

**POSITIVE ORGANIZATIONAL SCHOLARSHIP: MEET
THE MOVEMENT**

**An Interview with Kim Cameron, Jane Dutton, and
Robert Quinn**

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**for the
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Introduction

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

This group of faculty had planned another day-long event for Business School alumni, all based on this new perspective they labeled *Positive Organizational Scholarship*. They asked me to assist them with the design and to attend. The alumni event was a smashing success, and I witnessed first hand how a Positive Organizational Scholarship lens could open new ways of seeing possibilities in work organizations. The energy in the room for the faculty and the alumni was palpable. I wanted to know more. What makes Positive Organizational Scholarship so compelling to organizational researchers and to practitioners? Why is this a movement both executives and scholars are so energized and motivated to pursue? What accounts for the deep caring people express? This interview represents an attempt to provide answers to these questions. I hope you find the responses to my questions as interesting as I do.

Bernstein: Let's begin with an overview of the movement. What are some of the core ideas of POS?

Cameron: I think I speak for the three of us in indicating that we really do think of positive organizational scholarship (POS) as a new movement in the organizational sciences. Its breadth and inclusiveness, however, make capturing its essence difficult in a few short sentences. At its roots, POS represents a particular way of thinking, a value orientation, and a posture toward organizational research. It focuses on the dynamics in organizations that lead to the development of human strength, foster vitality and flourishing in employees, make possible resilience and restoration, and cultivate extraordinary individual and organizational performance. This emphasis parallels the new movement in psychology that has shifted from a traditional focus on illness and pathology—e.g., deviancy, abnormality, and therapy—toward a positive psychology focusing

on human strengths, virtues, positive affect, and what makes life worth living. Similarly, positive organizational scholarship examines the positive side of organizational performance. It investigates positive deviance, or the ways in which organizations and their members flourish and prosper in extraordinary ways.

At the risk of going on too long, we have deliberately chosen the words “positive,” “organizational,” and “scholarship.” *Positive* refers to an affirmative bias, an examination of phenomena that represent a value orientation toward abundance, elevation, and virtuousness. *Organizational* refers to positive processes and states that occur in association with organizational contexts. It draws from the full spectrum of organizational theories to understand, explain, and predict the occurrence, causes, and consequences of positivity in organizations. *Scholarship* refers to rigor, theory, scientific procedures, and precise definition. There is no lack of self-help accounts that prescribe relatively simple and uncomplicated prescriptions for achieving happiness, fulfillment, or effectiveness. POS does not stand in opposition to this array of self-help publications, but it extends beyond them in its desire to develop rigorous, systematic, and theory-based foundations for positive phenomena.

Bernstein: So what’s different? Why should others share your excitement by this POS movement?

Cameron: Again, I’ll risk speaking for the group in saying that each of us has become personally enthused and inspired by the POS movement. It has helped re-energize our own research and teaching activities. To illustrate why, think of the typical organization described in the business press or in academic research. Wealth creation is usually the key indicator of success. Employees are characterized by self-interest and a focus on problem solving. Selfishness, manipulation, greed, secrecy, and a single-minded emphasis on winning lead to conflict, law suits, contract breaking, retribution, and disrespect in social relationships. Our colleague, Jim Walsh (1999) found, for example, that words such as “win,” “beat,” and “competition” have dominated the business press over the past two decades whereas words such as “virtue,” “caring,” and “compassion” have seldom appeared at all. Scholarly research, therefore, has tended to emphasize survival, reciprocity and justice, managing uncertainty, overcoming resistance, achieving profitability, exercising power and influence, exchange and bargaining, or competing successfully against others. At their root, these are all non-positive phenomena.

Of course, POS does not ignore or denigrate these phenomena, but it seeks to study organizations typified by appreciation, collaboration, virtuousness, vitality, and meaningfulness where creating abundance and human well-being are key indicators of success. Examining characteristics such as trustworthiness, resilience, humility, authenticity, respect, and forgiveness among employees leads to theories of excellence, transcendence, positive deviance, extraordinary

performance, and positive spirals of flourishing. For the most part, organizational science has paid little heed to these kinds of phenomena up to now. We are energized by POS, therefore, because it opens up a broader array of phenomena to investigate and because these phenomena are inherently attractive. For me, they speak to something that I care about deeply.

Bernstein: Isn't POS a little sugary?

Quinn: It's very tempting to define Positive Organizational Scholarship in terms of good human practices. We are trying to be very clear that Positive Organizational Scholarship is multi-dimensional. It's about all different patterns of extraordinary behavior. It is about making money and it is about creating contexts in which people flourish. Any pattern of excellence is a pattern worthy of interest. POS refers to phenomena that occur at the far right end of the normal curve. The focus moves from questions of what is wrong and what is normal to the questions of what is extraordinary and what accounts for the extraordinary? We get uplifted and inspired by these questions. POS is an inherently uplifting and inspiring field.

Cameron: One explanation for the lack of attention paid to POS phenomena is that they have often been associated with philosophy, religious or moral dogmatism, and scientific irrelevance. We are serious, however, about the word "scholarship." We are firmly committed to investigating positive phenomena scientifically. In fact, some very exciting research results are beginning to emerge in which some of these heretofore neglected concepts—such as virtuousness, compassion, resilience, forgiveness, courage, and positive emotions—are being carefully and rigorously studied in the context of organizations. The significant relationships between such positive phenomena and desired organizational outcomes represent exciting new discoveries.

Dutton: Another way to say it is that POS is focused on the enduring and /or temporary structures and processes in organizational settings that create positive dynamics. So POS is not just about looking at topics like self-actualization. It is about structures, cultures, processes, leadership and other organizational conditions that foster positive states and positive dynamics in human communities. Positive states and/or positive dynamics in any of these areas may lead to extraordinary instrumental outcomes or extraordinary human outcomes or both.

Bernstein: Let's get to the heart of the matter. People often make the critique that focusing on the positive is overly simplistic with the implication that this means ignoring the negative. I think that everyone here would agree that the negative is an important facet of learning, and that small failures, in particular, are important building blocks of resilience. Isn't there a possibility that by focusing on the positive you miss some important aspects of organizational life?

Cameron: Of course there is. But, there is an equal danger that we'll miss very important aspects of organizational life by continuing to ignore positive dynamics from our research.

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

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

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

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

Bernstein: You've mentioned that these are not new ideas. Why are they coalescing into something coherent now?

Dutton: When people see a need, articulate a direction, invest in the pursuit of a purpose, others may see themselves in that purpose and also begin to invest. That is what is happening. We have a core group of excited people. Here at Michigan, we have people in a number of departments and schools who are investing in this movement. Many of them are senior people who can take risks. They can also invest in junior people. Having such a core group increases our chances of success. There are even more people who are outside of Michigan who have invested. There are lots of people who have been able to reinvent their previous research around the positive focus. For example, Fred Luthans was one of the first to ignite interest in a positive perspective on organizations through his association with the Gallup organization. Gallup's focus on strengths rather than weaknesses cued Fred to begin addressing these ideas in his own work as well. It re-energized his thinking. There is also a demand in the world of practice. The knowledge that comes from POS is inherently interesting to practitioners. They want to know how to move to the far right side of the curve. Research on POS is likely to be supported by companies and funding organizations. Such external resources tend to perpetuate a movement like this one.

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

Quinn: Great researchers become great researchers when they write papers that meet two criteria. They ask a truly creative question and answer it with rigor. Asking a creative question is often a risky endeavor. A person can be outside Positive Organizational Scholarship and meet the two criteria. A person can be inside Positive Organizational Scholarship and do it. Wherever you are, it is hard to make a great contribution without taking some risk. Having the field of POS reduces some of the risk, but risk will always be a part of great research.

Bernstein: Who is in and who is out?

Quinn: POS is very inclusive. We talk to lots of people about POS and there is a common reaction. They say, “Oh, I see how this can apply to what I’m doing!” They start to think about their work. They see that with a slight redefinition, a twist towards what it is that brings extraordinary results, that their work fits. Often they then catch fire.

Let me give you an example how contagious it is. Yesterday I gave a talk to about 80 people. By the time I came back to my office there were five or six responses on my email. One was from a professor at the Medical School. His email reviewed the research on physiology and all of the things they do in the Medical School in relation to stress and health. He said, “I listened to that talk about organizations and I suddenly I see new possibilities. I see this whole notion of organizations being absolutely critical to what I’m studying.” He said, “I’m very interested to know what is the optimal environment for wellness and productivity.” There is a concern that is both human and the instrumental. He wants people who are well and who are more productive. He said, “I have money to do a conference on this, what are the possibilities?” We exchanged several emails, Kim sent a chapter over, and by the afternoon the man was ready to explore launching a conference. We have a meeting next week. I’ll be surprised if there’s not a conference on Positive Organizational Scholarship in human health. This would bring together a whole bunch of people who are researching things right now but who, as a result of this process, will end up reframing what they’re doing, and they’ll become part of this movement. It is a very inclusive movement. It is growing fast.

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

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

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

Cameron: Positive Organizational Scholarship is fortunate to be able to build on the scholarly foundations of several disparate literatures that preceded us. For example, work has already been done in corporate social responsibility, prosocial behavior, community psychology, citizenship behavior, business ethics, appreciative inquiry, and positive psychology. POS work should certainly build on and extend these various streams of work, although, to date, not enough of it has found its way into organizational studies. On the other hand, one way POS extends what has been done previously is that most of those literatures—with the exception of the latter two—still focus mainly on avoiding harm, overcoming problems, assisting the disadvantaged, and acting in order to acquire a financial advantage. POS supplements those areas of focus with emphases on doing good irrespective of personal advantage, enabling abundance, and understanding extraordinary flourishing and vitality—that is, building the positive not just addressing the non-positive.

Dutton: I think it's important to say that we're riding the wave of positive psychology. That is a very vibrant movement that has a lot of momentum and a lot of terrific work being done in it. We are learning from how they are doing things, and I think that is part of what is energizing us and helping us make more impact. There have been transfers of practices: how to cultivate interest in a scholarly community, how to get junior people involved. . There are two key players in the positive psychology movement at Michigan, Barb Fredrickson and Chris Peterson. They have been major enablers for us. It's back to the idea of collocation and the ease of crossing disciplinary boundaries

Bernstein: What organizations have you come across that are exemplars of POS?

Quinn: This morning I was listening to a radio show. They were doing an extensive analysis of Southwest Airlines. They listed all the unusual things they do to reach out to their people. They discussed the intensive loyalty of the people. They discussed the financial success of the company. Many other organizations are also extraordinary in terms of people and performance. But POS points to something more interesting than just looking at the superstar organizations. What I like is the notion of looking deeply into very sick organizations, and even there finding patterns of excellence—flourishing inner city schools, hospitals that thrive despite enormous competitive pressures, Malden Mills. How do we explain extraordinary performance in these kinds of deprived settings? What are the implications of such explanations?

Dutton: One of the places that has changed how I see everything is a billing department at a community hospital. It's a unit of 30 women, 21 of them are single mothers. They are off the charts in terms of traditional ways of measuring performance. They're way above the standard performance of their industry. At the same time, the unit is extraordinary in terms of how it develops people. Some of the women have said, "I have learned to love by being in this billing department," or "I love my children better by being an employee of this billing department." They feel they have been loved by being in this billing department. In this context, being loved means being treated as someone who could become an extraordinary learner. The organization has very high standards for performance but everybody helps others get up to that standard. Admitting mistakes, saying you need help is totally normal, in fact, it is encouraged. Several of these women have suffered from physical abuse. They've been in the hospital and their rates of recovery have been faster, according to them, because of the amount of caring and flexibility that their coworkers have offered them. So that's an example, in a very unexpected place, of an extraordinarily positive, deviant unit that has taken everybody to a higher level in terms of how they describe their own sense of themselves as human beings and also how they see themselves as employees.

Cameron: I have another example. It's also a hospital, although I think this is by no means a healthcare phenomenon limited to hospitals. We were studying organizational forgiveness in the context of downsizing. We identified a hospital in New England that was struggling to survive, losing money, and having a difficult time. The CEO and the president fired the vice president of operations, the number three person. Many of the employees protested. Uninvited, they actually invaded the board meeting, demanding that this vice president be rehired. There were yellow ribbons all over the community in memorial of this guy being lost in battle and to signify they wanted him back. Three months later the CEO resigned, the president resigned and the board hired this guy back as the new CEO. The new CEO took great pains to institute a culture of virtue, caring, compassion, forgiveness, humility, generosity—extreme care as it related to his employees and to patients. There was a very conscious, visible change of culture. The indicators were things like carpeting all the halls so the hospital seemed warmer; designing double beds for the maternity ward so husbands

could sleep over with wives and not have to sleep in chairs; creating stations where all nurses were within sight of the hospital rooms, so patients didn't have to press a button multiple times before the nurse came in. One male nurse got cancer and couldn't work. The policy was that if you didn't work you didn't get paid, so people in the hospital, including doctors, put vacation days into a bank that this person could draw from. He ended up dying four or five months later, but never missed a paycheck. Over and over again there were vivid examples of practicing positive deviance. Well, within six months the new CEO found himself in a situation where he had to downsize the workforce by 10%. Normally, downsizing pulls all the positive energy out of the system. People hate it. They feel abused, unfairly treated, and their trust is violated. Instead of harming this organization, however, the downsizing actually contributed to positive dynamics among its employees. Compassion, caring, absolute honesty, and forgiveness were, in fact, enhanced in the hospital. People helped one another. They didn't ignore the difficult circumstances that downsizing created, but they focused much more on the positive things that had occurred. They created momentum for moving forward. Since that downsizing occurred, the hospital's financial performance has exceeded all expectations.

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

Bernstein: What are some of the new research horizons you see emerging from this movement? What questions do you feel have yet to be answered?

Cameron: The emergence of almost any new field requires definitions and identifying boundaries. There's real work to be done, knowing what is and what isn't compassion, what is or isn't flourishing and vitality, what is and what isn't virtuousness, or what is and what isn't highly energizing relationships. The concepts need to be examined carefully, defined precisely, and rigorously analyzed. The boundaries of the field need to be defined. What's different between POS and corporate social responsibility? What's different between POS and positive psychology? Then there are all of the standard questions: What's the relationship between the phenomena and outcomes? If we really do have a compassionate organization, for example, does it matter? Who benefits and who doesn't? How do you foster it? What facilitates it? We're in the very

early stages in terms of definition and in terms of finding relationships. But it is important to point out that we do have intriguing findings beginning to emerge, and there is real momentum. We know, for example, that individuals, organizations, and societies benefit from institutionalized virtuousness. We know that positive attributes, past successes, and strengths of individuals and organizations serve as more effective targets of change and improvement than do problems, weaknesses, or underdeveloped qualities. We know that positive emotions, positive energy, and positive human connections are self-reinforcing and create positive spirals of excellence. And, we know that organizational conditions can enable or disable positive dynamics, primarily through a sense of meaningfulness.

Quinn: I think because virtually anybody can redefine or see themselves as connected to POS, this field is as big as the field of organizational theory. I imagine evolving clusters of people coming together in the next five years, sharing research. Virtually any time someone has some kind of a breakthrough, it will create a path, a valley in this mountain range, down which a stream will flow. It's almost infinite in terms of the research questions to be asked. Everybody can fit in this, that's why this has so much energy. Rivers of questions will emerge constantly.

Dutton: An example of one river would be what are enabling relationships and what difference does it make in people's work life? What are new ways to model the interconnections? How do you create models of nonlinear positive dynamics? Take Bob's story about the link between POS and the Medical School. I think there's all kind of important linkages between organizational studies and human health. I feel like there's really fertile ground between medicine and organizational studies, between theology and organizational studies. In some ways POS makes disciplinary boundaries irrelevant. There are a zillion disciplinary connections; creative explosions waiting to happen.

Bernstein: Five years from now, what are your hopes regarding the shape and direction of the POS movement?

Quinn: I think our hopes are that POS is a wild social movement that quickly transcends disciplines, spills out into the world, picks up lots of people, creates many bodies of knowledge that are useful to the world.

Dutton: Organizations are the mediating institutions that basically create most of what society needs, whether it's education, business enterprise, health. If we can understand how to enable this human excellence in all those types of organizations, we've unlocked a lot of potentiality and possibly can move to a more positive trajectory of human and organizational well-being.

Cameron: I really agree with Bob and Jane. My dream is for a large community of scholars to take seriously the positive, life-giving aspects of organizations and human relationships—not as simple prescriptions and truisms, but as sources of

scholarly discovery. Hopefully, we will better understand these positive dynamics, enable them, duplicate them, and use them as levers of positive change.

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