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Thriving in Organizations

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Consider these contrasting images of individuals in relation to their work.

Slow death

- 'Here we house the legions of the walking dead.'
When people join the legions of the walking dead, they begin to live lives of quiet desperation. They tend to experience feelings of meaninglessness, hopelessness, and impotence in their work roles. (Quinn, 1996: 20)
- 'Seventy-five percent of our middle managers have opted for peace and pay.' Peace and pay means don't rock the boat, maintain the status quo, keep your head in a shell, come in at eight and leave at five, don't take any risks. (Quinn, 1996: 22)

In slow death, employees are stagnant, stale, and lifeless. Now consider a different image of individuals at work.

Thriving at work

- Thriving is about 'being energized, being enthusiastic, feeling valued, feeling what you do is valuable. For me thriving is a sense of connectedness. Feeling good about what you do ... So thriving is being productive, still being able to learn new things ... I think thriving is being willing to learn and grow, and having those opportunities.' (A mid-level manager in a large metropolitan non profit; Spreitzer et al., 2005)
- [Thriving is] being energized ... I know thriving as I feel it. It is like going forward. It is not staying in place. It is not stagnant. You are moving forward; not necessarily in job titles or positions, but just being able to move forward thinking and in the activities that you are engaged in and in your mindset, all of those things.' (A social worker; Spreitzer et al., 2005)

In these thriving images, individuals are growing, full of life, and engaged. While both slow death and thriving depict actual organizational realities, we know much more about the causes of slow death than of thriving. In the organization studies literatures, work contexts are often blamed for their untoward consequences on individuals. And many studies have shown the ways in which work contexts cause stress and contribute to health problems (e.g. French et al., 1982; Wright and Cropanzano, 1998; Danna and Griffin, 1999). However, as the thriving images reflect, work contexts can do more than generate stress and corrode health. They can enable employees to thrive and thereby can contribute positively to their health and well-being (Harter et al., 2003).

This chapter provides an introduction and overview on research on thriving in organizations. We build on a small but growing body of research that suggests when people have opportunities to thrive at work, positive outcomes follow. And because thriving may offer key insights into how work contexts can positively enable individuals, we seek to understand the process of thriving at work. We define thriving at work, examine key outcomes of thriving, and articulate the mechanisms through which features of work contexts produce their salutary effects. In doing so, we shift the research away from a focus on the negative aspects of work and work contexts (e.g. stress factors) to a focus on the positive, enabling potential of work contexts. We also begin to explore the notion of collective thriving.

What is thriving?

In medicine, there is a diagnosis pertaining to infants and the frail elderly known as failure to thrive. A 'failure to thrive' diagnosis is denoted by an acute lack of growth and is manifest in listlessness, immobility, apathy, and lack of an appetite (Bakwin, 1949). While failure to thrive focuses on not growing, thriving then is about personal growth and development. We draw on the work of Spreitzer et al. (2005) to define thriving as 'the psychological state in which individuals experience both a sense of vitality and a sense of learning at work'. Vitality refers to the positive feeling of having energy available (Nix et al., 1999). Learning refers to the sense that one is acquiring, and can apply, knowledge and skills. To bring these dimensions of thriving alive, consider these narratives from two employees about their experiences of thriving at work (drawn from qualitative work conducted as part of Sonenshein et al., 2006):

- 'Feeling that there's some upper thrust to your life instead of just a mediocre going on.'
- 'When you can look back and you can see how far that you have prospered, when you can see how far that you have advanced, when you can see how far, just see how far you've come.'

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These quotes capture thriving as the joint experience of vitality and learning. According to Spreitzer and colleagues (2005), both vitality and learning are essential components of thriving. If one is learning, but feels depleted and burned out, one is not thriving. When thriving, individuals feel alive and vibrant – they have a zest for life (Miller and Stiver, 1998). Conversely, if one is energized, but finds his or her learning to be stagnant, that person is not thriving. Consequently, these two dimensions encompass both the affective (vitality) and cognitive (learning) dimensions of psychological experience. Moreover, the definition of thriving as growing in terms of both learning and vitality captures both the hedonic (vitality) and eudaimonic (learning) aspects of psychological functioning and development (Waterman, 1993).

Thriving as conceived by Spreitzer and colleagues is closely aligned with perspectives on personal growth (e.g. Carver, 1998; Ryff, 1989). Ryff (1989: 1072), for example, suggests that when individuals grow, they consider themselves to be expanding in ways that reflect enhanced self-knowledge and effectiveness. Thriving reflects ‘continually developing and becoming, rather than achieving a fixed state wherein one is fully developed’ (Ryff, 1989: 1071). Individuals have a sense of realizing their own potential and seeing improvement in the self and their behaviors over time (Ryff, 1989). Likewise, Carver (1998) conceives of thriving as the psychological experience of growth in a positive capacity (i.e. a constructive or forward direction). The learning element of this definition of thriving is also consistent with Ryff and Keyes’ (1995) personal development element of psychological well-being. In short, thriving involves active, intentional engagement in the process of personal growth.

But thriving is not a dichotomous state. As Spreitzer et al. (2005) point out; thriving is a continuum where people are more or less thriving at any point in time. And individuals can experience a range of thriving experiences rather than experiencing thriving or not thriving. And it is a psychological state and not an individual disposition. Individuals’ thriving is malleable and shaped by their work context. Depending on a person’s work context, he or she can experience thriving as increasing, decreasing, or constant in comparison to the person’s thriving at a previous point in time.

Recent research on people’s experience of thriving at work (Sonenshein et al., 2005) demonstrates that everyone has had thriving experiences at work. No one was stumped when they were asked to describe an experience of thriving at work. And interestingly, when asked to reflect on an experience of thriving at work, people appear to focus on a past experience rather than a current experience. There are several plausible explanations for why this might be the case. First, people may remember past experiences more positively than present experiences. We may filter out the negative elements of past experiences. As such, we may remember past experiences as being ones in which we were thriving. Second, although it is clear that people can sense their current level of vitality or energy, it may be more difficult for them to gauge the extent to which they

are learning in the moment. As a result, people may see more learning in past experiences than current experiences.

Why does thriving matter? Some outcomes of thriving at work

Thriving is associated with important individual and organizational outcomes.

Self-development

First, thriving can be a powerful gauge (Spreitzer et al., 2005) for people about whether what they are doing and how they are doing it is helping them to develop in a positive direction – that is an individual's sense of improvement in short-term individual functioning and long-term adaptability to the work environment (Hall and Fukami, 1979; Kolb, 1984). Individuals can track the magnitude and changes in their sense of thriving to gauge whether and how they should take action in the context of work to sustain or renew their thriving. Thus, thriving serves an adaptive function that helps individuals navigate and change their work contexts in order to promote their own development.

Health

Second, when individuals are thriving, they are more likely to be healthy. Why? When individuals feel a sense of vitality and aliveness, they are less likely to be anxious and depressed, and thus more likely to be mentally healthy (Keyes, 2002). Consistent with this line of thinking, Christianson and colleagues (2005) found that individuals who report higher levels of thriving (measured as energy and increasing complexity) have better mental and physical health, even when controlling for the separate effects of depression, anxiety, panic attacks, body mass index, and chronic conditions. In addition, a sense of learning by itself can contribute to positive physical health. Alfredsson et al. (1985: 378) concluded that 'workers ... with few possibilities to learn new things' had a heightened probability of being hospitalized for heart attacks. Similarly, Ettner and Grzywacz (2001) found that employees who reported more learning at work also were more likely to report that work contributed positively to their mental and physical health.

Performance

Third, thriving may have implications for individual and organizational performance. We know less about performance outcomes of thriving but can speculate on this relationship. The health effects described above may have important implications for organizations because vitality and personal development have been associated with better individual work

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productivity (in terms of work effort and days lost to illness) and less health care usage (Keyes and Grzywacz, 2005). And when people use less health care, companies can cut health care costs which are skyrocketing out of control for many organizations.

We can also expect that individuals who feel more energized at work (i.e. one dimension of thriving) will expend more effort and be more committed to their work and organizations (Marks, 1977). Conceptually, Quinn and Dutton (2005) articulate the crucial role that energy plays in coordinated activities in organizations. Empirically, Cross et al. (2003) found that those who are energizers in organizations have higher job performance, and are more likely to have their ideas considered and put into action.

And individuals who experience more learning at work (i.e. the other dimension of thriving) are likely to be able to leverage that learning for performance improvements. The learning may capture new skills, abilities, and knowledge about how to function more productively at work. And that learning can be shared vicariously or directly with others to produce more organizational learning.

Contagion to others

We know that positive affect (and energy is considered an element of positive affect) can be spread from one person to another. Emotional contagion is 'a process in which a person or group influences the emotions or behavior of another person or group through the conscious or unconscious induction of affect states and behavioral attitudes' (Schoenewolf, 1990: 50). Through emotional contagion, emotions such as energy among group members become shared (e.g. Barsade, 2002; Bartel and Saavedra, 2000; Totterdell, 2000). So if one person is energized, others are likely to catch their energy, leading to a more energized group, unit or organization.

Spillover to home life

Although we know very little about positive spillover, we know that stress at work spills over into home life. For example, a study of more than 2000 male executives and their spouses over a five year period showed that the fatigue, tension and worry experienced by some executives at work caused emotional spillover into private life (Evans, 1981). However, the researchers also found evidence that other executives who endured the same long hours and tension-filled jobs went home full of energy and excited by the day. What differentiated these two groups of executives? The findings revealed that when individuals felt competent, had high levels of job satisfaction, and felt challenged by what they were doing (which appears to be consistent with recent conceptualizations of thriving), they were able to experience their work as invigorating, not depleting. Quinn (1996) finds something similar in his research on the

fundamental state of leadership. He found that when people engaged their work to move from a state of slow death to deep change, they not only felt more alive at work but also more alive in their home life. Their actions permeated their whole beings as people. So both of these bodies of research suggest the possibility of a positive spillover from thriving at work to thriving at home.

Of course an equally plausible alternative hypothesis is that there is a zero-sum relationship between thriving at work and thriving in other aspects of life. If one is thriving extensively at work, that thriving at work may crowd out the possibility of thriving in home life. Some executives give so much of themselves to their work lives that they ignore their home life. They devote all of their energy to work so that they literally have nothing left to give at home (Loehr and Schwartz, 2003). They sacrifice close connections to family and friends. In an extension of Evan's longitudinal research on the lives of executives, he found that some executives literally lost their will to live after retiring. They succumbed to death within two years of retirement (Evans, 2005). Clearly, the potential for positive spillover of thriving at work into private life is a fertile area for future research.

What contributes to thriving at work? Some antecedents

Spreitzer et al.'s (2005) model of thriving is based on the idea that thriving is socially embedded. By this, we mean that when individuals are situated in particular contexts they are more or less likely to thrive (see Figure 1). As the framework shows, three sets of factors which include (1) unit contextual features, (2) agentic work behaviors, and (3) resources produced in the doing of work contribute to thriving at work. Unit contextual features reflect the dominant way that work is accomplished and include such things as how decisions are made, how information is shared, and the extent to which interactions are infused with trust and respect. Agentic working behaviors reflect the ways that individuals experience their work context and how they carry out daily work activities. To be more specific, individuals are more likely to thrive to the extent that they (a) have a task focus to get their work done, (b) explore new ways of working and being to enhance their learning, and (c) heedfully relate with others in their work environment. Resources produced in the doing of work reflect the knowledge, affective, and relational assets that enable people to enact schemas to guide action. The dual arrow between the resource box and the agentic work behaviors box indicates that resources enable thriving but also are produced through the agentic behaviors of thriving employees. In this way, the resources are renewable and produced through thriving at work.

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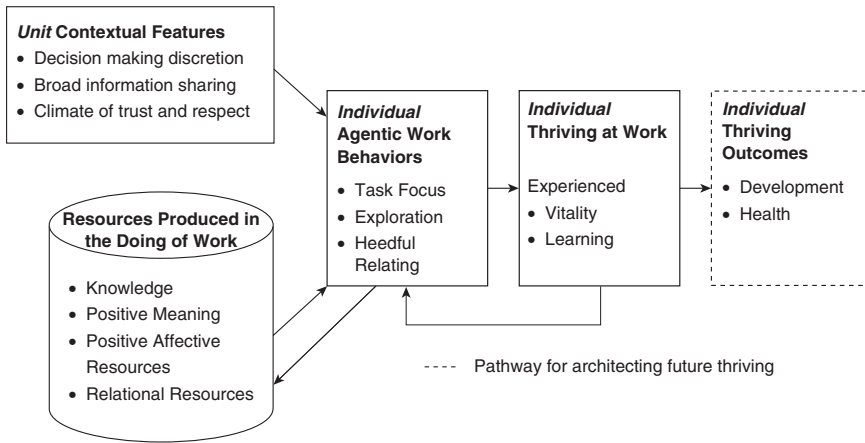


Figure 6.1 *The Social Embeddedness of Thriving at Work*

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While this framework has not yet been subject to rigorous empirical testing, we do have some initial encouraging empirical findings on several elements. Christianson et al. (2005) have found that in a nationally representative sample of mid-life adults, positive affective resources and agentic work behaviors were significant predictors of thriving at work. While no measure of unit contextual features was available, the research did not find significant differences across occupational types. The level of thriving experienced by blue collar workers and their white collar or professional counterparts was similar. This finding is important because it suggests that individuals in all types of jobs have the potential to thrive if they have an opportunity to exercise agency over their work and can create and nurture the necessary resources in doing their work.

Qualitative research also provides some insight about the subjective experience of thriving and growth at work. For example, Sonenshein et al. (2005) studied how people experience thriving at work and analyzed narrative accounts from a broad set of respondents. Respondents' accounts revealed that most experiences of thriving (76 per cent) involve learning, recognition and accomplishment; but almost 40 per cent of thriving experiences emphasize relationships and helping connections as well. Furthermore, Sonenshein and colleagues found that properties of work (challenge, novelty, variety, etc.), working closely with others (including supervisors, colleagues, and clients), and organizational properties (culture, structure, and physical space) were all described as enabling people to thrive and grow at work.

Thriving organizations

As described above, individual thriving is an important means through which people self-regulate their own growth. But is thriving limited to individuals? Can collectives (i.e. groups, units, or even organizations) thrive as well? And why should we care about thriving collectives? What are the implications and outcomes of thriving at the collective level? At present, to our knowledge, there is no research explicitly focused on thriving at the unit or organizational levels. Yet, these are important questions and ones that we will speculate about in the remainder of this chapter.

What is collective thriving?

Is a thriving group, unit, or organization merely the sum of its parts? That is, is it merely a set of individuals who are thriving? We do not expect a one-to-one correspondence between individual thriving and collective thriving. It may be that while individuals in an organization may be thriving, they may not be thriving in a way that benefits the organization. For example, at United Technologies, employees can enroll in any kind of educational program in which they have an interest – whether it is gourmet cooking, belly dancing, or fly fishing. While these employees are learning and likely to be highly energized, this learning is not necessarily aligned with the needs of the organization and hence may not relate to organizational thriving in the sense that the learning may not add to the organization's capabilities or growth in any substantive way.

On the other hand, an organization may be thriving, but its individual members may not be. The organization may be learning and energized as a whole, but individual members may feel overwhelmed and depleted. For example, in today's business environment, many organizations strive to be lean even though it may mean laying off high performing employees who may not be part of the strategic future of the firm. And people who stay may be stretched too thin. In both cases, although their organization may be thriving, if employees see little future in the organization or if they are overwhelmed, they are not likely to feel that they themselves are thriving.

So what is collective thriving? A group, unit, or organization is thought to thrive when the collective is both learning and energized. Thriving collectives are not afraid to try new things, take risks, and learn from mistakes. They build capabilities (i.e. sets of routines) and new competencies from their learning. This collective capability can be used to respond to the demands of an unpredictable world. A thriving collective is also energized – energy which contributes to the collective capacity to cope with obstacles, challenges, setbacks and failures and to persist in their efforts (Glynn et al., 1994).

What might be some ways to measure or assess the extent to which a group, unit, or organization is thriving? Certainly, we would expect that

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employees and outsiders would perceive the collective as growing. From an energy standpoint, we would expect a thriving collective to have high levels of employee vitality which may show up through increased activity, persistence, innovation. The energy network methodology of Baker et al. (2003) may be a useful method for identifying the magnitude of positive and negative energy in a collective. From a learning standpoint, we would expect that thriving collectives have more cognitive and behavioral complexity that comes from their learning orientation.

Why does thriving matter?

Why should we care whether groups, units or organizations thrive? Organizational scholarship typically has tended to emphasize performance outcomes, at the expense of considering social and public objectives (Walsh et al., 2003). We take seriously the idea that organizations are social entities as well as economic ones. Thus, thriving matters at the collective level because it enhances the vitality of our social and public environments. Most economists agree that knowledge economies differ from goods-producing economies. If we accept that previous industrial economic indicators may provide an inadequate account of the state of nations in a knowledge economy (David, 1999, as cited in Barley and Kunda, 2001), it is quite possible that the collective vitality of the workforce may be an important economic indicator and a way to conceptualize value in a postindustrial world. If so, our ideas about thriving can provide some insight to organizational theorists about how this alternative production value is created and the underlying logic of organizing to achieve it.

It is plausible to think that thriving collectives have a number of outcomes which would enhance the long-term sustainable performance of the collective. First, scholars have noted that the world confronting organizations is increasingly characterized as discontinuous, uncertain, and chaotic. Uncertain conditions favor organizations that are flexible and can adapt quickly to changing conditions. It is possible that organizations with many thriving individuals will be more responsive to these conditions.

Second, we would expect that the learning inherent in thriving may lead to new behavioral routines/repertoires. This could enable increased capability to improvise or recombine competencies to solve new problems. The energy inherent in thriving can contribute to an increased ability to build, repair, sustain, and endure challenges/problems/crises. In short, we expect that thriving collectives are likely to be more resilient in the face of adversity or hardship.

Third, given that prior research has found that individuals who thrive at work are likely to be healthier, perhaps the most obvious implication and important outcome for thriving collectives is reduced health care costs. It may be that thriving organizations can save millions of dollars in health care costs. The non-profit/non-partisan National Coalition on Health Care estimates that the average total cost to organizations for

health care benefits rose 14.7 percent in 2002, at a time when general inflation hovered around 2 percent, and it continues to rise. For each automobile it produces, General Motors spends more on health care (approximately \$1500/automobile) than it does on steel.

Possible concerns about thriving as a domain of study

Although we think thriving is a useful concept in organization studies, we suggest that future studies should undertake a critical review of some of the assumptions manifest in the perspective proposed here. Some scholars may see these ideas about thriving at work as totalitarian. Wilmott (2003: 77) for example, asserts that promoting allegiance to a particular set of norms is 'ethically dubious' not only because it reduces practical autonomy, but also because it systematically suppresses alternative ideas and practices. We are not trying to colonize individuals' affective domains (Willmott, 2003), or constrain variety (in fact we are trying to enhance it), nor are we suggesting that employees adopt particular ways of thinking. Rather, we are simply suggesting that a particular set of socio-contextual conditions are more salutary for individuals, groups, units, and organizations (and possibly societies) than others.

Conclusion

In this chapter we draw attention to the paucity of research on work contexts and their salutary effects for individuals and organizational collectives and make the case for why scholars ought to pay more attention to understanding thriving in organizations. Thriving is the psychological state in which individuals experience both a sense of vitality and a sense of learning at work (Spreitzer et al., 2005). We have proposed that thriving is an important precursor to employee health and well-being and may contribute in positive ways to organizational capabilities for long term adaptability in a dynamic and changing world. Interest in thriving reflects both growth in social trends recognizing that employee well-being and health include positive aspects that transcend economic productivity and wealth and growth in scholarship that seeks to understand the elements of positive functioning in ordinary circumstances rather than under conditions of adversity.

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