

Learning: The power of positivity

The power of a positive attitude: It's been heralded as a key to success in many areas of life, from learning to athletics to just about any profession you can imagine. But is there any evidence that positivity affects results or is it mostly mumbo jumbo?



In reality, it's difficult to separate a person's attitude from other factors that can affect performance. For example, a major league baseball player may have an incredibly positive attitude about hitting a baseball, but that could be simply because he's really great at it.

The same question comes up with learning. A positive attitude has long been believed to directly affect learning achievement. It's easy to envision how a negative attitude can derail a learning experience, but can a positive one actually improve results? And if so, how?

The research

Researchers from Stanford University recently uncovered how impactful a positive attitude can be. And the study didn't produce fuzzy or touchy-feely conclusions. In fact, the researchers present some pretty solid evidence – one of the first glimpses into the neuroscience behind positivity and learning.



The study looked at how students' feelings about math might shape their performance on a math-related challenge. The subjects were all given a survey about their attitude towards math and their self-perceived ability. They were also given a questionnaire designed to capture student demographics, IQ and working-memory capacity.

Subjects were then given a math assessment to measure their knowledge and problem-solving abilities. After analyzing the results, the researchers found that a positive attitude contributed to high performance in math even after statistically controlling for all other factors, including IQ.

"Based on our data, the unique contribution of positive attitude to math achievement is as large as the contribution from IQ," stated the head researcher [emphasis supplied].

But why?

There could be many explanations for why a positive attitude might lead to better results, so the researchers dug deeper. Specifically, they wanted to find out if anything significant was happening in the brains of those positive high performers.

As a follow up, the researchers asked subjects to solve math problems while in an MRI scanner so their brain activity could be monitored while engaging in the learning process. What they found was groundbreaking: For the first time, scientists found a link in the brain between positivity and achievement.

The results showed that a positive attitude was connected to greater activity in the hippocampus area of the brain – an area that is critical to learning and the formation of new memories. The results suggest that the hippocampus mediates the link between a positive attitude and retrieval from memory, which results in better problem solving and higher performance.

“Having a positive attitude acts directly on your memory and learning system,” said the researchers. “...If you have a strong interest and self-perceived ability in math, it results in enhanced memory and more efficient engagement of the brain’s problem-solving capacities.”

Recommendations

Based on the learning power of a positive attitude, here are some recommendations for promoting a positive learning environment in your organization.

Foster a growth mindset.

Previous research has shown that a learner’s mindset is important to successfully learning new skills. Essentially, a learner who has a growth mindset – who believes he or she can learn and improve – is usually right.

This mindset involves the belief that our skills aren’t set in stone, that we can always learn new things and change our behaviors for the better. And it’s been supported by countless studies. So ensure that this is the point of departure for all the learners in your organization. Make them aware of the research and the fact that they can always grow, learn and improve.



Share success stories.

Few things motivate and inspire learners like hearing from their peers. So consider having learners who have been successful in your workplace learning program share their stories with others. Ask successful learners to share what the learning opportunities have done for them but also ask them to share their struggles and how they overcame them. Hearing stories of positive outcomes and the ability to successfully deal with adversity will help learners envision their own success.

Focus on the benefits.

Sometimes learners can adopt a negative attitude about workplace learning when they fail to see the purpose or lose sight of the larger goal. Therefore, your learning program should consistently present to learners why they are learning a topic and how it will benefit them and their career.

Through discussing the benefits of learning a certain skill, learners will see how it directly impacts them and how it can make their work lives easier or more productive. When learners see the benefits, they are much more likely to stay positive during the learning process, knowing that they'll reap rewards for their hard work.

Source: <https://tinyurl.com/y9vz5uf7>