

A Book Report on  
***How Full is Your Bucket?***

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(Book Report by Gary Tomlinson)

## **Introduction:**

In the early fifties, Don Clifton, was teaching psychology at the University of Nebraska when he noticed a major problem: The field of psychology was based almost entirely on the study of *what is wrong* with people. He began to wonder if it would be more important to study *what is right* with people. So, over the next five decades, Don and his colleagues conducted millions of interviews, focusing on the positive instead of the negative.

Early in his research, Don discovered that our lives are shaped by our interactions with others. Whether we have a long conversation with a friend or simply place an order at a restaurant, every interaction makes a difference. The results of our encounters are rarely neutral; they almost always positive or negative. And although we take these interactions for granted, they accumulate and profoundly affect our lives.

Based on a simple metaphor of a “dipper” and a “bucket” Don’s theory carried profound implications and simplified his life’s work for others. *How Full is Your Bucket* contains the most compelling discoveries Don had gathered over half a century of work in his field of Positive Psychology.

## **The Theory of the Dipper and the Bucket:**

Each of us has an invisible bucket. It is constantly emptied or filled, depending on what others say or do to us. When our bucket is full, we feel great. When it’s empty, we feel awful.

Each of us also has an invisible dipper. When we use that dipper to fill other people’s buckets – by saying or doing things to increase their positive emotions – we also fill our own bucket. But when we use that dipper to dip from others’ buckets – by saying or doing things that decrease their positive emotions – we diminish ourselves.

Like the cup that runneth over, a full bucket gives us a positive outlook and renewed energy. Every drop in that bucket makes us stronger and more optimistic.

But an empty bucket poisons our outlook, saps our energy, and undermines our will. That's why every time someone dips from our bucket, it hurts us.

So we face a choice every moment of every day. We can fill one another's buckets, or we can dip from them. It's an important choice – one that profoundly influences our relationships, productivity, health, and happiness.

## **Negativity Kills:**

Don Clifton began studying *what is right* with people after his review of one specific case study. This study was about as far as possible from a positive or inspiring story.

Following the Korean War, Major (Dr.) William E. Mayer, who would later become the U.S. Army's chief psychiatrist, studied 1,000 American prisoners of war who had been detained in a North Korean camp. He was particularly interested in examining one of the most extremely and perversely effective cases of psychological warfare on record – one that had a devastating impact on its subjects.

American soldiers had been detained in camps that were not considered especially cruel or unusual by conventional standards. The captives had adequate food, water, and shelter. They weren't subjected to common physical torture tactics. In fact, fewer cases of physical abuse were reported in the North Korean POW camps than in prison camps from any other major military conflict throughout history.

Why, then, did so many American soldiers die in these camps? They weren't hemmed in with barbed wire. Armed guards didn't surround the camps. Yet no soldier ever tried to escape. Furthermore, these men regularly broke rank and turned against each other, sometimes forming close relationships with their North Korean captors.

When the survivors were released to a Red Cross group in Japan, they were given the chance to phone loved ones to let them know they were alive. Very few bothered to make the call. Upon returning home, these soldiers maintained no friendships or relationships with each other.

Mayer had discovered a new disease in the POW Camps – a disease of extreme hopelessness. It was not uncommon for a soldier to wander into his hut and look despairingly about, deciding there was no use in trying to participate in his own survival. He would go into a corner alone, sit down, and pull a blanket over his head. And he would be dead within two days.

The soldiers actually called it “give-up-it is.” The doctors labeled it “mirasmus,” meaning a lack of resistance, a passivity. If the soldiers had been hit, spat upon, or slapped, they would have become angry. Their anger would have given them the motivation to survive. But in the absence of motivation, they simply died, even though there was no medical justification for their deaths.

Despite relatively minimal physical torture, “mirasmus” raised the overall death rate in the North Korean POW camps to an incredible 38% - the highest POW death rate in U.S. military history. Even more astounding was that half of these soldiers died simply because they had given up. They had completely surrendered, both mentally and physically.

How could this have happened? The answers were found in the extreme mental tactics that the North Korean captors used. They employed what Mayer described as the “ultimate weapon” of war. The North Koreans denied the soldiers the emotional support that comes from interpersonal relationships. To do this, the captors used four primary tactics:

1. *Informing* – By rewarding the prisoners for informing on one another they were able to break the relationships between the men. The captors understood that the soldiers could actually harm each other if they were encouraged to dip from their comrades’ buckets every day.
2. *Self-criticism* – The captors would require each prisoner to stand up in front of the other prisoners and confess all the bad things he had done. By subtly eroding the caring, trust, respect, and social acceptance among the American soldiers, the North Koreans created an environment in which buckets of goodwill were constantly and ruthlessly drained.
3. *Breaking loyalty to leadership and country* – The primary way they did this was by slowly and relentlessly undermining a soldier’s allegiance to his superiors. Over time, the relationships were broken; the soldiers simply didn’t care about each other anymore.
4. *Withholding all positive emotional support* – This was perhaps “bucket dipping in its purest and most malicious form.” Soldiers were denied all positive reinforcement. Only negative news and reinforcements were allowed.

Mayer said that the North Koreans had put the American soldiers “into a kind of emotional and psychological isolation, the likes of which we had never seen.”

Moved by this story of psychological torture and deprivation, Don Clifton and his colleagues decided to study the flip side of this horrific equation. They wondered: If people can be literally destroyed by unrelenting negative reinforcement, can

they be uplifted and inspired to a greater degree by similar levels of positivity? In essence, they asked: *Can positivity have an even stronger impact than negativity?*

Their research to answer this question inspired the Theory of the Dipper and the Bucket. The theory is based on the following principles:

- ◆ Everyone has an invisible bucket. We are at our best when our buckets are overflowing – and at our worst when they are empty.
- ◆ Everyone also has an invisible dipper. In each interaction, we can use our dipper either to fill or to dip from others' buckets.
- ◆ Whenever we choose to fill others' buckets, we in turn fill our own.

### **Positivity, Negativity, and Productivity:**

Most of us will never endure the kind of psychological torture that the American POWs suffered during the Korean War. Yet we all experience the positive and negative interactions every day that influence how we feel and behave. Just because these interactions are commonplace and often undramatic doesn't mean they do not matter. They do. While most of our negative experiences will not kill us, they can slowly but surely erode our self-being and productivity. Fortunately, positive experiences or "bucket filling" can be even more powerful.

**Bucket Filling in Organizations:** Although the bucket filling goes far beyond the concepts of "recognition" and "praise," these are two critical components for creating positive emotions in organizations. Study after study has found that individuals who receive regular recognition and praise:

- ◆ increase their individual productivity
- ◆ increase engagement among their colleagues
- ◆ are more likely to stay with their organization
- ◆ receive higher loyalty and satisfaction scores from customers
- ◆ have better safety records and fewer accidents on the job

To put this into perspective, think about the greatest recognition you have ever received in the workplace. Chances are, it caused you to feel better about your organization and, in turn, become more productive. Great recognition and praise can immediately transform a workplace. And just one person can infuse positive emotions into an entire group by filling buckets more frequently.

Studies show that organizational leaders who share positive emotions have workgroups with a more positive mood, enhanced job satisfaction, greater engagement, and improved group performance.

**Killing Productivity:** Right now, the majority of us don't give or receive anywhere near the amount of praise that we should. As a result, we're much less productive, and in many cases, completely disengaged in our jobs. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, the number-one reason people leave their jobs is because they "*do not feel appreciated.*"

But the problem doesn't stop there. Studies show that when an employee worked for a boss they disliked, they had significantly higher blood pressure. According to these studies, boss-induced hypertension (high blood pressure) could increase the risk of coronary heart disease by one-sixth and the risk of stroke by one-third.

Our estimates suggest that there are more than 22 million workers – in the U.S. alone – who are extremely negative or "actively disengaged." This rampant negativity is not only disheartening, it's expensive. It costs the U.S. economy between \$250 and \$300 billion every year in lost productivity alone.

Where productivity is concerned, it would be better for organizations if people who are overly negative stayed home. When they do show up for work, they are counterproductive. We all know these types of people. They walk around the office with glazed looks or move from cubicle to cubicle stirring up trouble with whining, complaining, and even paranoia. It is possible for just one or two people to poison an entire workplace.

**Scaring off Customers:** Not surprisingly, workgroups drained by excessive bucket dipping aren't only less productive and less profitable, they also have higher turnover, more accidents on the job, and lower customer satisfaction, innovation, and quality scores.

Studies find that negative employees can scare off every customer they speak with – for good!

**The Recognition Gap:** Managers, take note: *Praise is rare in most workplaces.* One poll found that an astounding 65% of Americans reported receiving no recognition for good work in the past year. And we have yet to find anyone who reports suffering from *over-recognition*. Although we need and want recognition and praise, the fact is, we don't get enough – and organizations suffer because of it.

Sincere and meaningful bucket filling increases the morale of any organization. Managers and employees who actively spread positive emotions, even in small doses, will see the difference immediately. And creating that difference can be inexpensive – or even free. All it takes is a little initiative.

## Every Moment Matters:

Usually, we don't stop to consider the impact of brief interactions. But we experience literally hundreds of potential turning points in a given day.

**Our Negative Culture:** Most of us want more positive emotions in our lives. Ninety-nine out of every 100 people report that they want to be around more positive people; 9 out of 10 report being more productive when they're around positive people.

Unfortunately, wanting a more positive environment isn't enough. Most of us have grown up in a culture in which it's much easier to tell people what they did wrong instead of praising them when they succeed. Although this negativity-based approach might have evolved unintentionally, it nevertheless permeates our society at all levels.

**The Emergence of Positive Psychology:** As a result of the Positive Psychology movement – the study of *what is right* – with people – some of the world's leading academic minds are now devoting their careers to analyzing the effects of positive emotions.

*Recent studies show that negative emotions can be harmful to your health and might even shorten your life span.* We already know that one negative person can ruin an entire workplace, but negative emotions can also destroy relationships, families, and entire careers.

In contrast, recent discoveries suggest that *positive emotions are essential daily requirement for survival.* Not only do they improve your physical and mental health, but they can also provide a buffer against depression and illness.

**Thousands of Moments Every Day:** According to Nobel Prize-winning Daniel Kahneman, we experience approximately *20,000 individual moments in a waking day.* Each “moment” lasts a few seconds. If you consider any strong memory – positive or negative – you'll notice that the imagery in your mind is actually defined by your recollection of a precise point in time. And rarely does a neutral encounter stay in your mind – the memorable moments are almost always positive or negative. In some cases, a single encounter can change your life forever.

**The Magic Ratio:** Positive Psychology experts are finding that the *frequency* of small, positive acts is critical. John Gottman's pioneering research on marriages suggests there is a “magic ratio” of 5 to 1 – in terms of our balance of positive to negative interactions. Gottman found that marriages are significantly more likely to succeed when the couple's interactions are near that 5 to 1 ratio of positive to negative. When the ratio approaches 1 to 1, marriages “cascade to divorce.”

This ratio is critical in the workplace as well. A recent study found that workgroups with positive to negative interaction ratios greater than 3 to 1 are significantly more productive than teams that do not reach this ratio.

However, while this book focuses primarily on ways to increase positive emotions, it's important to note that we don't recommend ignoring negativity and weakness; positivity must be grounded in reality.

The positive-to-negative ratios in most organizations are woefully inadequate and leave substantial room for improvement.

**Increasing Longevity:** Negative emotions can lead to serious problems. Thousands of studies have revealed the damaging results of stress, anger, and hostility on the mind and body. In contrast, positive emotions can buffer us against adverse health effects and depression. They enable faster recovery from pain, trauma, and illness. And positive emotions might lead to an increase in life span. In fact, studies show that increasing positive emotions could lengthen life span by 10 years.

**Physical and Mental Health Effects:** In addition to extending our life span, positive emotions can improve our daily physical and mental well-being. Research shows that *optimism early in life predicted good health later in life*.

Barbara Fredrickson, director of the Positive Emotions and Psychophysiology Laboratory at the University of Michigan, reports, "Positive emotions do much more than merely signal well-being. Positive emotions also improve coping and produce well-being. They do so not just in the present, but over the long term as well. Positive emotions are not trivial luxuries, but instead may be critical necessities for optimal functioning."

It appears that science is just now beginning to scratch the surface of this topic. After centuries of studying mental illness, experts are finally investigating and attempting to measure *mental wellness*.

## **An Overflowing Bucket:**

Noted psychologist Ed Diener describes how our capacity for happiness has a "baseline" measure, much like our physical weight. Just as some people are predisposed to be thin no matter what they eat, some have a natural tendency to be happier than others. But our level of positive emotions can certainly rise or fall a great deal based on what happens to us over time. And it would not hurt most of us to go on a diet consisting of more positive emotions and fewer negative emotions. Regardless of an individual's innate starting point, regular bucket filling can increase his or her positive emotions.



## Making It Personal:

The key to great bucket filling: *Recognition is most appreciated and effective when it is individualized, specific and deserved.* The point is, there are unique and specific ways to fill each person's bucket – and most certainly inappropriate ways as well. Generic, one-size-fits all awards don't work. Neither does recognition that seems forced or false.

If you want people to understand that you value their contributions and that they are important, the recognition and praise you provide must have meaning that is specific to each individual.

Not only is individualized bucket filling more effective in boosting productivity in the workplace, it builds sustainable relationships and changes people's lives forever.

## Five Strategies for Increasing Positive Emotions:

To increase positive emotions in your life and others' lives, you must make a habit of filling buckets. This isn't news to you; by now, we know that our relationships, careers, and lives will be much more fulfilling if we increase the flow of positive emotions around us.

But just *knowing* isn't enough. Like any goal in life, you must have specific, actionable plans to transform good intentions into reality. Listed below are the five strategies that are most likely to produce results.

**Strategy One – Prevent Bucket Dipping:** Just as we have to start eliminating debt before we can truly save, we must start to eliminate bucket dipping before we can truly begin to fill buckets. The next time you see bucket dipping in progress, do something about it. Convince others that unwarranted negativity only makes matters worse.

Once you've consciously started to eliminate bucket dipping, keep track of your progress by *scoring your interactions*. That's right. Reflect on your last few exchanges with another person. Decide if, overall, each interaction was more positive or negative. Score each one as either a "+" or "-" in your head.

Now, as you consider what it would take to fill the buckets of your friends, family, coworkers, and others, ask yourself: "What would it take for me to reach that 'magic ratio' of five positive interactions for every one negative interaction?"

**Strategy Two – Shine a Light on What is Right:** Each interaction gives us the chance to shine a light on what's right – and fill a bucket. Every time you fill a bucket, you're setting something in motion. Consider this: If you fill two buckets



in a day, and the owners of those two buckets go on to fill two new buckets, more than a thousand buckets will have been filled at the end of 10 days. If each of those same people filled five buckets instead of two, more than 19 million buckets would be filled in just 10 days!

So continue the chain: When someone fills your bucket, accept it – never brush it off and diminish what that person is doing. Fill their bucket in return by saying “thank you,” letting them know that you appreciate the compliment or recognition. In turn, you are more likely to share your renewed positive energy with others.

**Strategy Three – Make Best Friends:** In grade school, kids often stick with sports teams, cheerleading, music, or other extracurricular groups, even when the activity isn’t a clear fit for their interests. If they’re experiencing no push from parents and having little success, then why do they stay involved? Maybe it’s the same reason why employees stay with organizations that are less than ideal, or even unhealthy – they probably have a best friend there.

If you think about it, most of us join and stay with groups, teams, and organizations because of our best friends. People with best friends at work have better safety records, receive higher customer satisfaction scores, and increase workplace productivity.

Whether you want to build many relationships or just a few deep ones, your best approach is to fill a person’s bucket in your very first interaction. This is a powerful way to initiate new relationships – and to strengthen your existing relationships. In fact, your friendships are unlikely to survive, let alone thrive, without regular bucket filling.

Create positive interactions with others that you come into contact with. When you do, you might start to notice that more and more people want to be around you.

**Strategy Four – Give Unexpectedly:** According to a recent poll, the vast majority of people prefer gifts that are unexpected. Expected gifts do fill our buckets, but for some reason, receiving things unexpectedly fills our buckets just a little more. It’s the element of surprise. And the gift doesn’t have to be anything big to be successful.

An unexpected gift doesn’t have to be tangible either. It can be a gift of trust or responsibility. Sharing something personal or entrusting a friend with a secret can fill his or her bucket.

In your own interactions, look for opportunities to give small gifts to others out of the blue – maybe a funny little trinket, a hug, or an offer to grab a cup of coffee. Even a smile can be an unexpected and cherished gift.

**Strategy Five – Reverse the Golden Rule:** In the case of bucket filling, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” doesn’t apply. Instead, we suggest a slight variation: “Do unto others as they would have you do unto them.” When it comes to robust and meaningful bucket filling, individualization is the key. So when you’re bucket filling, go ahead and reverse – or at least redefine – the Golden Rule.

An important aspect of individualization is this: What we recognize in others helps them shape their identity and their future accomplishments. This is why bucket filling must be specific to the individual.

Not sure where to start? Try these questions out on your friends, family, and coworkers:

### The Bucket Filling Interview

1. By what name do you like to be called?
2. What are your “hot buttons” – hobbies or interests you like to talk about a lot?
3. What increases your positive emotions or “fills your bucket” the most?
4. From whom do you most like to receive recognition or praise?
5. What type of recognition or praise do you like best? Do you like public, private, written, verbal, or other kinds of recognition?
6. What form of recognition motivates you the most? Do you like gift certificates, a title for winning a competition, a meaningful note or e-mail, or something else?
7. What is the greatest recognition you have ever received?

### **Epilogue:**

Imagine what your world will be like one year after you have engaged in daily bucket filling. We suspect the following changes will have occurred:

- ◆ Your workplace will be a lot more productive and fun.
- ◆ You’ll have more friends.
- ◆ Your colleagues and customers will be more satisfied and engaged.
- ◆ Your marriage will be stronger.

- ◆ You'll enjoy closer relationships with your family and friends.
- ◆ You'll be healthier, happier, and well on your way to a longer life.

There is plenty of scientific and anecdotal evidence to demonstrate the importance of bucket filling in our lives. Take every opportunity to increase the positive emotions of those around you. It will make a big difference. It may even change the world.

Don't waste another moment. *A bucket, somewhere, is waiting for you to fill it!*

### **Message from by Gary Tomlinson:**

I hope you have enjoyed my book report on *How Full is Your Bucket*. I encourage you to go buy the book. Although I have covered the key messages from the book in this book report, there are many stories and examples that I did not include.

Specifically, there are two assessment tools that are contained in the book that have not been included in this report. One is the *Positive Impact Test Questions* assessment tool, and the other is the *Clifton Strengths Finder* assessment tool.

Enjoy this education and feel free to share it with others in your life because as Alvin Toffler says; *"The illiterate of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century will not be those who cannot read or write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn."*

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