



1 ***Leading to grow and growing to lead:***
 2 **Leadership development**
 3 **lessons from positive**
 4 **organizational studies**

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 6

7 **W**hat is more vital to an organization's
 8 long-term success than its ability to
 9 cultivate leaders? In an era in which the
 10 demand for high quality leadership exceeds
 11 the supply, exemplary organizations are
 12 those that grow leaders at all levels of the
 13 organization by developing their leadership
 14 pipelines. Leaders, through a process of
 15 social influence, guide and inspire followers
 16 toward desired outcomes. Organizations,
 17 such as General Electric Co. and Unilever
 18 PLC are envied for their success in growing
 19 leaders. How do they do it?

20 Scholars affiliated with the Center for
 21 Creative Leadership, such as Morgan
 22 McCall, Cynthia McCauley and Lynn Van
 23 Velsor, suggest that developing leaders calls
 24 for (1) assessing leadership competencies
 25 based on observable indicators of success
 26 to identify strengths and performance gaps,
 27 (2) offering developmental challenges to

close the gaps, and (3) providing support
 to nurture leaders to grow. This three-part
 approach has worked successfully in leader-
 ship development for several decades. In
 recent years, these three elements have
 increasingly been interpreted and implemen-
 ted along the following lines: (1) in the *assess-*
ment of leadership competencies, most
 energy is focused on identifying perfor-
 mance gaps, (2) the *challenge* focuses on creat-
 ing discomfort and hardship to break people
 out of their comfort zones – i.e., no pain, no
 gain, and (3) the organization is charged with
 creating the right institutional *support*
 mechanisms, such as providing formal men-
 tors and training for skill development.

Although these implementation trends
 have often been associated with successful
 leadership development, we suggest that
 they reflect an incomplete picture of effective
 leadership development. They assume a def-

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49 icit approach to human development; that is,
 50 gaps on predetermined areas of generic com-
 51 petence need to be closed, pain is necessary
 52 to prompt leaders to break out of comfort
 53 zones, and the organization knows how to
 54 best support leaders’ growth.

55 In this paper, we highlight a complemen-
 56 tary perspective on growing leaders. What if,
 57 beyond focusing on performance gaps, we
 58 focus on leveraging strengths in assessment?
 59 What if, beyond creating discomfoting chal-
 60 lenges that potentially paralyze leaders, we
 61 offer positive jolts that energize growth?
 62 What if, beyond charging the organization
 63 with providing the right support to facilitate
 64 growth, we encourage leaders and employ-
 65 ees to co-create their own durable resources
 66 that provide support?

67 Of course, we are not suggesting that the
 68 more traditional framework of leadership
 69 development does not add value. Rather, it
 70 is likely that the most impactful leadership
 71 development will contain elements of the
 72 traditional and complementary frameworks.
 73 Akin to Jim Collins’ notion of moving orga-
 74 nizations from good to great, it may be that a
 75 combination of the traditional and comple-
 76 mentary frameworks can ratchet leadership
 77 development systems up a level – from
 78 developing good leaders to developing truly
 79 great leaders. However, while the traditional
 80 framework is well developed, we know
 81 much less about this complementary
 82 approach. Therefore, in this paper, we
 83 explore a complementary approach to lead-
 84 ership development through the applica-
 85 tion of a Positive Organizational Studies
 86 (POS) lens. Toward this end, we first intro-
 87 duce the essence of POS and illustrate how
 88 the application of a POS lens may bring new
 89 insights to conventional wisdom on leader-
 90 ship development. In particular, we draw on
 91 recent theory on authentic leadership, the
 92 reflected best self, and thriving at work to
 93 better understand how to grow leaders at all
 94 levels of an organization. We then discuss the
 95 contributions, as well as the challenges, of
 96 leveraging strengths, providing positive
 97 jolts, and co-creating a supportive context.
 98 The challenges we identify provide guidance

on an agenda for future research on leader-
 ship development.

AN INTRODUCTION TO POS

POS, drawing on the fields of organizational
 behavior, psychology, and sociology, focuses
 on the generative dynamics in organizations
 that promote human strength, resiliency,
 healing, and restoration. A POS perspective
 assumes that understanding how to enable
 human excellence in organizations will
 unlock potential, reveal possibilities, and
 move us along a more positive course of
 human and organizational functioning.
 POS draws from a full spectrum of organiza-
 tional theories to understand, explain, and
 predict the occurrence, causes, and conse-
 quences of positive phenomena. POS views
 states, such as confidence, hope, optimism,
 and resilience as key to high performance. At
 its core, POS investigates “positive
 deviance,” or the ways in which organiza-
 tions and their members flourish and prosper
 in extraordinary ways.

We draw from several streams of POS
 research to offer new insights on growing
 leaders, including authentic leadership (to
 understand how self-awareness and identity
 can enable growth), the reflected best self (to
 understand how positive jolts can stimulate
 growth) and thriving at work (to understand
 processes of individual growth in organiza-
 tions).

**HOW POS MAY OFFER
 INSIGHTS FOR LEADERSHIP
 DEVELOPMENT**

In terms of *assessment*, POS suggests the
 importance of leveraging strengths rather
 than focusing acutely on performance gaps.
 Leveraging strengths involves identifying
 what one does best and then finding ways
 to organize one’s work and life around those
 skills, unique gifts, and passions. A strengths
 approach has been a core of the Gallup
 Organization from its earliest days. Lever-

2 ORGANIZATIONAL DYNAMICS

143 aging strengths builds competence so that
 144 individuals can perform tasks well, explore
 145 to learn new things, and heedfully relate with
 146 others to create collective attunement. Speci-
 147 fically, leveraging strengths enhances aware-
 148 ness of people’s best selves. In these ways,
 149 employees grow to understand and build on
 150 their unique areas of contribution.

151 Second, without challenges, it is easy for
 152 people to stay in their comfort zones – they
 153 have no reason to try something new or
 154 change. Whereas traditional leadership
 155 development accentuates the ways in which
 156 leaders learn from difficult experiences or
 157 hardships, a POS lens suggests the impor-
 158 tance of positive jolts as a stimulus for learn-
 159 ing. Jolts are triggers that stimulate growth.
 160 They are personal experiences that cause
 161 people to pause and think about the meaning
 162 or implication of a given event in relation to
 163 themselves. They are jarring (but not neces-
 164 sarily negative) because they are outside the
 165 range of typical experience. A personal
 166 example of a positive jolt might be the birth
 167 of baby – changing one’s perspective on what
 168 is important. Professional examples might
 169 include a profound compliment from an
 170 influential supervisor who changes one’s
 171 career aspirations, an early and unexpected
 172 promotion, or an opportunity to participate
 173 in a special development program. Positive
 174 jolts stretch and energize people to take risks
 175 and try new things in order to grow and
 176 develop as human beings. Although people
 177 can and do learn from hardships, they often
 178 feel paralyzed in the face of threat and miss
 179 opportunities for personal growth. Whereas
 180 people remember criticism, they try harder
 181 with praise. Positive jolts provide opportu-
 182 nities for growth because they stimulate posi-
 183 tive emotions, which psychologist Barbara
 184 Fredrickson’s research has shown open peo-
 185 ple up to learning and broaden their perspec-
 186 tives.

187 Third, in terms of *support*, where tradi-
 188 tional leadership development places
 189 responsibility for leadership development
 190 largely on the organization, a POS lens
 191 encourages individuals to co-create support
 192 through the building of durable resources.

The assumption here is that individuals are
 not only affected by their environment, but
 that they can also, through agentic working
 behaviors, mold their work environment to
 build contexts that elicit their best selves. If
 the organization takes responsibility for
 creating the environment for leadership
 development that it thinks is best, chances
 are that the organization will fail to tap into
 the specific elements that energize and
 enable many employees. Individual employ-
 ees are often uniquely aware of the appro-
 priate contexts that matter for developing
 their potential. For example, some people
 may learn best from on-the-job experiences
 that involve learning in context, but others
 may be overwhelmed with the complexity of
 learning in context and thus feel best sup-
 ported by having some classroom training to
 teach basic skills in a specific area of devel-
 opment. Still others might grow most dra-
 matically with the close guidance of a
 mentor. In ways that are not always obvious
 to others, individuals have a sense for the
 contexts that help them feel safe and enable
 them to learn and grow.

In the sections that follow, we further
 develop these three POS insights for growing
 leaders.

**LEVERAGING STRENGTHS:
 LEADERS BUILDING
 POSSIBILITIES FOR
 GREATNESS**

“A good leader inspires others with
 confidence in him (sic); a great leader
 inspires them with confidence in
 themselves.” – Unknown

In general, we tend to put significant
 focus on identifying and correcting weak-
 nesses to develop leaders and improve per-
 formance. This approach can be helpful, but
 it has limitations. To generate the energy to
 address one’s limitations or even make them
 irrelevant, we suggest that organizations
 must help leaders identify, develop, and
 leverage their unique strengths and talents.

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242 A strengths perspective *questions* a pervasive
 243 assumption in leadership development:
 244 focusing on a person’s areas of weakness
 245 provides the greatest opportunity for
 246 growth. Instead, the assumption underlying
 247 a strengths-based approach is that improving
 248 areas of weakness will bring individuals to
 249 average, not excellent, performance. The
 250 assumption of the strengths-based perspec-
 251 tive is that in order to achieve greatness,
 252 people must find their own paths to excel-
 253 lence through leveraging their unique
 254 strengths and talents. This deep kind of
 255 self-awareness is essential to develop their
 256 authenticity as a leader.

257 As an example, consider the case of
 258 Southwest Airlines Co. chairman and former
 259 chief executive officer (CEO) Herb Kelleher,
 260 who is known for his charismatic, and some-
 261 times eccentric, leadership style. Rather than
 262 being isolated in corporate headquarters, he
 263 frequently flew on his planes just to get to
 264 know his employees and customers. When
 265 visiting a maintenance hanger, he dressed in
 266 ~~drag~~ to get a laugh and build connections. On
 267 many levels, he sounds like a disaster wait-
 268 ing to happen. The reality is that he was
 269 highly successful as a leader. He developed
 270 close relationships with his employees, who
 271 often went above and beyond the call of duty
 272 for him. They came up with creative ideas to
 273 better serve customers, turn planes around
 274 quickly, and cut costs. This helped Southwest
 275 to become what *Fortune* calls the most suc-
 276 cessful airline in the industry.

277 If we were to apply the lessons from
 278 conventional leadership development to
 279 Herb Kelleher at an early stage of his career,
 280 the following chain of events might have
 281 occurred. As a low level manager, Kelleher’s
 282 performance review would have focused on
 283 the specific gaps in his competencies as a
 284 leader. He would have been instructed to
 285 attend training courses to tone down his
 286 eccentricity and fit the appropriate image
 287 of a corporate manager. The likely result
 288 would have been some toning down, but also
 289 considerable frustration and demotivation.
 290 Clearly, a key factor in his success has been
 291 leveraging his unique strengths. The tradi-

292 tional approach to leadership development
 293 would likely have turned Herb Kelleher into
 294 a mediocre leader. He became a great leader
 295 because he leveraged his strengths while
 296 compensating for, but not focusing on, his
 297 weaknesses.

298 Why is leveraging strengths so impor-
 299 tant for leadership development? Leveraging
 300 strengths creates more vivid and elaborate
 301 possible selves for individuals. That is, when
 302 individuals become aware of their strengths,
 303 they recognize more of their full potential. A
 304 better sense of their full potential can then
 305 enable individuals to successfully construct
 306 and project images of competence and cred-
 307 ibility to key constituents, such as colleagues
 308 and clients. Crafting a viable professional
 309 image through understanding one’s
 310 strengths can become critical for eventual
 311 career success. In short, when leaders help
 312 others to identify and nurture their strengths,
 313 they build awareness of possibilities, gener-
 314 ate hope about the future, and encourage
 315 others to take courageous action to become
 316 their hoped-for possible selves. ~~For example,~~
 317 through an awareness of his strengths, Herb
 318 Kelleher had the courage to act in unconven-
 319 tional ways that allowed him to bond with
 320 his employees.

321 **CHALLENGES IN**
 322 **LEVERAGING STRENGTHS**

323 Leveraging strengths does not mean ignor-
 324 ing weaknesses. People are often required to
 325 operate with a basic level of competence in
 326 their areas of weakness. Therefore, leaders
 327 must learn to manage around weaknesses.
 328 This may mean finding someone else to do
 329 the tasks one does poorly. Herb Kelleher
 330 compensated for his weaknesses (little atten-
 331 tion to details, lack of operational focus, poor
 332 organization) by hiring people with comple-
 333 mentary strengths. For example, the long-
 334 time president of Southwest, Colleen
 335 Barrett, was as conventional as he was
 336 eccentric. She managed the details of running
 337 the airline so that Kelleher could think stra-
 338 tegically about a vision and develop and

339 nurture the culture that energized South-
 340 west’s success as an airline. At other times,
 341 compensating for weaknesses may mean
 342 putting in enough effort to develop one’s
 343 areas of weaknesses to acceptable levels of
 344 performance. For example, a software devel-
 345 opment manager with a gruff demeanor may
 346 never become charismatic, but she can learn
 347 strategies to soften her gruffness and become
 348 more approachable.

349 In addition, leveraging strengths does
 350 not mean becoming arrogant. Psychologist
 351 Jennifer Crocker has shown that an excessive
 352 focus on self-esteem has significant costs for
 353 individuals; overconfidence can impede
 354 learning and lead individuals to focus on
 355 validating their abilities, rather than carrying
 356 out their tasks. In order to avoid these costs,
 357 leveraging strengths must be in the service of
 358 a goal other than feeding one’s ego. It is
 359 important to reiterate that leveraging
 360 strengths still involves managing around
 361 weaknesses, which often implies dependen-
 362 cies on others whose strengths are another’s
 363 weaknesses. Thus, a strengths focus may
 364 require humility in order to remain in a
 365 learning mode and to develop interdepend-
 366 ent relationships with others who have
 367 complementary strengths. It also means
 368 creating an environment of transparency to
 369 allow for exchanges that are based on
 370 authentic recognition of one’s strengths
 371 and weaknesses.

372 **POSITIVE JOLTS: LEADERS**
 373 **STRETCHING PEOPLE**
 374 **THROUGH APPRECIATION**

375 The second insight that POS can offer per-
 376 tains to the kind of challenges that can nur-
 377 ture leadership development. People feel
 378 challenged when they encounter situations
 379 that require skills and abilities beyond their
 380 current competencies. Typical challenges
 381 include setting difficult goals, carrying out
 382 tough job assignments, managing destruc-
 383 tive conflict, or dealing with losses, failures,
 384 or disappointments. The rationale for these
 385 challenges is akin to “no pain, no gain.” All

of these challenges connote a type of negative
 jolt that moves people out of their comfort
 zones and disrupts their normal routines.
 Although people can grow in significant
 ways in the face of hardship, they often
 respond to threats with paralysis or rigidity.
 In the face of adversity, threat rigidity
 research finds that individuals close down
 and regress to past learned behaviors, rather
 than seeking out learning and growth.

Unlike threatening challenges that imply
 real potential for failure or harm, positive
 jolts imply the possibility of gains, and thus
 energize individuals. One type of positive
 jolt is appreciation. For example, when a
 valued colleague leaves an organization to
 take a different job, people often share their
 appreciation for all the person has contribu-
 ted at a formal goodbye gathering. The
 appreciation induces positive emotions,
 which facilitate a person’s ability to see the
 self differently. Like gratitude, appreciation
 stimulates reflection and action because it
 disrupts expectations for the future and
 helps individuals move toward more posi-
 tive self-images. Below, we provide another
 example of a positive jolt we have found to be
 quite powerful in leadership development.

THE REFLECTED BEST SELF
ASSESSMENT

One example of a positive jolt that is increas-
 ingly used in the service of leadership devel-
 opment is an assessment called the Reflected
 Best Self (RBS). The RBS, developed by scho-
 lars at Harvard University and the Univer-
 sity of Michigan, is an exercise in enhancing
 self-knowledge as a pathway to increasing
 authenticity as a person. We all have blind
 spots that make it difficult for us to see our
 full spectrum of strengths and contributions.
 The RBS asks participants to obtain short
 descriptions of who they are and what they
 do when they are at their very best from a
 diverse array of significant people in their
 lives (friends, family, co-workers, boss, sub-
 ordinates, customers, etc.). With their stories
 in hand, they identify commonalities across

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433 the different sources of feedback and com- 483
 434 pose a portrait of their “best self” that cap- 484
 435 tures the insights in the data. This type of 485
 436 positive jolt often deeply moves participants 486
 437 because the descriptions are a form of appre- 487
 438 ciation. Some of the stories describe events 488
 439 that they do not even remember. People 489
 440 comment that they never realized that their 490
 441 actions had made such a difference for 491
 442 others. This type of narrative feedback is 492
 443 rarely given, especially in organizational 493
 444 contexts. The RBS stimulates growth because 494
 445 it builds positive emotions, relationships, 495
 446 and agency that enable people to break out 496
 447 of their comfort zones. 497

448 First, the RBS evokes positive emotions. 498
 449 In her path-breaking research on positive 499
 450 emotions, psychologist Barbara Fredrickson 500
 451 demonstrated that positive emotions 501
 452 broaden individuals’ thought-action reper- 502
 453 toires and build their capacities to act. Hence, 503
 454 positive emotions help build leadership cap- 504
 455 ability by enabling people to pursue new 505
 456 opportunities for personal growth and 506
 457 agency. This broadened perspective is critical 507
 458 for developing leadership potential because 508
 459 it is important for leaders to be able to see the 509
 460 big picture and how different pieces fit 510
 461 together. 511

462 Second, the RBS strengthens individuals’ 512
 463 relationships with those providing feedback, 513
 464 producing relational resources that can be 514
 465 drawn on during times of difficulty. These 515
 466 relationships can be a form of social support 516
 467 that provides security and safety for indivi- 517
 468 duals. These relationships are critical for 518
 469 leadership development because they build 519
 470 social capital, which may be the lifeblood of 520
 471 leadership effectiveness both inside and out- 521
 472 side of organizations. Social capital ensures 522
 473 that leaders are better informed, more crea- 523
 474 tive, more efficient, and better problem sol- 524
 475 vers. With the right networks, leaders save 525
 476 time because they know where to get the 526
 477 information they need. With the right net- 527
 478 works, they foster cooperation and collabora- 528
 479 tion and work smarter. 529

480 Third, the RBS process produces a heigh- 530
 481 tened sense of agency and efficacy to help 531
 482 people move forward, embrace challenges, 532

and grow. This is critical for leadership 483
 development because leaders must take 484
 initiative in order to make things happen 485
 in organizations. Leaders must be active 486
 initiators, not passive participants, in orga- 487
 nizational systems. In this way, the RBS pro- 488
 cess is similar to what Bruce Avolio calls a 489
 “booster” that focuses attention and rein- 490
 forces learning in leadership development. 491

492 In short, all three forces generated by the 492
 RBS help people to grow into leaders. Posi- 493
 tive emotions help people to see their leader 494
 potential through broadening and building; 495
 positive relationships build social capital; 496
 and agency facilitates initiative-taking. We 497
 have now used the RBS assessment with 498
 thousands of undergraduate, M.B.A., and 499
 executive students. Many call the exercise 500
 “life transforming:” They see the glimpses 501
 of greatness in themselves. Most recently, we 502
 are using the exercise in business organiza- 503
 tions to transform the culture of the organi- 504
 zation from good to great. In a European 505
 bank, the 800 most senior managers have 506
 taken the RBS assessment. They see this 507
 new knowledge on individual strengths as 508
 playing a key role in the bank’s 20 percent 509
 increase in profits and substantial customer 510
 growth in 2005. In a global financial services 511
 firm, the top 25 leaders have used the RBS 512
 assessment to build themselves into a nim- 513
 ble, high performing team. And each team 514
 member is driving POS practices throughout 515
 their divisions to make POS a source of their 516
 competitive advantage against industry lea- 517
 ders, such as Vanguard Group, Inc. and 518
 Fidelity. 519

520 **CHALLENGES IN THE USE OF**
 521 **POSITIVE JOLTS**

522 Of course, not all positive jolts help people 522
 grow. Sometimes, individuals relish the posi- 523
 tive feelings engendered by a positive jolt but 524
 fail to take action in any significant way. 525
 What characteristics of positive jolts engage 526
 individuals to grow? At a basic level, the 527
 positive jolt must be seen as authentic. Other- 528
 wise, people may not experience the positive 529

530 jolt as valid. For example, imagine a newly
 531 promoted manager who wanted people to
 532 feel appreciated, and chose to end every
 533 interaction with his subordinates with,
 534 "Keep up the good job! You are doing great!"
 535 The first time the manager uttered these
 536 words, subordinates felt elevated and experi-
 537 enced gratitude for the warm words about
 538 their performance. But soon, they found that
 539 this positive feedback came every day, and
 540 even worse, the manager uttered these words
 541 to everyone without distinction. The positive
 542 feedback quickly lost its meaning to subor-
 543 dinates and became more dysfunctional than
 544 motivating.

545 In addition, positive jolts are more likely
 546 to facilitate growth if they come from multi-
 547 ple, trusted sources. For example, if multiple
 548 sources give specific positive feedback inde-
 549 pendently, the jolt will be felt more strongly.
 550 For example, consider a successful biochem-
 551 istry professor who had no aspirations to go
 552 into administration. She was told by a num-
 553 ber of different colleagues who did not know
 554 each other that she had the potential to be an
 555 outstanding administrator due to her calm
 556 demeanor, leadership skills, and organiza-
 557 tion. Because the positive feedback came
 558 independently from multiple respected
 559 sources in a short window of time, she per-
 560 ceived it as a positive jolt, much more so than
 561 if it had come from a single source. As a
 562 result, she accepted an offer to become the
 563 director of a new cancer center – a position
 564 that she had not previously considered. This
 565 is one reason why the RBS feedback, in draw-
 566 ing on people from different walks of life, is
 567 so potent.

568 Finally, positive jolts are likely to engen-
 569 der growth to the extent that they come at
 570 opportune times. For example, positive jolts
 571 that come just before, or at the time of, a
 572 critical transition are more likely to motivate
 573 personal change than the same jolt offered at
 574 the wrong time. A transition is a time when
 575 people are in flux. A manager working as
 576 part of a team to complete a major project
 577 before a deadline may not be open to a
 578 positive jolt without the time or energy to
 579 process it. On the other hand, the same man-

ager who is between projects or considering a
 career change will likely be much more
 receptive to a positive jolt.

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**CO-CREATING SUPPORT:
 LEADERS STIMULATING THE
 BUILDING OF RESOURCES**

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Traditional organizational theory and
 research emphasizes the role of the leader
 in defining the context, culture, and norms.
 Although leaders often do play a vital role in
 designing the organizational context, here
 we focus our attention on the leader's cap-
 ability to shape the context in collaboration
 with employees – that is, to co-create a con-
 text for maximal support. To paraphrase Lao
 Tzu, "The wicked leader is he whom the
 people despise. The good leader is he whom
 the people revere. But the great leader is he of
 whom the people say, 'We did it together.'" Co-
 creation is the process of leaders and
 employees working together to build a sup-
 portive environment.

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Leaders build a supportive context con-
 ductive to growing leaders by encouraging
 employees to develop the kinds of resources
 that matter to them within the organization.
 Specifically, in the process of thriving articu-
 lated by Spreitzer and her colleagues,
 employees create and draw on four durable
 resources produced in the doing of work:
 shared knowledge, positive meaning, posi-
 tive emotions, and positive connections. The
 leader's role is to stimulate and nurture these
 four resources in order to facilitate employee
 growth.

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SHARED KNOWLEDGE

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Leaders can create a common knowledge
 base so that individuals know about how
 things work and how different pieces fit
 together into the integrated system. With
 common knowledge, individuals can quickly
 uncover problems and issues as they arise. A
 common knowledge base also helps people
 to integrate and coordinate actions across a

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624 diverse array of tasks and participants. When
 625 people share common knowledge, they are in
 626 a position to grow because they can act with-
 627 out waiting for approval from others, as
 628 relevant information is shared. Armed with
 629 broader information and the “big picture,”
 630 individuals can focus on larger organiza-
 631 tional contributions as well as on narrower
 632 tasks.

633 Leaders can also create shared knowl-
 634 edge by making information widely available
 635 about individual skills and expertise. For
 636 example, leaders can foster knowledge shar-
 637 ing directly by cataloging and publicizing
 638 information about employee expertise across
 639 the organization. A broadly accessible data-
 640 base of each employee’s work experience,
 641 background, and skills may allow employees
 642 to seek each other out when they need infor-
 643 mation. Why is this important? Intrapersonal
 644 functional diversity, or the extent to which
 645 team members had broad experiences in dif-
 646 ferent areas, facilitates information sharing
 647 and performance in management teams.
 648 Equipped with common knowledge, employ-
 649 ees are able to build relationships in which
 650 valuable information is shared.

651 **POSITIVE MEANING**

652 Positive meaning is about having a sense of
 653 purpose through one’s work. We articulate
 654 two pathways for leaders to stimulate the
 655 experience of positive meaning. First, it is
 656 well understood that a superordinate vision
 657 or purpose facilitates goal alignment, coop-
 658 eration, and communication. Leaders can
 659 emphasize the meaning and purpose of
 660 employees’ roles and jobs, as well as the
 661 meaning and purpose of their projects and
 662 groups. In this way, leaders give employees
 663 multiple lenses for finding positive meaning.
 664 Employees will engage their relationships in
 665 efforts to draw on each of these frames as
 666 they search for positive meaning.

667 Second, employees derive their identities
 668 at work – and thus positive meaning – from
 669 their work roles and their memberships. Leaders
 670 can promote the discovery of positive

671 meaning simply by explicitly supporting the
 672 development of support networks. Because it
 673 constitutes an individual’s informal group of
 674 contacts and colleagues at work, a support
 675 network is a harbor of psychological safety for
 676 employees. Even if job-prescribed roles and
 677 projects are not flexible, employees can craft
 678 their jobs in new ways or adopt personal
 679 projects. For example, when an altruistic man-
 680 agement consultant encourages his co-work-
 681 ers to volunteer at a homeless shelter over the
 682 weekend, he is able to lead his support net-
 683 work in a value-congruent project. Because
 684 individuals experience value-congruent roles
 685 and activities as meaningful, it is likely that
 686 individuals will find positive meaning
 687 through their support networks. In this
 688 way, the leader’s active encouragement of
 689 support networks with flexible roles and pro-
 690 jects may inspire employees to generate posi-
 691 tive meaning and take on leadership roles.

692 **POSITIVE EMOTIONS**

693 Leaders can encourage thriving to develop
 694 leaders by espousing the expression of posi-
 695 tive emotions as they experience them. Indi-
 696 viduals who express intense emotions often
 697 have powerful effects on others’ moods.
 698 Because individuals tend to weigh negative
 699 cues more heavily than positive, leaders
 700 must encourage the expression of positive
 701 emotions as they are experienced so that
 702 negative emotions do not dominate the orga-
 703 nization. When leaders encourage the
 704 authentic expression of positive emotions,
 705 mood contagion may ensue across relation-
 706 ships in the organization, thereby creating
 707 opportunities for growth. For example, at a
 708 weekly departmental seminar series at the
 709 University of Michigan Business School, we
 710 begin the meeting by having people share
 711 good news to the group. A health care orga-
 712 nization uses the same practices at their
 713 weekly staff meetings and reports that their
 714 meetings are more fun and productive than
 715 they have ever been. Similarly, at a leading
 716 financial services company, the CEO leads a
 717 monthly “shout out,” where employees can

718 reveal stories about employees who went
 719 beyond the call of duty to help each other
 720 or customers. This practice creates the space
 721 for the authentic expression of positive emo-
 722 tions.

723 **POSITIVE CONNECTIONS**

724 Finally, in order to enable thriving, leaders
 725 are also charged with cultivating positive
 726 connections at work. Expressing and
 727 encouraging positive emotions can lead to
 728 the development of positive connections. For
 729 example, compassion, trust, respect, and gra-
 730 titude facilitate positive connections in orga-
 731 nizations. When leaders share information
 732 about themselves and create opportunities
 733 for people to interact in informal, social
 734 events like lunches or hallway conversations,
 735 they will be increasingly likely to discover
 736 common interests. Therefore, leader actions
 737 may help enable positive connections in the
 738 thriving process.

739 **CHALLENGES IN
 740 IMPLEMENTING
 741 CO-CREATION**

742 It is important to note that the leader’s role is
 743 not only to *stimulate* these durable resources,
 744 but also to *regulate* the level of these resources.
 745 More specifically, in the next sections, I articu-
 746 late the ways in which excessively high levels
 747 of shared knowledge, positive meaning, posi-
 748 tive emotions, and positive connections may
 749 be detrimental to thriving.

750 **Regulating Shared Knowledge**

751 It is important for leaders to regulate the
 752 sharing of knowledge in an organization for
 753 at least two reasons. First, as human beings,
 754 we are limited in our capacities to process
 755 information, and too much information can
 756 lead to cognitive overload and reduced
 757 knowledge. Indeed, when faced with too
 758 many choices, individuals tend to disengage
 759 or experience regret for forgone opportu-

nities. These findings indicate that excessive
 information can be deleterious to thriving,
 both by hampering vitality and by limiting
 an employee’s ability to deal with complex-
 ity. A learning orientation is adaptive up to a
 particular point. Teams that overemphasize
 learning may be trapped in experimentation
 at the expense of carrying out the work. Thus,
 both the cognitive overload and excessive
 experimentation lenses suggest that it is
 important for leaders to regulate the amount
 of knowledge sharing that occurs in units.

Regulating Positive Meaning

Leaders must also regulate the amount of
 positive meaning that employees experience.
 Extremely high levels of positive meaning
 may lead an employee to feel a tremendous
 sense of pressure. For example, the ostensibly
 positive meaning of “saving the organiza-
 tion” may, in actuality, be a burden that leaves
 the weight of the world on an employee’s
 shoulders. Meaningful activities are not
 necessarily those that are manageable. When
 demands surpass abilities and challenges sur-
 pass skills, employees experience anxiety,
 strain, and sometimes burnout. Vitality, a
 critical component of thriving, will suffer as
 a result. In sum, because extraordinarily high
 degrees of positive meaning may entail posi-
 tive illusions and/or pressure, it is prudent
 for leaders to ensure that positive meaning is
 both grounded in reality and manageable.

Regulating Positive Emotions

Like shared knowledge and positive
 meaning, positive emotions, too, can exist
 in surplus. Negative emotions can be valu-
 able. For example, negative emotions of guilt
 and embarrassment can actually motivate
 the repair of relationships at work. Moreover,
 the positive emotion of contentment can
 impede creativity because people are less
 likely to take risks. Barbara Fredrickson
 has found that a ratio of about three positive
 emotions to one negative emotion is optimal
 for human flourishing. Too many positive
 emotions without a corresponding negative

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806 emotion can lead to positive illusions or the
807 denial of reality. Interestingly, marriage
808 researcher John Gottman has found the same
809 positive to negative ratio (about five positive
810 interactions for every negative interaction)
811 for successful long-term marriages.

812 **Regulating Positive Connections**

813 It may also be necessary for leaders to
814 regulate positive connections in order to
815 enable thriving. When an individual has
816 many connections with others, he or she
817 may spend time socializing rather than com-
818 pleting tasks. In turn, task focus may decline.
819 Although vitality may be present, such dis-
820 tractions may impede the increases in com-
821 plexity that are central to thriving. Leaders
822 may therefore find it advantageous to ensure
823 that positive connections are not impeding
824 work processes.

825 **COMPENSATORY RESOURCES**

826 In addition to the challenge of regulating
827 these resources, leaders may also find that
828 the four resources may be compensatory. In
829 order to grow, leaders may not need all four
830 resources. Indeed, a leader who is low in
831 dispositional positive affect may not benefit
832 from expressing positive emotions. The
833 intrapersonal consequences of generating
834 positive resources may include burnout
835 and poor performance. For a leader who is
836 introverted, the interpersonal consequences
837 of building relational resources may involve
838 being perceived by others as inauthentic.
839 Such a leader may be better suited to focus
840 on stimulating and regulating shared knowl-
841 edge and positive meaning. In short, we
842 believe that the most productive steps for
843 leaders to take toward promoting leader
844 growth are those that are consistent with
845 their strengths.

846 **CONCLUSION**

847 Ralph Nadar once said, “I start with the
848 premise that the function of leadership is
849 to produce more leaders, not more fol-
850 lowers.” We agree with Ralph, and go one
851 step further in focusing on developing the
852 leadership potential in all employees. By
853 creating a thriving workplace, organizations
854 facilitate employee learning and develop-
855 ment. In this paper, we offered some lessons
856 for leadership development from the blos-
857 soming theoretical perspective of POS
858 through the lenses of authentic leadership,
859 the reflected best self, and thriving. Because a
860 POS approach energizes people to develop
861 their leadership potential, we believe that
862 developing leaders through this approach
863 will reduce the potential for burnout and
864 depletion. In contrast to traditional leader-
865 ship development approaches that use up
866 resources, as individuals struggle to improve
867 their weaknesses and deal with hardships, a
868 POS approach generates emotional, rela-
869 tional, and agentic resources. In addition,
870 given the focus on leveraging strengths, lead-
871 ers are developing their authentic selves.
872 This increases the probability of sustained
873 growth over time and reduces the probability
874 of leader derailment. Moreover, the critical
875 focus on co-creating means that leaders have
876 resources they can build *and* draw upon to
877 sustain their growth. At the same time, it is
878 important to note that a POS approach is not
879 a panacea – as we noted above, it comes with
880 its own set of challenges. However, a thriving
881 approach to growing leaders is best imple-
882 mented as a complement to the more tradi-
883 tional approach to growing leaders. By
884 fleshing out alternatives, such as our POS
885 approach, we hope to identify more path-
886 ways for growing leaders.



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907 into the larger literature on organizational
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909 Specific POS pieces mentioned in the
910 article include the process model of thriving
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912 Sutcliffe, Jane Dutton, Scott Sonenshein,
913 and Adam Grant's 2005 *Organization Science*
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915 son's work on the broaden-and-build theory
916 of positive emotions and the optimal posi-
917 tive-to-negative ratio, see her article with
918 Marcial Losada in their 2005 *American Psy-
919 chologist* article.

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Executive Summary

957 **LEADING TO GROW AND**
 958 **GROWING TO LEAD:**
 959 **LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT**
 960 **LESSONS FROM POSITIVE**
 961 **ORGANIZATIONAL STUDIES**
 962 by GRETCHEN M. SPREITZER
 963 The lens of Positive Organizational Studies
 964 can offer new insights on growing leaders. In
 965 practice, a traditional approach to leadership
 966 development emphasizes (1) assessing lead-
 967 ers to identify performance gaps, (2) intro-
 968 ducing discomforting challenges to close the
 969 gaps, and (3) providing formal organiza-
 970 tional support, such as mentoring. A POS
 971 perspective, drawn from recent research on

authentic leadership, the reflected best
 self, and thriving at work, offers a comple-
 mentary approach by (1) leveraging
 strengths in assessment, (2) providing posi-
 tive jolts to stimulate growth, and (3) co-
 creating support through the development
 of durable resources. This complementary
 approach can create healthy and sustainable
 growth in leaders. We describe how the
 Reflected Best Self Assessment is one leader-
 ship development tool that exemplifies a
 POS approach to leadership development.
 The article closes by recognizing some of
 the challenges in taking a POS approach to
 growing leaders.

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