Positive Organizational Scholarship:
Meet the Movement
An Interview With Kim Cameron,
Jane Dutton, and Robert Quinn

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Keywords: positive organizational scholarship

INTRODUCTION

As a University of Michigan master of business administration graduate with a 2-month respite before I began my job at McKinsey, I was looking for short-term, interesting work. I became an assistant to a group of faculty members at the Michigan Business School and the Department of Psychology who were on fire about their work. They had held a research conference in December 2001 and produced an edited book titled Positive Organizational Scholarship (Bennett-Koehler). Multiple symposia had been created and presented at the Academy of Management focusing on themes such as energy, positive emotion, resilience, and virtues. In addition, a Web site had been created to facilitate networking among researchers interested in this domain (see http://www.bus.umich.edu/~FacultyResearch/Research/Scholarship/).

This group of faculty had planned another daylong event for business school alumni, all based on this new perspective they labeled positive organizational scholar-

ship (POS). They asked me to assist them with the design and to attend. The alumni event was a smashing success, and I witnessed firsthand how a POS lens could open new ways of seeing possibilities in work organizations. The energy in the room for the faculty and the alumni was palpable. I wanted to know more. What makes POS so compelling to organizational researchers and to practitioners? Why is this a movement both executives and scholars are so energized and motivated to pursue? What accounts for the deep caring people express? This interview represents an attempt to provide answers to these questions. I hope you will find the response to my questions as interesting as I do.

Bernstein: Let’s begin with an overview of the movement. What are some of the core ideas of POS?
Cameron: I think I speak for the three of us in indicating that we really do think of positive organizational scholarship as a new movement in the organizational sciences. Its breadth and inclusiveness, however, make capturing its essence difficult in a few short sentences. At its roots,
POS represents a particular way of thinking, a value orientation, and a posture toward organizational research. It focuses on the dynamics in organizations that lead to the development of human strength, foster vitality and flourishing in employees, make possible resilience and restoration, and cultivate extraordinary individual and organizational performance. This emphasis parallels the new movement in psychology that has shifted from a traditional focus on illness and pathology—e.g., deviance, abnormality, and therapy—to a positive psychology focusing on human strengths, virtues, positive affect, and what makes life worth living. Similarly, positive organizational scholarship examines the positive side of organizational performance. It investigates positive deviations, or the ways in which organizations and their members flourish and prosper in extraordinary ways.

At the risk of going on too long, we have deliberately chosen the words "positive," "organizational," and "scholarship." Positive refers to an affirmative bias, as 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 rigorous, theory, scientific procedures, and precise definitions.

There is a lack of self-help accounts that prescribe relatively simple and uncomplicated prescriptions for achieving happiness, fulfillment, or effectiveness. POS does not stand in opposition to this array of self-help publications, but it extends beyond them in its desire to develop rigorous, systematic, and theoretically based foundations for positive phenomena.

Bereitstein: What's different? Why should others share your excitement about the POS movement?
Cameron: Again, I'm risk speaking for the group in saying that each of us has become personally enthused and inspired by the POS movement. It has helped reenvision our own research and teaching activities. To illustrate why, think of the typical organization described in the business press in academic research. Wealth creation is usually the key indicator of success. Employees are characterized by self-interest and a focus on problem-solving, self-interest, manipulation, greed, secrecy, and a single-minded emphasis on winning and to conflict, law, competition, and disrespect in social relationships. Our colleague, Jim Walsh (in press) found, for example, that words such as "win," "fair," and "competition" dominate the business press over the past two decades whereas words such as "virtue," "fair," and "compassion" have seldom appeared at all. Scholarship research, therefore, has tended to emphasize survival, power, goals, and status, increasing uncertainty, overcoming resistance, achieving profitability, exercising power and influence, exchange and bargaining, or conquering successfully against others. At their root, these are all nonpositive phenomena.

Of course, POS does not ignore or deignate these phenomena, but it seeks to study organizations epitomized by appreciation, collaboration, virtuousness, vitality, and meaningfulness where creating abundance and human well-being are key indicators of success. Examining characteristics such as trustworthiness, resilience, humility, authenticity, respect, and forgiveness among employees adds to theories of excellence, transcendence, positive deviance, extraordinary performance, and positive spirals of flourishing. For the most part, organizational science has paid little heed to these kinds of phenomena up to now. We are energized by POS, therefore, because it opens up a broader array of phenomena to investigate and because these phenomena are inherently attractive. For me, they speak to something that I care about deeply.

Bereitstein: Isn't POS a little sugar?
Quina: It's very tempting to define positive organizational scholarship in terms of good human practices. We are trying to be very clear that positive organizational scholarship is multidimensional. It's about all different patterns of extraordinary behavior. It is about making money and it is about creating contexts in which people flourish. Any pattern of excellence is a pattern worthy of research. POS refers to phenomena that occur at the far right end of the normal curve. The focus moves from questions of what is wrong and what is normal to the question of what are extraordinary and what accounts for the extraordinariness? We are uplifted and inspired by these questions. POS is an inherently uplifting and inspiring field.

Cameron: One explanation for the lack of attention paid to POS phenomena is that they have often been associated with philosophy, religion or moral dogmatism, and scientific inference. We are serious, however, about the word "scholarship." We are firmly committed to investigating positive phenomena scientifically. In fact, some very exciting research results are beginning to emerge in which some of these heretofore neglected concepts—such as virtuousness, compassion, resilience, forgiveness, courage, and positive emotions—are being carefully and rigorously studied in the context of organizations. The significant relationships between such positive phenomena and desired organizational outcomes represent exciting new discoveries.
Putnam: Another way to say it is that POS is focused on the enduring and/or temporary structures and processes in organizational settings that create positive dynamics. So POS is not just about looking at topics like self-actualization. It is about structures, cultures, processes, leadership, and other organizational conditions that have positive states and positive dynamics in human communities. Positive states and/or positive dynamics in any of these areas may lead to extraordinary instrumental outcomes or extraordinary human outcomes or both.
Bernstein: Let's get to the heart of the matter. People often make the critique that focusing on the positive is overly simplistic with the implication that this means ignoring the negative. I think that everyone here would agree that the negative is an important facet of learning, and that small failures, in particular, are important building blocks of resilience. Isn't there a possibility that by focusing on the positive you miss some important aspects of organizations? It's the same for our research.

Quinn: You make a very important point. Focusing on the positive does not mean excluding the negative. It's a crystal clear way to view the diversity of forces in the study of POS. What we're doing is asking questions about the positive human condition, about excellence, about flourishing, and how you get there. The answer can very well be that negative forces lead to those positive outcomes, so to exclude them would be unrealistic.

Dutton: Yesterday, I did a word search in sociological and organizational journals on flourishing and thriving, and I basically get no hits. There is an assumption that organizations just, on average, pretty negative places. One of the things that makes me really excited about POS is that it recognizes the positive possibilities of work organization. Even in organizations that aren't like Southwest Airlines, that are negative and may even be seen as despiseful, there are units and departments that are quite extraordinary. What we should be trying to understand are those parts of organizations that are extraordinary.

Quinn: Let me give an example from sociology. Sociology 101 is a course in social order about norms, values, organizing processes in society. Sociology 102 is a course in social deviance about crime, prostitution, all those kind of sociological pathologies. There is no Sociology 103, where you can study positive deviance. In fact, I once had a heated conversation with a sociologist about positive deviance. He said, "By definition there is no such thing." I thought that was really an important notion. He was so socialized to order and pathology that he couldn't even conceive of a world of positive deviance.

I would claim that organizations as processes and structures are mechanisms that exist to stamp out deviance. Management is about maintaining order, burying deviance in any kind. The first principle of any quality course, the principle upon which everything is based, is the elimination of variation. Quality is taking variation out of all systems and processes. Every discipline taught in the business school is an equilibrium-seeking discipline. Organizations can't differentiate between positive and negative deviance—they stamp out deviance, period. I think of a study I did recently at Ford. One of the respondents said to me, "If I fail, I get punished." I started to write that down, and he stopped me and finished his sentence: "If I succeed, I get punished." Now think about that incredible statement. "If I fail, I get punished;" the great message is to conform and always be in the middle group. No one intentionally designed organizations to be this way, but they're all designed this way because they're fear based. The disciplines are doing exactly the same thing. They're making the same set of assumptions about studying and perpetuating exactly the same kind of logic. Positive organizational scholarship, on the other hand, asks what is positive deviance, how do you find it, how do you cherish it, how do you nourish and develop it.

Bernstein: You've mentioned that these are not new ideas. Why are they coming into something coherent now? Dutton: When people see a need, articulate a direction, invent in the pursuit of a purpose, others may see themselves in that purpose and also begin to invent. That is what is happening. We have a core group of excited people. Here at Michigan, we have people in a number of departments and schools who are investing in this movement. Many of them are senior people who can take risks. They can also invest in junior people. Having such a core group increases our chances of success. There are even more people who are outside of Michigan who have invested. There are lots of people who have been able to reinvent their previous research around the positive focus. For example, Fred Lichtman was one of the first to initiate interest in a positive perspective on organizations through his association with the Gallup organization. Gallup's focus on strengths rather than weaknesses, Fred to begin addressing these ideas in his own work as well. It reenergized his thinking. There is also a demand in the world of practice. The knowledge that comes from POS is inherently interesting to practitioners. They want to know how to move to the far right side of the curve. Research on POS is likely to be supported by companies and funding organizations. Such external resources tend to perpetuate the movement.

Cameron: You are correct that POS is not a new invention. Well-known precursors exist such as Likert, McGregor, Manow, White, and others. But let me suggest one other reason why POS is capturing energy and momentum at the present time. There are several well-known senior scholars who have begun to rethink their own work and/ or engage in new avenues of research related to POS. Because these folks have international reputations, because they have produced outstanding scholarly work for decades in the past, and because they are not apt to follow intellectual fads, their work related to POS adds credibility and energy. For example, John Kotter, by his work on collaboration, on resiliency, on positive energy, and on high quality connections is opening up completely new areas of research. Without the impeccable scholarly reputation, these kinds of topics might seem as too nebulous. Senior scholars like these are given license to question and confront commonly held assumptions more than junior people. I suspect there are at least 20 senior people now doing work on POS topics that previously were seen as risky or irrelevant. This attention by senior scholars provides an environment where junior scholars and doctoral students can enter the arena with much less risk of having their work be labeled as unimportant.

Quinn: Great! Researchers become great Renaissance when they write papers that meet two criteria. They ask a truly
Let me give you an example how contagious it is. Yesterday I gave a talk to about 40 people. By the time I came back to my office there were five or six responses on my e-mail. One was from a professor at the medical school. His e-mail reviewed the research on physiology and all of the things they do in the medical school in relation to stress and health. He said, "I listened to that talk about organizations and, suddenly, I see new possibilities. I see this whole notion of organizations being absolutely critical to what I'm studying." He said, "I'm very interested to know what is the optimal environment for wellness and productivity." There is a concern that both human and the instrumental. He wants people who are well and who are more productive. He said, "I have to do money to do a conference in this, what are the possibilities?" We exchanged several e-mails, Kim sent a chapter over, and by the afternoon the man was ready to explore launching a conference. We have a meeting next week. I'll be surprised if there's not a conference on positive organizational scholarship in human health. This would bring together people who are promoting things right now but who, as a result of this process, will end up reframing what they're doing, and they'll become part of this movement. It is a very inclusive movement. It is growing fast.

Dutton: I agree. "POS helps people redefine their work. The personal paradigm shift for organizational researchers and practitioners is transformative. For example, the doctor who contacted Bob thought he was in the business of helping veterans recover from stress. Instead he sees himself in the business of helping veterans become optimal, functioning human beings, it's a really different story. POS revises not just the possibility of organizations, but it revises the possibility of us as organizational scholars and what our legacies will be. For example, you could describe Amy Wrzesniewski's work on careers, callings, and jobs as research that focuses on how and why work orientations matter (which it does). Alternatively, you could see Amy's work as fundamentally concerned with how individuals craft their work as calling that cultivates positive meaning and fosters creativity, commitment, and dedication to excellence. This later framing of POS from a POS perspective makes very clear the value of the work for deepening understanding about one's work that positive conditions and positive dynamics nurture success. It is an exciting, compelling, and important path to be on as an organizational scholar. The three of us have all had similar reactions as we have transformed our own way of thinking about our own research that connects us to a POS perspective. It helps us see new and why our work matters to improving the human condition. This refrain has been deeply motivating."

Bretton: Let's talk for a minute about the geography of the movement. What are the roots of POS?

Dutton: I see positive organizational scholarship as a label that unites many different efforts. Imaged positive organizational scholarship as a strew of really wonderful work that's been ongoing but has never been defined. There's great work being done on organizational creativity and the creativity of individuals in organizations. There's work being done on how to create positive meaning at work. There's work being done on empowerment and how different kinds of decision arrangements enable high-quality decisions. There's work being done on the social construction of hope and the positive role that hope plays in organizational change processes. Those are just four examples of already existing pockets of research that were bringin along and being published in respectable places but never saw themselves as being synergistic or complementary to each other in helping to paint a portrait or brow a stew. That in fact taken together collectively could help us reinvision possibilities of how to move organizations from ordinary to extraordinary or how to move people in organizations from ordinary to extraordinary.

Cameron: Positive organizational scholarship is fortunate to be able to build on the scholarly foundations of several disparate literatures that predated. For example, work has already been done in corporate social responsibility, prosocial behavior, industrial psychology, citizenship behavior, behavioral ethics, organizational justice, and positive psychology. POS scholarship should certainly build on and extend these nascent literatures. Although not enough of it has found its way into organizational studies. On the other hand, one way POS extends what has been done previously is that most of these literatures—because of the exception of the latter two—still focus mainly on avoiding harm, overcoming problems, assisting those disadvantaged, and acting in order to acquire a financial advantage. POS supplements those areas of focus with emphasis on doing good irrespective of personal advantage, enabling abundance, and understanding extraordinary flourishing and vitality—that is, building the positive not just addressing the nonpositive.

Dutton: I think it's important to say that we are riding the wave of positive psychology. That is a very vibrant movement that has a lot of momentum and a lot of terrific work being done in it. We are learning from how they are doing things, and I think that is part of what is energizing us and helping us to make more impact. There have been transfers of practices; how is cultivate interest in a scholarly community, how to get people involved. There are two key players in the positive psychology movement at Michigan, Beth Tredrickson and Chris
warming; designing double beds for the maternity ward so husbands could sleep over with wives and not have to sleep in chairs; creating stations where all nurses were within sight of their hospital zones so patients wouldn't have to press a button multiple times before the nurse came in. One nurse went on strike and couldn't work. The nurse was that if you didn't work you didn't get paid, so people in the hospital, including doctors, put vacation days in--a bank that this person could draw from. He ended up dying 4 or 5 months later, but never missed a paycheck. Over and over again there were vivid examples of prac-ticing, positive deviance. Well, within 6 months the new CEO found himself in a situation where he had to down-size the workforce by 10%. Normally, downsizing pulls all the positive energy out of the system. People hate it. They feel abused, unfairly treated, and their trust is vio-lated. Instead of harming this organization, however, the downsizing actually contributed to positive dynamics among its employees. Compassion, caring, absolute hon-esty, and forgiveness were, in fact, enhanced in the hospi-tal. People helped one another. They didn't ignore the diffi-cult circumstances that downsizing created but they focused much more on the positive things that had occurred. They created momentum for moving forward. Since that downsizing occurred, the hospital's financial performance has exceeded all expectations.

Quinn: Let me respond differently. This question assumes that we're talking about something real. I think it's not rare at all. I think positive phenomena occur constantly. They appear rare because of the shape of the normal curve. Take the 150 Division 1 basketball teams in the country right now. Tell me who's rated one, two, and three. Let me go into those systems, and I'll find some very definite patterns of excellence that are worth study-ing. For every 100 middle managers, I can identify 1 or 2 who are transformational leaders. If I have a very sick fac-tory that every employee hates and they're all behaving dysfunctionally, I can still find an employee who behaves very differently, does a great job, and the whole factory rises. Take any curve, and at the top there's excellence. It happens everywhere. It happens in the environment we're in but we've trained out to it. I want to dispel that it's ubiquitous, and this is one of the reasons why POS is important.

Bennis: What are some of the new research horizons you see emerging from this?