Positive thinking philosophy: 'I can'

by Lt. Col. Charles B. Giasson

As I reflect back on my days as a commander, I can recall many lessons learned about the difficult tasks and leadership challenges the unit faced. I often wondered how the unit was able to breeze through the Annual General Inspection and keep the communications system operating 24 hours per day with severe personnel shortages. The biggest aid that helped me and the unit overcome problems was the power of positive thinking. It became a pervasive philosophy that bred confidence and enthusiasm in myself and the unit's leaders. It made counseling soldiers easier and my time in command seem to go quicker. I believe that the power of positive thinking can aid you in achieving your desired level of success.

The philosophy of positive thinking can be summed up in two words: I CAN. These two words embody the faith you have in yourself and your ability to accomplish your job. To be a positive thinker you must believe that anything is possible.

- **Set performance objectives**
- **Use good problem solving principles**
- **Self-confidence, "I can"**

Figure 1. Postive thinking principles

To see how you can apply the power of positive thinking to your life, I believe that three principles should be followed as shown in Figure 1. First, you must learn to set performance objectives for yourself. To do this, you should realistically examine your talents and analyze the opportunities and challenges you will face. In examining your talents, look closely at the negative forces or those things that cause you to fear failure. This fear of failure often hides your true abilities and causes you to aim low. Take a list of your job responsibilities and functions of your unit. Then, think of every possible objective you could accomplish and write them down on a list. Go over the list carefully, remembering not to limit yourself needlessly, and pick out seven of the best. At least one of these should deal with a problem, and one should be innovative. The rest can deal with the routine functions of accomplishing your job. Associated with each objective are specific actions you must take to accomplish it. Identifying all the actions required to accomplish your objectives will form your action plan for success. Figure 2 summarizes the process of setting performance objectives.

As a Signal company commander in the FRG, I tried the technique of setting performance objectives for the unit. I wrote out a list of twelve objectives and asked the senior NCOs in the unit to do the same. After meeting with the NCOs for several hours, we ranked a long combined list and chose the top five to publish and post on all company bulleting boards and in all the unit's operational facilities. The senior NCOs then worked out detailed action plans. We kept high visibility for the top five objectives by announcing their progress throughout the year. Individual soldiers and site chiefs were cited, as appropriate, for their part in achieving the objectives. At the end of the year, all five objectives were exceeded and everyone took pride in the accomplishment.

The second trait of successful people is their ability to consistently use good problem solving principles. Once you set your performance objectives, you are bound to encounter problems. Problems are only temporary hurdles which can be overcome using the principles shown in Figure 3. They present a challenge to your problem solving techniques. I once had a battalion commander in Europe who forced me to define what I thought my problems were as a company commander. For example, I perceived that security violations in the unit's Telecommunication Centers (TCCs) were caused by the combined problems of personnel shortages and carelessness. Both reasons seemed logical to me but failed to convince my battalion commander. He told me to study the TCC classified message handling procedures. After spending several days in all four of the unit's TCCs, I realized that there were insufficient operator and supervision checks before the release of classified messages. When I stood in front of the battalion commander one week later, we discussed the real problem behind security violations: poor procedures. I quickly found out that many of the unit's problems were not what I thought they were. So, I believe the first step in problem solving is to define your problem. Be specific in your definition and include dates, observations, names and magnitudes if applicable. Once you have correctly defined your problem, the solution may be obvious to you. Nevertheless,

- **Examine talents and opportunities**
- **List your responsibilities**
- **List all objectives**
- **Identify actions to accomplish objectives**

Figure 2. Setting performance objectives

Gen. Omar Bradley on leadership:
Leadership in a democratic Army means firmness, not harshness; understanding, not weakness; justice, not license; humaneness, not intolerance; generosity, not selfishness; pride, not egotism.

list all the possible alternative solutions you and your coworkers can dream of. You should pick the best alternatives based upon an analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of each; this may take time, but remember to never oppose a possibility you haven't personally tried.

- Define your problem
- List all possible alternative solutions
- Weigh the pros and cons of each alternative
- Pick the best alternative

Figure 3. Problem solving principles

The "I can" attitude is a result of the third important principle of self-confidence. A lack of self-confidence can easily result in failure, while an abundance of it normally results in success.

An Annual General Inspection (AGI) seems to loom as a potential monster when you are a company commander, but the "I can" attitude can turn it into a morale building experience. As a company commander, I used the AGI preparation as an opportunity to instruct the NCOs and praise the soldiers. Standards in all areas were raised and nothing less than "I can do it" was accepted. Innovative approaches were developed to improve company management. New site and company procedures were written to insure all requirements were understood and followed. Avenues of communication were opened that had not existed before. Soldiers took greater pride in their appearance and in the appearance of their work and living areas as a result.

I believe that there are four enduring qualities of those people who display self-confidence as shown in Figure 4. First, they have strong desire to achieve success and are committed to their objectives. Second, they imagine what it would be like to achieve their objectives and ignore the negative forces that cause the fear of failure. Third, and perhaps most important, they never give up. I once saw a plaque on an office wall which was entitled "Press On." The plaque read, "Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not: nothing is more common than an unsuccessful man with talent. Genius will not: unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not: the world is full of uneducated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent." Fourth, enthusiasm is an essential ingredient of self-confidence. Positive thinking and enthusiasm breed each other. When you are enthusiastic about achieving your goal, your self-confidence will grow, and you will unlock opportunities that you never dreamed existed. You may have to start small and succeed at that level first, but then you can move on to bigger things.

- Strong desire to achieve success
- Imagination
- "Never give up" attitude
- Enthusiasm

Figure 4. Qualities of self-confidence

In summary, I believe the principles of positive thinking that I have outlined can change your career and your life. If you set realistic performance objectives and use good problem solving techniques, your self-confidence and ability to succeed will grow. If I were to leave you with one thought, I would say write down your objectives on one sheet of paper and look at them every day. When you encounter roadblocks, press on. The power of positive thinking embodied in the words "I can" is unlimited!

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