

Leading with emotions - Positive leadership with the power of optimism

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ABSTRACT

Emotions play a central role in leadership, and leadership itself has increasingly become a matter of building relationships. Positive Leadership integrates scientifically grounded insights from Positive Psychology with a leadership style rooted in trust, meaning, appreciation, and optimism.

This presentation explores how emotions can be used effectively in leadership to foster motivation, engagement, and psychological safety within teams. At its essence, optimism serves as a powerful force – an inner mindset that enhances clarity, builds resilience, and empowers decisive action.

Participants will gain practical insights into cultivating a leadership culture that is both positive and emotionally intelligent – and discover why, particularly in challenging times, leading with empathy and focusing on strengths is crucial for success.

INTRODUCTION

Leadership is often misunderstood. Many people still associate it with seniority or job titles – as if being in charge automatically makes someone a leader. But as Simon Sinek pointed out, “Leadership has nothing to do with rank.”

And it's true. We've all experienced people at the top of organizations who give orders, make decisions, and have authority – but don't actually inspire trust. We might follow them because we have to, but not because we want to.

On the other hand, there are people lower down in the hierarchy, with no formal title or power, who naturally influence and motivate those around them. Why? Because leadership isn't about control. It's about connection, trust, and how we make others feel.

That brings us to a different kind of leadership – one that's gaining more attention for all the right reasons: Positive Leadership.

In today's organizations, leaders are no longer just expected to manage performance or hit KPIs. They're expected to create environments where people can thrive – emotionally, mentally, and relationally. And how leaders show up emotionally matters more than ever.

By now, the idea that emotions shape leadership probably feels intuitive. But what makes this concept truly powerful is that it isn't just backed by theory — it's supported by solid, measurable outcomes.

Research from respected institutions like Harvard Business Review, Gallup, and Forbes confirms that Positive Leadership creates tangible business results. We're not just talking about a better atmosphere or happier teams (although those matter, too) — we're talking about key metrics like productivity, innovation, employee retention, and overall performance.

In fact, the numbers tell a very clear story:

Organizations that embrace emotionally intelligent, optimistic, and people-centered leadership don't just feel better — they perform better.

The figure 1 below highlights some of the most striking findings from recent research:



Figure 1: Effects of positive leadership (source: Great Place to Work®)

Seeing these results side by side makes it clear: Positive Leadership is more than a style — it's a strategic advantage that can significantly influence organizational success.

So what's driving all of this? At the heart of Positive Leadership lies one core element: **optimism**. Not blind positivity. Not fake enthusiasm. But a grounded belief that no matter the challenge, there's always a way forward.

Optimism in leadership means choosing hope — especially when it's hard. It means showing resilience, building trust, and encouraging people to keep going even when things are uncertain.

And ultimately, Positive Leadership is not just about techniques or tools. It's a mindset. And it starts with how we show up — every single day.

POSITIVE LEADERSHIP: A SHIFT IN FOCUS

Positive Leadership is not just a theory. It's a response to how work — and the world — is changing. In modern organizations, we're learning that it's not enough to manage tasks. People want meaning, connection, and purpose.

This approach to leadership is heavily influenced by the field of Positive Psychology, developed by Martin Seligman. Rather than focusing on problems and deficits, it asks: What helps people thrive? What creates lasting motivation and well-being?

When applied to leadership, these ideas become incredibly practical. Positive leaders focus on:

- Strength instead of weakness
- Energy instead of control
- Purpose instead of just performance

And most importantly: they lead with emotion, not in spite of it.

THE ROLE OF OPTIMISM

When we hear the word "optimism" we often think of cheerfulness or a positive attitude. But in the context of leadership, it's something more powerful and grounded.

Optimism means choosing to believe in possibility – even in the face of uncertainty. It's about staying hopeful, not helpless. It's about seeing problems clearly, but not getting stuck in them.

Winston Churchill once put it perfectly:

"An optimist sees an opportunity in every calamity; a pessimist sees a calamity in every opportunity."

This kind of mindset is especially important for leaders. Because when times get tough, people look to their leaders for emotional guidance. If the leader panics, the team loses confidence. But if the leader stays focused, hopeful, and constructive – that energy spreads.

Even playful quotes like this one from Pippi Langstrumpf make the point:

"I've never tried that before, so I'm absolutely sure I can do it!"

It sounds simple, maybe even silly – but it reflects a mindset that's open to learning and growth. And that's exactly the kind of mindset that encourages creativity, risk-taking, and innovation.

A CAT ON THE STAIRS: A SIMPLE TEST OF PERSPECTIVE

Let's take a moment to look at something a little unexpected – but surprisingly revealing.

There's a well-known optical illusion of a cat on a staircase. You may have seen it before. It's just a cat – but the question is: Is the cat going up... or coming down?

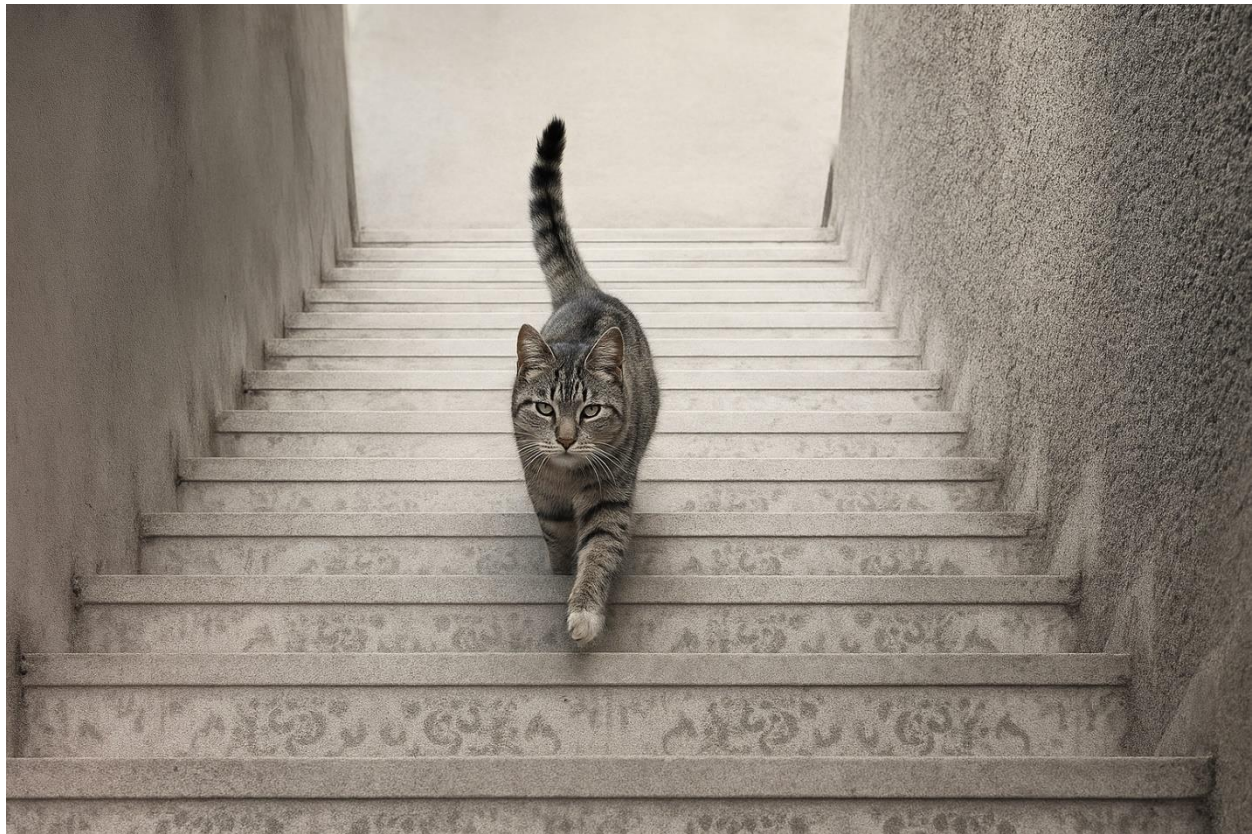


Figure 2: Optical illusion – Cat on a staircase

What's interesting about this image is not the cat – but what it reveals about us. There's no right or wrong answer. The picture is designed to be ambiguous.

But here's where it gets fascinating:

- Studies have shown that people who tend to see the cat going up are more likely to have an optimistic mindset.
- Those who see it going down often lean more toward pessimism or risk-aversion.

Again, this isn't about being right. It's about how our mindset shapes the way we interpret even the simplest things – like an image.

And in leadership, that mindset shows up in much bigger ways:

- How we handle pressure
- How we talk about change
- How we respond to failure
- And how we inspire others to move forward

In short, optimism is more than a personality trait. It's a leadership resource. And the best leaders don't just have it – they model it.

They show that even when things are unclear, they're still worth exploring. Even when a step feels uncertain, it might just be heading up.

HOW WE SEE THE WORLD SHAPES HOW WE LEAD

Let's consider a visual example. There's a well-known optical illusion that shows a cat on a staircase (figure 2). Some people see it going up, others see it going down.

What's interesting is that the way we interpret the image often reflects our general outlook. Studies suggest that people who tend to see the cat going up are more likely to have an optimistic mindset. Those who see it going down often lean more toward pessimism.

It's not that one view is correct. What matters is that our mindset subtly shapes how we interpret the world around us – and by extension, how we lead.

This brings us to a simple but powerful truth: ***Leadership is emotional.***

It's not just about logic or strategy. We lead with who we are. That includes how we manage ourselves and how we connect with others on an emotional level.

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE: THE FOUNDATION OF POSITIVE LEADERSHIP

If emotion plays such a central role in leadership, then Emotional Intelligence (EI) becomes one of the most essential leadership skills.

EI is about understanding and working with emotions – our own and those of others. It involves:

- Recognizing, understanding & managing one's own and others' emotions
- Key to self-regulation and effective interpersonal communication
- Critical for leadership, teamwork & customer relations
- Enables empathetic leadership, conflict resolution & a positive work culture

One framework, developed by Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso, breaks EI into four main abilities:

1. Perceiving emotions
 - noticing feelings through facial expressions, voice, and body language
2. Using emotions
 - allowing emotions to guide our thoughts and priorities

3. Understanding emotions
 - recognizing emotional patterns and predicting how emotions might change
4. Managing emotions
 - calming ourselves, motivating others, and staying balanced in conflict

Another popular model, introduced by Daniel Goleman, focuses more on how EI shows up in real-world leadership. His model includes:

1. Self-awareness
 - Recognizing one's emotions and their impact
 - Accurate self-assessment and self-confidence
2. Self-regulation
 - Managing emotions, impulses, and stress
 - Adaptability and trustworthiness
3. Motivation
 - Inner drive to achieve goals
 - Commitment, initiative, and optimism
4. Empathy
 - Understanding others' emotions and perspectives
 - Sensitivity to others' needs and feelings
5. Social skills
 - Building and managing relationships effectively
 - Communication, influence, conflict management, teamwork

Emotional Intelligence gives leaders the ability to stay grounded, connect meaningfully, and create environments where people feel safe, seen, and motivated. But it's only one piece of a much larger picture.

Because if we zoom out, we see that many leadership models – whether grounded in psychology, ethics, or organizational development – all point toward the same truth: The most effective leaders don't just manage tasks - they activate human potential.

And over time, several approaches have emerged that give structure to this kind of leadership.

DIFFERENT PATH, SAME PURPOSE: FIVE APPROACHES TO POSITIVE LEADERSHIP

Positive Leadership isn't a single method or one-size-fits-all framework. In fact, it shows up across several well-established leadership theories – each with its own emphasis, language, and tools.

But they all share one thing. A focus on strengths, growth, and emotional energy – instead of fear, control, or compliance.

Here's a comparison of five widely used models that reflect the spirit of Positive Leadership:

Model	Care Focus	Founder	Key Feature
PERMA	Well-being and human flourishing	Martin Seligman (Positive Psychology)	Science-based model of thriving and resilience
Strength-Based	Developing talents and potential	Donald Clifton (Gallup)	Coaching-oriented, individual growth
Positive Leadership	Strengths, energy, and meaning	Kim Cameron (University of Michigan)	Focus on high-performing, virtuous cultures
Servant Leadership	Serving others before self-interest	Robert Greenleaf (1970s)	Ethical, people-centered leadership
Transformational	Inspiring change and vision	James MacGregor Burns / Bass	Charismatic, values-driven leadership

Table 1: Comparison of five common positive leadership models

Rather than competing with each other, these models complement one another – offering leaders different ways to strengthen culture, purpose, and performance.

In the next section, we'll take a closer look at one of the most practical and research-based of these models: The PERMA Model from Positive Psychology.

THE PERMA MODEL AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR LEADERS

Out of all the frameworks connected to Positive Leadership, the PERMA Model – developed by psychologist Martin Seligman – stands out for its clarity and scientific foundation. It was originally designed to explore what helps people flourish in life. But over time, it's become highly relevant to leadership, team culture, and performance.

So what does PERMA stand for?

P – Positive Emotions

E – Engagement

R – Relationships

M – Meaning

A – Accomplishment

Let's take a closer look at each – and why they matter in leadership.

P – POSITIVE EMOTIONS

These include feelings like joy, gratitude, curiosity, pride, or hope. They're not just "nice-to-haves" – they play a major role in building psychological safety, creativity, and resilience.

In leadership: When leaders express appreciation, celebrate small wins, or model a calm, optimistic tone during challenges, it lifts emotional energy across the whole team.

Even short, genuine moments of positivity can make people feel valued – and that fuels motivation.

E – ENGAGEMENT

Engagement is that state of flow – when someone is fully absorbed in a task, using their strengths, and losing track of time. It's the opposite of disengagement or burnout.

In leadership: The more people get to use their strengths, the more they lean into their work. Leaders can boost engagement by giving people autonomy, matching roles to strengths, and eliminating unnecessary friction.

Ask your team: "When did time last fly by for you at work?" That's engagement – and it's a powerful signal of where they thrive.

R – RELATIONSHIPS

Seligman's research (and many studies since) shows that high-quality relationships are the strongest predictor of long-term well-being. Humans are wired for connection – and this doesn't stop at the office door.

In leadership: Trust, empathy, and listening are not "soft skills" – they're the foundation of loyalty and performance.

Teams where people feel seen and safe are more open, more collaborative, and more willing to take creative risks. "People don't leave jobs – they leave relationships."

M – MEANING

People want to feel that their work matters – that it contributes to something beyond themselves. Without meaning, even well-paid work can feel empty. With meaning, even hard work can feel worth it.

In leadership: Meaning starts with clarity. Great leaders help their teams connect daily tasks to a bigger "why".

This doesn't always require a grand mission. It can be as simple as reminding people who their work helps, or what it enables. Purpose isn't a poster – it's a conversation.

A – ACCOMPLISHMENT

Progress, mastery, and achieving goals give us a sense of growth. When people feel like they're moving forward – not just treading water – they stay motivated.

In leadership: This means recognizing effort, not just outcomes. Celebrating progress is one of the most effective – and overlooked – leadership tools.

A quick “Well done. That moved us forward.” can go a long way.

WHY PERMA MATTERS IN LEADERSHIP

When leaders build their team culture around these five elements, they're not just boosting morale – they're boosting performance, retention, and innovation.

PERMA isn't about being overly positive or avoiding problems. It's about creating an environment where people want to contribute, grow, and stay. And that's exactly what Positive Leadership is about.

CONCLUSION: LEADING WITH EMOTIONS – AND WITH INTENTIONS

We've looked at a range of ideas throughout this paper – from emotional intelligence and optimism to positive leadership frameworks that help people grow and thrive at work. But when you take a step back, one thing becomes clear. Leadership isn't just about what you do – it's about how you show up. And most of all, it's about how you make people feel.

In today's workplaces, where things move fast and pressure is high, emotions aren't a side note. They're right at the center of how we lead, how we connect, and how we build trust. Leaders who understand this – and work with it consciously – are the ones who create environments where people can truly do their best work.

A PERSONAL TAKEAWAY

If I had to leave you with just one personal reflection, it would be this:

- Don't make decisions when you're sad.
- Don't make promises when you're happy.
- And don't respond when you're angry.

It sounds simple – and it is – but it's also incredibly hard to follow in the moment.

Still, these three short lines have helped me take a breath when emotions are high. They've reminded me that how I respond matters more than how I react. And that kind of emotional self-awareness is, in many ways, the foundation of good leadership.

Because the truth is: People don't always remember the details of what we said in a meeting. They might forget the exact project plan, the deadlines, or the numbers we discussed.

But they will remember how we made them feel.

And that brings me to the quote I'd like to end on – one that captures the heart of everything we've talked about:

“People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” - Maya Angelou.

Let that be the legacy of your leadership.

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