An Old Sea Dog Can Learn New Tricks—Power Reframes and Feedforward

My approach as a change consultant has transformed radically over the past twenty-five years. I’ve replaced a number of my problem-focused tools with strategies that focus more on solutions. I’ve incorporated brain science to make my approach more energizing, memorable and useful. I love my work now more than ever, and my clients do as well. Through my work with individuals and teams all over the world, I’ve gradually developed the Energize approach to leadership and guiding positive change. This approach changes lives. How does it work? I’ll explain by sharing a true story.

It’s December 2008. I’m in a conference room in The Mariner’s House in downtown Boston, an inn sailors have been visiting for over 160 years. You can practically smell the salt in the air and feel the roll of the ship underneath your feet. I’m facilitating an inter-sector collaboration event with forty-five members of the US Coast Guard. I look up to see Bill Schenkelberg, my client and the special agent in charge of the Coast Guard Investigative Services, approach me. He’s one of those rare clients who really understands both the nitty-gritty challenges his agents face and the concepts of positive change. He and his eight agents are the hosts for this event, to which they’ve invited several other Coast Guard sectors. He has a worried look on his face.

“Some of these guys look tense,” Bill says. “Most of them only see my men when we’re investigating somebody within the Coast Guard. When we show up at their offices, we may be there to arrest someone. It’s like feeling worried every time you see a police car’s lights flashing. Bob, are you still confident that we can pull this thing off?”

I survey the room, looking at the inflow of sturdy sailors of all ages. These people look like they could face down the perfect storm, and I doubt they would tolerate anything that is not eminently practical.

Looking back at Bill, I put as much confidence into my voice as I can and say, “It worked with the Transit Authority, and they had a much tougher situation. These are good people here who are passionate about their jobs. We’re using language designed to activate helpful brain chemistry. It’s powerful stuff. Plus, we’re giving them a chance to really collaborate, which is in everybody’s best interest.”

Minutes later, as Bill begins his introduction, I notice a burly, weather-beaten man with his arms crossed and a look of real skepticism on his face. Let's call him “Mike.” Seeing Mike’s dubious expression makes me worry about how someone this skeptical can be convinced to give the process a try. I now need to reassure myself. To do that, I bring to mind memories about the good preparation Bill and I had, and then I begin to relax.

During our previous work together, Bill and his crew of eight agents had proven to be as tough and resilient mentally as they were physically and emotionally. They had learned the brain science I’d taught them. They’d really grasped the concepts on how to craft language that motivates others rather than scaring them into fight, flight or freeze (known as F responses). Most importantly, they had created Power Reframes about the value of each sector and the importance of collaborating with each other.

To prepare for this meeting at The Mariner’s House, we had first come up with a list of topics they wanted input on. However, we knew people tended to get defensive and argumentative when these topics were brought up. So, we needed to create very compelling Power Reframes
to outweigh the defensiveness. We had brainstormed a list of how collaboration would benefit all of the different sectors. Then, we had chosen two or three of the most important benefits for each collaboration topic they wanted input on. Bill and his eight agents had practiced presenting each topic, always starting by mentioning the benefits to help energize excitement and interest before mentioning the actual topic.

I now watch the audience with bated breath as Bill’s crew presents their Power Reframe presentations. I sigh in relief as I see that most people in the audience are relaxing. Many are starting to smile, and to my excitement, I even see nods of agreement. Throughout this first discussion, there is an almost tangible spirit of openness and sharing. During our break, Bill and I agree that things are going well. Bill is guardedly optimistic.

Later in the training, I lead the group in a **feedforward** activity. People are mingling energetically, asking others for ideas to help them improve their area of the Coast Guard. Instead of participating, Mike approaches me, still looking skeptical.

In a deep growl, he asks, “What’s the point of this positive stuff, anyway? Does this activity really make any difference?”

I take a deep breath to keep myself calm and replied, “In ten minutes”—I gesture to the group—“they will tell you the answer to your question. Yet, I can tell you now, if you’d like.” At his nod, I continue with as much confidence as I can muster. “My experience and many scientific studies have shown that people are much more open to new ideas when they build on the strengths they have and focus on positive outcomes. Obviously, at times, we need to address problems head-on, but, a vast majority of the time, focusing on solutions is faster, easier and a whole lot more fun.” Mike’s expression softens slightly, but he still looks a bit dubious. He does, however, join in the activity, which gives me hope.

After the feedforward activity is over, I ask each individual in the room to share one word about what the activity was like for them. The energy builds as they excitedly throw out words like “enlightening,” “engaging,” “fun,” “educational,” “helpful,” “insightful” and “energizing.” I look at Mike to see if he is satisfied with their responses. He nods at me thoughtfully. The smiles and creative ideas have understandably built far more credibility than I could have during my conversation earlier with him.

At the end of the event, Coast Guard members approach me to share how the experience has impacted them. One person says his group work has “built bridges”; another comments, “I now see how much we need each other”; and yet another says, “I have great ideas for better cooperation.” And the praise continues. Bill and I are happy about the event and talk excitedly about next steps to keep the momentum going.

The icing on the cake, however, is when Mike walks up to me and asks, “Can I have your business card? This would be really helpful in my sector, too.”

*The views expressed in this publication belong solely to the author. They do not reflect the official position of the US Coast Guard.*

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What About Bob?

Bob Faw is the author of *Energize: Ignite Passion and Performance with User Friendly Brain Tools*. He is also a motivational speaker and is the chief energizing officer at the Matchbox Group, a positive change consultancy. Bob has been helping organizations with the people side of business since 1988, where he guides energizing change by focusing on solutions. To connect with Bob, e-mail him at bob@matchboxgroup.com or call 603-882-2190. Learn more from free videos and blog posts at EnergizePerformance.com.

Sources Used in This E-book:


Other References Used in Bob Faw’s Energize Trainings:


