

LMI Journal



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Direct Your Leadership with Affirmation

By Paul J. Meyer

Philosophers, poets, and other writers from many centuries in the past have left us a rich legacy of literature that demonstrates one of the most vital tools of personal leadership development. This technique is the firing pin for rapid-fire change, the scope for the rifle of self-direction. This marvelous tool is affirmation. The dictionary calls *affirmation* “the act of asserting or affirming as true a positive assertion.” Affirmation is a positive declaration that describes what you want to be, what you want to have, or how you choose to live your life.

There is nothing particularly startling or new in using affirmation as a method of personal growth. It has been done for thousands of years. More than a hundred years ago, the French doctor Émile Coué began telling his patients they would feel happier and better if they adopted one simple idea: all they had to do was say over and over “Every day in every way I’m getting better and better.” Many people laughed at Dr. Coué. His method was so simple that they doubted its validity. He was teaching his patients nothing new. It was just another way of describing the power of affirmation used with spaced rep-

etition to affect attitudes.

The repetition of a positive thought over and over, day after day, affects your subconscious mind – the creative power within you. Quotations, proverbs, sayings, and axioms are all affirmations. For example:

- ◆ A penny saved is a penny earned.
- ◆ A fool and his money are soon parted.

- ◆ To have a friend, you must be a friend.

- ◆ A stitch in time saves nine.

These are all borrowed affirmations – ideas appropriated from someone else to support the value system we hold. Borrowed affirmations are the most commonly used but are effective only when genuinely internalized. Borrowed affirmations are not the only familiar type. How many times have you said something like this: “I said to myself, ‘I can do better than that,’” or “I told myself to remember where I was putting that book.” Talking to yourself may be conscious and directed, or it may be subconscious and

reflexive; but you do engage in self-talk, and that, in essence, constitutes affirmation.

When you see in the world what you believe to be there



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and affirm it through self-talk, you psychologically reinforce your opinions and ideas. “But,” you may say, “this does not alter reality. The fact that I believe or disbelieve doesn’t change anything.” Objectively, an affirmation may not change anything, but subjectively, it certainly does. You tend to live up to what is expected of you, to your reputation – good or bad. The real importance of this truth in the area of personal leadership is that you tend not only to live up to what others expect of you, you also live up to what you expect of yourself. This is why the use of affirmation is such a dynamic tool for personal leadership development.

When you consciously practice the use of affirmation, the law of reinforcement begins to work for you. First you begin to look for those strengths and changes that you have affirmed. Because you expect to see such changes, you also begin to act like the person you have decided to become. You literally change because you act according to the expectations you have set for yourself. Your affirmation becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

There is nothing mysterious about the power of affirmation. Although at first you may find it difficult to make conscious use of affirmations, the reinforcement principle actually is simple and relatively easy to apply. Your confidence in the value of affirmation increases gradually as you take each progressive step and learn from your experience that it is worthwhile.

Types of Affirmations

You have the choice of several kinds of affirmations:

1. A *numerical affirmation* makes use of some number that has a special meaning for you. It may represent money, a date, or a number of activities. For example, a salesperson might use an affirmation such as 10-6-3-50. This would be a reminder that 10 telephone calls every day will result in six appointments for sales presentations, lead to three sales, and produce an income of \$50,000 per year. Repeating this affirmation makes it easy to make

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calls because the salesperson knows the benefit.

2. *Pictorial affirmations* intensify and build desire in your subconscious mind. Looking often at a picture that represents your goal stimulates your imagination and helps you create ways of transforming it into reality.

3. *Verbal affirmations* are condensed statements of a desired result or an attitude you wish to possess. For example: “My annual income is \$50,000.”

4. *Actions serve as affirmations.* Repetition of a new tennis stroke in practice is an affirmation. Repetition puts the law of displacement to work for you.

Resolve to Success

Develop an unshakable determination to follow-through on your plans for success regardless of circumstances, criticism, or what other people say, think, or do. This is often the breaking point for good intentions. Many people live their lives in the shadow of public opinion, drifting with the tide of criticism, and wind up wallowing in the backwash of mediocrity. Set a realistic standard for yourself. No one else can determine your desires, needs, or wants because no one else knows your priority of values or understands your potential. Once you know yourself and set your goals accordingly, determination is natural because you know that you are right and you know *why* you are right. You have information no critic can ever have, and armed with this inside information, you are impervious to unjustified assaults. Determination is neither stubborn defiance nor unreasonable inflexibility. It is, rather, firm resolve, quiet confidence, and unshakable persistence.



Define Your Own Success

Everyone has the capacity for achieving success. Some fail because they lack persistence, others because they are unwilling to pay the price in effort, or perhaps most often, because they do not have a clear picture of what success means. When contemplating steps you can take to improve your effectiveness, consider this definition of success:

Success is the progressive realization of worthwhile, pre-determined personal goals.

To be successful, you must know where you are going. Your destination in life – your goals – must be worthwhile to exert the motivational force to keep you working for achievement. The most encouraging part of this definition, however, is “progressive realization.” That means when you choose a purpose, a goal, or destination for your life, determine that it has worth and value for you, and start moving toward it, you are successful. Success is a journey – not a destination.

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Create a Learning Environment

A work environment that encourages learning is essential for continuous productivity improvement. First, clearly send the message to your people that continuing mental and educational development – through both formal and informal plans – is vital. Then nurture the three primary freedoms that create a learning environment: freedom to express dissent, freedom to make mistakes, and freedom to invest time in learning.

An indispensable aspect of a learning environment is the freedom to engage in solution-oriented discussion and discovery. Make sure people are rewarded not for maintaining the status quo but for achieving constructive results. When people sense undue pressure to agree and to conform, they avoid pointing out even the most obvious problems for the sake of maintaining consensus and goodwill. The results are often embarrassing, and at worst, tragic. In contrast, a dynamic learning environment nurtures and supports people who express their ideas about existing policies and procedures that are not working well. Irate controversy, of course, is to be avoided; courtesy and positive attitudes should always be valued and maintained. Constructive, courteous dissent produces creativity, progress, and productivity.

Encourage those who possess the ability and the inclination to pursue answers to complex questions. One common yet misguided approach related to time efficiency is the autocratic demand for immediate answers and solutions. This approach rewards shallow thinking on the part of team members and exerts pressure to be agreeable at all costs. Give people adequate time and support to develop insightful solutions.

Valuable experience involves making mistakes and learning from them. If you never make a mistake, it is because you have never stretched to reach a new challenge. Mistakes teach people what does not work. Then they are free to move in a new direction to reach desirable goals. Establish “safety nets,” policies that protect people when they make honest mistakes in pursuit of corporate goals. In so doing, you encourage them to shed their protective, perfectionistic guards and to experience enthusiasm for innovation and learning.

Give your team members the freedom to schedule the necessary time for job-related educational development. Appropriate time allocation is a key factor in creating a learning environment. Although continuing education and training take time away from immediate results, the investment of time now provides huge dividends later. Goal setting, leadership, and management development are important for all team members’ continued professional development.

A healthy, dynamic learning environment is characterized by freedom to express dissent, to make mistakes, and to invest time in learning. These elements of a learning environment provide the necessary backdrop for effective communication, leading to continuous improvement and increased productivity.



Achieve Success with Careful Planning

Long-range objectives require time as well as action. Others can be reached easily and quickly. A few may even appear to be mutually exclusive. How do you choose between goals that conflict? How do you know which goal to tackle first? The answer is found in priorities.

To sum it up, you must decide which goals are most important for the success of your organization. Such decisions depend upon clearly stated priorities based on organizational values. Then, making workable plans is the key to making things happen.

Plan to Achieve

Once a goal is identified as a high priority, you are ready to develop a workable plan for achieving it. **Here are several suggestions:**

- ▲ State your goal as clearly and concretely as possible. Ask, "How will we know when we have achieved this goal?" Unless you can answer this question specifically, go back and restate the goal. To make a goal specific, isolate one particular type of situation for improvement. You might state a goal in this way: "Leaders will give instructions so that when an assignment is made, team members will follow instructions correctly without coming back repeatedly for additional explanations." This, then, is a goal for which you can identify specific actions that will bring appropriate results. To be as specific as possible when you state a goal, ask exactly what will you and your team do to accomplish this goal? When will you do it? Who else in the organization will be involved? How will this action change your overall effectiveness? How much effect will this action have on your productivity? What conditions will exist when this goal is achieved? Answering these questions makes it possible to state your goal more specifically.
- ▲ Identify the benefits of achievement. List every possible reward or benefit that will accrue to your organization when you and your team members achieve the goal. Include tangible rewards like increased profit and intangible rewards like satisfaction in a job well done. Anticipating the rewards of success keeps enthusiasm and motivation at a high level.
- ▲ Once you have stated the goal and identified the benefits of achieving it, list specific action steps for accomplishing it. These are the concrete activities you and your



team members can follow on a day-to-day basis for completing all the work needed to bring the goal into reality. Perhaps the goal is to advance your organization in the marketplace, and your staff lacks knowledge or training in a specific area. Action steps might include identifying books and materials to study, acquiring them from the library or by purchase, allocating time for team member study and interaction, and setting up a method to apply and test new knowledge.

- ▲ Set target dates for reaching your goals. When you have identified simple actions that are progressive steps to achievement of the total goal, estimate how long it will take to accomplish each step. You know how fast you and

your team members work, how urgent the need is to complete the job, and what else those involved will be doing at the same time. Set a target date for each step, and you can determine when the work will be completed and the goal finally reached.

- ▲ Identify obstacles and roadblocks. If you encounter difficulty listing needed action steps, you probably need to identify likely obstacles and to plan solutions for overcoming them. Ask, "What could keep us from achieving this goal?" You may list obstacles such as lack of information or skills training, shortage of resources or money, or the opposition of others. One obstacle might be doubt that you can reach the goal! Whatever they are, recognize the existence of obstacles and realistically anticipate the problems they could cause.
- ▲ Develop solutions for overcoming obstacles. Many solutions are obvious. If you lack information, choose a method of gaining the required knowledge. If time is a problem, consider eliminating some present time-consuming tasks by delegating appropriately, eliminating tasks that do not help meet organizational goals, or rearranging team member schedules. Use creativity to find solutions. Discover innovative ways to go over, around, or through any roadblocks to goals achievement. There is always a way to overcome any obstacle if you believe it exists and look for it!

Although the process of achieving success through goal setting is easy to understand, a written plan of action is not a substitute for organizational effort. The journey toward success becomes a process of accomplishing each of the steps in the process.

Empower Employees to Be Self-Confident

Empowerment of employees for increased productivity includes the development of self-directed work teams. Self-directed work teams are formally established work groups in which all team members undertake tasks and approach problems together without the direct involvement of management. Ideally, the group manages itself. Group members meet regularly during work hours to identify, discuss, and solve work-related problems. In many organizations, this involves dramatic culture change. Often this change is attainable, but it takes real commitment on the part of leadership, and it takes time. On a smaller scale, teams can be used to deal with just one project. Given challenging goals, sufficient training, and reasonable guidelines, self-directed work teams produce high-quality communication, involvement, and contributions from otherwise isolated employees.

The authority and responsibility given to a self-directed work team depend largely upon the capabilities and skills of the people involved. The size of the company and the nature of the business are also important factors. Self-directed work teams function effectively in designing and implementing procedures for accomplishing routine, day-to-day projects. When an appropriate, creative learning environment has been established, self-directed work teams can move to higher level tasks like brainstorming and planning for more complex problems and goal setting.

Self-directed work teams are possible when you refuse to view people as problems. Instead, encourage people to become problem solvers. Members of a self-directed work team are in a position to provide valuable input since they are closest to underlying problems and are able to readily identify issues not immediately evident to a manager. Their competence in individual areas of specialization relieves you of important, yet excessively time-consuming details.

Select members for a self-directed work team who possess diverse yet complementary personalities for balanced teamwork and group problem solving. Include members who demonstrate leadership abilities and the ability to motivate the rest of the group. Provide basic instruction in the skills of group dynamics. Explain the benefits of each member's full participation. Emphasize the value of

each member's contribution by asking questions that encourage team members themselves to point out the purpose and benefits of team involvement. Help them recognize the purpose of working in self-directed work teams: to capitalize on the knowledge and skills of a large number of people – for the highest possible level of results.

Self-directed work teams initially arrive at solutions more slowly than an individual authority figure does, but as their expertise improves, so does their pace. An additional advantage is the group's ability to provide win/win solutions for problems and strategies for reaching goals. Self-directed work teams also usually enjoy the benefit of increased commitment levels. Self-directed work teams, however, are not always appropriate for every work environment.

Recognizing the needs of your organization helps you make that decision.

Encourage participation through varied approaches: one-on-one coaching to overcome fear, pairing team members in mentoring relationships, developing surveys for soliciting input, and additional leadership development courses. Be an example of courage yourself by trying original ideas to address the

specific needs of your organization. In extreme cases, some employees simply are not able to adapt to high-involvement teams; for those individuals, a transfer or alternative assignment may be the only option. For the morale of the team, however, do all you can to discover and develop the strengths of all team members.

Because workers possess diverse skills, education, and motivation levels, developing self-directed work teams requires a highly motivated, skillful leader. The challenge of addressing diversity is often a necessary cost of increased productivity gains. Performance measurement and equitable reward systems grow complex as employees and team members become accustomed to management practices that support increased power sharing, individual development, and process flexibility.

Self-directed work teams free you for new priorities and release you from the tyranny of urgent matters that should be handled closer to the problem. Giving responsibility to a team, however, does not erase your responsibilities. To keep momentum rolling, provide periodic supervision and tracking of the progress of the work team.



Believe in Your Ability to Succeed

Self-image is not the same as conceit or an overinflated ego. It is, instead, a genuine self-respect, a positive mental picture of yourself that grows out of the recognition of your untapped potential. Unless you can develop a strong self-image, you greatly diminish your chances for success in personal leadership. Your self-image sets up an invisible barrier. You set your own ceiling and cannot rise above it nor progress beyond it. Unconsciously, you mark a line and say, "Beyond this point I cannot go."

If your self-image is negative, every decision filters through a network of unconscious fears and doubts. If you think that you are worth very little, that your talents and abilities are limited, you will unconsciously refuse to achieve very much. Ironically, the world is filled with people who have every attribute for personal leadership except self-confidence. They rate themselves so harshly that their low self-image relegates them to the ranks of plodders who venture little and gain less.

Although you cannot rise above it, you can raise your self-image. If you believe, "I can," you are correct. If you believe, "I cannot," you are also absolutely correct. It is a simple psychological fact that you act like the person you believe you are.

If you view yourself as a failure, you will fail no matter how hard you consciously try to succeed. You may accidentally outstrip your self-image for a time, but you will quickly readjust. We see an example of this on the professional golf tour. There are a dozen or more professional golfers who earn a comfortable living, yet never win a tournament. Often they lead by five or six strokes for the first two or three days of play but then manage to adjust to their self-image. You sometimes hear them tell a sports announcer something like this: "I have really been playing over my head," or "I don't believe how far ahead I am." Quite predictably, they adjust to their self-image and shoot enough bogies to lose the lead. They never win first place because their self-image is a fraction too low.

A low self-image produces negative attitudes that hamper development of personal leadership by forcing you forever to grapple with internal fears and doubts. If you cannot respect yourself, you cannot in turn, respect others; and if you cannot respect yourself, neither can others respect you.

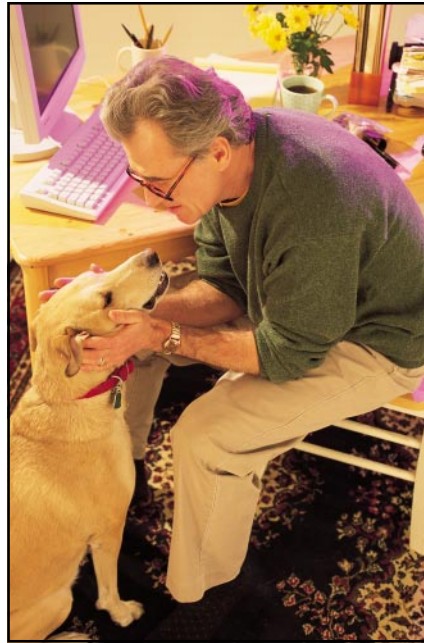
One difficulty in maintaining a positive self-image is that most of us have been taught that self-love is wrong. Perhaps

this is rooted in a misunderstanding of humility and in the idea that self-love is equal to selfishness. Nothing is further from the truth. We are told to love our neighbors as ourselves – not more than ourselves, nor instead of ourselves, but as ourselves. You must have respect for yourself. You need make no excuse for doing so.

Because the exercise of personal leadership springs directly from a strong self-image, you must learn to appreciate your potential and develop a self-image equal to the importance of the role you play in life. It would be futile, however, to attempt to use the external facade of positive thinking to substitute for a positive self-image.

How then can you go about improving your self-image? You must redirect your thinking and alter your attitude about yourself. Learn to appreciate and respect your own importance. You are the most elaborate machine ever designed. Your potential is unlimited.

You are unique in all creation; nowhere on earth is there another like you. There is never a basis for a comparison of one person with another, but by a process of growth and unfolding, you can make a contribution that no one else can duplicate. Knowledge of your personal strength and worth can help you to build a strong bulwark of security within your heart.



Motivating Yourself

You cannot wait for someone else to head you in the right direction; you must motivate yourself. Motivation is an inner need or drive that impels or incites an individual to action. Motivation is a desire held in expectation with the belief that it will be realized. Belief comes from your self-image, expectation comes from your reserve potential, and any desire supported by belief and expectation becomes a strong motivating force that propels you toward your goals. Self-motivation is neither a mystical power or a gift that descends from the heavens by chance. It grows, blooms, and flowers. It finds expression when you prepare for it, attract it, and reach out to receive it.

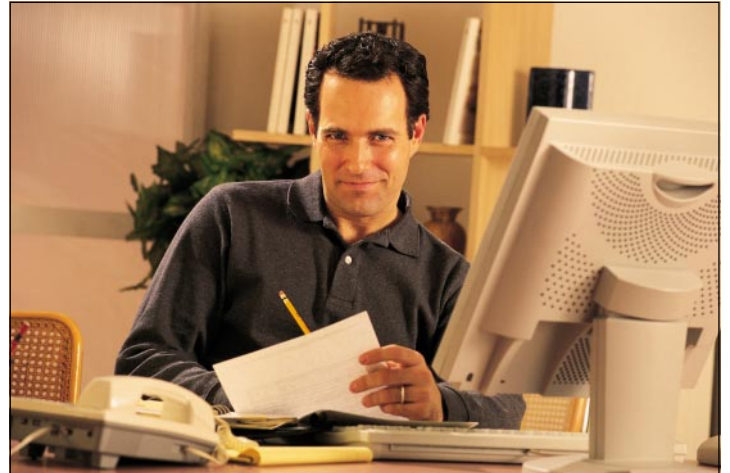
Human desires, needs and drives are fairly universal; but goals and behavior are individual. Two people may behave in diametrically opposite ways to reach identical goals. It's important for you to understand the universal drives that influence your actions, and learn to set goals and direct your actions toward achieving them.

Encourage Good Behavior on Your Team

One of the most effective methods of developing productive attitudes in people is to give specific feedback about both effective and ineffective behavior. Even people with good attitudes do not automatically know what behaviors are appropriate. They must be taught by separate instances of feedback how to choose the most acceptable behaviors.

Providing feedback on performance is a continuous process. Feedback has a greater impact on productivity when these principles are observed:

- ◆ Give feedback as soon as possible. When praise for a specific task well done occurs promptly, it does more to encourage continued high level achievement than a good rating on a semi-annual performance review several months after the good work is first accomplished. Likewise, immediate correction of an error accompanied by positive suggestions for improvement is more likely to produce a desirable change in behavior than an unfavorable performance review at some time in the future.
- ◆ Give feedback on both positive and negative factors. Giving feedback only to correct errors causes people to become discouraged. They may believe that the only way to gain your attention is to do something wrong. Since most people crave recognition, a lack of positive feedback often encourages negative performance. Being criticized is better to some people than being ignored. Attention of any kind can be a form of reward. Be sure you are rewarding positive behavior, not just negative behavior, with attention and recognition. Watch for outstanding performance, improved performance, and continued quality performance in your team members, and mention that you have noticed it. Visibly reward positive performance when possible. Give extra compliments for work well done, for innovative ideas pursued, and for extra effort expended to meet a deadline. People who regularly receive praise and recognition for work well done are less likely to react defensively when you find it necessary to correct errors.
- ◆ Regard feedback as coaching for growth. Keep in mind that if a team member's behavior is inappropriate, avoiding confrontation usually prolongs and intensifies the negative situation. As long as the behavior continues, you, your organization, and your clients suffer from the person's less-than-effective performance. And by persisting in current habits, the person misses a valuable opportunity to reach higher levels of development and achievement. Ideally, you should give much more positive than negative feedback to your team members. But when you must address a negative situation or action, adopt an attitude that giving feedback is an opportunity



to coach the other person to grow. When you coach for improved performance, you communicate that you care – about the team member, the organization, and the customer. As you confront inappropriate behavior, keep these guidelines in mind:

- Address the situation as privately as possible.
- Give the person the benefit of the doubt.
- Avoid sarcasm and joking about serious issues.
- Avoid words like always and never.
- Confront only specific factors the person can change.
- Give the person ideas for fixing the problem.
- Affirm the individual as a valuable team member.

- ◆ Make feedback specific to behavior. Effective feedback focuses on a specific situation, action, or decision and the consequences. Praise and correction alike are most effective when they are specific. Non-specific over-generalizations, on the other hand, are confusing and counterproductive. In addressing negative situations, dealing with specifics helps separate the unacceptable behavior from the person. For example, if you tell an associate, “You’re one of the sloppiest individuals in our organization,” the person might wonder whether to buy new clothes, reorganize the work area, or be more meticulous with paperwork. Instead, state the unsatisfactory behavior in specific terms and give the person an opportunity to analyze the cause. You might say, “You have missed two of your deadlines in the last week, and I have noticed your desk looks disorganized. How do you see these two items being related?” Listen carefully. You may learn that the cause is beyond the person's control. But if you decide that the person's behavior is the cause, first explain why it is unacceptable. State what you expect in the way of changed behavior, and the benefits for making this change. Emphasizing the benefits increases your ability to gain the person's commitment to change.

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