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The Positive School *Manifesto*

By Jon Gordon

You would have to live on another planet not to notice the plethora of books and articles discussing the importance of developing a positive school culture. The research is clear. Positive educators, positive schools, and positive engaged students produce positive results.

However, if building a positive school is so important and beneficial, then we are left to wonder, “Why aren’t more schools, more positive?” Why are there not more teachers skipping through the halls, smiling at their colleagues and loving their job? Why does negativity sabotage teamwork, careers, morale and performance?

The answer is simple; you don’t build a positive school by osmosis and it clearly doesn’t happen by sitting around, holding hands and singing Kumbaya. Successful, positive schools with positive educators and positive cultures are created like anything else. Through a set of principles, processes, systems and habits that are ingrained in the culture and each educator and student. Positive schools aren’t born. They are developed by positive leaders. And when you build a positive school, *culture drives behavior and behavior drives habits*.



Positive Leaders are Required

In my work with schools, businesses and professional sports teams I have found that in order to build a positive culture the leader must *drive the bus*. They must make their organizational culture a priority, lead the initiative and be engaged in the process. If the leader is not driving the bus positive change won’t happen. But when the CEO, school principal, head football coach, or team leader decides its necessary to build a positive culture and they commit to the process then amazing things result. An example of this is Coach Mike Smith, the head football coach of the Atlanta Falcons. Last season before Coach Smith’s arrival the Falcons team culture was in shambles and the organization was filled with negativity. Mike was hired to turn things around and to do this he knew he needed to change the culture. As part of this process Coach Smith gave a copy of *The Energy Bus: 10 Rules to Fuel Your Life, Work and Team with Positive Energy* to every player and coach and he also brought me in to speak to the team to reinforce the positive message found in the book. Coach Smith also engaged in a number of initiatives to build trust, improve communication, weed out negativity and build a winning team. He was and is actively involved in every aspect of the process and if you asked him he would tell you it’s his #1 priority. Within 6 months Coach Smith has completely changed the culture, mindset and actions of his team. He drove the bus and led the way.

I have seen the same results with numerous principals who decided to drive the bus and create a positive school. I've worked with a number of school districts where Principals have utilized *The Energy Bus* and it's principles to dramatically improve their culture, school morale, teacher performance and student engagement—all within a year's time. They drove the bus, lead the way and it made all the difference.



Build a Positive Leadership Team

Once the principal is committed to the process of building a positive school it is essential then to build a positive leadership team that shares this commitment, focus and purpose. I have met too many principals who have tried to create a positive school culture by themselves. To build a positive school fueled by positive energy, the principal must invite his/her leadership team on the bus and develop a shared vision, focus, purpose and direction for the school. The leadership team must join the principal in making their organizational culture a top priority and be engaged and committed to the process. After all, positive energy trickles up and sideways through an organization but it flows powerfully from the top down: from principals, to their leadership team, to teachers to students to parents. To get the leadership team on the bus I often recommend a workshop where the team is taken through a process that generates a powerful vision, road map, action plan and set of initiatives to move the school in the right direction.



Develop a Fleet of Bus Drivers

Leadership is not just about what you do but also what you can inspire, encourage and empower others to do. To build a positive school it's not enough to just be a bus driver yourself. You must also develop a fleet of bus drivers in your school. This involves a process where a united leadership team shares the school's vision with their teachers and students, invites them on *the bus* and then encourages and empowers them to drive their own bus. The leadership team explains that it's their job to create a positive environment where teachers and students can perform at their highest level and it's each teacher's and student's job to stay positive and utilize their gifts and strengths to contribute to the goals and vision of the school. Individual conversations should also take place between the principal and teachers and teachers and their students. Each person needs to understand the school vision and identify how their personal vision, job and effort contribute to the overall vision. When this happens, instead of one bus with one driver, you now have a fleet of bus drivers all moving in the same direction. This generates a tremendous amount of power and momentum in the school.



Practice the Secret to Winning

In a world driven by test scores, budgets and short term results building a positive, successful school requires leaders to have a long term vision and an understanding that too many of their counterparts focus on the outcome rather than the process. They focus on what is urgent rather than what matters. They focus on the fruit of the tree and ignore the root—the culture, trust, people and positive energy of the school. Leaders who run successful, positive schools over a long period of time know that when you take care of the root of the tree you will always be pleased with the fruit it supplies. However, if you ignore the root, eventually the tree will dry up and so will the fruit. Of course you have to measure outcomes. You have to measure results. But you do so with the knowledge that the outcome is simply a by-product of your culture, teamwork, vision, talent, innovation, execution and commitment to your people and process. You know that it's not the numbers that drive the people but the people that drive the numbers. A great example of this is John Wooden, the legendary UCLA basketball coach. He never focused on winning. He focused on the culture of his team, the character of his players, winning teamwork, fundamentals and daily improvement. As a result he won... a lot.



Weed out Negativity

It's the biggest problem in schools today and the biggest obstacle to creating a positive school. Yet, it's like the elephant in the room. Everyone sees it but they ignore it—allowing negativity to ruin far too many careers, teams and schools. Not anymore. To build a positive winning culture you must deal with the cost of negativity head on. At work you'll likely face organizational and individual negativity. You'll have to deal with processes and systems that create poor communication and negative interactions. In other cases negativity will arise from negative teacher, students and parents. That's why I encourage every individual and school to *ask* and *answer* the following question:

How are we going to deal with negativity, challenges and energy vampires (negative people)?

Dwight Cooper, the CEO of PPR, a nurse staffing company that was voted one of the best places to work by SHRM, asked himself this question about negativity and his answer was a company policy he called *The No Complaining Rule*. Cooper decided to deal with the subtle negativity that acts like a cancer in an organization. The rule states that “Employees are not allowed to mindlessly complain to their co-workers. If they have a complaint they can take it to a manager or someone who can do something about the problem, BUT they must also offer one or two possible solutions.” The intention is to eliminate mindless complaining which leads to a toxic work environment and encourage justified complaints that lead to new ideas, innovation and success.

Cooper is not alone in the fight to cultivate a positive culture and weed out negativity. Colorado Permanente Medical Group chose to deal with negativity by letting go of 10-20 negative doctors each year increasing morale and profits in the process. Turns out the negative doctors were creating a poor work environment and scaring away patients.² First Transit dealt with the low morale and negativity of its bus drivers by initiating a positive reinforcement process that required managers to praise drivers for their positive behaviors and positive actions. The result was less absenteeism, enhanced morale and profits. And a school district in New Jersey recently let go of a few negative teachers and dramatically improved their morale in the process.

Regardless of your situation or the source of negativity it is critical that you take action to cultivate the positive and weed out the negative. Like a garden you'll have to get rid of weeds from time to time and let go of your negative people but the best way to deal with the weeds is to create a positive environment where the good grass grows healthy and strong eventually to the point where the weeds have no where to grow. In this spirit you'll want to ingrain positive energy into your systems, process and culture and eliminate negative energy wherever you find it. From hiring practices to recognition programs to communication processes you'll want to identify the people and the gaps in your processes that are contributing to negativity. You will want to address these gaps and incorporate positive strategies and best practices that are proven to hire, develop and fuel positive, engaged teachers.



Get The Right Teachers on *The Bus* and The Wrong Teachers off the Bus

Building a positive school always begins with selecting the right people. In the classic book *Good to Great* Jim Collins says to build a successful organization and team you must get the right people on the bus. His research shows that great companies and organizations do this. They get the right people and put them in the right seats. However a bigger question that is not in his book is "Who are the right people?" After all in order to get the right people on the bus you must identify who the right people are, right? The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company asked this very question and they have saved millions of dollars and became a leader in their industry by identifying the key characteristics, strengths and traits of each job/position at the hotel and then creating a benchmark that every potential employee is measured against. Utilizing a company called *Talent Plus* they interview each potential employee and then identify how they measure up to the benchmark of the position they are applying for. As a result they are better able identify who the right people are for each job at the hotel.

It's not enough to say that we need to get the right teachers on the bus. We must identify who the right teachers are, make sure they are positive and create a process that gets them on the bus. The key is to identify the characteristics of your best teachers, benchmark these characteristics and seek to hire teachers with the same traits.

We must also make sure we let the wrong teachers off the bus. Too many principals know who their negative teachers are but they don't know what to do with them, so they do nothing which leads to dangerous consequences. Like a cancer, one energy vampire can spread negativity throughout a team and school. While you should give them every chance to get on the energy bus and contribute to your positive culture, if they don't make the necessary changes, then at some point you'll have to let them off the bus. One principal told me that he invited all his teachers on the bus by sending bus tickets via www.TheEnergyBus.com and everyone but two teachers accepted the invitation. By the end of the year the two who didn't get on the bus were on another bus and everyone benefited. It may not sound positive to let someone off the bus but it's essential to create a positive culture. In this case the principal said that inviting everyone on the bus and letting the wrong teachers off the bus improved school morale dramatically.



Fill the Void

With the right teachers on your bus you want to make sure you communicate consistently and effectively with them so they always know where the bus is going. Peter Drucker said that 60% of management problems are the result of faulty communication. This is because where there is a void or gap in communication, negative energy will always fill it. When people feel fearful or uncertain or unheard they start thinking the worse and act accordingly. And as negative energy fills more voids and grows in these gaps, the positive energy can't flow through the organization. By designing systems that enhance communication you eliminate the gaps and allow positive energy to flow through the school. Companies such as PPR, for example, address these gaps by hosting company wide weekly Monday morning 8:31am meetings. The meeting lasts 10 minutes and everyone in the company is briefed on everything each department will be working on that week. Consider it a company's version of the football huddle. You can do something similar in your school. Teachers not only want to be seen and heard but also desire to hear, see and be part of the team. Brief daily and weekly meetings allow principals to communicate with their teachers, share their vision and values, celebrate successes, recognize individuals for their accomplishments and infuse their teachers with team spirit—and this makes all the difference.



Love your Passengers

It's a simple fact. When you care about your teachers and students they are more likely to stay on the bus and work harder, with more loyalty and greater positive energy. In turn they are more likely to share their positive energy with your community and create a powerful school spirit.

Just the other day I was speaking at a hospital and was told that they were doing patient satisfaction surveys as a way to improve nurse performance. "What about nurse satisfaction surveys," I asked. "No we're not doing that," they said. The problem was clear. Measuring patient satisfaction will not make nurses more energized, positive and attentive. Patient satisfaction will go up when nurse satisfaction goes up. It works with same way in education. I have found that the best schools also have the best culture where teachers are valued, listened to and cared for and in turn these teachers value, care for and serve their students. Great teaching begins with a positive culture where teachers are engaged and energized at work and enjoy sharing positive, contagious energy with their students.

So how do we love our staff? The ways are endless and practical and here are a few to get started.

- *Treat them Like a Person, Not a Number*—The number one question every employee in every school is asking is "Do you care about me and can I trust you?" Employees want to know if you care about them. If you do they will be more likely to stay on the bus and work with you. If you think this sounds corny consider that one of the questions in Gallup's engagement survey is "Does your boss care about you?" Employees are more engaged at work when their boss cares about them.
- *Develop a Relationship with Them*—Andy Stanley said "Rules without relationship lead to rebellion." Far too many leaders share rules with their employees but they don't have a relationship with them. So what happens? The people rebel and they disengage from their jobs and the mission of the school. I have had many principals approach me and tell me that I helped them realize they needed to focus less on rules and invest more in their relationships at school. The result was a dramatic increase in team performance and productivity. To develop a relationship with your employees you need to listen to them, make time for them, recognize them, collaborate with them, invest in them and mentor them. And, when relationships are created they stay – because they have invested in others and others have invested in them.

- *Appreciate Them*—The main reason why people leave their jobs is because they don't feel appreciated. When you love your passengers you thank them and appreciate them for the work they do. Doug Conant, the CEO of Campbell Soup for example has written over 16,000 thank you notes to employees over the last 7 years and created a very positive business in the process. Who do you need to thank today? How can you show your team you appreciate them?



Drive with a Bigger Purpose

Loving your passengers keeps your people on the bus, but when you drive with purpose they will help you push it when the bus breaks down. The fact is every school will face adversity and challenges and be tested on their journey. And the answer to these tests is a positive culture filled with purpose driven people.

The research shows that people and organizations are most energized when they are focused on a bigger purpose beyond themselves. Howard Shultz, founder of Starbucks, for instance, told his people from the beginning that we are not in the coffee business serving people but in the people business serving coffee. He inspired his employees with a sense of purpose to make a difference.

Unfortunately there are far too many people in education who are hopeless and purpose-less. They have forgotten their WHY. They have forgotten the reason why they became educators in the first place. This is fueled by the glaring misconception that in order to live a life of purpose we have to leave our jobs and go solve world hunger, or feed the homeless or move to Africa or start a charity. While these are all noble causes and there are people called to do this, for many of us our bigger purpose can be found in the here and now, in the jobs we have, right under our noses. And when we find and live this purpose at work it will provide the ultimate fuel for a meaningful and successful life and career.

I recently spoke at a conference to a large number of bus drivers. Ironically, when the conference organizers booked me to speak they didn't even know I had written a new book, *The Energy Bus*, a story about a bus driver named Joy who changes the life of a passenger who rides on her bus. After my talk I met a gentleman who told me that he was a pastor of a small local church. He said he originally started driving a school bus for the insurance benefits. But after a few years of driving a bus, it occurred to him that he was having a bigger impact on people as a bus driver than as a pastor at his church. Wow.

The truth is we don't have to go on a mission trip to be on a mission. Every day we can live our mission at work. I heard of a janitor who worked at NASA and felt his bigger purpose was to put a man on the moon. I met a hairstylist who saves lives. I met an administrative assistant who has become the Chief Energy Officer of her company. I heard of a grocery store bagger who inspires his customers with positive notes in their bags. I know a Popeye's Chicken employee named Edith in the Atlanta Airport who makes millions of air traveler's smile. And I know many educators who fuel up with purpose each day and impact the lives of thousands of children.

Ordinary people, doing ordinary jobs with an extra-ordinary purpose.

In any job our purpose waits for us to find it and live. It's not the job we have but the energy and purpose we bring to it that matters. Purpose is the ultimate fuel that energizes your culture, keeps your people stay focused and perpetually moves your bus towards a destination called significance. Every school and educator must know and live their purpose. When you know why you do what you do and you fuel up with this purpose each day you live and work with more power. You bring a greater passion, energy and spirit to your school. And you make the right decisions because every decision and action that flows from your purpose and is based on your WHY, is always the right decision. For example if a school and their staff decides that their purpose is to educate, empower and inspire students and every decision they make is based on this purpose then they will always do what's in the best interest of their students.

To identify your school's purpose and to fuel your educators with it, I suggest you host a Positive School workshop with one of our facilitators where your team can roll up their sleeves and clarify the vision and purpose for your school. For more information visit www.PositiveSchool.com



Zoom Focus

I've shared a number of principles, strategies and suggestions to develop a positive school. However, I am realistically aware that none of this will do any good unless you and your educators have the ability to take action and execute. As Einstein said, "Vision without execution is hallucination." The difference between a successful positive school and unsuccessful school is one word, "Execution."

You must engage in a process I call Zoom Focus where you focus on what truly matters and you tune out all the distractions that drain organizational and individual energy. I have studied a lot of leaders and organizations and what I have found is that there really aren't any secrets to success. There is no magic pill or genie that makes one school better

than another. Rather, the most successful schools do ordinary things better than everyone else. They do ordinary things with extraordinary consistency, comment, focus and positive energy.

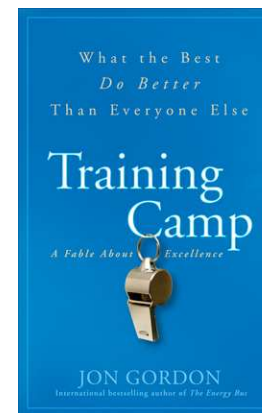
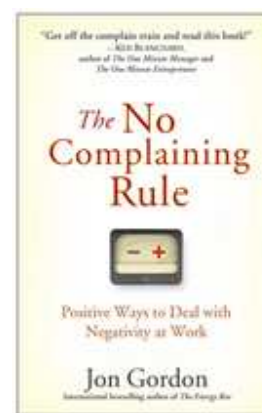
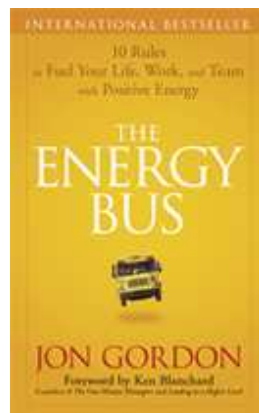
To build a positive school you must be able to not only identify your vision and purpose for your school but make it so it is ingrained in the culture, mindset and actions of your educators and students. Encouraging your educators and team to read positive books and attend workshops is one thing but translating knowledge into action and habits is another. Having the desire to be a positive school is wonderful but it won't happen unless you relentlessly focus on your culture, people, processes and systems.

As part of this process I encourage you to utilize my books *The Energy Bus* and *The No Complaining Rule* as a roadmap to build your positive culture and as a tool to empower your educators to take positive action. In addition to books we provide keynotes, workshops, training videos, lesson plans, assemblies and many free resources found at www.PositiveSchool.com that help you build a positive school, develop a fleet of bus drivers and transform your vision and purpose into action and results.

I wish you all green lights on your journey.

Stay Positive, Jon Gordon

Jon Gordon is a speaker, consultant and author of the international best seller *The Energy Bus: 10 Rules to Fuel your Life, Work and Team with Positive Energy*, *The No Complaining Rule: Positive Ways to deal with Negativity at Work* and *Training Camp: What the Best do Better than Everyone else*. Jon and his books have been featured on CNN, NBC's *Today Show* and in *Forbes*, *Fast Company*, *O Magazine*, the *US News and World Report*, *Wall Street Journal* and the *NY Times*. Clients such as NAESP, The Principal Partnership, NAPT, The Atlanta Falcons, The Jacksonville Jaguars, PGA Tour, Northwestern Mutual, Publix Super Markets, Denver Public Schools, and Campbell Soup also call on Jon to get their team "on the bus" and moving in the right direction.



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