

# A POSITIVE APPROACH

## Just the Facts

*Traditional change management methods focus on finding what is wrong with something and changing it. But with the high rate of failure among change initiatives, the author argues it's time to try a new method: positive psychology.*

*Positive psychology takes a more optimistic approach. Instead of looking for what's wrong and trying to fix it, positive psychology advocates promoting the strengths of employees and organizations to facilitate change.*

***Ditch the old methods of change management and give positive psychology a try | by Brooks Carder***





**While behaviorism has been largely abandoned in psychology, it continues to be the basis of much of the strategy in business.**

Individuals and groups are viewed as machines that can be adjusted simply by changing contingencies. Reward them for this, and they will do that.

Much of this tendency derives from Frederick Taylor and his theory of scientific management, published in 1911.<sup>1</sup> Taylor's point of view was that management always knows best and a resistant workforce must be controlled by attaching pay to the desired behavior of the workers. In this theory, the emotions of workers are no more of a consideration than the emotions of a rat in a Skinner Box.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, if behaviorism were effective, you might expect better results. Embarking on a change program carries substantial risk. In 2011, after 10 years of effort, the United Kingdom National Health Service scrapped a computer system implementation at an estimated cost of \$18 billion. The initial cost estimates had been in the range of \$4 billion.<sup>3</sup>

In an extensive review of studies of change success, author Paul Gibbons presents data that indicate that at least 50% of change

initiatives fail.<sup>4</sup> The type of change makes a difference, too. Restructuring, for example, has a median success rate of 48%, Six Sigma improvement 37% and culture change 18%.

Some failures are so costly they can threaten the existence of the organization that attempted them. Ambrose Bierce quipped in his book, *The Devil's Dictionary*, that litigation was something you entered as a pig and exited as a sausage.<sup>5</sup> The same statement might well apply to change processes.

Almost certainly because of the difficulty of change processes, W. Edwards Deming, in his later years, became interested in the psychology of change. Deming was not fond of behaviorism and frequently recommended Alfie Kohn's book, *Punished by Rewards*, which was a detailed indictment of behaviorist theory.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, there was little else available at the time.

## Major changes


Psychology has undergone a seismic shift since Deming's death. According to Martin E.P. Seligman, the founder of positive psychology and one of the two most prominent psychologists today (the other being Daniel Kahneman, the first psychologist to win the Nobel Prize):

"When I first encountered psychology, more than 30 years before my stint as [American Psychological Association] president, two warring factions in the field—the behaviorists and the Freudians—were at a standoff. For all their differences, they shared many of the same dogmas. Both focused on misery. Neither took evolution seriously. Both believed that the past, especially childhood trauma, frog-marches us into

the future. Both considered thinking and consciousness mere froth. They also shared many of the same blind spots: happiness, virtue, free will, meaning, creativity, and success. In short, they both missed everything that makes life worth living.

"I have witnessed the transformation of psychology, and at more than one pivotal moment, I led the transformation. Psychology in my lifetime rejected these premises in order to remove four huge blind spots. First, the discipline abandoned behaviorism to embrace cognition and consciousness. Second, it realized that evolution and the brain constrain what we can learn. Third, it ended its fixation on only curing what is wrong to include building what is right and positive in the world. Finally, it discovered that we are drawn into the future rather than driven by the past."<sup>7</sup>

Positive psychology was announced in a paper by Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi,<sup>8</sup> in which they called for psychology to focus on not what was wrong with people, but what was right. They used terms such as well-being, contentment, satisfaction, flow, happiness, perseverance, courage, forgiveness, future mindedness, spirituality, wisdom, insight, love, growth and play to describe the desired human traits and conditions. In the days of behaviorism's dominance, only the brave would utter any of these terms in the presence of other psychologists. A fundamental objective was to make life worth living and to improve the condition of everyone—in particular, the condition of people who did not suffer from any pathology.



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An important target became the improvement of human well-being. Eventually, Seligman settled on the PERMA model<sup>9</sup> for human well-being:

- + **P**ositive emotions.
- + **E**ngagement.
- + Positive **R**elationships.
- + **M**eaning.
- + **A**ccomplishment.

Positive emotions had to be measured subjectively, but the others were subject to various forms of objective measurement. Of course, being able to measure it was the first step in attempting to improve it.

According to Seligman, the goal was to flourish, a high level of well-being. He described a study that used a slightly different definition of well-being from the PERMA model. To be considered flourishing, a person had to have positive emotion—meaning and engagement—plus three of the following six characteristics:

1. Self-esteem.
2. Optimism.
3. Resilience.
4. Vitality.
5. Self-determination.
6. Positive relationships.

The study measured this in 24 European countries. Denmark had the highest percentage of citizens flourishing at 33%, while Russia—at 6%—was at the bottom. The United Kingdom was in the middle at 18%.

One problem, particularly in business, is the suspicion that happy people will be lazy and fail to perform. Plus, it will be too costly to make them happy. In reality, happy people are

more creative and more productive, and it is often not all that difficult to make employees happy.<sup>10</sup>

Like happy people, happy organizations also are more productive. Alex Edmans, a professor of finance, studied the price of stock for organizations included in the “100 Best Companies to Work For,” published annually by *Fortune*. Inclusion in this list is based on an extensive survey of employees. According to Edmans, “Firms with high levels of employee satisfaction generate superior long-horizon returns, even when controlling for industries, factor risk and a broad set of observable characteristics.”<sup>11</sup>

To apply positive psychology to the individual rather than look for deficiencies to correct, the focus should be on building on the individual’s strengths. Of course, you must understand what the strengths of the individual are.<sup>12</sup> The same thing should apply to a business. Rather than spending time looking for deficits to correct, build from strength. I learned that lesson the hard way.

About 20 years ago, a partner and I owned an organization that sold promotional products to a client base that was mostly *Fortune* 500 organizations. We had about 120 employees and sales exceeding \$30 million. Our customer service was world-class, with a net promoter score around 50. But the organization had a problem: Operating margins were thin—less than 5% per month. In fact, this was a characteristic of the industry we were in.

So, we decided to change the organization. But, rather than building on our existing customer



service strengths, we changed the organization into a consulting firm. We had had some success in the field and the margins were excellent, but we lacked the talent and financial resources to make the overall business profitable. To make the change, our employees would've had to develop new skills, but they were satisfied with their old skills and did not engage. Eventually, we gave up, but the organization was left weak spiritually and financially.

While many organizations would have navigated this process better than we did, it represents the typical basis of change. There is a deficit that must be corrected and, likely, there is someone or something to blame. We must change or else. The platform is burning.

Positive psychology offers a different way—positive change. Authors David Cooperrider and Diana D. Whitney define positive change as:

"Any form of organization change, redesign, or planning that begins with a comprehensive inquiry, analysis, and dialogue of an organization's positive core, that involves multiple stakeholders, and then links this knowledge to the organization's strategic change agenda and priorities."<sup>13</sup>

The most prominent method for organizational change in positive psychology is called appreciative inquiry (AI), in which the facilitator asks questions designed to yield a positive response. Participation is required at all levels of the organization. The conversation should highlight the strengths and character of the organization. Consider the four Ds:

1. **Discovery.** In this phase, the group develops an understanding of the strengths of the organization and the opportunities related to those strengths. What are the strengths that set the organization apart from its competitors? What are the values that can make the organization great?

What accomplishments demonstrate the excellence of its people?

2. **Dream.** What are the possibilities? What is the vision? If the sky is the limit, what can be achieved if everyone works together and brings his or her signature strength?

3. **Design.** In this phase, the strategic vision is clarified and a strategy is designed for organizing into the future based on the strengths and current needs of the organization. How do you start? What are the most important things to do? Who is responsible for what?

4. **Destiny.** Act on the strategy to realize the dream. This process is continuous and renewing, but it is not like implementing an action plan. According to Cooperrider and Whitney: As the momentum for change and sustainability increase, the more action planning and process monitoring are abandoned. Instead, everyone is given AI and the transformation emerges.<sup>14</sup>

According to Cooperrider and Whitney:

"Each application of AI is different. The purpose or strategic change agenda for the AI initiative creates a context for the selection of topics. Within that context, members of the organization choose topics to move the organization in a direction they find desirable."<sup>15</sup>

Given the process that most of us have used for change management over the years, AI is a radical departure. Leadership would appear to have less control, but I expect this is an incorrect conclusion.

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To the extent that the transformation moves forward better under the AI approach, management's goals are more likely to be reached. Certainly, given the statistics on the expected success rates of change management, success using the old methods is not assured.

I cannot bring you any experimental evidence that demonstrates the superiority of positive psychology approaches to change. I probably cannot bring you any experimental evidence of any other techniques either (although I can get bushels of consultants' assertions). I can tell you, however, that positive psychology is an extremely powerful method.

In the QP article "The Happiness Effect,"<sup>16</sup> I describe the application of positive psychology to the problems of soldiers returning from deployment. Resilience training—a positive psychology technique—administered by U.S. Army trainers, who were trained by Seligman's group at the University of Pennsylvania, significantly reduced the incidence of post-traumatic stress disorder and cut in half the rate of drug abuse by returning soldiers.

In another area, Seligman designed a 14-week treatment for depression using positive psychology methods. Patients who underwent this treatment were paired with matched controls who received conventional psychotherapy or conventional psychotherapy plus drugs. A key part of the positive treatment was the three blessings: Each evening before bed, patients wrote down three things that went well for them that day and explained why.

Remission was achieved in 55% of Seligman's patients compared to 20% in the patients who received conventional psychotherapy and 8% who received psychotherapy plus drugs.<sup>17</sup> According to Seligman, the National Institutes of Health turned down two grant requests for larger scale testing of positive psychology methods, likely because of the political power of pharmaceutical organizations and the therapists.

The quality field has not yet fully embraced positive psychology. On the other hand, psychology has embraced it deeply. The two most prominent psychologists living today are Seligman and Kahneman. Kahneman was the first psychologist to win the Nobel Prize for his work with Amos Tversky in cognitive psychology. (The prize was in economics because there is no prize in psychology.) Seligman is the leader of the positive psychology movement, and Kahneman has announced that he will devote the rest of his career to positive emotions.

I spent the first years of my professional career as a psychologist, an assistant professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, working in the field and hoping to solve problems and make the world a better place. I have a deep appreciation for what these men and their many colleagues have done. They have placed psychology in a position of equality with the other

sciences. When the U.S. Army arranges for the training of 40,000 sergeants in the methods of positive psychology, that is a seismic shift and indicates the power it can have in quality as well. **QP**

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