

Developing a Discipline of Positive Organizational Scholarship

Kim S. Cameron, Jane E. Dutton,
Robert E. Quinn, and Amy Wrzesniewski

From: Cameron, K. S., Dutton, J. E., & Quinn, R. E. (Eds.). (2003). *Positive Organizational Scholarship: Foundations of a new Discipline*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

The chapters in this book have introduced a wealth of insights and developments born of the new and emerging discipline called positive organizational scholarship (POS). Collectively the chapters chart exciting and relatively unmapped territory in the study of behavior, processes, structures, and dynamics in organizations. The objective of this final chapter is to summarize and integrate some themes and insights found in the book. One liability of edited books is that the threads that bind the chapters together, and the overall value of the aggregation of the topics, are lost without an attempt at integration. It is not difficult to get excited about individual chapters in this volume and the specific contributions made by each, but it is also important to highlight the excitement and the positive energy that is associated with the overall discipline of POS. This final chapter aspires to help illuminate some exciting paths that, hopefully, will be traversed by other scholars in the future.

Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, and Vohs (2001) demonstrated the pervasiveness and impact of negative events, behaviors, and outcomes in human behavior. Negative or "bad" occurrences, for example, appear to have greater impact on individual emotions and behavior than positive or "good" occurrences. Thus, because negative phenomena capture the most

one negative interaction (Losada, 1999; Gottman, 1994). The ratio is not five to zero, and the negative interactions serve as foil against which to interpret and activate the strengths in the positive. In addition, organizational and individual strengths are sometimes evidenced by mere normality—an absence of mistakes and crises—when deterioration or weakness is the predicted condition. When organizations should fail but don't, when they bounce back but shouldn't, when they remain flexible and agile but ought to become rigid, the presence of resilience—for example, maintaining the status quo—is also an extraordinarily positive strength (Weick, Chapter 5; Sutcliffe & Vogus, Chapter 7; Bateman & Porath, Chapter 9).

A third integrative theme relates to the self-reinforcing nature of positive emotions, positive energy, and positive human connections. For example, positive emotions not only serve as a cause and consequence of positive outcomes in individuals and organizations, but also create positive self-reinforcing spirals that broaden thought-action repertoires—that is, individuals and organizations develop more human resources, intellectual resources, social resources, and psychological resources (Fredrickson, Chapter 11). High-quality connections are life-giving rather than life-depleting. Their positive energy is easily discerned by those involved in them; they enhance emotional carrying capacity and tensility (the ability to bend under pressure), and they are important contributors to processes of learning, identity creation, and growth (Dutton & Heaphy, Chapter 17). They create the transfer of vital resources between individuals and organizations.

The most generative relationships are infused with physiological significance, so that actual physiological and organizational functioning are enhanced. They are infused with emotional significance in that they highlight how the connection relates to experienced vitality and engagement. They are infused with existential significance emphasizing that different connections facilitate the crafting of different identities and meanings. They are infused with material significance in exposing people to difference amounts and qualities of information and resources, which endow individuals with differing amounts of power, choice points for action, and coordination capacity (Gittel, Chapter 18). Positive emotions, positive energy, and positive human connections lead, in other words, to mutually reinforcing upward spirals of meaningful experience and extraordinary performance.

Fourth, a variety of authors point out that rather than being neutral entities, organizational conditions can enable or disable positive dynamics, primarily through a sense of meaningfulness. Organizational forms and organizing processes determine the micro-contexts in which people function; the meaning that people make of their own experience, the information and opportunities available for people to excel, and the resources that facilitate or hinder positive individual and organizational performance. For ex-

ample, organizations can make resources available that are motivating and enabling; they can provide empowerment and freedom for individuals to perform at their best; they can structure communication patterns and human connections that enable the execution of coordination in highly dependent tasks; they can provide examples of authentic leadership; and they can institutionalize positive networks that affect both internal and external constituencies' performance. In particular, these mechanisms can infuse meaning into work and into work organizations (Luthans & Avolio, Chapter 16; Wrzesniewski, Chapter 19; Baker, Cross, & Wooten, Chapter 21). Meaningfulness may occur by clarifying goals, purpose, and values and by connecting those factors to the core values of employees—an integration of doing and being (Pratt & Ashforth, Chapter 20). Doing good along with doing well, recognizing and supporting the salience of employee family and personal life, and exemplifying integrity and virtuosity in organizational policies, routines, and culture are among the belief system factors associated with meaningfulness in organizations. Organizational design, then, can be seen as a positive source of connection and coordination, not merely a structure for achieving task objectives.

In sum, positive organizational scholarship brings together ideas that have not been previously integrated—for example, empowerment on the inside of organizations changes the capacities and dynamics that enable empowerment on the outside. POS makes that which may have been interpreted as detrimental to performance be seen as potentially helpful—for example, contradictions, skepticism, ambivalence, complexity, and advanced publicizing of intentions all are frequently interpreted as antithetical to high reliability, yet they can help organizations maintain positivity and resiliency in the face of tragedy and trauma. POS also enriches our understanding of the dynamics and effects of common phenomena that may not have been considered in a positive light—for example, social networks can collect and distribute not only information and resources but also positive energy. New variables, processes, and relationships that have seldom been considered are uncovered and explained (e.g., positive energy, positive emotions, high-quality connections, virtuosity, vitality, and meaningfulness).

PUZZLES AND UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

One key objective of this volume is to invite organizational scholars to engage in further examination of these and other relevant phenomena related to POS. A number of key questions remain unexamined, and much is yet to be learned. We highlight six categories of questions that emerge from the work in this volume.

Level of Analysis

A variety of questions relate to the level of analysis at which phenomena occur and the extent to which relationships at one level of analysis can be observed at another level. Specifically, do individual dynamics reproduce themselves in organizations, and vice versa? Why or why not? Relationships between individual expressions of virtuosity and individual performance and health have been demonstrated, for example, but do these same dynamics occur in organizations?

Expressions of gratitude by individuals affect others' attitudes and behaviors, but how much does this generalize to organizations? Positive individual emotions lead to positive individual outcomes, but does positive emotionality have the same effects in organizations? Do high-quality connections among individuals have the same kinds of effects in organizations as they do in the lives of the individuals involved? Do interpretations of meaningfulness in work produce a sense of meaningfulness of work in the organization? Does empowerment inside an organization lead to empowerment in the network of constituent organizations or the broader social environment? Demonstrating relationships at one level of analysis does not necessarily mean that they will be present in another, and understanding what is *organizational* is an important challenge for POS researchers.

Measurement

The variables and concepts associated with POS have often been ignored or relegated to religion or philosophy. They have been left out of equations in disciplines such as economics and sociology. Few instruments, methods, or reliable indicators have been developed to assess positive phenomena. Specifically, how are positive concepts and variables best identified, measured, and explained? What are the key indicators? How does the process of inquiry shape the results? For example, self-report instrumentation may not be appropriate for measuring concepts such as positive energy, humility, or virtuosity. Key indicators have not been identified for organizational phenomena such as resilience, transcendence, authentic leadership, virtuosity, or even positive deviance. Since POS focuses on what factors help people experience or express more of the whole self in the workplace, what are the dimensions of the whole self? A need exists to locate and measure the existence of extraordinarily positive states, processes, structures, and behavior. What are the markers? Moreover, the manner in which investigations occur may have impact on the phenomena being observed. Asking appreciative questions or seeking for positive dynamics may actually produce them or may alter the interpretations people place on their ex-

periences. Questions relating to what is measured as well as how it is measured are clearly in need of investigation.

Causal Associations

Questions relating to causal directionality have a central place in POS. That is, what are the causal relationships (directionality) associated with various positive phenomena? Do positive emotions produce creativity and learning, or does the causal directionality go in the opposite direction? Do high-quality connections lead to rapid learning, or vice versa? Which comes first, virtuosity or high performance in organizations? Typical questions related to which causal variables are most important are also important in studying positive phenomena. For example, how important is authentic leadership in high-performing organizations? What specific aspects of high-quality connections and social networks produce positive outcomes? What features of organizations and of environments shape the construction of positive meaning about work, self, and the organization? Also, why does improvement occur more with a focus on strengths than on weaknesses? To what extent must a balance be present in positive outcomes between strengths and weaknesses? Can weaknesses be ignored?

Supplementing these usual causal questions, however, is an even more complex causality issue that arises when studying positive phenomena. Because some positive phenomena tend to produce mutually reinforcing, positive spirals, the typical causal relationship questions may not be relevant in studying positive dynamics. Differentiating among independent and dependent variables may be less germane in POS because both factors can serve to enhance and reinforce the other. For example, positive emotions foster enduring individual resources and reserves that foster organizational thriving. This, in turn, fosters positive emotions or an elevating spiral of positivity. Separating predictors from effects—or identifying which is which—under conditions of mutual reinforcement and contagion presents special research challenges to POS investigators as they uncover extraordinarily positive organizational dynamics.

Enablement

In addition to questions of causal association, issues relating to the mere enablement of positivity also are salient. Certain factors appear to enable positive outcomes, and uncovering why and how this happens is an important issue for POS scholars. For example, what are the attributes of the structures, processes, cultures, leadership behaviors, and/or resources that are most conducive to, or resistant of, positive dynamics in organizations? What

kinds of organizational arrangements are conducive to high-quality connections, positive energy development, or resilience? What factors create conditions where organizations avoid highly probable errors or disasters? How can organizations best buffer themselves from negative encroachments from the environment? What organizational conditions facilitate the development of emotional competence and authentic leadership, or bring forth the best in people? Studies of enablement are not the same as searching for a "best practices" approach to organizational behavior. Highlighting best practice avoids systems-level thinking that explains the processes and dynamics by which organizations become sites for growth and health. Cameron and Quinn (1999) argued that organizations often fail to get results from implementing the best practices because these organizations import a set of discrete, unconnected pieces of practice without attending to the underlying philosophy or system in which such practices need to be embedded in order to take root and change the organization. Likewise, POS does not merely advocate a research agenda meant to surface best practices, but rather advocates studying the processes and mechanisms that allow for and encourage excellence, growth, and health.

Time

Issues related to the temporal dimension of positive phenomena also invite scholarly research. Illustrative questions are: How long does it take for positive dynamics to unfold, to be demonstrated, and to produce effects? What are the temporal relationships between virtuousness and profitability? How long does heedful interrelating or respectful interaction need to occur to produce positive outcomes? What is the half life of organizational resilience? When does deterioration occur and at what rate? How quickly do positive emotions produce broadening and building outcomes? What is the duration of high-quality connections and of their relationships to positive energy? As POS scholars focus more and more on self-reinforcing positive spirals, issues of time frame and phase development will arise, and these issues represent fruitful areas for future investigation.

New Concepts and New Relationships

Most new areas of investigation are labeled as new because of original theoretical explanations but also because of new variables and new phenomena that are uncovered or highlighted. In POS, there is an orientation toward identifying what previously unexamined factors may help explain positive phenomena. For example, concepts have been examined in this volume relating to positive energy, transcendent behavior, organizational

virtuousness, resilience, strengths, courageous principled action, positive deviance, high-quality connections, authentic leadership, meaningfulness, cascading vitality, and positive network ties. Most of these concepts have been newly introduced in this volume or have been rarely examined. POS invites and encourages scholars to increase the number of relevant positive phenomena that can be investigated. What aspects of individual and organizational phenomena have not been taken into account in explaining performance? What environmental, organizational, or individual factors might affect positive organizational and individual outcomes? What concepts from other disciplines might help inform POS? What might be the unexamined effects, causal mechanisms, or manifestations of concepts central to, say, medicine, biomechanics, psychology, or computer science? How might systems dynamics or complexity theory explain self-reinforcing positive spirals among POS concepts? The point is that most empirical organizational studies account for small percentages of the variance in explaining organizational outcomes. POS hopes to encourage the examination of previously underrepresented positive phenomena in organizational scholarship.

In sum, positive organizational scholarship aspires to increase the breadth of phenomena being described and explained in organizational studies by expanding the kinds of variables being examined and by developing richer theories of the dynamics of positivity. Understanding positive dynamics that have heretofore been neglected or underexamined is the desired outcome. A host of research issues are embedded in this aspiration, of course, several of which are highlighted in this volume. They include: the extent to which relationships at one level of analysis—say among individuals—can be extrapolated to another level of analysis (say, organizations); the key indicators and measurement devices to be used in POS research; the causal associations among variables and the relevance of dependent or independent variables given self-reinforcing positive dynamics; identifying enabling factors that enhance or restrict the development of positive processes and outcomes; the time frames that must be considered when identifying positive dynamics and their development; and what new variables and theoretical relationships must be uncovered or developed to explain the positive dynamics in systems.

CONCLUSION

We began this chapter by referring to a review of the psychological literature by Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, and Vohs (2001), concluding that "bad" or negative factors have greater impact on human beings than "good" or positive factors. A single traumatic episode, a single incident of negative feedback, or a single loss, for example, has stronger effects on

people than a single happy episode, a single incident of positive feedback or a single win. Multiple positive events are required to overcome the effects of a single negative event, and a single negative event can undo the effects of multiple positive events. On the other hand, individuals are inherently attracted to that which is inspiring, positive, and uplifting. All human systems *desire* to experience that which is good. The aspiration for fulfillment is ubiquitous, yet it has gone largely unnoticed in organizational studies and has seldom been studied scientifically. Baumeister and colleagues' finding that a dearth of research exists on the effects of the positive and good in psychology is equally typical in organizational studies. Seldom have investigations examined the factors that may lead to self-reinforcing positive cycles and to extraordinarily positive outcomes.

The discipline of positive organizational scholarship is an invitation to investigate, in rigorous, systematic, and enlivening ways, the phenomena that are associated with flourishing, vitality, virtue, meaning, and life-giving dynamics. The fact that the human race, and organizations in particular, thrive and flourish amid difficult, threatening, ambiguous, and turbulent conditions is testimony to the power of positive phenomena in mitigating and overcoming the more impactful negative factors. Too little is known about these positive processes and their interrelationships, and we encourage others to join in this new and exciting adventure.

References

Chapter 1

- Batson, C. D. (1991). *The altruism question: Toward a social-psychological answer*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- (1994). Why act for the public good? Four answers. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 20, 603–610.
- Bolino, M. C., Turnley, W. H., & Bloodgood, J. M. (2002). Citizenship behavior and the creation of social capital in organizations. *Academy of Management Review*, 27, 505–522.
- Cooperider, D. L., & Whitney, D. (2000). A positive revolution in change: Appreciative inquiry. In Cooperider, D. L., Sorenson, P. F., Whitney, D., & Yeager, T. F. (Eds.), *Appreciative inquiry* (pp. 3–28). Champaign, IL: Stipes.
- Cowen, E. L. (1977). Baby steps toward primary prevention. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 5, 1–22.
- (1980). The wooing of primary prevention. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 8, 258–284.
- (1986). Primary prevention in mental health: Ten years of retrospect and ten years of prospect. In Kessler, M., & Goldston, S. E. (Eds.), *A decade of progress in primary prevention* (pp. 3–45). Hanover, NH: University Press of New England.
- (1994). The enhancement of psychological wellness: Challenges and opportunities. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 22, 149–179.