

Photo: Pam LeBlanc



BY DENNIS SPARKS

## The Leader's Role in Cultivating Positive Emotions

**Emotions are contagious, and positive emotions resonate throughout an organization and into relationships with other constituents. To get extraordinary things done in extraordinary times, leaders must inspire optimal performance—and that can only be fueled with positive emotions.**

— James Kouzes & Barry Posner

**L**eaders' joy and enthusiasm are contagious. So, too, is their sense of possibility and of hopefulness. Likewise, leaders' sadness, anxiety, anger, fear, cynicism, and resignation are contagious. Consequently, leaders' emotions spread throughout a school or school system when one member of the school community picks them up like a virus and wordlessly carries them to others.

In *Primal Leadership: Learning to Lead with Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee use "resonant" to describe leaders whose positive emotions create similar feelings in others and "dissonant" for leaders whose negative feelings create downward flows of emotions and energy, a condition that some have called a "slow death spiral." "The fundamental task of leaders," they argue, "is to prime good feelings in those they lead. That occurs when a leader creates a resonance—a reservoir of positivity that frees the best in people. At its

root, then, the primal job of leadership is emotional."

A first step in addressing this issue is for leaders to honestly assess their emotional state to determine where they stand along a continuum from hopeful, positive, peaceful, and enthusiastic to worried, angry, cynical, and pessimistic. Courageous leaders may also ask staff members to give them anonymous feedback in this area to better understand how others perceive them and how their emotions affect the school community.

No matter where leaders find themselves along such a continuum, research in positive psychology ([www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu](http://www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu)) suggests that individuals can increase their personal well-being and sense of happiness by cultivating gratitude and more consistently using their strengths in their work. A simple research-based technique that leaders can use to increase their gratitude is to note in writing at the end of each day three things for which they are grateful. Practicing this discipline for as little as six weeks has been shown to produce positive emotional effects. Other related research indicates that the development and application of "signature strengths," particularly when used to achieve purposes beyond one's self-interest, fosters emotional satisfaction. Psychologist Martin Seligman provides a self-assessment inventory of signature strengths that can be viewed at [www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu](http://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu). (More will be said about cultivating positive energy in my next column.)

When leaders foster positive emotions in themselves and others, they lead through learning.

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