



Happiness@TheSpeedofLife Newsletter Edition 68: You Can't Change Other People

1,774 words of content including **seven steps** that will help you create a more positive, powerful presence. Approximate reading time required: **7.1** minutes. And isn't your Happiness worth it?

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Welcome to my e-newsletter, which focuses on defining and applying the Principles of Happiness and Positive Emotion in your life and work.

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I. YOU CAN'T CHANGE OTHER PEOPLE

"You can't change other people. You can only change how you respond to them." I first heard this life lesson from a mentor when I was a newly-minted supervisor 30 years ago. At the time I was struggling with how to manage several very difficult personalities on my team. What I learned in that important conversation with Tiona has served me in many, many life situations.

People are who they are, and you can't change that. Yet how much time do you spend trying? If you're like most people, a lot. And you probably find that your efforts, like mine, lead to feelings of anxiety, resentment, maybe anger, and sometimes even guilt. And frustration, lots of that. Because what's the matter with you, that you can't "help" them see the "right" way to see the situation, or the "right" way to behave.

There's nothing wrong with you – you just need to shift your focus from them back to yourself. E.g., What story are you telling yourself? What emotional state are you bringing to the conversation? What is your habitual reaction to how they speak or behave? What would you rather be doing in the conversation?

A story to illustrate: Last week I attended a business-networking event where I met several new and interesting people. One of them, Patrick, is upbeat and full of energy, and we immediately fell into a spirited conversation. We are both into self-improvement and believe in the power of Positive, so we discovered much we had in common.

At one point, Pat spoke of a situation where he's having problems remaining positive. He owns a small business that employs a dozen people and for which he is the primary rainmaker/sales person. He loves his work – most of the time. His primary contact at the company's largest customer is a very aggressive (and sometimes almost nasty) manager who constantly seeks to provoke his "opponent" in every conversation. From experience, Pat believes that this client interprets any sign of weakness as a signal to "go in for blood and finish the kill." Pat figured that

going eye-to-eye with this guy was the only way to survive – so when the client pushes, he pushes back. The tactic seems to work, but Pat feels drained by encounters, and dislikes having to behave that way.

“So,” he asked me, “how can I influence him to change?” I smiled. Then I offered the same advice that began this article: *You can’t change other people, you can only change how you respond to them.*

The story Pat’s telling himself is, “I must stand up to this guy – that’s the only way I can succeed.” Thus he’s approaching every meeting in a mood of intimidation mixed with determination, and his habitual reaction has been to match aggression with aggression, which makes every conversation a battle in which he must hold his ground.

“What would you rather be doing in the conversation?” I asked. Pat said he’d like to get the business but without feeling like he’s been in a fight. So I showed him two simple practices that may help him to succeed in a different way.

First, the verbal skill of Yes, And... This is the foundational language skill we see in Improvisational acting, where the goal is to embrace what comes at you, then build on it to keep the action going. **Yes, And** is the opposite of **Yes, But**. Rather than trying to push back on everything this client says, try Accepting it (the Yes) and then Building on what he says (the And...). In other words, let it be a conversation rather than an argument; and notice what happens.

I also taught Pat a quick physical skill to help him shift his presence in the conversation. Pat’s instinctual reaction to his client’s aggression is to Resist. The way this shows up in his body is that he plants both feet, squares his shoulders, and leans forward – sort of like a lineman in US-style football.

The part that works here is his footing – both he and his client need to feel that Solidity. But by always facing off with the client, Pat is constantly “taking a hit,” or absorbing all that negative energy, which is why he feels tired.

So we worked to combine Flexibility with Solidity. I had Pat keep his feet solidly planted, and pull one foot back just a few inches. Then I had him pivot slightly at the waist so that he faced me at an angle. This small shift allows him to deflect the hit, or watch it pass, rather than taking it on the chest.

This physical shift can allow Pat to embody the spirit of Yes, And... as well as support an emotional shift from aggression (solid and inflexible) to assertive (solid yet flexible). If Pat changes how HE shows up in the conversation, the conversational dynamic will shift even if the other person remains as stubborn as before. And hopefully Pat can emerge from his next negotiation with a contract AND his energy intact!

Do This For Yourself!

Is there someone in your personal or professional life with whom you wish to have a different (aka better) relationship? Work through these steps to create a new response for yourself.



1. **What story are you telling yourself about that other person?** e.g. Joe *always* does this... or Chris *never* does that...
2. **What emotional state does that invoke in you, even before you start?** When you acknowledge your emotion, you give yourself more power to change it.
3. **What is your habitual reaction to how they speak or behave?** Do you shrink, tense up, get quiet, turn sarcastic, push back, panic?
4. **What would you rather be doing in the conversation?** Use your power to choose. Name the feeling you'd like to hold when you are in relationship with that person – in other words, how do you want to feel when you are around them? Confident? Caring? Loving? Valued? Accepting? Calm?
5. **What body posture would match that feeling?** How would you stand, sit, or breathe? Would you be leaning forward, or back? Where would your center of gravity land?
6. **Practice the new posture and the new story** for awhile, in non-stressful situations, to help your system get used to it.
7. **Then try it in the real conversation, and notice what happens when YOU show up in a different way!**

Remember: you are half of every conversation; so if you shift, so will that next conversation.

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Anyone can make the decision to be happy when they PRACTICE it every day. Why not post a copy of the 13 Principles on your workstation wall or on your refrigerator? You can download a 1-page summary here: <http://www.theexecutivehappinesscoach.com/happiness/philosophies.cfm>. Choose Happiness.

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## II. IN THE WORKPLACE: IS IT THEM OR YOU?

Pat's story came directly from the workplace, and I'm sure many of you also have someone in your work world who "challenges" you such that you avoid conversation or, when you do talk with them, you feel frustrated, upset, or drained.

If someone is not doing their job or their behavior is actually dysfunctional, sometimes you do need to get the other person to change. But in most situations, you can change the dynamic by taking responsibility back to yourself. Much of leadership is about INFLUENCING others, and one of the most powerful ways to do that is to show up in a positive and powerful way in every conversation.

**Remember: Leadership is not about a title.** Anyone can be a leader who eschews being the "victim" and instead focuses on what they Can do and what is Possible. A true leader takes responsibility to make things happen and exerts a positive influence – and in the end, that is the best path to creating change in others!

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## III. FROM THE INBOX

1. **In last month's edition, my wife appeared as guest columnist** and her byline read: *Cheryl Smith, CPA, is a wife, mother, and tax accountant. She lives in Cleveland, Ohio, with her terminally happy husband and two unnamed goldfish.* Several people wrote me asking about



those poor, unnamed goldfish. One person even suggested having a naming contest.

**Here's the truth about the fish:** These were carnival goldfish that were supposed to die within a month, like all the others our kids had ever brought home. They were unnamed so we'd avoid attachment - but these turned out to be very healthy goldfish. In fact, it was seven years ago when our youngest brought them home... and he just graduated from college! We're afraid if we name them, they will be cursed.

**So unnamed they will remain... and now you know the rest of the story!**

2. Another email related to the topic itself, [Applied Happiness](#). Gerald wrote:

*Hi Jim. We met at a talk you gave last year. I read your newsletters and wonder how one actually walks around feeling happy. Seems that most of the time I have either no feelings or some anxious feelings. Very seldom anything on the positive side even when I'm doing "fun" things it seems like just an activity. It's almost like I have a self limiter inside that won't let me feel anything on the upside. Have you heard of this?*

**Gary, your experience is not uncommon, the sort of "no feelings" about things.** Because humans are emotional creatures, the reality is that you are ALWAYS in some emotional state. But in today's world of high speed and sensory overload, there is often just TOO MUCH coming at us! So our defense systems kick in to protect us, helping reduce the overwhelm to a tolerable "numbness." Unfortunately that autonomic response also smoothes out the rest of our emotions, so even joy and happiness can feel flat. It's like having your vocal range limited from several octaves to just a few notes.

**To re-calibrate that self-limiter on the upside you will need to gradually re-open your awareness of what's going on around you.** One of the most powerful exercises to do that is to keep a gratitude journal. Every day, write down 3 things you're grateful from the past 24 hours (three things you considered blessings/good fortune, etc). Try not to repeat stuff daily – stretch your awareness to include even the smallest things.

**It can feel like quite a challenge at first, but as you do it more you will notice your positive emotional "muscles" getting stronger.** Do this for 30 days, and I promise you'll notice an expansion across your entire range of emotional space. I hope this is helpful! J

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#### IV. OUR STUFF, ETC

- **My 11<sup>th</sup> annual Summer Reading List has been getting rave reviews.** Grab your Kindle, iPad, iPod, library card or credit card, and get ready to download, buy, or borrow some fabulous new (and old) titles. Go to [http://www.theexecutivehappinesscoach.com/resources/2010\\_Books.cfm](http://www.theexecutivehappinesscoach.com/resources/2010_Books.cfm) or visit my home page and look for the link. Then head out to your backyard or the beach to listen or read and escape to another world for awhile. No obligation -- this is just my way of giving back.
- **Over 110 practices for building your Positive Emotional muscles, plus dozens of practices specifically for the workplace:** [Happiness At The Speed of Life: 13 Powerful Strategies for Finding Happiness at Home and on the Job.](#)



