

UNIVERSITY *of* WASHINGTON

Total Talent Management

Changing the Way You Think

BE BOUNDLESS

A large, bold, white letter 'W' logo, which is the primary branding element of the University of Washington, positioned in the bottom right corner of the page.

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Changing the Way You Think

One of the simplest ways to relieve stress and feel better about ourselves is to change the way we think about things in our lives. Having a positive attitude allows a person to change their own lives because it shows that they have an understanding of their surroundings and feel confident enough to use them to their advantage. But if we hide behind negative thoughts and allow our environment to make us sad or depressed, we may never have the drive to reach for our goals and ambitions.

Shifting from “What’s Wrong?” to “What’s Right?”



One of the first things that can ruin a positive attitude is looking at a situation and only noticing the negative aspects, or the “What’s Wrong” side. Since the main focus of appreciative inquiry is being positive and aiming towards goals, a pessimistic attitude won’t get anyone very far. When presented with a problem, take a few minutes and look at both sides of the problem. Make a mental list of everything that is positive about the situation before touching on the negative aspects. You’ll find that any situation won’t appear as bad as we think when we notice the positive first.

Keys to shifting our thoughts:

- Avoid the “all or nothing” thinking – deciding a situation only has two sides.
- Realize the difference between being right and being happy.
- Avoid over-generalizing a situation – focus on details.

Suggested Activity

Consider working through the following activity with your team.

Estimated Time	10 minutes
Topic Objective	Learning to notice what is wrong as well as what is right.
Topic Summary	Shifting From “What’s Wrong?” to “What’s Right?” Recognize both sides of a situation – what can be wrong and what can be right.
Materials Required	Wrong vs. Right handout (below)
Planning Checklist	None
Recommended Activity	Complete the handout individually. Discuss your ideas with the rest of the class.
Stories to Share	Share any relevant personal stories.

Delivery Tips	Ask for volunteers to share their ideas.
Review Questions	How does seeing things as one way or the other affect our attitude?

Worksheet: Wrong vs. Right

Sometimes we can look at a situation as wrong or right. Sometimes we find similarities in each situation we come across. Think about your current job position. What do you find wrong with it? What do you find right with it? Make your notes on the lines provided.

What's Wrong?

What's Right?

What key elements are identified in each set of situations?

It's Not Eliminating Mistakes-It's Holding up Successes

A common misconception that people make is that being positive or progressive means they cannot make mistakes nor have faults. This, of course, is untrue. Mistakes happen all the time, and although they can sometimes be prevented, they cannot be stopped altogether. The key is to learn from your mistakes and then focus on the successes that follow them.

When a child falls off their bike before learning to ride, we do not focus on how many times they fell, but celebrate when they ride down the sidewalk on their own. Being positive doesn't mean we eliminate mistakes or problems, we just learn to focus on the achievements we reach. Success leads to more success when we are focused on the positive.

Positive Language Will Affect People's Thinking

From a young age we have learned that positive language has more effect on us than negativity. When we tell ourselves *"I can't do that"* or *"I'll never finish this"*, we normally find ourselves to be right. But if we use more positive and influential phrases and language, we find ourselves feeling more confident and ready to handle any situation. Positive words encourage positive thinking, so add some *"I can..."* and *"I'm great"* phrases to your vocabulary! Positivity is contagious, so don't be afraid to share it with others and encourage them to think positive too.

Using positive language:

- Avoid negatives, such as *"can't"* or *"won't"*
- Reassure yourself and remind yourself of your abilities
- Compliment yourself – *"Good job"* and *"Well done"*

Limit or Remove Negative Phrasing

As we've said before, positive words encourage positive thinking. The same goes for negative phrasing – when we allow ourselves to use negative language, our thoughts become negative. Studies have shown that there are five key phrases that any person should remove from their vocabulary in order to ban negative language.

- **Just** – This word limits our accomplishments and devalues our skills. By saying phrases such as *"I'm just an accountant"* or *"I just work in customer service"* can make anyone feel unhappy in their job.
- **Try** – This word can often give us an excuse to fail. We will 'try' to accomplish something, but if we don't succeed then it's not our fault. We either do something or we don't.

- **Can't** – This word is often used when a person does not want to take the effort to reach a goal or accomplishment. Replace this word with a mental action plan on how you can act on your goals.
- **Impossible** – This word is normally used when we are faced with something big and overwhelming. However, anything can seem possible if broken down into smaller, more attainable jobs. Anything can be accomplished when we take things one step at a time.
- **Someday**- This word can have the same problem as 'try' – it sets us up to allow failure. When we plan to reach our goals "someday", we are giving ourselves permission to procrastinate. Set a timeline for your goals and stick to them.

Case Study

Stacy was angry that her manager had decided to give her another long project to complete. "Didn't he see how many mistakes I made last time?" She became more frustrated when she felt like she did not have enough time to finish and would have to turn it in late. Stacy was ready to give up on the whole thing. When she spoke to her manager again, he told her that she always did a great job and that he had faith that she could complete this project successfully.

Stacy immediately began to feel better about it and decided to have a more positive outlook. She remembered the success she had on the last project and kept reminding herself she can do a great job. When she began to feel negative again, she just remembered her manager's words. When she turned in the final project, on time, she realized her critical thinking almost got the best of her.

Suggested Activity

Consider working through the following activity with your team.

Estimated Time	5 minutes
Topic Objective	Outline the Changing the Way You Think case study.
Topic Summary	Case Study Discuss how changing the way we think and perceive things can affect our choices and decisions.
Materials Required	None.
Planning Checklist	None.
Recommended Activity	Discuss the results of the case study. How did the manager's words help Stacy?
Stories to Share	Share any relevant personal/professional story.
Delivery Tips	Encourage everyone to participate.
Review Questions	Why was Stacy so negative about the project?

Further Study

To learn more about appreciative inquiry, consider our in-person offerings such as, [Building a Positive Work Culture](#), [Courageous Collaboration](#), and [Increasing Your Influence](#). Further trainings to develop Organizational Excellence will be shared here in the Leadership Café, on all of the competencies found in our [Competency Guide](#). Subscribe now to [The Learning Lab](#), an online platform featuring Business Skills & Productivity, Leadership Development, and Office 365, powered by Skillssoft Percipio and customized for UW learners.