



The Monthly Coach - May 2023

Leadership Edge is exhibiting at:
Inspiring Leaders, Birmingham ICC, 8-9 June
Optimus MAT Excellence, London, 29 June
Please come and say hello if you're there!

“What we see depends mainly on what we look for.” – John Lubbock

With exams, statutory assessments and report-writing approaching, our learners’ strengths and weaknesses become even more firmly fixed under the spotlight. But this month, we’d like to invite you to consider your role as a Spotlight Director for staff within school, too: how often, and in what proportion, do you direct light on colleagues’ talents and challenges?

Humans are neurologically hardwired to focus on negatives (as most people who have done a 360 will, I’m sure, testify!). Evolutionary research explains this is to keep us safe from danger: the more aware we are of our risks and vulnerability, the more prepared we are should action be necessary. However, we all know the potential damage to our professional impact and personal wellbeing if we are led too much by our negativity bias: we create a picture of deficit, a sense of lacking and a dip in self-esteem. [Click here](#) for some great research and tips on how to overcome it.

On the other extreme, we’ve been warned of the risks of ‘toxic positivity’: using shallow ‘feel-good’ messages in the hope these create a picture of optimism, a sense of success and a rise in morale. Of course, this does not work either. We are critical beings and will not tolerate insincerity for very long; it does not make us feel safe. We ought not then to re-paint a glossy reality but rather to shine a light on it, all of it: the good, the bad and the ugly!

HOW TO AVOID TOXIC POSITIVITY

INSTEAD OF SAYING...	SAY...
✗ "You'll get over it."	✔ "It's hard but I believe in you."
✗ "Don't be so negative!"	✔ "It's okay to feel bad sometimes."
✗ "Always look at the bright side!"	✔ "It can be difficult to see the good in this situation, but we'll make sense of it when we can."
✗ "Failure is not an option."	✔ "Failure is part of growth."
✗ "Think happy thoughts!"	✔ "Things can get really tough, I am here for you."
✗ "It could be worse."	✔ "Sometimes we experience bad things. How can I support you?"

SOURCE: TANGLAU MENTAL HEALTH

“Daring leaders say the unsaid, unsurface what's been pushed down, and bring to light the stuff that's in the shadows and in the corners.” -Brené Brown

So how do we balance the need to shine a light on the challenges colleagues need to face, whilst maintaining (or building) their self-confidence and morale?

Coaching provides an excellent vehicle for this. It provides a space of non-judgement, where difficult questions are asked, and answers are deeply absorbed with curiosity and compassion. For example, “I’m hearing that’s a real challenge for you. What would need to be different for you to feel more confident about this?” and of course, “What’s the first step in making that happen?” etc.

The result is that our colleague feels heard, valued and able to shape and direct the steps of improvement themselves. They feel safe and in control.

“We are unafraid.” – Juli Copley, Headteacher of Radley’s Primary School, a Leadership Edge school since 2019.



If you’re stuck in a culture, team or working relationship which seems overly focused on either the positives or negatives, perhaps you could consider these questions:

1. What proportion of your time is spent shining a light on positives versus negatives? Does this happen in some situations more than others?
2. Within a negative discussion, are you taking time to really pay attention to the reality of what others are seeing? Are you curious for long enough? Or would it be beneficial to shine a light on their perspective a bit longer?
3. Within a positive discussion, could you be at risk of glossing over the ‘ugly’ underneath? What is holding you back from shining a light on the reality?

To grow and develop, we need to help colleagues face reality but do so through an approach of support, trustworthiness and psychological safety. We grow with light, nourishment and protection from damage. The light must therefore come from a deep-seated principle of “I mean you no harm” and that will be seen and felt by those around you.

“Nothing can dim the light that shines from within” - Maya Angelou.

We are all learners. Just as we encourage our students to feel both proud of their abilities, and motivated to improve further, we can benefit our colleagues, and ourselves, by ensuring we shine our light fairly and compassionately.

Brightest wishes

Catherine Hulme
Director
Leadership Edge

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If you have enjoyed this think-piece, you can find our back-catalogue [here](#)

We invite you to take our **free 3 minute self-reflection quiz all about you** and what's stopping you from being the best you can be! Results direct to your inbox:
<https://assess.coach/leadershipedge>

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