Strike the right balance in 2010

Expert on people
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By Virginia Merritt

Can lessons from positive psychology help us get our message to staff right as we face the New Year?

So here we are in 2010 - a new year and a new decade - and most of us are glad to see the back of 2009. But as leaders, how do we set the right tone for the year ahead? We want to be truthful and help our people to understand the realities of the difficult economic environment, but we also want to shield them from the impact of the continued uncertainty. We can easily find ourselves being falsely positive in our attempts to restore confidence in the future.

After a long haul and probably a succession of cuts in people, costs and other resources, it feels like it's time to end the starvation diet. We want to start building up strength again. We want to start thinking positively, and focus that positive energy on achieving profitable growth again.

So I've been reflecting on how we can best do that, while maintaining integrity about what's really going on. I wonder if we can perhaps apply the lessons of positive psychology in the workplace. We need to be aware of its limitations – it's hardly a panacea for overcoming all the bad things that befall us, as Barbara Ehrenreich's recent book 'Smile or Die: How positive thinking fooled America and the World' makes plain and clear. But are there some useful lessons we can learn?

What is positive psychology? Martin Seligman, its founder, describes it as a scientific study of optimal human functioning [that] aims to discover and promote the factors that allow individuals and communities to thrive. It's basically the science of happiness, and addresses the very real and important need to help people thrive in challenging environments. It therefore addresses questions such as: what is right about this person rather than what is wrong... what works rather than what doesn't?

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