

Addressing Criticisms of Positive Psychology and Positive Organizational Scholarship

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- **A special thank you to Sajel Bellon for her invitation and for extraordinary leadership of this CPPA Conference.**
- **In a session last year at the IPPA meetings in Orlando, we summarized the key areas of criticism and critique leveled at positive psychology as a field of study.**
- **I would like to build on that session by addressing in a rather cursory way some of those critiques and criticisms.**
- **I do this with some trepidation inasmuch as a lot more could be said, and many of these points deserve much more discussion than we have time for here.**
- **First, a special thank you to Sanaiya Bellon, age 8.**



Umbrella Advocates Versus Validity Police: **A Life-Cycle Model** (Hirsch & Levin, 1999)

- 1. New concept or framework emerges.**
- 2. Broad acceptance occurs.**
- 3. Challenges from the *validity police* arise.**
- 4. Fine-grained criticisms and critiques emerge.**
- 5. Some elements fall by the wayside.**
- 6. Sometimes, complete abandonment occurs.**
- 7. If survival occurs, the new concept is stronger, more institutionalized, and expands in influence.**



Umbrella Advocates Versus Validity Police:

A Life-Cycle Model (Hirsch & Levin, 1999)

- 1. A new framework, model, or perspective is introduced (e.g., a focus on the positive).**
- 2. This new approach resonates broadly because it addresses relevant issues and brings attention to new, previously unrecognized concepts or phenomena.**
- 3. Then, the validity police arrive. *Validity police* challenge definitions, concepts, findings, methods, and the validity of the new perspective.**
- 4. The critiques and criticisms usually focus on individual research findings and claims, specific concepts, methodology, and/or distinctive aspects of the new perspective.**
- 5. Some of the discrete elements in the new approach fall by the wayside and are rejected as invalid or unsound. Some aspects do not stand in the face of close scrutiny.**
- 6. Sometimes, the entire perspective or framework dwindles and is abandoned.**
- 7. Sometimes, however, the framework, model, or perspective becomes stronger and more institutionalized, and it expands and magnifies its impact and influence.**

Criticisms of “Positive” Have Always Been Present

“denies reality”

“values bias”

“ethnocentric bias”

“ignores negative phenomena”

“mitigates against hard work”

“avoids difficult questions”

“implies boastfulness and pride”

“leads to reckless optimism”

“squishy”

“saccharine and Pollyannaish”

“narrow moral agenda”

“elitist point of view”

“invites unpreparedness”

“restrictive in connotation”

“assumes all success is deserved”

“produces delusional thinking”



The current validity police are more sophisticated and well-informed than these particular critics who mostly misunderstood or caricatured positivity and well-being.

Summary of Issue Categories

1. Research Issues
2. Cultural / Values Issues
3. Simplistic / Narrowness Issues
4. Manipulation / Unethical Issues
5. Practice Issues





1. Research Issues

- Research findings are often invalid, overstated, and misleading. Mis-analyzing data and mis-interpreting or over-claiming results are common. Real proof is scarce.
- Sweeping claims are made about human nature and the causes of happiness and well-being, often based on very few studies of, mainly, college students.
- Positive psychology and positive organizational scholarship are not guided by an overarching theory or framework. One-off studies dominate to scholarly literature.



For Example - Irreproducible Results

- More than 250 scientists around the world tried to reproduce key findings from a sample of articles published in 2008 in three leading psychology journals. Results posted online on 24 April 2015, (which have not yet been peer-reviewed), suggest that key findings from only 39 of the 100 published studies could be reproduced (Nature, 2015).
- On the other hand, in recent years, researchers have reported that they could not reproduce the results from a large number of scientific studies, including research in oncology, drug-target, validation, and gender differences in disease (Science, 2014).
- Studies show a very low reproducibility for articles published in scientific journals, often as low as 10-30%. Here is a partial list: The biotech company Amgen had a team of about 100 scientists trying to reproduce the findings of 53 “landmark” articles in cancer research published by reputable labs in top journals. Only 6 of 53 studies were reproduced (about 10%). Scientists at the pharmaceutical company, Bayer, examined 67 target-validation projects in oncology, women’s health, and cardiovascular medicine. Published results were reproduced in only 14 out of 67 projects (about 21%). The project, *PsychFileDrawer*, dedicated to replication of published articles in experimental psychology, shows a replication rate of only about 33%. (2012)



1. Research Issues – Some Responses

- On the one hand, much more empirical research is needed in positive organizational scholarship, well-being, and positive psychology. The fields are still in the toddler stage of development.



- Many more questions are in need of answers than have been addressed. Some of these criticisms are valid.



- On the other hand, some solid empirical work has been conducted that demonstrates the importance and impact of positive phenomena. Many of these criticisms are over-stated and lack substance.

1. Research Issues – A Sample of Responses

Individual Effects? On the other hand . . .

SOURCE: Diener 2010

A SAMPLE

Well-being, positive emotions, and virtuousness predicted all-cause-mortality, heart attacks, and cancer survival rates in:

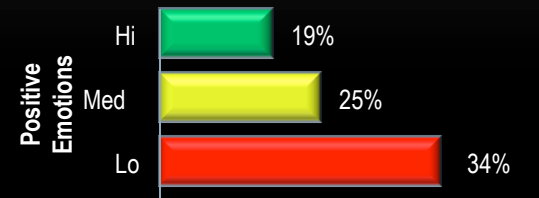
Barefoot (2000) – 1250 coronary disease patients ages 46-54
 Giltay (2004) – 941 Dutch elderly (65-85) over 9 years
 Kubzansky (2001) – 1306 Boston residents age 21-80
 Loberiza (2002) – 193 stem-cell patients
 Lyrra (2006) – 320 elderly Scandinavian twins
 Moskowitz (2008) – 715 diabetics
 Ostir (2000) – 2282 elderly Mexicans
 Scherer (2009) – 575 hospitalized patients after discharge
 Xu (2010) – 6856 Californians followed over 28 years

Predominance of Positive Emotions / Negative Emotions

- Live 11 years longer.
- Succumb to fewer illnesses.
- Higher survival rates after serious illness or accident.
- Stay married longer.
- Tolerate pain better.
- Work harder.
- Perform better on the job.
- Make more money over a lifetime.
- Display more mental acuity.
- Make higher quality decisions.
- More creative and flexible in their thinking.
- More adaptive and resilient after trials and trauma.
- Engage in more helping behaviors.

SOURCES: Diener & Diener, 2008; Fredrickson, 2008

Probability of Catching a Cold



SOURCE: Snowden, 2001

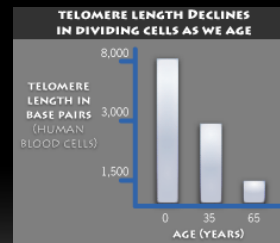
Inherent Virtuousness

- Children 3 to 8 months old were studied.
- Using puppets, some animals were depicted as helping and assisting other animals. Some animals were seen as hindering.
- Infants were given a choice of which puppet to play with.
- Infants overwhelmingly preferred the animals that tried to help, even when the helping was not successful. Children almost always (90%) preferred virtuousness.
- **CONCLUSION:** An inherent tendency exists in all humans to prefer positive, virtuous behavior from infancy. It is heliotropic.

SOURCE: Wynn, 2007



Telomere Length

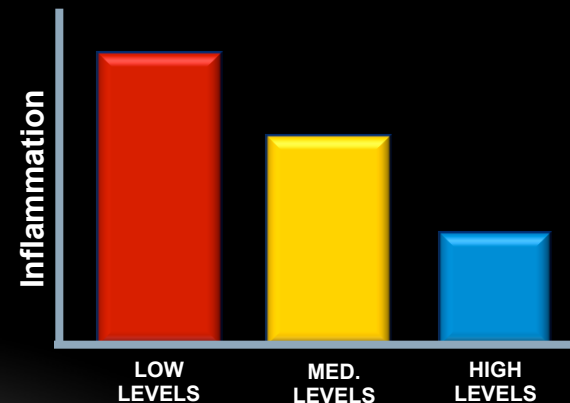
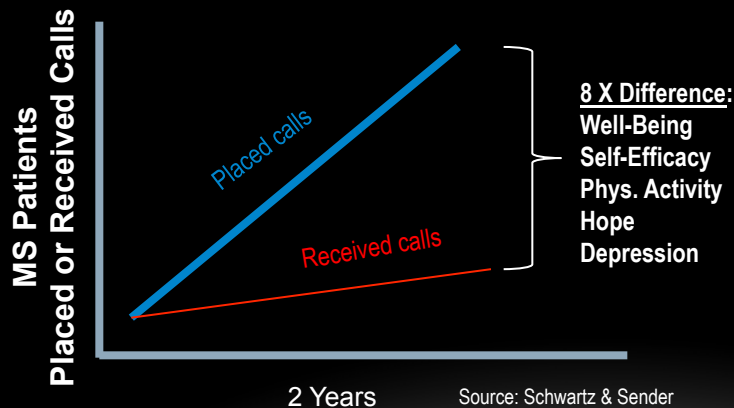
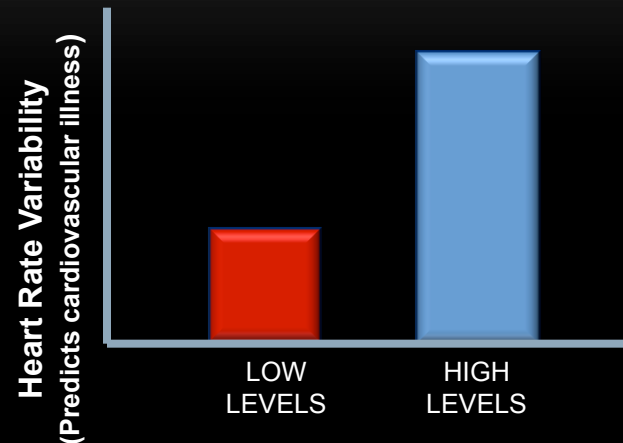
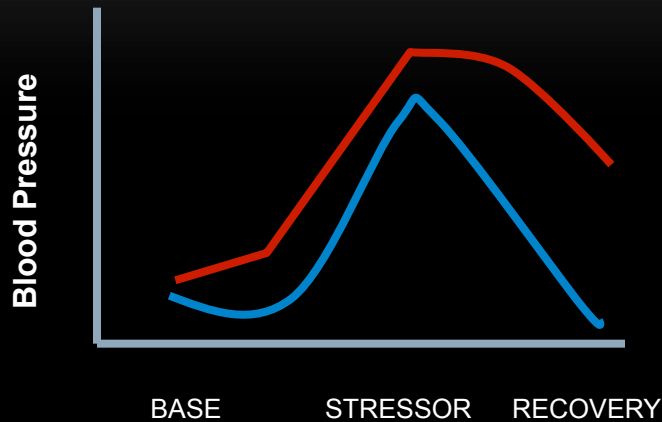


SOURCE: O'Donovan, et al, 2009

1. Research Issues – A Sample of Responses

Medical Effects? On the other hand . . .

High versus Low Positive Emotions and Virtuousness



Source: Steptoe, 2011

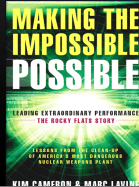
1. Research Issues – A Sample of Responses

Organizational effects? On the other hand . . .

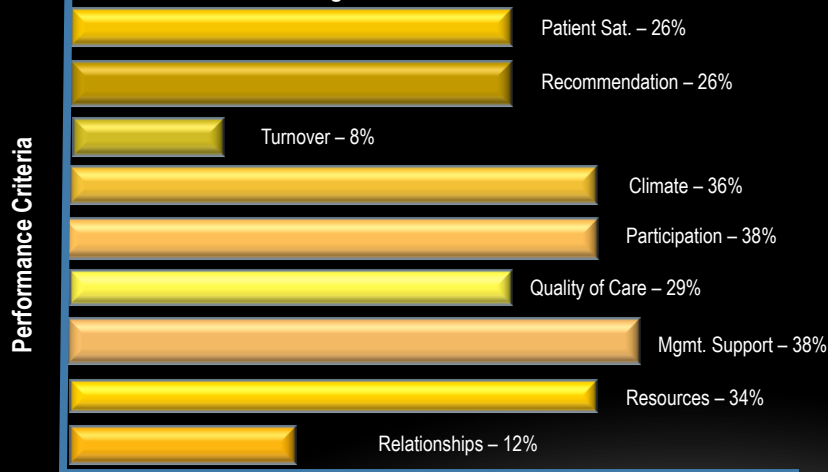
Rocky Flats Nuclear
Arsenal



60 years early
\$30 b. under budget
13 X federal standard



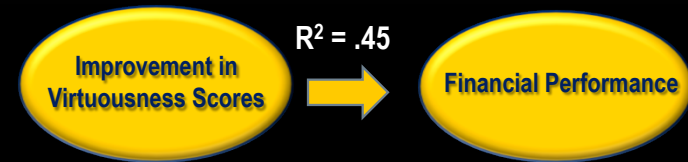
30 Health Care Organizations



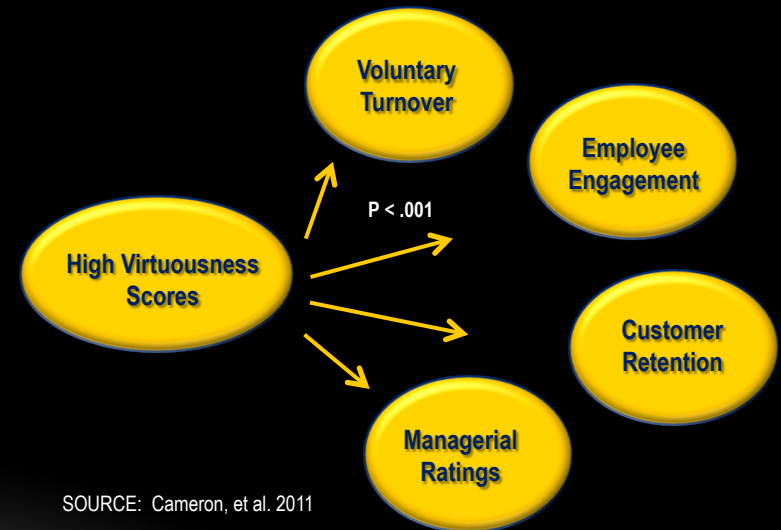
Improvement Over 2 Years

SOURCE: Cameron, et al. 2011

Organizational Virtuousness and Financial Performance



40 Financial Service Organizations



SOURCE: Cameron, et al. 2011

2. Cultural / Values Issues

- Positive research reinforces and is applicable only to the existing Western socio-economic system and value system. It is U.S.-centric and Euro-centric, especially emphasizing individualism, capitalism, and Western definitions of thriving and happiness. The West is superimposing its dominance on the rest of the world.
- Positive psychology and positive organizational scholarship represent the perpetuation of a values-based perspective, not rigorous scientific analysis.
- POS and PP have a white middle-class bias and ignores the plight of minorities and disadvantaged groups. Poverty, inequality, injustice, repression, and other societal problems are ignored by positive organizational scholars and positive psychologists.



2. Culture Issues – A Sample of Responses

A Western Bias? On the other hand . . .

Sample of Countries Presenting Research at IPPA

- Argentina
- Australia
- Austria
- Brazil
- Canada
- Chile
- China
- Denmark
- Finland
- France
- Germany
- Iceland
- Ireland
- Israel
- Italy
- Japan
- Mexico
- Nepal
- Netherlands
- New Zealand
- Norway
- Poland
- Portugal
- Russia
- Singapore
- South Africa
- South Korea
- Spain
- Switzerland
- Taiwan
- UK
- USA

50 countries
were
represented
by attendees
at IPPA

Countries publishing in *The Journal of Positive Psychology* so far in 2016

Australia
Belgium
Canada
France
Germany
Hong Kong
Ireland
Israel
Netherlands
Russia
Singapore
UK
USA

2. Culture Issues – A Sample of Responses

A Partial Bias? . . . On the other hand? . . .

Examples of Countries or Ethnicities Studied

- Academic achievement in Bhutan
- Happiness in Chinese teens
- Trust among Chinese retirees
- Transforming culture in Ukraine
- Optimal environments in French schools
- Body image - youth in Singapore
- Purpose & well-being in Hispanic women
- Test construction - An Indian model
- Education modules for Indian rural women
- PsyCap & employability in Africa
- Psy Cap in Indian NGOs
- Secondary students well-being in Singapore
- Positive psychology in Europe
- Buddhist mind training
- Positive education in India
- Gratitude - International perspectives
- Positive leadership in New Zealand customs officers
- Intercultural study of semantics

Examples of Topics Presented at IPPA

- Courage & childhood anxiety
- Traumatic brain injury
- Neurorehabilitation
- Resilience in the military
- Self-compassion in women
- Positivity & disability
- VIA w/ forensic patients
- Stress & perception
- Decreased happiness among adolescents
- Child psychotherapy
- Social capital & academically at-risk students
- Neoropsychiatric disorders in childhood
- Psychosocial factors among black HIV's
- Positivity in Parkinson's disease patients
- Resilience in kidney disease patients
- Positive change in psychosis patients
- Racial & ethnic gaps in life-satisfaction
- Spiritual reframing with HIV patients
- Character strengths in LGBT
- Hope & meaning in poverty
- Embracing the dark side

3. Simplistic / Narrowness Issues

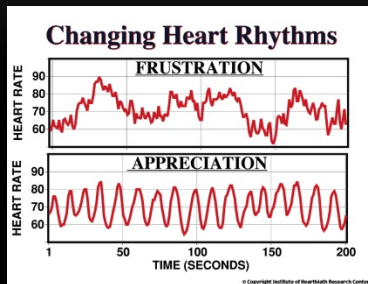


- POS and PP are mainly a focus on “happiology” and are oversimplified and superficial. They are oriented towards prescriptions of universal rules for flourishing. But, life is complex, and a focus on only the positive is wishful-thinking.
- POS and PP are merely warmed-over “power of positive thinking” from the 1940s and 1950s. There is nothing new here, and the findings are mostly commonsense. The term “positive” connotes more pizzazz than substance, and the field has garnered attention merely because the conclusions being spouted seem “reasonable.”
- POS and PP imply that the rest of scholarly research is negative. They ban negativity and negative phenomena from scientific exploration and from workplace dynamics.



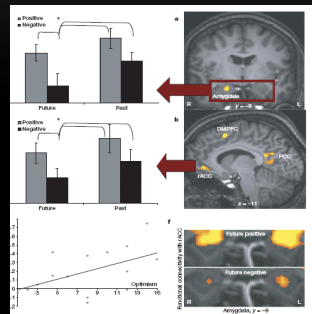
3. Narrowness Issues – Some Responses

Commonsense Happiology? On the other hand . . .



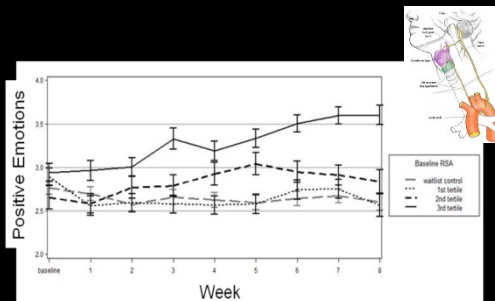
Heart rhythms

SOURCE; McCraty, 2014



Brain activity

SOURCE; Sherrot, et al., 2007

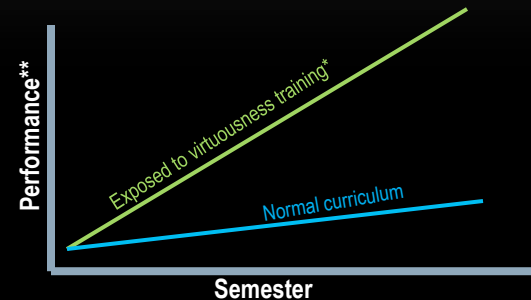


Engendered positive emotions enhance vagal nerve functioning and, consequently, long-term wellness.

SOURCE; Cohn & Fredrickson, 2011

**Contribution
versus
Achievement in
University of
Michigan
freshmen**

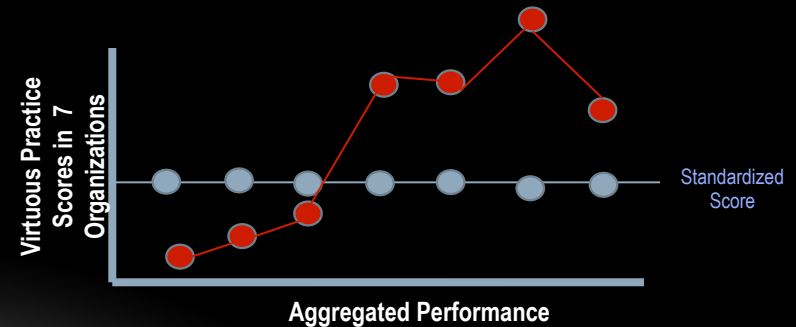
9th Grade Literature Students



***Training in:**
Virtuousness
Kindness
Gratitude
Purpose
Nobility

****Performance:**
Social skills
Zest for learning
Writing competence
Absence of depression

SOURCE; Seligman, 2012



SOURCE; Cameron, et al., 2004



4. Manipulation / Unethical Issues

- Positive interventions (e.g., coaching, therapy) manipulate clients and employees. People are made to feel good in order to coerce from them certain outcomes. Virtuousness, engagement, and positive emotions are manipulative techniques used to take advantage of workers merely to produce more.
- The values of POS and PP are not conducive to an increase in human freedom but only to conformity.
- The practice of positive psychology is often technique-laden, and its practice can create more cynicism than success.



4. Manipulation Issues – Some Responses

Employees Worse Off? On the other hand . . .

“I was brought into Prudential Retirement in the spring of 2004 as the head of integration. The company had just acquired a big division from the Cigna Corporation, and we were trying to merge two cultures together. In the beginning it was like trying to merge the Red Sox and the Yankees; we had two distinct cultures—one from New England and the other one from the New York/New Jersey area. Both were very strong, very passionate, and very powerful. As you can imagine, trying to put these two cultures together was a challenge. The president at the time happened to be a graduate of the University of Michigan. He had just come back from a session there where he had learned about positive organizational scholarship. He implemented positive practices to help us create something that was really different and outstandingly unique . . . We kept 95 percent of our clients. Our annual employee satisfaction scores and employee opinion survey results increased. We had less voluntary turnover, and the earnings of the company started going up at about 20 percent per annum on a compound rate . . . I think that POS helped us create the benchmark for how you take two distinct companies and put them together.”

(Jim Mallozzi, Prudential Retirement)

“We started with a variety of exercises to show our employees that when you start with the positive . . . fabulous things can happen . . . We went from an 80 million dollar loss to a 20 million profit that year, and we actually achieved two times our expected business plan. We doubled our profits from what we'd expected. Our employee satisfaction scores went up in nine out of twelve categories” *(Prudential Real Estate - see Cameron & Plews, 2012).*

“Our CEO was looking for what the organization needs...He wanted something that would help the business. The point of introducing POS to the organization was to first and foremost to drive the organization and shareholder value, but he wanted to implement something that would also make the people feel inspired to do their best work and feel valued . . . I believed that, by using POS, we could do all of these things simultaneously: create value for our people, create value for our customers, and create value for our shareholders. In 2005, at the outset of the POS culture change initiative, Prudential scored above the industry average on only 8 of the 38 positive practices. One year later, Prudential scored above average on 24 of the positive practices. Moreover, improvement occurred on 35 of 38 positive practices between 2005 and 2006.” The correlation between positive practice scores and six aggregated measures of financial performance was $r = .49$ (significant at the $p > .0001$ level).

(Helen Frye, VP of HR, Prudential Retirement)

4. Manipulation Issues – Some Responses

The Paradox:

- Virtuousness and positivity are “goods of first intent” (Aristotle)
- Achieving virtuousness is its own reward. Virtuousness is inherently valuable.
- “Goods of second intent” are valuable only because they can be used to acquire goods of first intent.



- To pursue virtuousness (and positivity) only to obtain another outcome—such as money—destroys the nature of virtuousness itself. It ceases to be virtuous.
- On the other hand, executives are held accountable for producing certain outcomes—such as revenues, stock price, and customer satisfaction.



4. Manipulation Issues – Some Responses

POS research has uncovered evidence that the pursuit of virtuousness and positive practices does, in fact, elevate the outcomes for which executives are accountable, even though they do not need to do so in order to be valuable.

Organizations that downsize almost universally deteriorate in performance (due to the emergence of the “dirty dozen”).

Positive Practices

Gratitude and Appreciation

Dignity and Respect

Support and Compassion

Caring and Concern

Meaningfulness and Purpose

Inspiration and Positive Energy

Forgiveness and Understanding

Trust and Integrity

Those downsizing organizations that implemented positive leadership and positive practices were significantly more effective than those that remained the same (e.g., profitability, productivity, quality, employee engagement, customer retention).

Cameron 2012

5. Practice Issues



- Little evidence exists that positive practices make any real difference in organizations. Techniques are repeated but without substantive empirical backing. Causal associations are largely absent.
- Many people claim to practice positive principles without a proper grounding in behavioral sciences. An emphasis on the positive is merely a way for consultants and change-agents to earn a better stipend. The potential exists for great harm to be done.
- POS and PP should not be used in the policy arena because of aggregation, definition, and measurement issues. They should never be applied to national policy regarding well-being (e.g., Bhutan, UK, USA).



5. Practice Issues – Some Applications

Little Evidence? On the other hand . . .

Martin (2015) – A Test of the Positive Leadership Framework Among Government Employees After the Earthquake in Christchurch, NZ



Reduce sick days
Quality assurance
Accuracy
Activity reports
Efficiency
Data mismatches
Primary processing
Reduce annual leave

Exceeded goals
Exceeded goals
Exceeded goals
Exceeded goals
Exceeded goals
Goal achieved
Not achieved
Not achieved

Ross School of Business

- 2011:
 - \$40 million deficit
 - No institutional differentiation
 - Stagnant applications
 - Blasé climate
 - Lack of strategy to guide decisions

Institutionalized “positive” as a differentiator

- 2015:
 - \$21 million in financial surplus
 - Culture change
 - Differentiated culture, strategy, and identity
 - New programs and innovation

“The ‘economic miracle’ that occurred in the Ross School could not have occurred without the change in culture created by the positive strategic pillar.”

5. Practice Issues – Some Responses

Little Evidence? On the other hand . . .

"The 'economic miracle' that occurred in the Ross School could not have occurred without the change in culture created by the positive strategic pillar."

POSITIVE BUSINESS CONFERENCE

Positive Business through the Co-Creation Paradigm
Positive Lean in Health Care
Entrepreneurs as Value Creators
Inspiring Through Radically Transparent Finance
Building Stronger Brands by Creating Brand Love
Positive Investor Relations
Positive Management and Employment Law
Improve Consumer Welfare and Performance through
Choice Architecture
Responsible Global Supply Chain Management
Positive Lean: Inspiring Efficiency
Technology Innovation and Positive Organization



Mindfulness at Ross



Jennifer Evans
Admin. Assistant

2015 Staff Lunch and Learn Workshops
Competing Values Framework
Positive Leadership – The Game
Supportive Communication
Visioning and Preferred Futuring
“Lift” and The Fundamental State of Leadership
High Quality Connections



Mary Ceccanese
Tax Policy



170
presentations
4000
participants



World Gratitude Day – September 21st



Betsy Erwin
CPO Assoc. Director

120 applicants for 24 + Lab slots in 2015
75 students in 2015 CPO projects
40 students enroll in “Magnify”
200 students have been members of + Lab

5. Practice Issues – Some Examples

The Biggest Challenge of All...

The Detroit Public School System

- \$7,600 a day in interest penalties
- Approximately \$1,200 per student annually for debt service
- A projected deficit of \$166 million this year
- A net accumulated deficit of \$1.28 billion in the last 11 years
- 47,238 students, representing a 68% loss in the past decade
- Approximately 27% of expenditures go to classroom instruction, about half the percent in many other districts
- Approaching half of our schools scoring in the bottom 5% in performance
- Average teacher pay lower than 10 years ago
- Scarce professional development for teachers and staff
- 4% of students are at grade level in mathematics
- Graduation rates are up, but the base was 16%



College Readiness Rates, 2013-2104		
Ethnic Group	Detroit	Michigan
Asians	17.5%	43.9%
Whites	5.8%	23.5%
Hispanic	7.0%	9.2%
Black	2.9%	3.2%
All Students	3.5%	20.0%

Source: Michigan Department of Education

Workshops on POS principles with DPS senior executive team, the emergency manager's team, principals, and teachers.



Q: "Why do put up with this?"
A: "The kids."

5. Practice Issues – Some Responses

Harm? On the other hand . . .

“This summer after graduation, I chose to undergo a preventive double mastectomy and breast reconstruction, not your typical post-MBA plans. A few years ago, I found out that I had the BRCA1 gene mutation and an 88 percent chance of having breast cancer in my lifetime. My mother and grandmother, who also have BRCA1, were diagnosed with breast cancer when they were in their early 30s. As a woman in my late 20s, I felt the timing was right to take a pre-emptive strike against breast cancer with this procedure. Little did I know that my time at Ross would impact this experience.

After scheduling the surgery, I very clearly remember sitting in Professor Kim Cameron’s Navigating Change class and hearing all the research behind the power of positive thinking. More specifically, he mentioned that patients with a positive attitude recover faster after surgery. Obviously, this struck a personal note with me, and I started to think: How could I approach this experience, something that could be seen as terrible and traumatizing, with a positive attitude? How could I maintain a positive attitude during the three-month reconstruction and recovery process, and how could I leverage this experience to have a positive impact on others?

I doubt I would have asked myself these questions if I did not attend Ross. Ross had fundamentally shifted my mindset to think, well, *positive*.

So I decided to start a blog to chronicle my surgery and recovery. By publicly blogging about my experience, I held myself personally accountable for maintaining a positive attitude, and I hoped to help other young women with the BRCA1 gene mutation as they contemplated their choices. After brainstorming different titles for my blog, I settled on “Positive Previvor” (women who undergo preventive double mastectomies are called “breast cancer previvors”) to signal my commitment that I was going into this experience with a positive mindset. I started each blog by sharing something I was grateful for; the power of gratitude was another lesson I learned at Ross.

Six weeks after my surgery and 10 blog posts later, I can tell you that the positive approach I learned at Ross dramatically affected my recovery. While it was not the best summer of my life and there were a couple of not-so-great weeks, my overall recovery has been better than expected and I’m very happy with my decision. Most importantly, other young women with the BRCA1 gene have already reached out to me after seeing my blog. Knowing that I am helping others has been incredibly fulfilling.

Another major takeaway I learned from Ross is that if you put out positive energy, it will return to you. The amount of support I received from my blog has been shocking and overwhelming. People from all different chapters of my life have reached out to me, and it definitely helped me through my low moments. In particular, the Ross community has gone above and beyond, sending me messages, emails, cards, gifts, and even helping me move across the country. At Ross, it is the norm to help and support each other, which is a distinguishing characteristic of the school. I mean, what other business school would organize a month of gratitude where students send more than a thousand thank-you notes to each other?! “ (Pam Soberman, MBA ’15)

Conclusion

- Many criticisms contain legitimate points. Much is left to be done.
- The refinement that emerges from the validity police will be helpful, both for scholars and for practitioners.

On the other hand . . .

- Empirical evidence is building that positive psychology and positive organizational scholarship significantly affect individuals at the basic physiological, cognitive, emotional, and social levels . . . and they affect organizational performance when profitability, productivity, quality, innovation, customer satisfaction, and employee retention are the assessed outcomes.



**Thank you again, Sajel, for the
opportunity to present.**

**Questions, comments, ‘Yeah,
buts,’ contributions?**