

NUMBERS GAME

BY CHUCK REAVES

Identify—and empower—
your employees by the Theory of 21.

TWO LINES FROM THE MOVIE “Apollo 13” are applicable to every business.

The first is: “Houston, we have a problem.” Sooner or later every organization faces a seemingly insurmountable problem. How do you address it?

The second is: “Failure is not an option.” For a certain type of employee, this is a mantra.

And this is where the Theory of 21 comes into play. The idea is that for every person who will say yes, there are 20 who will say no. In other words, for a positive response you must find the 21st person. (While these numbers are a not exact, the point is that sometimes it can *seem* like you hit the wall 20 times before getting over it.)

Here’s an example. The CEO of an electronics company was, as would be expected of a CEO, an expert at business but was not as well-versed in electronics as his engineers. He came up with what he saw as a game-changing idea for his products but did not know if it would be feasible to implement. He asked two engineers to explore whether the idea was possible so they could potentially bring it to market.

The first engineer delivered a formal presentation to the CEO explaining why the idea would not work. He had color charts and graphs and plenty of data that suggested no one would want the product even if it were to make it to market.

When he finished, the CEO told him that the second engineer was already in the process of implementing the idea. Instead of developing a knock-your-socks-off presentation explaining why the idea was a bad one, the second engineer had waded through the obstacles to find a way to make it happen.

The idea, by the way, was caller ID.

There are two types of people in the world: the “20s” and the “21s.” The 20s are those people who consistently declare that anything new cannot, should not or will not be done. The 21s are those people who look for ways of making things happen—even those things considered to be impossible by others.

Breaking it down further, there are two types of 20s: Negative 20s and Positive 20s.

Negative 20s are easy to spot, and you already know who most of them are in your organization and in your life. You know that if you bring a new idea to them, they will shoot it down. Immediately and out of habit, they will let you know in no uncertain terms that it cannot be done, should not be done or will not be done. If you press them, they will give you valid-sounding reasons why their position is justified. They give away their position with statements like:

- We have never done it that way before
- It has never been done
- We are already doing that
- Nobody will like it
- The boss will never approve it

By now you have learned who these people are and how frustrating

it can be to engage them. In fact, when you want to get something done quickly and done well, you tend to give it to someone who is already busy, a 21.

Positive 20s, on the other hand, are more difficult to identify because they can sound like 21s.

These slippery critters can delay a project until it is no longer viable. They can dilute an idea until it has little resemblance to the original concept.

The Positive 20 may say something like, “That’s a great idea and something we need to do someday,” or “We could do that if...” or “It will be easier for us to do that when...”

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Chuck Reaves helps companies raise their prices and volumes simultaneously through innovative processes, tools and training. His achievements include Vistage’s “Impact Speaker of the Year” honors and being named a top salesperson for AT&T. For more information about Chuck Reaves, please visit www.chuckreaves.com.



business issues

The 21s are the people you know who somehow always seem to find a way to make things happen. Rather than offer excuses, they may offer alternatives. Instead of saying they do not have time to do whatever you are asking them to do, they will ask, “What is your time frame?”

To differentiate between the Positive 20s and the 21s, listen for delays, “buts” and “ifs.”

How do 20s find their way into otherwise successful organizations? First of all, there are more of them than are 21s. In fact, there are (obviously) simply not enough 21s in the world, and you will almost certainly find several 20s in your organization. If they are in a position to influence a hiring decision, they will attract other 20s. (After all, 20s don’t like having 21s around.)

So, what do you do with the 20s, Positive and Negative, in your organization? Put them on the path to becoming 21s with the following:

Teach. The single most important function of leadership is to teach. You have achieved your level of success because

someone took the time to teach you. As you teach, you will ascertain whether you have a student or not.

Exemplify. Praise the 21s in public. When your employees know that you appreciate, admire and respect the efforts of the 21s, more of them will aspire to be 21s.

Remind. There are no extraordinary people. There are only ordinary people who are doing things that other people consider to be extraordinary. Everyone on your team was brought onboard because they have a skill set, ability or something else that can make them extraordinary.

Henry Ford and Thomas Edison were friends and mentors. Ford was in Edison’s facility when an engineer reported that one of Edison’s ideas could not be done. Edison listened patiently and then said, “Build it anyway.”

Later, one of Ford’s engineers would come into his office and explain why a “shiftless” (automatic) transmission was impossible to manufacture. How did Ford respond? “Build it anyway.”

And there really are no sweeter words to a 21. ■