

Positive organizational scholarship has helped answer important questions about why some companies perform so much better than others. Concepts about virtue, compassion, and positivity may seem simple, but they turn out to be crucial implements for broader success.

UNLEASHING POSITIVITY IN THE WORKPLACE

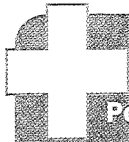
By Ann Pace

In 1989 in Rocky Flats, Colorado (a small town 16 miles west of Denver), the FBI raided and temporarily closed a nuclear weapons production facility in response to continued allegations of environmental violations. The U.S. federal government estimated that it would take 70 years and more than \$36 billion to close and clean up the site. Employees who had worked at the 6,000-acre facility since the 1950s were suddenly ostracized by the surrounding community, which feared radioactive pollution. Seemingly in a day, the Rocky Flats workforce—once hailed as patriotic heroes aiding the United States' Cold War nuclear proliferation efforts—became environmental criminals without a mission.

Six years later, the government awarded the contract to close the Rocky Flats facility to a local engineering and environmental firm, CH2M HILL. Astonishingly, CH2M HILL finished the job 60 years ahead of schedule, \$30 billion under budget, and 13 times cleaner than federal standards required. The employees, who had initially filed 900 grievances, were transformed into an engaged force that worked themselves out of their jobs.



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Positive Organizational Scholarship

- Positive refers to an affirmative bias, an examination of phenomena that represent a value orientation toward abundance, elevation, and virtuousness.
- Organizational refers to positive processes and states that occur in association with organizational contexts. It draws from the full spectrum of organizational theories to understand, explain, and predict the occurrence, causes, and consequences of positivity in organizations.
- Scholarship refers to rigor, theory, scientific procedures, and precise definition.

CH2M HILL's extraordinary performance has prompted the question: What did the organization do to produce such phenomenal outcomes?

The theory

The cleanup at Rocky Flats is an example of positive deviance, or extraordinary success. The study of positive deviance within the workplace is a core emphasis of positive organizational scholarship (POS). According to the *Sage Handbook of Organizational Behavior*, "positive organizational scholarship is a broad framework that seeks to explain behaviors in and outside of organizations. It focuses explicitly on the positive states and processes that arise from, and result in, life-giving dynamics, optimal functioning, or enhanced capabilities and strengths." This approach focuses on both an individual's and an organization's strengths and virtues.

While POS is a recent development in organizational sciences, it serves as an empirical basis and connection mechanism for preexisting topics such as appreciative inquiry, organizational change, creativity and innovation, engagement, and leadership.

The origins

The POS movement originated within the organizational studies field nearly a decade ago. Jane Dutton, a Robert L. Kahn distinguished professor of business administration and psychology at the University of Michigan, recalls that after the tragedies of September 11, 2001, she and her colleagues realized that their field had little to offer companies in terms of rebuilding strength and capability. To meet this need, the department reorganized its annual conference in November 2001, and focused on the positive cases of strengths-building in organizations during that trying time.

Additionally, the faculty created the Leading in Trying Times website, an online resource that provides a series of offerings to leaders based on the field's best research about organizational strengths building. The website received 30,000 hits within the first month. "This was an indicator to us that the world was hungry for this and that we needed to do more," Dutton says.

Kim Cameron, a William Russell Kelly professor of management and organizations at the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business and professor of higher education at the School of Education, traces his POS roots to the mid-1980s, when he began studying downsizing in the auto industry. From his dozen or so years of research, Cameron learned that 80 to 85 percent of organizations that implement downsizing experience significant deterioration in performance, including decreased productivity, curtailed creativity and innovation, low morale, and restricted communication. However, Cameron also discovered that the remaining 15 or 20 percent of organizations flourished after downsizing. He began referring to these flourishing few as "virtuous organizations" because they were set apart by their virtuous practices.

Cameron's research efforts skyrocketed in the mid-1990s when he took advantage of funding by the Templeton Foundation and conducted a five-year empirical study on forgiveness and virtuousness within

organizations. During this time, Cameron sought to answer the questions: What does virtuousness mean? How would one recognize it? How would one affect it within an organization?

Domains of excellence

Organizational virtuousness, as defined by the Center for Positive Organizational Scholarship, refers to the attributes characterizing the best of the human condition. Virtuousness is one of the POS domains of excellence—areas of the center's research depth and experience—that serve as new constructs for organizational studies. Additional domains include resilience, thriving, positive social capital, and compassion.

In 2008, the *Journal of Organizational Behavior* defined compassion as "the process of noticing another person's suffering, emphatically feeling that person's pain, and acting in a manner intended to ease the suffering."

"Compassion is just one example of a human capability that we need to learn how to do well collectively," Dutton explains. "Typically, we don't think about how our workplaces can actively foster a collective good around that competence, and in the process, bring out and strengthen that capacity in each of us as individuals."

Dutton refers to one story of compassion exercised within a physician billing department at a large community hospital in the central United States. The 30-person unit's performance measured far beyond industry standards, and the department positively influenced employee development through compassion. When an employee lost three close relatives, her co-workers lobbied for a formal system that would allow them to donate their vacation or personal days to those who needed extra time off. After the September 11 attacks, the same employees donated more than \$18,000 worth of their vacation time to the Red Cross relief fund, and the organization matched the amount.

"This workplace has taught us a lot about how everyday practices at work create resources and strengths that allow employees to feel like the

organization is enabling them to be better people than they ever thought they could be," Dutton says.

Reflected best-self and abundance gaps

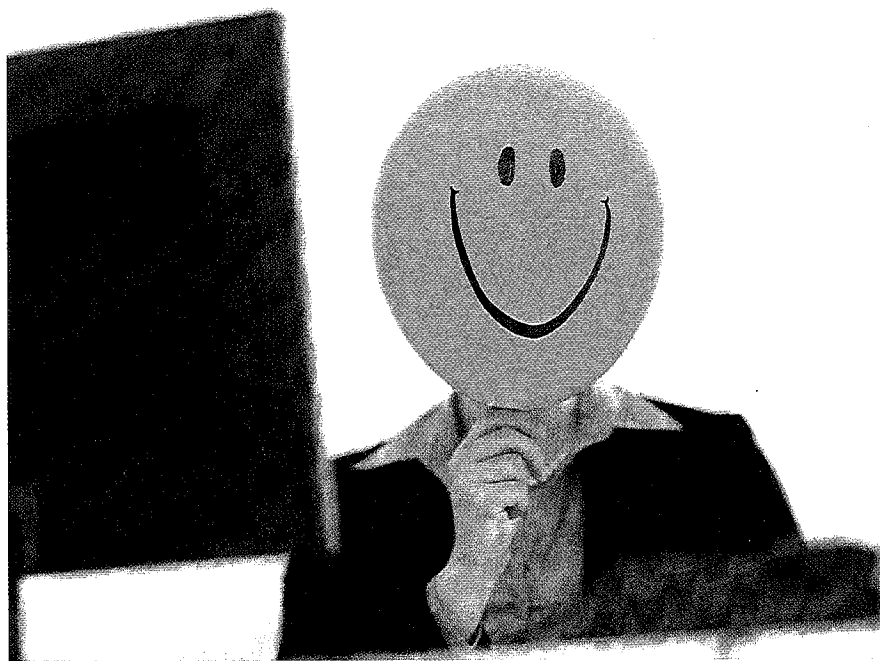
Enabling individual capabilities is one of POS's major tenets. "Reflected best-self" refers to an intentional focus on and development of one's strengths instead of one's weaknesses.

Shawn Quinn, managing partner for organization development firm LIFT Consulting, describes a reflected best-self feedback exercise organizations can implement to unlock employees' best talents and strengths: Each employee asks 20 to 30 people—for example, friends, family members, and co-workers—to share three examples of when they have seen him at his best, and the specific strengths he displayed in those instances. The employee then uses the feedback to create his best-self portrait.

Quinn recounts one client's (Jim) reflected best-self experience: Jim's feedback showed he was good at "football," although he really wanted to be good at "skiing" and had spent a significant amount of time developing his skiing skills. Jim decided to instead focus on football and delegate skiing to one of his direct reports. As a result, the direct report excelled in his career like never before and received the best performance score possible—a 1 on a scale of 1 to 5. Jim noted to Quinn, "This whole time I was waiting for my direct report to earn a 1, but I was the one keeping him from achieving it."

Applying strengths-building on an organizational level, abundance gaps emphasize the dynamics that foster organizational excellence and win the hearts and minds of customers. Quinn describes the experience of a British mobile phone company, 02 Telefonica, whose debt collection department decided to adopt an abundance perspective.

The company trained employees to listen to the customers, hear their personal stories, and attempt to work out payment plans that met the customers' needs. If customers were unable to make their payments, employees



were instructed to forgive the debts. By acting from this POS perspective—with compassion, forgiveness, and virtuousness guiding strategic processes—02 Telefonica's debt collection improved by 50 percent.

Positive leadership

Leadership is one facet of the learning and development profession that has been especially enlightened by POS. "Many people have a one-dimensional paradigm of what it looks like to organize and lead," says Robert Quinn, professor of management and organizations at the University of Michigan. "But, if you have any awareness whatsoever, you know that this is insufficient, and if you follow that [one] system fanatically, it will break down. A positive organizational approach is really a matter of being able to integrate the competing demands that make up an organization."

POS leadership methods are gaining ground in the Iraq and Afghanistan combat arenas, where U.S. military leaders are realizing that simply killing enough people is not sufficient to win the war. When training U.S. Army officers, Cameron proposes focusing war efforts on unlocking the "heliotrope

effect"—the inherent human tendency toward that which is good and virtuous—and identifying ways by which to turn the war-torn countries into places that are abundant, as opposed to deficit-focused.

Cameron expounds on POS leadership in his book *Positive Leadership*. He describes four positive strategies that tend to produce life-giving, flourishing outcomes in individuals and organizations: positive climate, positive relationships, positive communication, and positive meaning.

✦ **1. Positive climate** is "a condition in which positive emotions predominate over negative emotions in the work environment." A leader can help to enable a positive climate in the workplace by emphasizing positive opportunities and relationships rather than fixating on the negative or problematic. The fostering of compassion, gratitude, and forgiveness among employees is especially important in enabling a positive workplace climate.

In a study of various not-for-profit and public organizations, including General Electric, National City Bank, and OfficeMax, across 16 different

industry groups, companies with more positive climates (that is, those that scored higher on compassion, forgiveness, and gratitude activities) performed significantly better in profitability, productivity, quality, innovation, customer satisfaction, and employee retention.

✦ **2. Positive relationships** are “those that are a generative source of enrichment, vitality, and learning for both individuals and organizations.” Studies have shown that positive social relationships have beneficial effects on the body’s hormonal, cardiovascular, and immune systems. Research has also linked the existence of positive relationships to improving career mobility, and mentoring and resource acquisition.

Individuals can function as “positive energizers” or “negative energizers.” Positive energizers leave others feeling inspired, motivated, and full of vitality, while negative energizers tend to deplete the strength and enthusiasm of their peers. “High-performing organizations have three times more positive energizers than average organizations,” Cameron says. “The strength of the interpersonal relationships that are formed, the coordination and collaboration among individuals, and the efficiency of work being done are all positively affected by individuals who exude positive energy.”

Positive energizing is a learned behavior that leaders can model and facilitate. Leaders should focus on diagnosing the “positive energy networks” within their organizations; rewarding employees who are positive energizers; and coaching, training, and mentoring the negative energizers.

✦ **3. Positive communication** takes place when “affirmative and supportive language replaces negative and critical language.” In a study of high-, average-, and low-performing teams, the single most important factor in predicting organizational performance was the ratio of positive statements—support, appreciation,

or compliments—to negative statements—disapproval, criticism, or disparagement. The ratio of positive-to-negative communication was 5.6 to 1 in high-performing organizations, 1.85 to 1 in average-performing organizations, and 0.36 to 1 in low-performing organizations.

The reflected best-self feedback process and supportive communication are two practical tools leaders can implement to enable positive communication in their organizations. Supportive communication upholds a positive relationship when one must deliver negative feedback or address a problem. *Positive Leadership* prescribes three steps to this process: “Describe a situation (rather than evaluate it); identify objective consequences or personal feelings associated with it (rather than place blame); and suggest acceptable alternatives (rather than argue about who is right or at fault).”

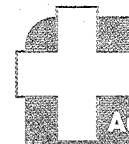
✦ **4. Positive meaning** “has been proposed as a universal human need, and well-established relationships exist between engaging in meaningful work and positive outcomes.” Those employees who view their work as a calling or career and completely adopt the organization’s goals tend to produce more positively deviant performance.

Cameron suggests that leaders can enable meaningfulness in work by “reinforcing the benefits produced for others; associating work outcomes with the core values of employees; identifying the long-term impact created by the work; and emphasizing contribution goals more than achievement goals.”

Closing thoughts

A POS approach does not ignore the existence of the negative. In fact, many positive outcomes occur as a result of conflict, weakness, and trauma. Rocky Flats is one example of positive deviance triumphing in the face of trial and defeat. A leader at the Rocky Flats Nuclear Arsenal shared the following testimony three years before the project was completed:

“It took years to change the attitude of the workforce. We got leaders on



Additional Resources

Center for Positive Organizational Scholarship
www.bus.umich.edu/Positive

Leading in Trying Times. www.bus.umich.edu/Positive/POS-Research/leadingintryingtimes.htm

Executive Education Offerings
www.bus.umich.edu/Positive/POS-Teaching-and-Learning/Learning.htm#Executive_Education

Compassion Lab
www.compassionlab.com

The LIFT blog: Thoughts and Updates on Positive Organizational Scholarship and Its Implications for Leaders.
www.leadingwithlift.com/blog

board by listening to them and unleashing their energy to do good work. The climate changed to one of working together... That was the shift that really allowed us to make progress. It isn't much more magical than people sitting down together and actually solving problems together... I said the very first day I arrived at Rocky Flats: 'This is the best team I've ever worked with,' and I say that today. It is the best team I've ever worked with... I think we have the best in the industry right now." **T+D**

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