

CREATING THE **HIGH** PERFORMANCE **WORK PLACE**

IT'S NOT
COMPLICATED
TO DEVELOP A
**CULTURE OF
COMMITMENT**



SUE BINGHAM & BOB DUSIN

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THE HIGH PERFORMANCE CULTURE



CHAPTER 4

Lead With Positive Assumptions

The New Line

Jeff slumped down in his chair and stared at his phone. He was going to have to call his son and tell him he would miss another baseball game. As he reached for the phone, his boss, Jason, walked in. Three months ago, Jason had set the deadline for completing the new production line installation. It was now five weeks away.

"I wanted to let you know as soon as I could," Jason said. "That big Hartford order came through. We need to have that line up in two weeks." Jason was the operations manager at Wilson Plastics, a midsize manufacturer of plastic toys. Jeff was the plant manager.

"Two weeks?" Jeff exclaimed. "I wasn't sure we could make the original schedule." Jason and Jeff had worked together for eight years, and Jeff was familiar with project schedules being shortened.

"I know," Jason said as he headed for the door. "But we have to make this happen."

A bit shell-shocked after Jason's announcement, Jeff sat a few minutes before giving us a call. Here at HPWP Group, as soon as Bob answered the phone, he recognized Jeff's voice. We had been working with Wilson Plastics for six months, helping them implement processes that would create a higher-performing work environment.

Jeff sounded exhausted as he told Bob what was happening. Bob said he'd meet with him first thing the next day.

"Late night?" Bob asked as he entered Jeff's office.

"That's putting it mildly," Jeff groaned. "I don't know how we'll make this new deadline. I'm just not sure the crew is up to it."

Bob looked at the whiteboard on the wall near Jeff's desk. "Are those your employees?"

Jeff nodded.

"So, what's the problem?"

"Well, Mary and Sal always need to leave right at 4:00. Butch and Phil and Doug just don't have the background or desire to offer more than they already do. Bud and Renee barely do enough to keep their jobs."

"And the rest?" Bob asked.

Jeff pointed at the first name and began to go down the list. "No passion. No desire. Doesn't care about the company. Doesn't want to make decisions. Avoids any kind of responsibili—"

Bob interrupted him, pointing. "What about these two?"

"She's lazy, and he's lazier." Jeff deadpanned. "Sometimes I wish I could just start with an entirely new group. If I had people who were really enthusiastic and committed to getting this line installed, we might be able to get somewhere."

Bob went on. "How much have you told your team about the project—about the new production line?"

Jeff's frustration was growing. "I've told them what they need to know. But most of them don't want to know much. And that's not the way we've done things around here. Look, they're production workers. They're not supposed to be doing my job."

Bob looked at Jeff. "It sounds like you don't think they're really capable. Why is that?"

Jeff is a perfect example of how negative assumptions about coworkers can sabotage both the work environment and the ability to accomplish what we hope to.

Why is it that we tend to have more negative assumptions about people than positive? Is it because most of what we see and read in the news is negative? Is it because some of us have jobs that require us to deal with the small part of the population that lies, cheats, and steals? Have we personally had bad experiences when we were duped and now look at most strangers with a jaundiced eye? It could be any of these reasons, and we'll talk more about that in chapter 6. But first, let's talk about the impact our assumptions have on the way leaders behave.

Beliefs Drive Behavior

In the 1950s, Douglas McGregor, a professor at MIT Sloan School of Management, developed a philosophical view of people based on two opposing perceptions about how people behave in the workplace. His studies showed that leaders' underlying assumptions about people drive these approaches. Theory X is a command-and-control management style based on the perception that people have an inherent dislike for work and will avoid it whenever possible; they must be coerced, controlled, directed, or threatened with punishment to get them to achieve objectives. People prefer to be directed, do not want responsibility, and have little or no ambition. Based on these perceptions, a command-and-control style would appear to be the most effective.

But McGregor also offered Theory Y, the opposing belief, that posits for most people, work is as natural as play and rest; people will exercise self-direction if committed to its objectives; creativity, ingenuity, and

imagination are widely distributed among the population; and people have potential.

Generally, traditionally managed organizations operate from negative assumptions. Jeff personified this attitude, which seemed to match the overall philosophy of his company (“... that’s not how we’ve done things around here.”)

When leaders proceed from negative assumptions, they believe that people, by nature:

- Lack integrity
- Are fundamentally lazy and desire to work as little as possible
- Avoid responsibility
- Are not interested in achievement
- Are incapable of directing their own behavior
- Are indifferent to the organization needs
- Prefer to be directed by others
- Avoid making decisions
- Are not very bright

While no one believes this is true of everyone, experiences with five-percenters often cause management to paint an entire employee group with this broad brush.

Don’t the majority of people deserve positive assumptions? When leaders begin with positive assumptions, they believe that people:

- Have integrity
- Work hard toward objectives to which they are committed

- Assume responsibility within the scope of those commitments
- Desire to achieve
- Are capable of directing their own behavior
- Want the organization to succeed
- Are not passive or submissive
- Will make decisions within the scope of their commitments
- Are bright

Assumptions about People Drive Our Behavior

There's a marked difference between behavior and attitude. Judging someone's attitude is a subjective determination. Yet if we believe someone has a bad attitude, we are usually able to describe that in terms of behaviors: doesn't smile, states what won't work versus what can work, ignores requests for help, bad-mouths the company to others, etc.

Strike the word *attitude* from your vocabulary when you are describing others. Instead, describe the *behaviors* that led you to reach your conclusion regarding someone's attitude. It's also important to describe behaviors when talking about such concepts as trust. What behaviors demonstrate trust?

On four separate sheets of paper with the labels below, make a few notes to describe what *behaviors* demonstrate the assumptions management and employees may have about each other, both positive and negative.

Start with management's negative assumptions about employees. In the second box describe employee behaviors that reflect negative assumptions and perceptions they may have about management.

Management: Negative Behaviors

Negative Behavior

Negative Behavior

Negative Behavior

Negative Behavior

Negative Behavior

Negative Behavior

Negative Behavior

Employees: Negative Behaviors

Negative Behavior

Negative Behavior

Negative Behavior

Negative Behavior

Negative Behavior

Negative Behavior

Negative Behavior

Next, make a few notes in the first box below to describe what *behaviors* management exhibits that demonstrate *positive assumptions* about employees. Finish by describing in the second box *behaviors* employees would exhibit if they have positive assumptions and perceptions about management.

Management: Positive Behaviors

Positive Behavior

Positive Behavior

Positive Behavior

Positive Behavior

Positive Behavior

Positive Behavior

Positive Behavior

Employees: Positive Behaviors

Positive Behavior

Positive Behavior

Positive Behavior

Positive Behavior

Positive Behavior

Positive Behavior

Positive Behavior

Your lists probably contain many of the behaviors below, which are common in many workplaces.

Management: Negative Behaviors

Micromanage
 Create and enforce lots of rules
 Lock stuff up
 Minimize responsibility
 Talk down to employees
 Restrict access
 Look for who to blame
 Ignore them
 Don't ask for input or ideas
 Withhold information
 Have timeclocks for hourly workers
 Communicate low expectations

Employees: Negative Behaviors

Talk badly about the company
 Hide mistakes
 Do the minimum
 Don't come to work
 Quit
 Say, "It's not my job"
 Come in late
 Display low energy, no passion
 Don't volunteer
 Resist change
 Gossip
 Show no accountability

Look at the **Management: Negative Behaviors** list here and the one you created. When employees see and feel these behaviors, how do you suppose they will react? They will display the behaviors you have listed under **Employee: Negative Behaviors**. But it doesn't just stop there.

Now, what happens when management sees these behaviors in employees? Because management had negative assumptions from the start, they see their assumptions have now been *proven*. They are now facts, and management will display even more of the behaviors in the first list. The more they practice these negative behaviors, the stronger the negative reaction from the employees. This continues in a downward spiral of negative behaviors that has become prevalent in traditional work environments.

Now let's look at it from the other perspective. Look at **Management: Positive Behaviors** and **Employees: Positive Behaviors**.

Management: Positive Behaviors

Challenge people
 Celebrate successes
 Eliminate silly behavior rules
 Make tools and supplies easily accessible
 Broaden all jobs—expand responsibility
 Share information
 Look for the cause of a problem, not who's
 guilty
 Challenge thinking and creativity
 Lots of two-way communication
 Brag about employee accomplishments
 Communicate high expectations

Employees: Positive Behaviors

Brag about the company
 Recruit others
 Give 110 percent
 Offer ideas
 Solve problems
 Train new employees
 Support change
 Are loyal/don't leave
 Welcome visitors/customers
 Volunteer for extra projects
 Look for opportunities to engage

When leadership embraces the behaviors shown in your positive assumptions list, what reaction will that elicit in the employees? You will see employee actions and conduct in line with those in the corresponding list. And when leadership sees that level of performance, they will enthusiastically exhibit more of the positive behaviors that they originally assumed. And this spiral goes in the direction most leaders want their spirals to go—up.

Assumptions versus Facts

It's not a negative assumption if experience has demonstrated that a failure to meet expectations has happened before, consistently, on the part of the same person or group. There's still a need for problem solving, but at least you know the problem doesn't lie in part with you.

The Creation of Silos

Have you ever been frustrated when another work group, department, shift, or division hasn't delivered as planned and that has negatively

impacted you or your team's performance? What assumptions did you make about the other group's failure to meet your expectations? Did you and others find yourself thinking poorly of the other team in general? This is just one of several ways silos develop, but negative assumptions further this dysfunctional organization factor.

Having worked with many large corporations, it's become clear that some of the fiercest and most bitter competition exists under the same roof. Whether it's operations versus sales, operations versus maintenance, quality versus production, or Human Resources versus everybody, boundaries are drawn, blame is cast, and decisions are rationalized.

Assumptions drive our behavior. If one group has positive assumptions about another, the response to a failed action would logically be to find out what happened and assist in solving the problem. However, if the same thing happens and one group has negative assumptions about the other, the response is often to share frustrations with those on the same team and document the other group's failure. Not only does problem-solving not occur, but walls between the groups become stronger.

Silos can also be created by incompatible objectives, competing bonuses, and management territorialism. These causes may be more difficult to overcome. Challenging ourselves and others to have positive assumptions, however, is an easy organizational habit to develop. It drives cross-functional problem-solving and creates a significant decrease in non-value-added conflict.

Not the Chicken or the Egg

A leader's job is to create a working environment that promotes passion, loyalty, maximum effort, and pride in the company. This

cannot be accomplished without first operating based on positive assumptions. When companies see waste, poor quality, compliance instead of commitment, strong resistance to change, people doing the minimum, turnover, and absenteeism, this reflects management beliefs and behaviors.

In the book *Maverick*, visionary leader Ricardo Semler describes how his family's traditional company transformed into one that defied virtually all closely held standard management practices.¹ His career at Semler has been covered by the news media worldwide. Below is an excerpt from a 1989 *Harvard Business Review* article that is as relevant today as it was then.

“We hire adults, and then we treat them like adults. Think about that. Outside the factory, workers are men and women who elect governments, serve in the army, lead community projects, raise and educate family, and make decisions every day about the future. Friends solicit their advice. Salespeople court them. Children and grandchildren look up to them for their wisdom and experience. But the moment they walk into the factory, the company transforms them into adolescents.”²

Most people who work in organizations are good people who own homes, raise children, coach children's sports teams, and contribute to their churches and communities. Why should they be treated as anything less than responsible adults?

Operating from positive assumptions drives people to problem-solve versus blame. It relieves anger and frustration, promotes teamwork,

¹ Semler, Ricardo. *Maverick!: The Success behind the World's Most Unusual Workplace*. London : Arrow, 1994.

² Semler, Ricardo. “Managing Without Managers.” *Harvard Business Review*. August 01, 2014. <https://hbr.org/1989/09/managing-without-managers>.

results in solutions, and promotes trust and respect. It eliminates non-value-added, time-consuming CYA activities and fosters commitment versus compliance—all critical organizational behaviors for high performance. And the best part of it is that it costs nothing and can be entirely controlled by leaders. As Jeff experienced in the opening story, negative assumptions elicit stress and become an obstacle to higher performance.

The New Line, Part Two

Jeff had no answer when Bob asked why he assumed his employees weren't capable.

"Look, let's start here," Bob continued. "Who are three of your best employees?"

Jeff thought for a moment. "Probably Tim, Dan, and Angie."

Bob suggested that Jeff get Tim and Dan and Angie together that afternoon. Jeff would describe the project to them and tell them about the concerns that he had and what he was struggling with. He would emphasize how critical it was that the project be completed in two weeks, and he would challenge them to get others involved.

"But if I do that," Jeff said, "it will look like they have to figure this out, like I'm having them do my job. And even if they don't think that, my boss will."

"Let's say that's true," Bob said. "Isn't he concerned about getting this up and running on time, and seeing that his employees are all doing their best? So, if that happens and you're their leader, won't he think you're doing a *good job*?"

Jeff thought about that, and then despite his concerns, agreed to give the approach a try.

The next morning, Bob asked Jeff about the meeting. "It wasn't what I expected," Jeff said. He went on to describe the input he'd received when he laid out the blueprints. Dan had worked through a similar installation at his previous job six years ago, and Angie used to install conveyor systems. The employees continued to talk and to brainstorm, and they volunteered to stay late or work weekends to get the project completed on time. Tim was going to get four other employees together to create an action team to produce a day-by-day schedule to keep the accelerated project on track.

"But now I just need to take all of this...stuff," he looked around his office, "and put my new plan together and get this going."

"What about them? What about your people?" Bob asked.

"What do you mean? You wanted me to start with the assumption that they cared, and I did. I've got their ideas, and now I need to move forward."

Bob suggested to Jeff that he should continue to talk with them, involve them in the project, and challenge them. The meeting was evidence that they were capable and wanted to contribute. Jeff disagreed and again expressed his thoughts that it would appear he wasn't doing his job or didn't know how.

Bob continued to challenge Jeff. "What will be the effect on your team when they see that you don't want them involved in completing this project when you have those negative assumptions? Will they be more or less likely to showcase their abilities?"

"I don't know," Jeff said, searching for an answer. "I hope it shows them that I know what I'm doing. I mean, I'm using some of their ideas." He paused. "But I can see the message that would send, especially to the rest of the team."

The next day Jeff called another meeting with the entire group. He had clearly thought about Bob's question and gave the team time to discuss ideas. He recorded their thoughts and suggestions on flipcharts. Soon, one of the packaging operators, Blaine, spoke up. "We still have to reconfigure the access from the

new line to the loading bay.” The team was silent for a few seconds. Jeff nodded. “I don’t think I had thought much about that. I’ve just been focusing on getting the line going. Can I get three volunteers to get together after this meeting to start laying out the details for that?” The meeting continued for another forty-five minutes. Afterward, Jeff made his way back to his office, flipcharts in hand. “I think we’re going to make it,” he said quietly to himself.

That Friday afternoon, Bob got a call from Jeff. They had finished the job, and Jeff was excited and relieved. They still had to fix a processor software glitch and recalibrate one of the packaging units, but nothing that would keep production from starting on the new line. And he was amazed at the response he got from his people. “Once Tim and Dan and Angie got behind it, others started to help out too. I didn’t know that they cared so much about this place, and about helping me. They’re certainly more than just production workers.” Jeff also mentioned that his boss, Jason, was very pleased with his hard work and effort to meet the deadline. “I told him it wasn’t me. It was the entire team. He said he agreed, but he was sure I had something to do with that.”

Once Jeff shifted his assumptions about his team—started seeing them as conscientious and capable

people who cared about the company and who were doing their best—and treated them accordingly based on that knowledge, the outcomes were startling. Not only was the production line up and running on time, but Jeff's relationships with his employees, and their feelings of satisfaction with their own jobs, were also transformed.

Even the setbacks they encountered were solved by the team in a spirit of cooperation rather than blame. And Jeff's stress level—as well as his standing with his own boss—was better than he thought possible.

Four months later, Bob stopped by to see Jeff. He wasn't in his office, so Bob asked Kerry, a production team member working nearby, if he had seen Jeff. Kerry said he had left to get to his son's baseball game.

"He took off early?" Bob asked, a little surprised.

"Yeah, he's been making it to most of Zach's games lately. There are enough of us here to cover until he gets back."

"Gets back?" Bob asked.

"Yeah, he's coming back in later. We had another big order come in just this morning, and we all have to put our heads together to figure out how to get it done."