Make You Feel Safe TED Talk



9 Quotes on the Topic

Need a good quote on leadership? Check out these 9 quotes.

“Leaders establish trust with candor, transparency, and credit.”

Jack Welch

“Outstanding leaders go out of their way to boost the self-esteem of their personnel. If people believe in themselves, it’s amazing what they can accomplish.”

Sam Walton

“Leadership is the ability to guide others without force into a direction or decision that leaves them still feeling empowered and accomplished.”

Lisa Cash Hanson

“If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work, and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea.”

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

“You don’t lead by pointing and telling people some place to go. You lead by going to that place and making a case.”

Ken Kesey

“Leaders are made, they are not born. They

are made by hard effort, which is the price which all of us must pay to achieve any goal that is worthwhile.”

Vince Lombardi

“Average leaders raise the bar on themselves; good leaders raise the bar for others; great leaders inspire others to raise their own bar.”

Orrin Woodward

“Leadership is about making others better as a result of your presence and making sure that impact lasts in your absence.”

Sheryl Sanberg

“As a leader, it’s a major responsibility on your shoulders to practice the behavior you want others to follow.”

Himanshu Bhatia

A Take-Home Message

I hope this piece gave you a good primer in positive leadership. If you feel you know a little bit more about how to be a positive leader than you did at the beginning of the piece, I’ve done my job!

What are your thoughts on positive leadership? Do you have any examples you’d like to share? How do you

incorporate positive leadership techniques into your personal style? Let us know in the comments section below.

Thanks for reading, and happy leading!

References

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About the Author

Courtney Ackerman is a graduate of the positive organizational psychology and evaluation program at Claremont Graduate University. She is currently working as a researcher for the State of California and her professional interests include survey research, well-being in the workplace, and compassion. When she's not gleefully crafting survey reminders, she loves spending time with her dogs, visiting wine country, and curling up in front of the fireplace with a good book or video game.

5 Comments



Dr.Rishad Buhari *April 18, 2019 at 4:33 am* [Reply](#)

Wonderful article than you very much



Randall Braddock *April 17, 2019 at 5:43 pm* [Reply](#)

Excellent information



Dr. Teresa Nazario *April 17, 2019 at 2:43 pm* [Reply](#)

GRACIAS, thanks for sharing this useful information. From San Juan, Puerto Rico



Fred Kwan *April 17, 2019 at 6:41 am* [Reply](#)

Useful!



Darcy Sisson *April 16, 2019 at 2:48 pm* [Reply](#)

What a wonderful article and I love the references and explanations given on all the many types of leadership! The books and ted talks are wonderful! Thank you!

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