

Reproduced with permission. Published August 13, 2019. Copyright 2019 The Bureau of National Affairs, Inc. 800-372-1033. For further use, please visit <http://www.bna.com/copyright-permission-request/>

Bloomberg Law[®]

INSIGHT: Positivity and Negativity—Keeping an Even Keel for Legal Professionals

By Krista Logelin



Posted August 13, 2019

Positivity predicts healthier life outcomes, better work product, innovation, and good relationships, but in the practice of law, negativity is prevalent. Krista Logelin, director of employee well-being at Morgan Lewis, explains challenges in balancing them and how to cultivate positivity.

When discussing the value of positivity, I find the best place to start is actually with the negative.

To borrow an analogy from leading Positive Psychology researcher, Barbara Fredrickson, think of a sailboat, which has two main components: the sails and the keel. The sails allow the boat to catch wind and move while the heavy keel keeps the boat from tipping over. Without one, a sailor renders the other useless.

In our analogy, positivity is the sail and negativity is the keel. The way both components are vitally important to a functional sailboat, so too are both positive and negative emotion important to a functional person. The positivity of your sails gives you fuel while the heavy negativity of your keel keeps you on track. The point is, negativity isn't all bad.

What makes the difference is how much negative emotion you have in relation to positive emotion.

Positive Psychology tells us negative emotions are much more powerful than positive ones. The weight of a negative emotion is significantly more impactful than the lightness of positivity. Therefore, in order to achieve an emotional balance, we need to outweigh each negative emotion with a few positive ones. It's no coincidence that a sailboat's mast, which holds up the sails, is several times longer than its keel.

This balance is what we call the positivity ratio. While the exact number of positive emotions needed to balance out a negative one is not exact, it is something in the neighborhood of three positive for every one negative.

Why does creating this balance matter? Positivity is a means towards a better end. It predicts things like healthier life outcomes, better work product, innovation, and good relationships.

Flexible Optimism

But wait a minute. What about in the legal profession? Are negativity and pessimism not virtues in law? Predictors of success? Things you are *taught* in law school?

This is all true, and that tension is one of the unique challenges of bringing the science of well-being to this industry. By encouraging more positivity, I by no means intend to undermine the importance of the analytical, questioning, and examining mindsets that make for a successful lawyer and legal professional.

What I am instead suggesting is that we (and professionals in other risk-mitigating roles, such as project managers, safety engineers and pilots) create an awareness around when that negative mindset is and is not beneficial.

Where to start? Ask yourself these questions: "When does negativity help me? When does it get in my way?" By building self-awareness of your mindset and its effects on your experience in different aspects of your life, you can better use your negativity for good and turn it off when it is no longer useful. This concept is often referred to as "flexible optimism."

So, lawyers and legal professionals, own and appreciate your negativity when it's helping you be effective in your job. But also be aware that you will likely have to do more positivity-generating than the average person in order to keep your ratio balanced.

Cultivating Positivity

Looking to cultivate more positivity for yourself? Start with a gratitude journal. (Did you just roll your eyes? Stick with me.) Gratitude exercises have been shown to be some of the most impactful and long-lasting positive interventions. Each day, think of/ write down/ share with your partner three things that have gone well. The cumulative effect of these small yet consistent gratitudes can have an enormous impact on your ability to thrive.

The effects of positivity don't end with you. In fact, you are just the beginning. Consider the ripple of a raindrop in the waters that you are sailing: The small occurrence of a drop hitting the water creates a ripple that effects the space around it. Positivity is the mindset version of that raindrop. You have a choice in every interaction you're involved with. When negativity isn't providing benefit, why not choose to create a ripple of positivity?

This column does not necessarily reflect the opinion of The Bureau of National Affairs, Inc. or its owners.

Author Information

[Krista Logelin](#) serves as Morgan Lewis's director of employee wellbeing. In this global position, she works to design and implement a custom wellbeing curriculum as part of the firm's employee engagement efforts.