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Introduction to Positive Psychology

Positive Psychology is Not Positive Thinking

This distinction is important, but unfortunately there is a certain amount of confusion about these two ideas. We shall first examine positive thinking to enable it to be distinguished from positive psychology, before going on to consider positive psychology in its own right. Positive thinking has a history all of its own, brilliantly traced by Barbara Ehrenreich in her 2009 book *Bright-sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America*. This book traces the origin of positive thinking to a particular human malaise prevalent in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century, which took the form of unexplained fatigue and mysterious physical symptoms. It occurred at the time when a Calvinist doctrine of joyless, work-oriented, fearful, sin-avoidant living was in the ascendant. While this religious perspective and its accompanying prescriptions of hard work and sobriety contributed to, and supported, the work ethic that helped make the US the country it is, it also reduced the amount of positive emotions in life, such as hope, joy, passion, interest and happiness. From our perspective we might suspect this malaise to have been a form of depression.

The recommended cure was frequently complete bed rest without stimulation – no reading, no company, bland food and in a darkened room. With the benefit of hindsight we might question the wisdom of such a prescription. At the time few did until Phineas Quimby came on the scene. Quimby had little respect for the medical profession and set himself up as an alternative healer. He identified Calvinism as the source of the problem, arguing that it was oppressive guilt that was laying his patients low. He eschewed the depression-inducing prescriptions and instead developed a talking cure 'through which he endeavored to convince his patients that the universe was fundamentally benevolent' (Ehrenreich, 2009, p. 85). He suggested to his patients that they were essentially at one with this benevolent mind and that, through this power of connection, they could use the power of their mind to cure their own ills.

Such magical thinking, a belief that you can influence things by thinking, is not new. To anthropologists it is known as sympathetic magic and is prevalent in native, or unscientific, cultures; hence, perhaps, the close association between promoters of the benefits of positive thinking and shamanistic, Native American or other Native culture practices. Such an association isn't always benign. In 2010, three people died and 20 more were injured in a Native American steaming ritual run by self-styled spir-

itual guru James Arthur Ray (Harris, 2010). In addition to these sweat-lodge deaths, there is a history of people being injured by fire-walking, such as the 20 managers of the KFC fast-food chain in Australia who, in 2002, received treatment for burns caused by fire-walking (Kennedy, 2002). Again in July 2010 eight employees in Italy had to go to hospital with foot injuries from fire-walking, which were expected to take up to 10 days to heal (Hooper, 2010).

Sensible people try these forms of magical thinking or sympathetic magic because they offer hope and because they bypass other, harder routes to achieving what they want. But this isn't to say that, as with many things, there isn't some truth in it. Visualization does have an effect on human behaviour, but through the medium of our actions, not through the medium of the magic of our thoughts. It is unfortunate that positive thinking and positive psychology both contain the word 'positive' and that both make reference to the power of positive visualization. However, it is possible to distinguish the two fields.

How Positive Psychology Differs from Positive Thinking

The main difference is that positive psychology is subject to the rigours of scientific experimentation and endorsement, suggesting that the phenomena discovered are reliable and repeatable: if it worked in the studies, then under the same circumstances, it is likely to work again. Positive thinking deals more with the realm of anecdote and exhortation. It also takes up the tautological position that, if it didn't work, it's because you weren't positive enough (Ehrenreich, 2009). Positive psychology is about accruing a body of knowledge that is useful to people who want to live good, long, happy and productive lives, while positive thinking is about persuading people that what happens to them is their own fault. (Of course, this is usually presented in more upbeat fashion – that what happens to them is under their own control!)

Positive psychology literature can also be distinguished from positive thinking literature in that it accommodates the reality, and necessity, of negativity: it not only accommodates the reality of negative events, emotions, behaviour, and so on, but also recognizes their importance to human wellbeing. Negative emotions and outcomes are recognized and accommodated by positive psychology in at least three ways. First, within positive

psychology there is a recognition that bad things happen to people through no fault of their own; there is such a thing as randomness. It is possible to live a life free from carcinogens (tobacco, alcohol, red meat or exposure to toxic agents) and still contract cancer at an early age. Bad luck if you will. Second, negative emotions can serve a useful purpose. Fear, anger, sadness, anxiety, stress, and so on are essential for alerting us to threats to our wellbeing so that we can do something about them. They are necessary to our survival. Finally, it is clear that some well-intended behaviour has adverse outcomes, due to a basic inability of people to understand all the causal relationships within which they operate. In other words, we are all susceptible to making mistakes with unforeseen negative consequences. That's life.

Positive psychology is further distinguished from positive thinking by the fact that it has 'body of knowledge' structures such as collegiate bodies, university departments, professors and rigorous accredited academic courses that work to collate and share information. It has all the paraphernalia of scientific discourse with peer-reviewed journals and academic conferences. Its practitioners apply to respected scientific bodies for research grants. Assertions made as fact can be checked, verified or refuted by others. People build on other's work and acknowledge their debts to them. Traditionally, within the scientific establishment this has meant that the discoveries made often remain within the ivory towers of academia, only seeping slowly into public consciousness. Now something different is happening.

Interestingly, in contrast to other lines of inquiry in psychology, and possibly in response to the changing world, the founding mothers and fathers of positive psychology undertook from the beginning to make a conscious effort to get the information they were gaining over the wall of the cloistered world of academia. They felt that what they were thinking about, learning about and discovering how to practise was too fundamentally important to human life to be isolated within a small closed community: the world needed to know. Accelerating the rate of transmission of knowledge from the specialist community to the general public is not without risk.

In attempts to make work more accessible to the public a fine line has to be trodden between the danger of 'dumbing down' the message and producing something in the style of an academic paper, with the attendant danger of discouraging potential readers by detailing the scientific journey

in too great a depth. This is a point that Barbara Held raises in her critique of positive psychology, where she notes the over-reliance on a few key, and not entirely satisfactory, research events for statements of a causal relationship between happiness and longevity (2004, p. 16). Held also notes a lack of attention to mixed or contradictory findings and an emphasis on clear, simple messages for the public. Clearly, there are dangers associated with bringing an embryonic science to the public too quickly.

Such caveats notwithstanding, the field is demonstrating a commendable rigour in pursuing both an academic and a more general reading public. As I write a range of texts already exists. Those aimed at the general reader include, for example, *Positivity* (Frederickson, 2009), *Authentic Happiness* (Seligman, 2002) and *Now, Discover Your Strengths* (Buckingham and Clifton, 2002) – all aimed squarely and pragmatically at helping people improve their lives. Accompanying these on the positive psychology bookshelves are texts aimed more at practitioner or academic markets. These include *Positive Psychology Coaching* (Biswas-Diener and Dean, 2007), *A Primer in Positive Psychology* (Peterson, 2006) and *Positive Psychology in a Nutshell* (Boniwell, 2008) – all excellent integrated texts. For readers who like their academic information straight from the horse's mouth, there are rigorously referenced edited texts that pull together expert papers, most recently *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology and Work* (Linley, Harrington and Garcea, 2010). High on academic standards, they are richly referenced and make for dense reading.

This book aims to complement the existing field. Working to bridge the gap between academic rigour and accessibility, it hopes to avoid the Scylla of dumbing down and the Charybdis of interruptive referencing. This text aims to offer a guided read through the science from this developing field pertinent to the challenges of running, leading, managing and working in a workplace organization. It aims to illuminate the science with useful anecdotes, practical examples, top tips and the occasional cartoon. In this way it aims to present a central argument that positive psychology can lead us to a new era of organizational understanding and practice. Much of the research comes from the US, which leads this field. However, the research has spread remarkably quickly and people all over the world are picking up these ideas and working on how to develop them. I have tried to incorporate examples of practice from Europe and the US and beyond. I have also tried to demonstrate how these findings are relevant to public and private, large and small organizations.

So this book needs to be read within a series of caveats: the science is young; it is more soft than hard science; there is an ever-present danger of over-eager interpretations of preliminary results; there is a tendency within the field to over-generalize and over-extrapolate findings; there can be a glossing over of the null hypothesis findings; and there are slips from established correlations to speculative causality. This text is not designed to be a critical academic text and I shall not be taking the reported findings from positive psychology and subjecting them to rigorous scientific criticism; that is a job for the academic community. Instead, I am offering the best information that is currently available about what seems to distinguish the more virtuous, beneficial, flourishing and inspirational workplaces from the average or worse, to boost your chances of ensuring that your practice within your organization promotes the best that organizational life can offer.

Many managerial texts seem to be written from an unquestioned position that what is good for the organization is good for the workers; that practices that increase productivity need no particular ethical justification. Little consideration is characteristically given to the impact on the worker. These books are written from a managerial perspective, where the unspoken aim is to get more, the best, out of employees. I have always felt slightly uneasy about this assumption and would be wary of adding a book to that cannon.

The Ethical Bias of This Book

The justification for this book, one that I also hope further distinguishes it from its positive-thinking cousins, is the clear reference to an ethical base. Cameron, Dutton and Quinn (2003), discussing their work on positive organizational scholarship, a sub-branch of positive psychology if you will, note that positive organizational scholarship is not value neutral:

> It advocates the position that the desire to improve the human condition is universal and that the capacity to do so is latent in most systems. (Cameron *et al.*, 2003, p. 10)

They also suggest that this school of organizational studies, while recognizing the importance to organizational life and survival of goal achievement and making a profit, chooses to prioritize for study that which is 'life giving,

generative, and ennobling' (p. 10). In other words, they hold a firm belief that organizational life is neither inherently good nor bad. Rather, it contains the potential to be both and it is a worthwhile and ethical endeavour, in which they are engaged, to discover how to help organizations unleash their potential for good.

From a slightly less lofty position, I start from the observation that most people are obliged to earn a living by working in an organization. Given this, anything we can do, as psychologists, to help that experience be life-enhancing rather than spirit-deadening is a good thing. For all those hours on someone else's payroll, to add to the sum of good things in someone's life, to increase their sense of a life well lived and to enhance their capacity to experience positive emotional states are good things. So this book is not about trying to get more out of people in terms of hours or effort, although this is often a side-effect of a growth-enhancing working life, such may be the occasional benefits; it is about pursuing wellbeing at work as an ethical endeavour in its own right.

Throughout this text, then, you will find reference to the ethical basis for suggesting a particular practice or intervention. We shall be constantly referring to the bedrock science of positive psychology, which is about what it means to be a good person and to live a good life. A positive psychology-based understanding of aspects and elements of organizational life offers us an ethically viable choice about how to be leaders and managers. Without this compass we can get waylaid by the snake oil salesmen and find ourselves submitting our colleagues and workers to humiliating and even dangerous juju practices, as we saw earlier.

Ehrenreich suggests that one of the reasons why positive thinking-based activities took such a hold during the last years of the twentieth century was the undermining of the power of rational management techniques by the speed of change. It was no longer sufficient to accumulate a depth of knowledge of your organization and your business to prepare you for senior leadership. Your knowledge was too quickly outdated. Ehrenreich credits Tom Peters, of *In Search Of Excellence* fame (Peters and Wasserman, 1982), as one of the first to create the bandwagon of constant downsizing and renewal as he began to appreciate the speed of world change. And it is undoubtedly true that the world is, competitively speaking, a smaller place, that innovation offers a shorter market lead-time and that ideas spread at the speed of the internet. Does that mean organizations have to abandon any rationality in their attempts to manage or lead and resort instead to charlatanism and magical thinking to forge new paths? Is it possible to offer

leadership based on authenticity, integrity and an ethical base, as well as detailed knowledge and skills? Increasingly, the research shows that this is not only possible but also productive.

There is an inherent paradox in a lot of the research in the area. Virtuous practices are consistently found to produce good results for people and organizations. Yet to simulate virtuous practices to produce the good results can lead to a lack of authenticity that is quickly detected and so undermines the intended outcomes. As John Lennon famously said: 'Life is what happens to you when you are busy making other plans.' So positive psychology suggests that good organization results happen to you when you are busy making your organization a good place to be. There is no shortcut. If you as a leader don't practise what you preach, don't live by the values you espouse for the organization, are unable to show humility as well as pride, sorrow as well as delight, then people will quickly spot the 'authenticity gap' and into that gap cynicism will flow. Entrenched organizational cynicism can undermine the best efforts at organizational improvement.

Key Themes of the Book

As I have researched and written this book a number of themes have emerged. These are threaded through the chapters. The reference to an ethical basis for science shared and advice given has already been mentioned. Throughout the book we shall be treating organizational change as an ethical and moral act.

You will also find continual references to the power of positivity, or 'feeling good'. It is worth reiterating that positivity is not a brand of positive thinking. It is not about pretending bad things don't happen or that people never feel down. Rather, it refers to the balance of positive emotions against negative ones in people's lives. It is becoming clear that this ratio profoundly affects both individual and organizational wellbeing. The more positive emotions are studied, the clearer it becomes that they are hugely important and powerful factors in human wellbeing. Interestingly, one of the most powerful approaches to organizational change, Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider *et al.*, 2001), which developed independently of the school of positive psychology (although they are now coming much closer together), incorporated an early recognition of the power of positivity in achieving organizational change: one of the key principles of Appreciative Inquiry is the principle of positivity.

Appreciative Inquiry is another theme that is present in this book, along with other whole-system interventions. When I started to write I didn't appreciate quite how much backing the research would give to the importance of thinking and intervening at a whole-system level in organizations. Yet time and again the implication from the research is that piecemeal, or linear, interventions are unlikely to be as successful as whole-system approaches. These are explained in more detail in Chapter 8, which was added to the original book plan as it became apparent that many paths of inquiry led to them as a practical way forward. The link is that these methods invariably build social capital.

The importance of social capital to organizational life and wellbeing is another theme. The terms 'social capital' and 'relational reserves' refer to the quality of relationships and interactions within the organization. They profoundly affect organizational capability. Key to building good reserves of social capital is an affirmative bias within organizational life, and the importance of this is another of the book's key themes. Together, these ideas – positivity, ethical actions, affirmative bias and whole-system approaches – hold out the exciting and tantalizing possibility of building sustainable, flourishing, inspirational organizations for the next stage of organizational development. Organizations are living entities within a living world. This means that we need to give up our ideas of organizations as dead machines and instead understand them as complex, adaptive systems.

Understanding organizations as complex, adaptive systems is the final unifying theme of the book, along with an important idea that stems from this way of viewing organizations, that of the value of ambivalence. Complex adaptive systems are explained in Chapter 2 and will be referred to as a frame of reference for understanding organizations throughout the text. The value of ambivalence has been another interesting discovery on the path to writing this book. Organizations have a tendency to regard clear, unambiguous statements and positions as the basis for strong, clear organizations. Increasingly, research is indicating that the best organizations incorporate, rather than attempt to banish, the ambivalence inherent in human life. At a fundamental level the existence within the brain of both an approach and an avoidance behaviour system (Pickering and Gray, 1999) suggests that we need ambivalence to survive. Organizations, it seems, also benefit from an ability to hold two opposing ideas, thoughts and approaches in their repertoire of behaviour. We explore this more fully in Chapter 4.

Given the collapse of the world financial markets following the unbridled pursuit of profit and the proliferation of unedifying unethical practices, the time has come to take a look at the evidence suggesting that organizations can be built on virtuous and ethical principles and still be profitable and sustainable. This book brings together the various parts of the jigsaw of research, theory and practice from positive psychology and Appreciative Inquiry to explore how this can be achieved and sustained.