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WHAT MAKES PEOPLE FEEL UPBEAT AT WORK

By Maria Konnikova July 30, 2016



How can an employer create an upbeat workplace? By not telling people to be positive.

Illustration by Wren McDonald

Creating a positive work environment sounds like a noble aspiration for both businesses and the people who work for them. No one ever says that they want to work in a negative environment, after all, or even in a blasé one. And yet, in late April, the National Labor Relations Board issued a ruling against T-Mobile for that

very aspiration: the telecommunications company had run afoul of the law by including a provision in its employee handbook requiring workers “to maintain a positive work environment in a manner that is conducive to effective working relationships.”

There was, of course, a perfectly sound legal reason for this seemingly odd decision. The ruling was the culmination of a series of charges that had been brought against the company in the course of several years, during which the N.L.R.B. struck down multiple T-Mobile policies that appeared to hamper union organization and other, more benign efforts to discuss employment practices. The wording in the employee manual regarding the “positive work environment,” the board held, was “ambiguous and vague” enough to have a chilling effect on the right of employees to speak freely and to organize, rights guaranteed under the National Labor Relations Act. Because the “positive work environment” was never explicitly described, workers would have to err on the side of over-sensitivity—steering clear of “potentially controversial but protected communication in the workplace,” as the ruling put it—lest they be punished.

The law has its own imperatives, but if you took the same work-environment mandate and put it through a different intellectual grinder—in this case, social science—would you come up with a different result? If we agree that a positive environment is a worthy goal, we still have to agree on how, exactly, to foster such an environment. Research certainly suggests that people thrive in positive and supportive spaces: they are happy and satisfied; they are motivated and optimistic, setting higher goals and working harder and longer; they are creative; they are less likely to burn out and more likely to stick with a company or project. But can you actually create positivity by mandating it?

“It sounds really nice. It sounds like they’re creating a civil workplace,” Alicia Grandey, an organizational psychologist at Penn State who studies emotional labor, told me when I asked her about positive-environment provisions such as T-Mobile’s. But Grandey cautions that it is incredibly difficult to impose positivity from the top and actually exert a positive effect. “When anything feels forced or externally

controlled, it doesn't tend to be as beneficial as when it's coming from the self," she said. "The irony is, when you're trying to get people to do something positive, you can't do it. Once it's required, it's fake and forced." What you create instead is a negative backlash. "It feels like Big Brother."

Worrying about whether or not you're in violation of a feel-good policy and constantly monitoring yourself for slipups takes a mental toll. More than two decades of research suggests that thought suppression, or trying to stifle your initial impulses in favor of something else, can result in mental strain and may also impair other types of thinking—memory, self-control, problem solving, motivation, perceptiveness. When we are actively monitoring ourselves, our mental energy for other things suffers. The result is not only a less-than-positive work environment but also workers who are less-than-optimally productive. In other words, it's bad business.

Such behavior-limiting regulations may inhibit thinking and sap initiative and drive. In 2004, the psychologists Myeong-Gu Seo, Lisa Feldman Barrett, and Jean Bartunek posited a connection between employees' emotional experience in the workplace and their resulting levels of motivation. According to their model, our feelings affect behavior along a continuum between, on one end, something they term "generativeness" (that is, how likely you are to explore something that may end up having a good result, if doing so involves risk) and, on the other, "defensiveness" (when you are focussed on avoiding negative outcomes, forgoing opportunities in the process). It's a concept akin to what the Columbia University psychologist Tory Higgins calls promotion and prevention—that is, the decision to work toward something or to direct your energy toward avoiding something else. When we are constantly monitoring our behavior, we tend to be on guard and act defensively. We tend to prevent rather than to promote.

Even more salient, Grandey argues, is the feeling of inauthenticity that enforced emotional displays create. In her research, she has found that putting on an emotional mask at work—conforming to a certain image that doesn't necessarily correspond to how you feel or who you are—drains you of energy that can only be

replenished if you then have an opportunity to be yourself. “You have to be able to be real,” she told me. “If we’re expecting people to be super happy and positive to people you’re expected to be positive with as part of your job”—to smile and act upbeat with clients and customers—“if you can’t turn around and be real with co-workers, you are amplifying emotional labor. And you have a real problem on your hands.”

Everyone wants a civil workplace, but demanding that your workers be positive may be an uncivil thing to do. It may be especially so when it comes to broad and sweeping pronouncements, as in T-Mobile’s case. Last year, a group of researchers decided to explore whether there were *any* policies aimed at emotional management in a workplace that would actually succeed. To answer that question, they had three hundred and eighty-two employees, from a number of retail stores, rate the degree of explicitness of the rules governing their emotional behavior at work: on the one end are vague, ambiguous admonitions such as “be positive,” without any guidelines; on the other end are explicit rules that govern when you should smile, what you should say, and the like. The researchers then observed how motivated the employees were and how customers responded to them.

What they found was an inverted-U relationship between rule explicitness and effectiveness: if rules were overly vague or overly prescriptive, they had a demotivating effect. (Customers, too, were disappointed, giving both employees and their shopping experiences lower ratings.) Where the rules generally had their intended effect was in the moderate range: when there were some explicit guidelines, but flexibility in how they were to be implemented. A second study, of a hundred and seventy-five salespeople, found the relationship to hold for sales numbers as well: sales were higher in environments with moderate rules, while environments with too few or too many rules suffered. The highest performers of all were those in a moderately regulated environment who also felt a high degree of autonomy, as determined by their responses to a single statement: “My job permits me to decide on my own how to go about doing the work.” In other words, people want to feel in control. They want to be afforded respect and to determine on their own how to act; it is this autonomy that helps foster emotional positivity. Grandey suggests we are all still a bit like our two-year-old selves: tell a toddler exactly what to do and what not

to do, and she balks. Let her figure it out within a certain framework, and she is happy.

So it turns out that enforcing a generalized positivity can create problems in the realm of psychological motivation as well as in the legal realm. The issue of how to encourage workplace positivity raises another problem, which is the possibility of suppressing freedom of expression. In asking for a “positive” environment, you can promote your own agenda and reprimand anyone who doesn’t fit with your concept of positivity at that particular moment. In T-Mobile’s case, enforcing a positive environment might have been a way of preventing a very specific type of speech and action, namely anything that was critical of the employer or trying to promote employee rights. Similar dynamics have arisen in non-corporate settings. In recent years, we’ve seen a trend toward prescribing what someone can or can’t say in order to protect a subjective notion of how it makes someone else feel. This is most obviously happening on college campuses, in the guise of microaggressions, triggers, and their ilk; in some cases, the effects of checking one’s speech can be to reasonably protect members of the community, but in others the fear of offense can create anxiety and can even become a kind of censorship. T-Mobile’s positive-environment clause is, essentially, a grownup version of the “safe space” that is only safe for the people who’ve created it, not for those with contrary opinions.

And yet the ruling itself gives us cause to be truly positive: after all, the N.L.R.B. decided against T-Mobile. One can only hope—positively, optimistically hope—that the decision presages a broader understanding of a deeper truth: we all deserve a positive environment, but that very positivity is at risk when we try to force it rather than fostering it by example.



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