

The Magic Ratio of Positive and Negative Moments

• By [Patsi Krakoff](#)

According to the Nobel Prize-winning scientist Daniel Kahneman, each day we experience approximately 20,000 moments. A moment is defined as a few seconds in which our brain records an experience. The quality of our days is determined by how our brains recognize and categorize our moments—either as positive, negative, or just neutral. Rarely do we remember neutral moments.

There is no question that the memories of our lives are recorded in terms of positive and negative experiences. Now scientists propose that each day our brains—i.e., our thoughts and emotions—keep track of our positive and negative moments, and the resulting score contributes to our overall mood.

Our emotional tone or mood is defined by the number of positive versus negative moments experienced during the course of a day. This is not really news to those people who study emotional intelligence and how the brain works. Yet it has major implications for how we can improve the quality of our lives.

The Magic Ratio

Over the past decade, scientists have explored the impact of positive-to-negative interaction ratios in our work and personal life. They have found that this ratio can be used to predict—with remarkable accuracy—everything from workplace performance to divorce.

This work began with noted psychologist John Gottman's exploration of positive-to-negative ratios in marriages. Using a 5:1 ratio, which Gottman dubbed 'the magic ratio,' he and his colleagues predicted whether 700 newlywed couples would stay together or divorce by scoring their positive and negative interactions in one 15-minute conversation between each husband and wife. Ten years later, the follow-up revealed that they had predicted divorce with 94 percent accuracy.

The Bucket and the Dipper

In a recent book *How Full is Your Bucket*, psychologists Donald O. Clifton and Tom Rath propose a metaphor of looking at positive and negative interactions during the day. Imagine we all have a bucket within us that needs to be filled with positive experiences, such as recognition or praise. When we're negative toward others, we use a dipper to remove from their buckets and diminish their positive outlook. When we treat others in a positive manner, we fill not only their buckets but ours as well.

Here are 5 strategies from these authors for increasing your magic ratio of positive to negative moments in any given day:

- Prevent 'Bucket Dipping.' Increase your own awareness of how often your

comments are negative. Work toward a ratio of five positive comments to every one negative comment.

- Shine a Light on What Is Right. Try focusing on what employees or peers do right rather than where they need improvement, and discover the power of reinforcing good behaviors.

- Make Best Friends. People with best friends at work have better safety records, receive higher customer satisfaction scores, and increase workplace productivity.

- Give Unexpectedly. A recent poll showed that the vast majority of people prefer gifts that are unexpected.

- Reverse the Golden Rule. Instead of 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,' you should 'Do unto others as they would have you do unto them.' Individualization is key when filling others' buckets.