

Positive Leadership in Project Management¹

The PNR (Positive to Negative Ratio)²

By Frank Saladis, PMP, PMI Fellow

We all know that there are many leadership styles in the business world and what works for one leader may not work for another. In any case, and in any organization, leaders must be aware of how they interact with people, especially their subordinates, and continuously monitor how people react to the leader's personal style and behaviors. Most people, when asked about the characteristics of an effective leader, mention the following traits or skills: Effective communicator, ability to motivate, establishes a clear vision, works at a high energy level, highly trustworthy, displays passion, shows dedication to the team, has the ability to work effectively with people, and so on. These are all traits commonly associated with leadership.

In my search for information about leadership, I found something else that can have a significant impact on the people who report to leaders: The PNR or positive to negative ratio. The PNR is described in an article entitled "The Impact of Positive Leadership" by Tom Rath, co-author of the book "How Full is Your Bucket?" The article focuses on the typical positive and negative interactions an employee may encounter on any given day. The PNR is the ratio of bad or unpleasant interactions to the good or positive interactions. An unbalanced ratio can lead to the loss of key employees. The manager should therefore be aware of his or her contribution to the PNR. As Tom Rath states, "Unless you are actively working, today and every day, to make sure your employee has more positive interactions, you may soon have a disengaged employee on your hands—or worse, you could lose one of your best people."

For the project manager, the PNR, which appears to be connected to, or part of the subject "Emotional Intelligence", is a factor that must be considered in the course of day to day managerial and leadership activities. Take a good look at your style and how you interact with your project team. What is the PNR? Consider your first hour of work yesterday or today. How many of your interactions were positive and how many were negative? Here's an example of a negative interaction:

You have a meeting scheduled for 9pm. One of your key project team members is ten minutes late, and when he arrives and takes his seat you make a comment like, "Well, I guess we can get started now."

¹This is the first in a series of articles on Positive Leadership in Project Management by Frank Saladis, PMP, PMI Fellow, popular speaker and author of books on leadership in project management published by Wiley and IIL in the United States. Frank is widely known as the originator of the International Project Management Day, the annual celebrations and educational events conducted each November by PMI members, chapters and organizations around the world. Learn more in his profile at the end of this article.

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This type of comment is fairly common in many organizations and considered by many as “acceptable sarcasm.” This is definitely a negative interaction. How often do you or others on your team make these types of comments? Probably more than you realize. Here’s another:

You review a report from a team member and it isn’t exactly what you wanted, so you make the following statement: “I guess you weren’t listening when I gave you my instructions.” Does this comment sound familiar?

Take a few minutes and recall your most recent work day. How many times did you use a sarcastic or negatively charged statement, or hear someone else say something that could be interpreted as a negative interaction?

What about positive interactions? How about starting a meeting off with “Great to see you all again” or “Nice work team; we are really making progress” or “I appreciate the work you do.” Even during difficult times, we can use positive comments to keep the team engaged. “I know we have a major issue to deal with, but this is a strong team and I have confidence that we will find a solution soon!”

As you can see, it is extremely important to maintain an awareness of the PNR and adjust it in favor of the positive side.

The Magic Ratio

According to the Tom Rath article, studies indicate that teams with a PNR greater than 3:1 were significantly more productive than teams that did not reach this ratio. Another interesting fact is that teams that had achieved a very high PNR and exceeded the upper limit of 13:1 became less productive and annoying to each other. Too much blind optimism, insincere positive comments, unusually friendly and blissful behavior, overly polite people, and extensive mutual admiration, can create some serious problems. Studies show that reaching the upper limit is rare among work teams so managers shouldn’t worry too much about the impact on the team at that level. If the team begins to approach the upper limits of the PNR thresholds, you will probably observe some signs of changes in team behavior. Is there a greater effort to avoid disagreement? Are team members becoming less talkative and using phrases such as “sounds good to me” or “whatever you say is fine.” These are indications that too much emphasis has been placed on the need to be “positive” and people are becoming frustrated because they feel they are restricted from being honest and cannot express themselves openly.

Remember, some conflict is actually good for a team. Lack of conflict can result in complacency and indifference. Managing a team to avoid destructive conflict is a talent and skill that all team leaders should develop and continue to enhance.

It is recommended that managers focus more on reaching the 3:1 PNR. Reaching this point within the team seems to provide a near optimum environment. I think it’s important for project managers to begin to track their personal and team PNR and, if the data indicates a need, to look for ways to improve the ratio. This will increase self-awareness about leadership styles, communications skills, and other factors that have a direct impact on the team. The “magic ratio” may be slightly different for each project team but a target ratio of 4:1 or 5:1 may be something to aim for.

The Impact of Positive leadership

Considering the PNR and the influence the leader has on the team, I think it can be safely stated that the positive leaders (those who have created a favorable PNR) increase the productivity of their teams and create a very favorable *esprit de corps* within their teams or within their entire organization.

Positive leaders make significant contributions to their organizations both tangibly and intangibly. According to the Tom Rath article, positive leaders deliberately increase the flow of positive emotions within their organization. They choose to do this because it leads to a measurable increase in performance. Leaders who share positive emotions and create the appropriate PNR will develop work groups or project teams that will experience:

- A more pleasant and enjoyable working environment
- Enhanced job satisfaction and greater team support
- Increased engagement among employees and team members
- Improved productivity and overall performance
- More effective interaction with clients and customers
- Enhanced brand recognition
- Less employee turnover
- World class status as an exceptional provider of services

*“What differentiates positive leaders from the rest? Instead of being concerned with what they can **get out of** their employees, positive leaders search for opportunities to **invest in** everyone who works for them. They view each interaction with another person as an opportunity to increase his or her positive emotions.”*

- Tom Rath, Gallup Management Journal.

About the Author



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Frank P. Saladis, PMP, PMI Fellow is the Owner/Founder of Blue Marble Enterprises Inc. and Project Imaginers. Frank is an accomplished leader and contributor in the discipline of project management. He is the author of 12 published books, the past editor of the All PM Newsletter and the author of over 160 project management articles. Frank provides training and consulting internationally and has educated and entertained countless audiences with a special blend of project management knowledge and tasteful humor. He is also an experienced and well-known project management instructor and consultant and a member of the PMI® Seminars World team of trainers. Mr. Saladis' 35 year career includes 28.5 years with AT&T, 3 years with Cisco Systems, and more than 25 years as a professional trainer, facilitator, mentor and keynote speaker.

Frank is the Originator/Founder of International Project Management Day which launched in 2004 and has been growing in recognition yearly. The goal of International Project Management Day is the worldwide recognition of the many project managers and project teams in every industry including nonprofit organizations and health care who contribute their time, energy, creativity, innovation, and countless hours to deliver products, services, facilities, and provide emergency and disaster recovery services in every city and community around the world.

Frank was PMI's 2006 Person of the Year. Frank is a Project Management Professional, a graduate from the PMI Leadership Institute Master's class, and has contributed significantly to the organization's growth and knowledge base for more than 20 years. His leadership activity within PMI included the position of President of the New York City PMI chapter from 1991-2001, President of the Assembly of Chapter Presidents, and Chair of the Education and Training Specific Interest Group. He received the high honor of the "PMI Fellow Award" in October 2013 and received the very prestigious "PMI Distinguished Contribution Award" in October 2015.