

### Introduction

In two of my 2004 newsletters, I referred briefly to positive emotions and their impact on people and on the workplace. This attracted some attention, and because interested clients and colleagues have asked for more information, below I provide a high-level introduction to this area.

### Positive Research

The emerging fields of positive organizational scholarship (Note 1) and positive psychology (Note 2) focus on the impact of positive emotions on people and organisations. Happiness, for example, is extensively researched and analysed, showing that there are three paths to happiness: pleasure, engagement (flow) and meaning, with the latter two very significant in creating happiness and positivity.

The studies reveal that negative emotions (e.g. fear, anger, sadness) provoke narrow responses such as flight or fright; whereas positive emotions brought about by cultivating happiness, "broaden and build". That is, there is a wider set of adaptive responses (broaden), and reserves are built up which can be drawn upon when a threat or opportunity presents itself (build). (Note 3)

Positive emotions can have encouraging improvements in:

- resilience
- creativity
- personal health and longevity
- enthusiasm
- alertness
- energy levels
- motivation
- personal satisfaction
- productivity
- effectiveness
- business results
- team cooperation

For example, studies have shown that where workgroups/teams which have a ratio of positive interactions to negative interactions of 3:1, are significantly more effective than teams that do reach this ratio.

In an age where resilience is becoming a necessary feature of organisational life, it's important to know that positive emotions create a buffer against future misfortunes and negative emotions. And, the use of strengths and natural traits, together with coming from a position of positivity, build 'psychological capital' (confidence, hope, resilience, optimism) which when invested in the organisation results in benefits both for staff and the business. (Note 4)

### What Can Be Done?

Research in the psychological fields of positivity tells us that everyone can improve their ability to be optimistic and happy. This can be achieved through the implementation of a customised series of tests, organisational and personal analysis, and some simple exercises. For example, happiness can be 'cultivated' by identifying and using one's strengths and traits - Martin Seligman and his colleagues have researched and identified 24 core strengths, from which one can determine their strongest 'signature strengths'. Finding opportunities to use one's strengths and virtues contributes to increasing happiness and positive emotions.

Other examples of what can be done include: recognising the good things; practising acts of kindness; savouring life's joys; thanking a mentor; learning to forgive; investing time and energy into relationships; taking care of one's body; developing strategies for coping with stress and hardships. (Note 5)

Because emotions are contagious, each person needs to consider not only that their levels of positivity have personal implications, but that they impact those around them and the business as a whole. Leaders have a role in inspiring positive moods and have a role in creating the conditions that promote positivity. Managers who understand that employee wellbeing has an impact on their organisation, work and business relationships should implement activities that increase happiness and positive emotions at all levels.

## Quotes

“Positive Organizational Scholarship is inspiring researchers to look at work in a whole new light – and they are finding that employee happiness really does pay. It’s beginning to look as if a positive workplace atmosphere is worth developing, and not merely for its own sake; it may be the foundation of true organisational success.” (Harvard Business Review, February 2004)

“By unlocking capacities for elements such as meaning creation, relationship transformation, positive emotion cultivation, and high quality relationships, organisations can produce sustained sources of collective capability that help organisations thrive.” (Positive Organizational Scholarship, 2003)

“A growing body of research is demonstrating that happy workers not only are happier in life but are also crucial to the health of a company.” (“Thank God It’s Monday”, Time Magazine, 17 January 2005)

## Notes & References

Note 1: Positive Organizational Scholarship is a study of positive outcomes, processes and attributes of organisations and its members. It provides an expanded view of how organisations can create sustained competitive advantage. It focuses on the dynamics of excellence, thriving, flourishing abundance, resilience, and virtuousness. There is an interest in developing empirical credibility and theoretical explanations.

Note 2: The Positive Psychology movement, which focuses on strengths, health, vitality and happiness, originated in 1998 by a team of leading psychologists, championed by Martin Seligman.

Note 3: Notes about broaden and build – from a lecture I attended in Nov 2004 led by Barbara Fredrickson, Associate Professor of Psychology, University of Michigan.

Note 4: Positive Organisational Capital: Beyond Human and Social Capital” by F. Luthans, K.W. Luthans and B. C. Luthans, in Business Horizons, 47, No 1, January 2004.

Note 5: “The New Science of Happiness”, Time Magazine, 17 January 2005.

## Other References

“Positive Organizational Scholarship” (2003) by Kim S. Cameron, Jane E. Dutton and Robert E. Quinn.  
“Authentic Happiness” (2002) by Martin E.P. Seligman, Ph.D.

## About This Article

My aim is to provide you with information to assist you at work, with your own development, and in developing your staff. The theme for 2005 is ‘Thriving People, Thriving Workplaces’. Each month I concentrate on an area based on topics raised by my clients. Material is drawn from journals, books, articles and shared experiences.

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