

Compassionate Coaching Evokes Better Results

By Jeanette Mulvey, BusinessNewsDaily Managing Editor

Turns out, the old expression, 'you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar,' is true. Recent brain image research found that coaching that encourages students, workers, players or kids to envision a positive future is much more effective than coaching that focuses on a person's failings and what he or she shouldn't do.

"We're trying to activate the parts of the brain that would lead a person to consider possibilities," said Richard Boyatzis, professor at Case Western Reserve University, where the research took place. "We believe that would lead to more learning. By considering these possibilities, we facilitate learning."

The researchers said coaches (or bosses, teachers or parents) should seek to arouse a Positive Emotional Attractor (PEA), which causes positive emotion and arouses neuroendocrine systems, which in turn stimulate better cognitive functioning and increased perceptual accuracy and openness in the person being coached. Emphasizing weaknesses, flaws and other shortcomings — or even trying to "fix" the problem for the person being coached — has an opposite effect.

"[If you focus on the negative,] you would activate the Negative Emotional Attractor (NEA), which causes people to defend themselves, and as a result they close down," Boyatzis says. "One of the major reasons people work is for the chance to learn and grow. So at every managerial relationship, and every boss-subordinate relationship, people are more willing to use their talents if they feel they have an opportunity to learn and grow."

Effective coaching can lead to smoothly functioning organizations, better productivity and potentially more profit. In classrooms, better student performance can occur. Doctors or nurses can connect more with patients. So, coaching correctly would seem to be a natural goal, the researchers said.

For all the energy and money spent on coaching, there is little understanding about what kind of interactions can contribute to or detract from effectiveness, the researchers found. Ways of coaching can and do vary widely, due to a lack of understanding of the psychophysiological mechanisms which react to positive or negative stimulus.

"By spending 30 minutes talking about a person's desired, personal vision, we could light up (activate) the parts of the brain five to seven days later that are associated with cognitive, perceptual and emotional openness and better functioning," said Boyatzis, who conducted the research with Anthony Jack, another Case Western Reserve professor.

"Everyone's got to look at weaknesses and take them on," Jack says. "But often the focus is so much on the bottom line that we worry ourselves into the ground. It is more important to focus on what gets you going in the morning and gets you wanting to work hard and stay late."