



Book How Full Is Your Bucket?

Positive Strategies for Work and Life

Tom Rath and Donald O. Clifton
Gallup Press, 2004
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Recommendation

Going through life with a short, handy, happy philosophy – particularly one as affirming as the concept in this book – is very nice. However, a fine line separates simple from simplistic. Although some readers will enjoy the breezy easiness of this approach, others might find it to be just a first step toward becoming more upbeat. Donald O. Clifton, a pioneer in positive psychology, and his co-author and grandson, Tom Rath, developed the “bucket” and “dipper” theories of happy emotions, based on Clifton’s research. The bucket is a metaphor for your sense of well-being. Every interaction fills your bucket or drains it. You also have a psychological dipper you use to add to or take away from other people’s sense of joy and security – their buckets. The choice, the authors explain, is yours. The book includes small drop-shaped cards for dropping a few friendly notes. It also provides five strategies that can increase your positive emotions and those of the other people in your life. If your bucket is perennially half-empty, *BooksInShort* recommends dipping into this bestseller to see if it holds water for you.

Take-Aways

- Every interaction affects the way you feel.
- When your “bucket” is full, you feel upbeat and happy. When it is empty, you feel negative and sad.
- You either fill other people’s buckets or use your “dipper” to empty them.
- Praise generates good feelings at work, but negative actions also are contagious.
- Most people focus on what is wrong instead of what is right. That also has been the prevailing trend in studies of human nature.
- Research shows that negative emotions actually can cause health problems.
- Positive emotions can increase your life span, provide a buffer against illness, and reduce stress and depression.
- In a marriage, the “magic ratio” is five positive interactions for every negative one.
- Using five strategies can increase your optimistic emotions and those of everyone around you.
- Those tactics are: Boost other people, emphasize your strengths, form close friendships, give spontaneously, and be aware of other people’s preferences and needs.

Summary

“The Dipper and the Bucket”

Traditionally, doctors study what is wrong with people. Donald O. Clifton decided to take a different approach and study what is right with people. He became curious when he learned that the death rate in North Korean prisoner of war camps was around 38%, higher than in any similar camps. The difference was that the North

Koreans broke each prisoner's will to live by depriving him of all positive emotional support. The impact of this overwhelming desolation caused many captives to give up. After learning about this, Clifton decided to pose a new question: "Can positivity have an even stronger impact than negativity?"

"The results of our encounters are rarely neutral; they are almost always positive or negative."

Clifton's subsequent research gave birth to the "Theory of the Dipper and the Bucket." The bucket is a metaphor for how you feel. Everyone has an invisible bucket. Throughout the day, every interaction either fills your bucket or takes away from it. When your bucket brims over, you feel contented. When it is low, you feel sad and depleted. Everyone also has an invisible dipper. You use this dipper to either fill or empty other people's buckets. Doing and saying positive things fills their buckets, whereas being negative empties them. Every choice you make in your interactions with other people adds to or takes away from the contents of their buckets.

Creating a Positive Work Environment

Managers need to supply two ingredients – "recognition" and "praise" – to generate good will among their employees. People who regularly receive both forms of encouragement achieve increased productivity, warmer relations with their co-workers, better feedback from customers, fewer accidents and longer tenures with their companies. Unfortunately, people's buckets are seldom filled at work, so they become negative and "actively disengaged," which costs companies billions in lost productivity. Empty buckets also result in more absences, accidents, turnover, and even fraud and embezzlement.

"We face a choice every moment of every day: We can fill one another's buckets, or we can dip from them."

Most work environments not only lack positive reinforcement, they breed negativity, a highly contagious condition. In fact, one disengaged employee can infect an entire workplace. Laura's story is a prime example. Laura spent a great deal of time and effort preparing for a presentation. However, just as she was getting into the meat of her program, she overheard two of the people attending the meeting share a negative comment about her appearance. She grew flustered and lost her momentum. Her boss added fuel to the fire by saying, "Laura does not look very happy with us." Laura continued spiraling downward as her boss and colleagues drained her bucket.

"Great recognition and praise can immediately transform a workplace."

The realm of customer service is particularly vulnerable to workplace negativity. One study of a call center revealed that a few of the service representatives alienated every customer who talked to them. In contrast, several other representatives gave each caller a positive experience. Those effective reps needed praise and attention, but employees often find that formal corporate recognition programs feel contrived and insincere. That does not have to be the case. Managers can easily, inexpensively generate positive emotions among employees and achieve great results.

At Home and in School

Hundreds of opportunities arise every day for people to fill or empty your bucket during thousands of brief, individual moments. Some of these moments are neutral, whereas others are either positive or negative. Look at one person's day to see the impact of every interaction.

"Right now, the majority of us don't give or receive anywhere near the amount of praise that we should."

Take Tammy, a single mother of three. Amid a typical morning rush, Tammy is giving her kids a quick breakfast when her six-year-old drops her toast on the floor. Her two older siblings and Tammy reprimand her, making her feel awful about an inadvertent mistake and somewhat depleting everyone's bucket. Tammy then leaves the kids at school and pulls into the parking lot at work just in time. She heads for an open space at the same time as another driver. Tammy decides to relinquish the spot. When she walks up to the building's entrance, the other driver holds the door for her and thanks her for being so kind. Tammy feels a warm rush after that pleasant exchange, but her mood darkens when she realizes she has a performance review later that morning. Her boss outlines several things she needs to work on, but neglects to mention any of her successes. She feels down until an executive passes her in the hallway and pays her a compliment. Tammy is proud that the executive remembered her and her work, and her bucket feels much fuller.

"Most of us have grown up in a culture in which it's much easier to tell people what they did wrong instead of praising them when they succeed."

Although a simple compliment can have a wonderfully beneficial effect, most people tend to point out what is wrong instead of what is right. Schools tend to focus on the negative, not the positive, and, often, so do parents. For instance, when a child brings home a report card with two As, two Bs, one C and one F, most parents talk about the F instead of the two As. One study confirmed that praise and positive reinforcement are far more effective teaching tools than criticism. Children who received praise improved their work by 71%, those who were criticized improved it by 19% and children who were ignored raised their achievement only 5%.

Positive Psychology

Positive psychology focuses on "what is right" with people and tracks the outcomes of positive emotions. Research shows that negative feelings actually can cause health problems. Conversely, optimistic, upbeat feelings can increase longevity, provide a buffer against illness, and reduce stress and depression. They allow you to function at your very best. Research by Barbara Fredrickson at the University of Michigan revealed that:

- Positive emotions protect you from negative emotions.
- Positive emotions increase your resistance and buoy your spirit.
- Positive emotions enable you to explore new avenues of thought.
- Positive emotions boost your physical and psychological resilience.
- Positive emotions raise the productivity of teams.

"Positive reinforcement about our strengths can buffer us against getting overwhelmed with the negative."

One study about marriage showed that a couple needs a "magic ratio" of five positive moments for every negative moment for the marriage to remain strong. This magic

ratio holds true in the workplace as well.

The Author's Story

Author Tom Rath believes that his personal story is a perfect example of how getting your bucket filled can shape your life. From when he was very young, Tom's large family always focused on the things he did well. They encouraged him to pursue his passions and they celebrated his accomplishments, great and small. At age 10, Tom opened a snack stand. By the time he was 12, he employed 20 of his schoolmates. His parents did not try to force him to excel in areas that didn't interest him. Instead, they encouraged him to devote himself to the things he did best. His mother would say, "Never try to teach a pig to sing. It wastes your time and it annoys the pig."

"Negative emotions can be harmful to your health and might even shorten your life span."

When Tom was 16, he developed poor vision in one eye. This turned out to be a symptom of a rare ailment called von Hippel-Lindau disease, which causes tumors to develop in various parts of the body. Tom's family helped him focus on what he could do to prevent the onset of more symptoms. This proactive stance helped him remain positive in the face of adversity. Tom believes that living with a full bucket has enabled him to face the challenges of his illness and to continue to live his life to the fullest.

"Positive emotions are not trivial luxuries, but instead may be critical necessities for optimal functioning."

Use these five strategies to boost your emotions and those of the people around you:

First Strategy: "Prevent Bucket Dipping"

The first step toward maintaining a full bucket is learning to stop dipping from other people's buckets. Catch yourself in the act of making a negative comment. Try to say something positive instead. When you hear other people talking negatively, see if you can turn them around. Keep score by rating your interactions as positive or negative. Strive for the magic ratio of five to one.

Second Strategy: "Shine a Light on What Is Right"

Focus on "what is right." A woman in an unhappy marriage decided to do just that. She began to comment on everything she liked about her husband. Although he was skeptical at first, he soon warmed up to her new attitude and began to do the same for her. Their relationship grew more loving and positive as they concentrated on filling each other's buckets at every opportunity.

"We all experience positive and negative interactions every day that influence how we feel and behave."

Consider the 15 statements in the "Positive Impact Test" to determine if you fill other people's buckets or empty them:

1. "I have helped someone in the last 24 hours."
2. "I am an exceptionally courteous person."
3. "I like being around positive people."
4. "I have praised someone in the last 24 hours."
5. "I have developed a knack for making other people feel good."
6. "I am more productive when I am around positive people."
7. "In the last 24 hours, I have told someone that I cared about her or him."
8. "I make it a point to become acquainted with people wherever I go."
9. "When I receive recognition, it makes me want to give recognition to someone else."
10. "In the last week, I have listened to someone talk through his or her goals."
11. "I make unhappy people laugh."
12. "I make it a point to call each of my associates by the name she or he likes to be called."
13. "I notice what my colleagues do at a level of excellence."
14. "I always smile at the people I meet."
15. "I feel good about giving praise whenever I see good behavior."

Third Strategy: "Make Best Friends"

Many people stay with their jobs, at least in part, because they have developed close relationships at work. This "best friend" syndrome is evident in every kind of group, team and activity. Research shows that people who have best friends at work are more productive and achieve higher customer satisfaction levels than those who do not.

"When it comes to robust and meaningful bucket filling, individualization is key."

How can you build such relationships? Learn the names of the people you interact with regularly. Try to fill their buckets at every opportunity. Listen to them with an open mind and make an effort to be supportive. Be free with your praise. Let them know when their work or their actions are special.

Fourth Strategy: "Give Unexpectedly"

Although receiving a present on your birthday is always nice, unexpected gifts fill your bucket a little bit more. This holds true with your employees, friends and loved ones. An unexpected gift lets them know that you appreciate them. It does not have to be something tangible or expensive. The gift can be as simple as sharing a secret,

or sending someone an article you think he or she will find interesting. In this case, truly it is the thought that counts.

Fifth Strategy: “Reverse the Golden Rule”

This bucket-filling variation of the golden rule is, “Do unto others as they would have you do unto them.” This means that you should tailor your bucket-filling approach to the individual involved. For instance, some people enjoy over-the-top gestures while others prefer a private compliment. By considering someone’s preferences, you recognize his or her unique identity. Ask some of these questions to get started:

- “What are your ‘hot buttons’ – hobbies or interests you like to talk about?”
- “What increases your positive emotions or ‘fills your bucket’ the most?”
- “What type of recognition or praise do you like best?”
- “What is the greatest recognition you have ever received?”

“We don’t have to allow ourselves to be defined by our hardships.”

Use small, personal notes to tell people thank you, to give a compliment, or to acknowledge an achievement or good deed. Such “drops” are very good at filling buckets.

About the Authors

The American Psychological Association recognized the late **Donald O. Clifton**, Ph.D., as the “Father of Strengths Psychology.” He chaired Gallup, Inc., and wrote *Now, Discover Your Strengths*. His grandson, **Tom Rath**, worked with him and now focuses on professional development programs.
