

## Accessing Resourcefulness: “Go for the Green”

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Like velvet butterflies that dart from shadow to sunlight, a singular mental mindset, preceding behavior, allows an intentional move that teachers, presenters, or facilitators use to maintain safe learning environments as well as their own resilience.

Eddie Holcomb, commenting on this move in her book, *Asking the Right Questions* (2009), says “Bob Garmston introduced this activity at a workshop I attended several years ago. It is one of the most valuable techniques I have found for addressing conflicts and nonproductive behavior in groups.”

*Accessing Resourcefulness* addresses the all too frequent misunderstandings, tensions and blame that can occur in human interactions. Of course, misunderstandings are common in the very fluid interactions among humans. Too frequently, responses to misunderstandings are a byproduct of the need to minimize threat. David Rock's research, among several recent studies in social neuroscience, observes that emotional threat activates the same regions in the brain stimulated by physical threat (Rock, 2009).

Our purposes in writing this are:

- Introduce a practice that capacitates group members to reframe negative perceptions into neutral ones.
- Ease unnecessary workplace tensions, misunderstandings, and conflict.
- Explore what might be happening in the brain when this approach becomes a default.

Beginning with that last point, we offer descriptions of how this strategy alters activity in the brain and why this activity is powerful and supports the effectiveness of leaders.

Our brains constantly assess the environment – both the *physical environment* and the *social environment* – for anything it might perceive as a ‘threat’ (such as laughter, hope, acknowledgement, self-determination, and being heard) or a ‘reward’ (such as misunderstanding, criticism, microaggressions, other-directedness, and being discounted). When a **reward** is detected, an automated neural response is triggered that drives us toward that perceived reward. In the reward state we are able to cognitively perform at our best. Our abilities to solve problems, communicate, understand other people's intentions, deal with adversity, plan and enjoy more effective decision-making occur.

When a **threat** is detected, our ability to solve problems, evaluate situations, plan, understand consequences, and make decisions is impaired. When in this state, an individual's ability to perform even simple routine actions, not to mention perform at their best, can be severely impaired as the brain frantically tries to work its way through the perceived threat, inter-personal or environmental (SLI, 2022).

The Go for the Green strategy triggers a reward state for the leader and participants, resulting in positivity, creativity, and broadened understanding of the moment and challenges.

Leaders practice selfcare when they assume positive intentions drive the behaviors of others and communicate this consciously and unconsciously, engendering atmospheres of reward, rather than threat. The Go for the Green strategy reframes attention from disturbing behaviors to possible positive intentions motivating the behaviors. Seen in this way, it's presumed the group leader and members will cease regarding the behaviors as threats, and instead interpret those same behaviors as ways members might be attempting to care for themselves. The introduction of this positivity opens perspectives and minds to creatively address the situation.

### **More Positivity/Less Negativity Relates to Higher Performance**

Go for the Green is a strategy we've used in meetings and workshops successfully for years in a variety of settings.

*First*, Go for the Green sharpens and intensifies awareness of one's in-the-moment judgments of self or others or the motivations informing behaviors, and reframes attention in a positive direction.

*Next*, a stimulus occurs prompting a cognitive shift in which the subjects gain insight about the unifying premise of their present ways of perceiving. They are jolted into considering a different and contrasting premise that might perceive members as attempting to take care of themselves. Mindsets of positivity take the place of earlier negative ones, allowing the capacity for expanded understandings and choices.

A number of studies have explored the question: How much positivity is needed to support successful endeavor? Fredrickson (2009) describes a positivity to negativity

ratio of 3 to 1 as desirable for optimum functioning. Losada and Heaphy (2004) cite similar findings regarding business teams. 60 teams were ranked in terms of performance, as measured by profit and loss statements, customer satisfaction surveys, and 360 reviews by superiors, peers, and subordinates to the teams. High performing teams had an average positivity to negativity ratio of 5.8 to 1. John Gottman (2015) discovered that couples in flourishing marriages were found to register 5 to 1 in positivity to negativity. Couples with these ratios stayed together and both partners remained satisfied. Take a moment to consider: What might be your positivity ratio with a colleague or partner?

S. J. Scott (2012) summarizes recent findings around faulty mathematics in these studies. What was happening? The math used to measure and develop the ratios in these studies, unbeknownst to the researchers, was not within the correct family of mathematics. While the simpler form of math (linear) that was used can provide an accurate ratio of one specific snapshot in time, or for a single in-the-moment time occurrence, a different type of math (dynamical) is required to measure a scenario in which that same ratio fluctuates over time. An example of this would be attempting to determine the ratio of large fish to small fish in a given pond. One single measurement would not be enough as the actual numbers vary not only from season to season but even from moment to moment. Thus dynamical mathematics would be required to determine a ratio that could be represented over time. Human systems, even at varied levels of organization – the individual, families, communities, affinity groups, organizations, nations, and even international entities – must be understood using dynamical math. All

exhibit the common dynamics of living systems in which any factor influences all others and even minor events can cause major disturbances (Diamond, 2016; Garmston & Wellman, 2016).

Even so, while the wrong form of math was used when determining the original ratios, the general conclusions remained the same: higher positivity ratios predict flourishing mental health and other beneficial outcomes (Fredrickson, 2009), even including improved health (Johns Hopkins, 2022).

### **Benefits of Positivity**

The warmth of the sun opens fragile petals of flowers, each at the rate of its own biology. Roses, tulips, African daisies, peonies, and others all open from their protective posture as light mobilizes an essential chemical. When light hits outer flower petals the chemical auxin is triggered that causes the flower to open as its distinctive physiology allows. Like flowers, positive emotions open human minds, each according to their own biology and culture. Positive emotions open hearts and minds allowing creativity and effectiveness to bloom (Fredrickson, 2009).

When hearts and minds become more receptive, human perspectives broaden (Fredrickson, 2009), our eyes record what we could not perceive before, creativity thrives and problem-solving capacity increases. As the boundaries of perception broaden, more

accurate mental maps are attained allowing detailed characteristics of challenges and opportunities to appear.

### **Brief Strategy Description**

Go for the Green begins by offering the group with which you are working an activity bringing their personal experiences into play. A collective inquiry into possible causation follows. It can be done with any size group, large or small, and requires only chart paper and markers.

Why might you consider using it?

While we have often found audiences hungry for concrete facilitation strategies, we are discovering what might be equally potent in the facilitator's toolkit and skills: their mindset allowing them to be calm in tense situations. Garmston and McKanders (2022) identify five productive mindsets that energize facilitators and help them work productively with groups. The Go for the Green strategy structures an opportunity in which participants experience the generative cognitive shift that a change in mindset offers them.

How does it work?

The Go for the Green strategy reframes perceived negative experiences as neutral. Moving from negative to neutral is easier to accomplish than moving from negative to

positive, followed by collective inquiry designed to move impressions from neutral to positive.

Initially, Go for the Green sharpens and intensifies awareness of one’s in-the-moment judgments of self or others or the motivations informing behavior. Next, Go for the Green prompts a cognitive shift in which the subjects gain insight into the unifying theme of their present ways of perceiving and are jolted into considering a different and contrasting theme that might instead inform their perceptions. New perceptions inform the theme of current behaviors. Mindsets of positivity take the place of former negativity, allowing new choices to be available.

**Table: Go for the Green Steps: What and Why**

(Adapted from *Deepening Identity as Collaborators and Inquirers Through Application of the Norms of Collaboration*, Prickett & Ravlin, 2015)

	WHAT?	WHY?
1	Using chart paper, draw a large red circle in the upper left-hand quadrant.	To set the stage.
2	Pose a question to the group: <i>When you are facilitating a group, what are some of the group member</i>	To activate personal experiences, to focus attention, and to pique interest and curiosity.



	<p><i>behaviors that distract you or the group from learning or accomplishing its task?</i></p> <p>Be sure to emphasize the word “behaviors.”</p>	
3	Partners brainstorm.	To reinforce that 1) these behaviors are experienced by many, and 2) it is normal to be distracted by unproductive behaviors.
4	Partners share out as the facilitator charts behaviors in the red circle. In the event a participant names something that is not a behavior, for example "rude," ask the participant what behaviors the person would be exhibiting that constitute "rudeness."	To normalize for the large group and to generate a single list to be used by all.
5	Partners explore the following prompt: <i>What might be some of the reasons you would engage</i>	To support participants in shifting from observable behaviors to potential causes for the behaviors.

	<i>these behaviors? Start at the top and go as far as you can.</i>	
6	<p>Draw a second large green circle in the lower right quadrant of the chart paper.</p> <p>Invite partners to add to the green circle some of the "reasons" elicited.</p>	<p>To normalize that there are likely self-protective reasons for the behaviors observed.</p>

An alternative that some facilitators are using is to have two separate charts, anchored at opposite sides of the presentation space. The first chart holds the “red” behaviors, and the second chart holds the “green” ideas. Having anchored these two spaces, the facilitator can later physically reference them as the meeting/presentation unfolds.

Conclude with language such as: *In order to access our own resourcefulness, and to presume positive intentions in others, it is crucial that we “Go for the Green.” When behaviors cause us “to see red” or even block us like a stop sign, we instead look to the green.*

Looking to the green supports the leader because when looking to the red, one tends to get defensive or judgmental. Looking to the green, you can get

curious. Your disposition influences the quality of your presence, your interactions, and the responses you get. By avoiding the emotional flooding that comes with looking to the red, one has access to the full range of intervention strategies one knows.

*The authors would like to acknowledge the contributions of colleagues Suzanne Bailey, Mark Ravlin, and James Roussin to our thinking.*

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