

Did You Know That You're Pavlov's Bell To Your Employees?

By David Lee

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Yes, to your employees, you are Pavlov's Bell... for better or for worse.

I was reminded of this during a presentation I recently made at a conference. Two men in the audience, both senior level executives, made their presence known. One because his face was frozen in a dour, grouchy expression, and both because of their cynical perspectives on issues we discussed.

You're Not This Type of Boss... Are You?

You know the type. They're the kind that embody the saying "They brighten up a room... the moment they leave." They're the folks who can take a rollicking, possibility-filled discussion and grind it to a screeching halt with a sarcastic comment or their "That'll never work...we tried that once in the 80's" pessimism.

As I watched them in action, I thought "Boy, I'm glad I'm not one of THEIR employees..."

I imagined what it would be like offer suggestions, get my ideas heard, or voice my concerns to them.

If You Want To Bring Out The Best in Others Remember This

It got me to thinking of the principle I'm about to share with you, a principle I try to share with every manager I work with. And that is:

"To Your People, You Are Pavlov's Bell"

You remember Pavlov and his canine subjects? Because Pavlov rang a bell when he gave them food, the dogs associated the bell with food, and began salivating simply at the sound of the bell. Because of the Associational Learning – an automatic, unconscious learning process – the sound of the bell became associated with that very pleasurable experience. Once the association was strong enough, the sound of the bell alone soon could trigger the same physical and emotional response that the food did.

To your employees, you are Pavlov's Bell. I don't mean you trigger drooling, but that you can trigger in others the primary emotions they've grown to associate with you.

Here's the key point to consider:

"The emotions you trigger depend on the dominant emotional themes of your interactions."

Haven't You Had a Boss Like This?

I remember experiencing this with a manager of mine when I worked for a national seminar company. The only time I and my colleagues heard from him was if he had a complaint or some bad news. Commenting on his management style, one of my colleagues observed "You know, Greg would benefit from taking one of those management development seminars the company sells."

It got to the point where just hearing a voice mail message from Greg would trigger instant dread and defensiveness.

"Now what's wrong?" I would say to myself the moment his voice came on the line.

Haven't you had bosses who elicited that kind of response from you? Because they only interacted with you when they pointed out a mistake you made, gave you bad news, or took out their bad mood on you, just their presence or voicemail message triggered a negative emotional response in you.

To you, they had become a Negative Pavlov Bell.

People Who Are Positive Pavlov Bells

Conversely, don't you know people who, just by their presence, make you feel better? Whether they're uplifting and inspiring, or just a pleasure to be around, you instantly feel better when you're around them. They are a Positive Pavlov Bell.

Managers who take time to encourage employees, to give positive feedback, express appreciation, show interest in employee ideas and input, and share exciting new developments; these managers become positive Pavlov Bells.

What Are The Consequences?

Because the preponderance of their interactions are positive, these managers becomes associated with positive emotions. Just their presence uplifts and encourages. Because they are a positive Pavlov Bell, employees are more likely to

be in a positive emotional state when they interact with them. Thus, these managers find it easier to give corrective feedback, get buy-in for new changes, and get employees to talk about difficult issues. Furthermore, their people are more likely to exhibit high morale and to care about helping their company succeed.

Conversely, managers who are Negative Pavlov Bells are already “in the hole” before they even bring up a difficult issue. Before they’ve even opened their mouth, their mere presence has triggered a negative, distrustful, defensive, and/or resentful state in their employee... not exactly an emotional state conducive to productive outcomes.

Long term, these managers are also more likely to have workers who demonstrate negativity, low morale, and little interest in helping their company succeed.

Thus, supervisors and managers who are a positive Pavlov Bells to their people have a far easier time managing and motivating employees. They also provide far greater value to their employer, because they’re more capable of bringing out the best in their people.

What to Do With This Knowledge:

1. Review your relationships with direct reports, peers, and superiors. Ask “Am I a positive, negative, or neutral Pavlov Bell for them?” If you’re not sure, reflect on conversations you’ve had with them over the last six months as well as the most memorable ones you’ve had. Were they primarily constructive and encouraging or critical and negative? Were they primarily transactional and “all business” or did you include the human element?
2. Reflect on whether you allow yourself to take your bad moods and bad days out on your people. If so, you are forming negative emotional associations in others, including distrust.
3. If you’re not sure about your effect on your direct reports, ask them. Tell them that you know your job is to bring out the best in them and you would appreciate their feedback about how well you do that. Tell them about this article and ask them what they experience as the predominant tone of your interactions – positive and uplifting or negative and discouraging. Obviously, their willingness to respond honestly will depend on your relationship with them. If you believe they would be reluctant to give you honest feedback face to face, do an anonymous survey or have an outsider interview them.
4. Reflect on people whom you find to be a Positive Pavlov Bell for you and those you find negative. Examine what each has done to create that response in you. Then reflect on your interactions with your direct reports, peers, and superiors. See if you do with these people any of the things your Negative Pavlov Bell people do with you. See if there are positive things your

Positive Pavlov Bell people do with you, that you can apply in your relationships.

5. For those people you find difficult or with whom you have conflict, consciously look for opportunities to engage them in positive interactions or to show goodwill by doing something kind, generous, or thoughtful.
6. Keep in mind, being a Positive Pavlov Bell isn't about pretending to be friends with someone you don't like. It's about recognizing that how you affect others has a big effect in your life, and consciously choosing to make that effect as positive as possible. It's also choosing to demonstrate informal leadership. By modeling productive, mature, evolved ways of interacting, you increase the odds that others will do the same. The more people in your company who act in ways that make them a Positive Pavlov Bell to others, the more positive and productive your workplace culture becomes.

Conclusion: Do This and You Become More Valuable... and Happy

The more you practice being a positive Pavlov Bell to your direct reports – and to all of your colleagues – the greater the value you provide to your employer. Regardless of your position in your organization, when you're a positive Pavlov Bell to others, you help uplift everyone, making your employer a better, more productive place to work. Finally, by being a positive Pavlov Bell to others, you make your life easier and more enjoyable, because people are more likely to be in a positive, collaborative frame of mind when they deal with you. Thus, the more conscious you are of becoming more of a positive Pavlov Bell, the more everyone wins.

Note: To reprint this in an association or corporate newsletter, please contact the author first at David@HumanNatureAtWork.com

About the Author: David Lee is the founder and principal of [HumanNature@Work](http://HumanNature@Work.com). He is an internationally recognized authority on organizational and managerial practices that optimize employee performance, morale, and engagement. Mr. Lee is the author of *Managing Employee Stress and Safety*, as well as several dozen articles on organizational and individual performance that have been published in a number of trade journals in North America, Europe, Australia, and Asia.

Mr. Lee provides consulting, training, and executive coaching services that help organizations and their managers achieve the following results:

- Improve employee morale and productivity.
- Develop a Magnetic Employer Brand™ that leads to “employer of choice” status, cuts down on recruiting costs and turnover, and leads to a better talent pool to draw upon.
- Reduce the time, energy, and financial cost of employee relations problems by identifying organizational and managerial practices that prevent such problems from occurring, and helping managers develop the facilitation skills to quickly and effectively resolve such issues.
- Help employees respond effectively to change, so their energy is spent contributing to – rather than fighting – change initiatives.
- Create an environment and provide skills that enable sales and customer service professionals to maximize customer loyalty.

Comments About David Lee’s Work:

"David, not only did I find your presentation very clear on concepts and theories, but more importantly, your program includes practical suggestions and multiple workshop handouts that participants can take back to their workplaces to implement those concepts and theories in a practical way". - *Don Steig, HRH of Northern New England, ME*

"Whenever I attend a seminar, if I leave with 2 or 3 solid items to implement back at our office, I feel the day has been worthwhile. I left David Lee's half-day course with more than 20 solid, common-sense, no-cost items that I am eager to implement. And the best part is that it is clear that implementing them will have a measurable impact for our firm! This half-day course was an excellent use of time." - *Eric S. Wood, President, EnviroSense, Inc., NH*

"Thank you for doing such an outstanding job keynoting our conference. As you could tell by the response, participants loved both the content and the delivery of your presentation." - *Dr. Ian Gawler, Director, The Gawler Foundation, Victoria, Australia*

"David’s presentation style is unparalleled! The substantive and timely content of his subject materials is immediately adaptable to the workplace making his seminars an invaluable aid to an employer seeking to be an “Employer of Choice.” - *Lynn M. Lombard, VP, MMG Insurance Company, ME*

"I just wanted to thank you again for a magnificent presentation. I have been to many seminars, and this far exceeded any past experience. I walked away feeling energized, enthusiastic and empowered. I can hardly wait to apply the principles that we discussed today at work and beyond." - *Sybil L. Morin, Director of Administration, LifeShare, Inc., NH*

"I learned more in this seminar than in four others I took from (a well known national seminar company)."- *Jennifer Sgroi, Stonyfield Farm, NH*

"I can honestly say that your sessions were highlights for me at the conference. Since then I have perused your website and read many of the articles posted on there. Again, thank you and kudos to you for the great presentation!" - *Rob Huppée, Amica Mature Lifestyles Inc., British Columbia*

I want to say a big thank you for the wonderful job you did in your presentations during our Quality Leadership Conference. You are a talented individual; thank you for sharing your gifts with Fairview. You have touched our soul. - *Tom Hanson, Fairview Healthcare System, MN*

David Lee's seminar, *Constructive Conversations: How to Foster Honest, Open, Non-Defensive Dialogue About Difficult Issues*, was one of the most worthwhile training experiences that I have had in a long time. Geared towards more experienced practitioners, it presented a whole new way to look at challenging discussions we have with employees and really changed my approach and perspective. I am looking forward to returning to work and implementing the many ideas that came out of the course, and look forward to attending future seminars from HumanNature@Work. - *Cindy Joyce, Director of Human Resources, FundQuest, Boston, MA*