Normalize Positive Feedback

In my 40 years of leading and coaching people, I have observed that everyone responds favorably to receiving positive feedback. Further, nearly everyone I have worked with or coached wants more. Humans already are wired with a "negativity bias", where negative and unpleasant experiences and thoughts have a greater effect on our psychological makeup than positive ones. An emphasis on negativity is a benefit to survival in the wild, such as spotting a grizzly bear, but not in building emotional connection and resilience for those you lead.

Negative feedback lasts longer than praise; that is, people remember critical feedback more pronounced and do so longer than they do positive feedback. While bad news (and fear) sells more quickly than good news, in our interpersonal relationships, most underestimate that negative or sloppy remarks wound people's emotional make-up and are a cost to relationship trust. Negative comments do not build character. Telling people to toughen-up is not the answer; life is not a football game or boxing match.

Success in leadership depends on speaking praise praise. One study (Weaver, Garcia, Schwarz, and Miller, 2007) found that **hearing one person express the same opinion multiple times had nearly the same effect on listener's perception as the opinion being spoken by multiple people**. "More surprising, and consistent with our hypotheses…our studies showed that hearing one person express an opinion repeatedly also leads perceivers to estimate that the opinion is more widespread relative to hearing the same communicator express the same opinion only once. Across our studies, we found that although three people each expressing the same sentiment is more influential than one person expressing the same belief three times, the latter was, on average, **90%** of the former."

Some leaders think to balance positive and negative feedback evenly. Nope. Researchers Heaphy and Losada found that teams that gave 5.6 positive assessments to each critical were the most productive. Middle performance teams gave positive assessments at a ratio of 2:1, and the ratio in poor performing teams as .4:1 (negative assessments outnumbered positive). Hall of Fame basketball coach Phil Jackson, who led NBA teams to 11 finals, settled on 3:1. **Thus, the best ratio of speaking positive feedback and negative feedback is around 4:1 positive comments to negative remarks**.

People may think to give positive assessments after critical ones as if to soften the blow. Instead, split those into separate conversations, as the positive assessments more effectively land and sink in if spoken in a single discussion. Leaders are engaged in complex endeavors, and this makes positivity more important, as success has some ambiguity to it. In some endeavors, such as medicine, where even the best efforts can include the loss of life or an unsuccessful outcome for a patient, positive feedback should be considered doubly important. *For moments where speaking critical assessments is valid, separate them from positive ones.* Being tough with people to "build character" is nonsense. People already are their own biggest critic, and life, in its own way, already supplies plenty of character-building obstacles. Instead, build resilience through helping people to see and apply their strengths and virtues, and to rely more readily on these in moments of adversity.