

# Starvation in Corporate Malaysia

*A paradigm shift needed to get more out of  
employees*

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I can't believe it. We are in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and we have starvation in corporate Malaysia. I'm not talking about food-deprived starvation. Rather, I'm talking about another type of human need – the need to be motivated through positive reinforcement at work. My observation is that rather undesirable management behaviours are tolerated, and even accepted, in Malaysia. This is based on a paradigm of “push and drive harder to achieve results.” But it need not be so. Let me explain.

Before this article is branded as being “soft and fluffy”, let me share with you some tangible results. I draw on the research conducted by the authors of the Carrot Principle, Adrian Gostick and Chester Elton. Companies that most effectively recognise their employees:

**Positive reinforcement yields tangible benefits**

- Have a return on equity triple that of those companies which do the worst on recognition
- Have higher customer satisfaction, employee satisfaction and employee retention rates. These scores will translate into dollars and cents

TMI’s experience over the last 35 years continues to reinforce the positive business results that are achieved by adopting its philosophy of Putting People First.

Let’s now be clear about what we are talking about. The core question is, “How can we affect people’s behaviour to have them achieve more?” We have two choices - positive reinforcement or negative reinforcement. Positive reinforcement involves some form of recognition for good work. It might be positive feedback, a simple “thank you” or a team celebratory morning tea. This is the “carrot” approach to achieving more through people. The aim is to have people do more of the behaviour for which they are being recognised. Negative reinforcement, on the other hand, is fear-based. It is the stick. It is the threat of negative consequences for not completing a task to target or to quality. The behavioural consequences of negative reinforcement are that people will perform to the minimum standard to avoid the negative consequences, e.g., a scolding, from recurring.

**Positive reinforcement encourages people to work harder**

**Negative reinforcement encourages people to do just what is required**

Now here is the main point behind this article. I ask employees, “How good is your manager at giving positive feedback?” A common answer is, “Positive feedback – what’s that?” I believe that managers are much too frugal with positive reinforcement. They spend too little time creating a positive culture in their teams or organisations, where people feel motivated and energised. This situation is not restricted to Malaysia. It is a common management malady around the world. However, this is not an excuse that we should hide behind. Rather, it should be a rally-cry for Malaysian companies to say that they want to be better than the rest of the world in building energised, motivated, high performing employees. The benefits to the nation, to companies and to individuals are great, so it is definitely a worthwhile rally-cry!

There are many really good bosses in Malaysia. They have developed motivated, high performing teams that will go the extra mile. I have had the pleasure of working with a number of these teams. A common factor among these bosses is that they have positive, people-focused management styles. They achieve results through positive reinforcement. They create a positive emotional connection with their employees. These people use a different language. When I ask them about how things are progressing, they start talking about their people.

**Engage your people to implement your plans**

On the other hand, when I talk to less effective people in leadership and management positions, they talk about strategy. I am writing a book with Paul Hutton, currently General Manager of the Sydney Hilton. This is the most profitable Hilton outside of North America. Paul has been successful in building highly engaged teams, enviable levels of customer satisfaction and great financial results in four countries – Kuwait, Romania, Malaysia and now Australia. His results are definitely not a fluke! Paul focuses on people, people, people. I said to him, “Paul, do you have a business plan? You never mention strategies and plans.” He looked at me and said, “of course we have a plan. My role is to engage people to do a top class job and to follow it through.”

**Negative management styles get results – with human collateral damage**

Outweighing the good bosses like Paul are the ones who are still in the very old hard-driving, achieve-the-results-or-else school. I was talking to a manager who works for a large local company. He works for a pretty high profile boss. I asked him, what it is like to work for your boss. His eyes rolled. He said, “Shouting is like breathing to my boss. We are scolded in front of our colleagues if our boss is not happy with our performance.” I had heard the same story from different people. I asked this manager how people felt when they were on the receiving end of the boss’s tongue lashing. He gave the classic answer, “I have given up. I just do what I have to do in my job.” I asked one more question, “Does your boss positively recognise the work of his managers?” The short answer was, “rarely.” This boss has developed a reputation for getting results. However, human beings are the collateral damage in the process of achieving those results. And, this person’s style begs the question, “If a more positive style was adopted, would better results be achieved?”

## The positive reinforcement cultural paradox

If you delve a little more deeply into why Malaysian managers don't give positive reinforcement, you will discover a cultural paradox. I was visiting someone's house and started talking to a young 19 year old university student. She was Chinese-Malaysian. I asked her what she did. She was studying medicine in Paris. After talking to her for a while, I turned to her father and said, "Your daughter is very intelligent," to which he replied, "No, she is not that intelligent at all!" This is the cultural paradox in Asia. When the current generation of managers were brought up, it was in an environment where parents did not praise them, lest they get "big heads." However, they were certainly told when their performance was not up to their parents' expectations. The paradox is that as human beings, we appreciate and are motivated by positive feedback. Some people need more positive reinforcement than others and there is not a "one size fits all" approach. However, the general principle applies – employees in corporate Malaysia appreciate and are motivated by positive reinforcement.

So here is a simple test for the coming month. Start up a "Pat-o-Meter". This very simple Meter has two separate dials. The first is the number of pats on the back and positive feedback that you GIVE to your colleagues. The second is the number of pats on the back and positive feedback that you RECEIVE from your boss and colleagues. If your Pat-o-Meter shows a healthy positive score, congratulations! There is a good chance that you are on your way to being part of a high performing team.

If your score is low, then you and your department are likely to be one of the throngs in corporate Malaysia that are starved of recognition. If this is the case, check to see whether people are coming to work full of energy, ready to go the extra mile or whether they are doing just what is required and talking of burn-out.

If you score low on giving other people recognition and positive feedback, now is the time to start. A simple and cost-free starting point to end the starvation among the people around you is to learn the power of two words, a genuinely delivered – "thank you". Use these magic words consistently and watch what happens. Until the next edition!

PS. **Thank you** for reading. Email me if you have any comments or suggestions. I will thank you even more for the trouble that you take!

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