

## **Developing a Discipline of Positive Organizational Scholarship**

### **Chapter 23**

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

The chapters in this book have introduced a wealth of insights and developments born of the new and emerging discipline called Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS). Collectively the chapters chart exciting and relatively unmapped territory in the study of behavior, processes, structures, and dynamics in organizations. The objective of this final chapter is to summarize and integrate some themes and insights found in the book. One liability of edited books is that the threads that bind the chapters together, and the overall value of the aggregation of the topics, is lost without an attempt at integration. It is easy to get excited about individual chapters in this volume and the specific contributions made by each, but it is also important to highlight the excitement and the positive energy that is associated with the overall discipline of POS. This final chapter aspires to help illuminate some exciting paths that we hope will be traversed by other scholars in the future.

Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, and Vohs (2001) demonstrated the pervasiveness and impact of negative events, behaviors, and outcomes in human behavior. Negative or “bad” occurrences, for example, appear to have greater impact on individual emotions and behavior than positive or “good” occurrences. Thus, because negative phenomena capture the most attention and, according to Baumeister, et al. (2001), account for the most variance in predicting outcomes, it is not surprising that most research in psychology and organizational studies has been problem-focused.

On the other hand, positive phenomena are associated with what individuals and organizations aspire to be when they are at their very best. These are the phenomena that separate humans from other creatures. Even household pets learn the meaning of “bad” and “good,” but states of virtuousness, transcendence, and high quality connections, for example, are uniquely human. They represent states of flourishing, ennoblement, and vitality. What makes life meaningful and abundant is more closely connected to positive phenomena than to negative phenomena. Endeavoring to understand these positive human processes and dynamics within organizations requires that new phenomena are examined, new explanatory theories are developed, and new ways of seeing are created. POS aims to contribute to this process.

The chapters in this volume demonstrate the importance of positive phenomena and their enablers in organizations. The authors, however, have taken somewhat different approaches to examining this new territory. Some work builds on a definitional foundation—carefully circumscribing concepts and grounding them in scholarly literature. Concepts such as resilience, transcendence, meaningfulness, cascading vitality, virtuousness, callings, courageous principled action, and positive deviance are examples. Other work explores relationships among various positive dynamics in organizations—including positive emotions and individual behavior, high quality connections and performance, social networks and positive energy, virtuousness and profitability, appreciative questioning and organizational change, empowerment and cascading vitality, and meaningfulness and work outcomes. Still other work investigates extraordinarily positive outcomes such as transcendent behavior, meaningfulness in and at work, organizational resilience, positive energy in individuals and systems, learning and new knowledge creation, avoiding highly probable errors, life-giving relationships, and courageous principled action.

We have organized these chapters into three sections, each representing a major domain of POS. The chapters within each section illustrate, demarcate, and elaborate these domains, and the brief introduction to each section highlights the range of generative ideas and research questions associated with the section's theme. This chapter, however, looks across sections to highlight key insights that find synergy across the various authors' perspectives. The purpose is to convey an invitation to other scholars to engage in their own investigations of the exciting and energizing phenomena embedded in the discipline of Positive Organizational Scholarship.

### **Generative Insights**

One theme that emerges from the chapters is that individuals, organizations, and societies benefit from institutionalized virtuousness. Virtuousness is an orientation toward human fulfillment and social betterment, characterized by ennobling human behaviors. Social stability, reciprocity, and commerce all are (are all?) shaped by the collective expression of virtuousness in forms such as character strengths, gratitude, transcendence, courage, forgiveness, compassion, and authenticity. The chapters highlight positive relationships between virtuousness and individual and organizational functioning—for example, meaningfulness at work, personal improvement among employees, and organizational effectiveness—as a result of its self-reinforcing effects and its associations with high quality connections. Virtuousness also serves as an inoculation agent against negative, damaging, and weakening occurrences in organizations. Authors' explanations for why virtuousness in and of organizations is such an important enabler of positive outcomes include its capability to provide various kinds of resources, create buffering effects, capitalize on competing values found in organizational forms, provide meaning amidst uncertainty, foster new knowledge creation, and enable positive feedback processes which contribute to positive deviance inside and outside organizations (Park & Peterson, Chapter 3;

Cameron, Chapter 4; Emmons, Chapter 6; Worline & Quinn, Chapter 10; Lee, Caza, Edmonson, & Thomke, Chapter 13; Spreitzer & Sonenshein, Chapter 14; Feldman & Khademian, Chapter 22).

A second theme relates to the power of appreciating strengths in approaching individual and organizational change. The 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 (Clifton & Harter, Chapter 8). Various authors explain how and why building and accentuating strengths is advantageous over attempts to shore up human weakness. Almost all living systems are subject to the heliotropic effect—an inclination toward the positive and away from the negative—so focusing on “achievements, assets, potentials, innovations, strengths, elevated thoughts, opportunities, benchmarks, high point moments, lived values, traditions, strategic competencies, memorable stories, and expressions of wisdom” (Cooperrider & Sekerka, Chapter 15), leads to a fusion of individual and organizational strengths. This, in turn, leads to the activation of positive energy and, subsequently, to positive organizational performance. Of course, an emphasis on the positive does not preclude the value of the negative (Bagozzi, Chapter 12). This is illustrated by the finding that high performing teams and long lasting relationships have a ratio of five positive interactions to every one negative interaction (Losada, 1999; Gottman, 1994). The ratio is not five to zero, and the negative interactions serve as foil against which to interpret and activate the strengths in the positive. In addition, organizational and individual strengths are sometimes evidenced by mere normality—an absence of mistakes and crises—when deterioration or weakness is the predicted condition. When organizations should fail but don’t, when they bounce back but shouldn’t, when they remain flexible and agile but ought to become rigid, the presence of resilience—e.g.,

maintaining the status quo—is also an extraordinarily positive strength (Weick, Chapter 5; Sutcliffe & Vogus, Chapter 7; Bateman & Porath, Chapter 9).

A third integrative theme relates to the self-reinforcing nature of positive emotions, positive energy, and positive human connections. For example, positive emotions serve not only as a cause and consequence of positive outcomes in individuals and organizations, but they create positive, self-reinforcing spirals that broaden thought-action repertoires—i.e., individuals and organizations develop more human resources, intellectual resources, social resources, and psychological resources (Fredrickson, Chapter 11). High quality connections are life-giving rather than life-depleting. Their positive energy is easily discerned by those involved in them, they enhance emotional carrying capacity and tensility (the ability to bend under pressure), and they are important contributors to processes of learning, identity creation, and growth (Dutton & Heaphy, Chapter 17). They create the transfer of vital resources between individuals and organizations. The most generative relationships are infused with physiological significance, so that actual physiological and organizational functioning are enhanced. They are infused with emotional significance in that they highlight how the connection relates to experienced vitality and engagement. They are infused with existential significance emphasizing that different connections facilitate the crafting of different identities and meanings. They are infused with material significance in exposing people to difference amounts and qualities of information and resources which endow individuals with differing amounts of power, choice points for action, and coordination capacity (Gittell, Chapter 18). Positive emotions, positive energy, and positive human connections lead, in other words, to mutually reinforcing upward spirals of meaningful experience and extraordinary performance.

Fourth, a variety of authors point out that rather than being neutral entities, organizational conditions can enable or disable positive dynamics, primarily through a sense of meaningfulness. Organizational forms and organizing processes determine the micro-contexts in which people function, the meaning that people make of their own experience, the information and opportunities available for people to excel, and the resources that facilitate or hinder positive individual and organizational performance. For example, organizations can make resources available which are motivating and enabling; they can provide empowerment and freedom for individuals to perform at their best; they can structure communication patterns and human connections that enable the execution of coordination in highly dependent tasks; they can provide examples of authentic leadership; and they can institutionalize positive networks that affect both internal and external constituencies' performance. In particular, these mechanisms can infuse meaning into work and into work organizations (Luthans, Chapter 16; Wrzesniewski, Chapter 19; Baker, Cross, & Wooten, Chapter 20). Meaningfulness may occur by clarifying goals, purpose, and values and by connecting those factors to the core values of employees—"an integration of doing and being" (Pratt & Ashforth, Chapter 20). Organizations that clarify and reinforce a belief system that includes doing good as well as doing well, recognizing and supporting the salience of employee family and personal life, and exemplifying integrity and virtuousness in organizational policies, routines, and culture are among the factors associated with meaningfulness at work. Organizational design, then, can be seen as a positive source of connection and coordination, not merely a structure for achieving task objectives.

In sum, Positive Organizational Scholarship brings together ideas that have not been previously integrated—for example, empowerment on the inside of organizations changes the capacities and dynamics that enable empowerment on the outside. POS makes that which may

have been interpreted as detrimental to performance be seen as potentially helpful—for example, contradictions, skepticism, ambivalence, complexity, and advanced publicizing of intentions all are frequently interpreted as antithetical to high reliability, yet they can help organizations maintain positivity and resiliency in the face of tragedy and trauma. POS also enriches our understanding of the dynamics and effects of common phenomena that may not have been considered in a positive light—for example, social networks can collect and distribute not only information and resources but also positive energy. New variables, processes, and relationships that have seldom been considered are uncovered and explained.

### **Puzzles and Unanswered Questions**

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

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

Expressions of gratitude by individuals affect others' attitudes and behaviors, but how much does this generalize to organizations? Positive individual emotions lead to positive individual outcomes, but does positive emotionality have the same effects in organizations? Do high quality connections among individuals have the same kinds of effects in organizations as they do

in the lives of the individuals involved? Do interpretations of meaningfulness in work produce a sense of meaningfulness of work in the organization? Does empowerment inside an organization lead to empowerment in the network of constituent organizations or the broader social environment? Demonstrating relationships at one level of analysis does not necessarily mean that they will be present in another, and understanding what is *organizational* is an important challenge for POS researchers.

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

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

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

challenges to POS investigators as they uncover extraordinarily positive organizational dynamics.

Enablement: In addition to questions of causal association, issues relating to the mere enablement of positivity also are salient. Certain factors appear to enable positive outcomes, and uncovering why and how this happens is an important issue for POS scholars. For example, what are the attributes of the structures, processes, cultures, leadership behaviors, and/or resources that are most conducive to, or resistant of, positive dynamics in organizations? What kinds of organizational arrangements are conducive to high quality connections, positive energy development, or resilience? What factors create conditions where organizations avoid highly probable errors or disasters? How can organizations best buffer themselves from negative encroachments from the environment? What organizational conditions facilitate the development of emotional competence or authentic leadership? What can organizations do to bring forth the best in people? Studies of enablement are not the same as searching for a “best practices” approach to organizational behavior. Highlighting best practices avoids systems-level thinking that explain the processes and dynamics by which organizations become sites for growth and health. Cameron and Quinn (1999) argued that organizations often fail to get results from implementing the best practices because these organizations import a set of discrete, unconnected pieces of practice without attending to the underlying philosophy or system in which such practices need to be embedded in order to take root and change the organization. Likewise, POS does not merely advocate a research agenda meant to surface best practices, but rather it advocates studying the processes and mechanisms that allow for and encourage excellence, growth, and health.

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

New Concepts and New Relationships: Most new areas of investigation are labeled as new because of original theoretical explanations, but also because of new variables and new phenomena that are uncovered or highlighted. In POS, there is an orientation toward identifying what previously unexamined factors may help explain positive phenomena. For example, concepts have been examined in this volume relating to positive energy, transcendent behavior, organizational virtuousness, resilience, strengths, courageous principled action, positive deviance, high quality connections, authentic leadership, meaningfulness, cascading vitality, and positive network ties. Most of these concepts have been newly introduced in this volume or have been rarely examined. However, it is surely an incomplete set. POS invites and encourages scholars to increase the number of relevant positive phenomena that can be investigated. What aspects of individual and organizational phenomena have not been taken into account in explaining performance? What environmental, organizational, or individual factors might affect positive organizational and individual outcomes? What concepts from other disciplines might

help inform POS? What might be the unexamined effects, causal mechanisms, or manifestations of concepts central to, say, medicine, biomechanics, psychology, or computer science? How might systems dynamics or complexity theory explain self-reinforcing positive spirals among POS concepts? The point is that most empirical organizational studies account for small percentages of the variance in explaining organizational outcomes. POS hopes to encourage the examination of previously under-represented positive phenomena in organizational scholarship.

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

### **Conclusion**

We began this chapter by referring to a review of the psychological literature by Baumeister, et al., (2001) concluding that “bad” or negative factors have greater impact on human beings than “good” or positive factors. A single traumatic episode, a single incident of

negative feedback, or a single loss, for example, has stronger effects on people than a single happy episode, a single incident of positive feedback, or a single win. Multiple positive events are required to overcome the effects of a single negative event, and a single negative event can undo the effects of multiple positive events. On the other hand, individuals are inherently attracted to that which is inspiring, positive, and uplifting. All human systems *desire* to experience that which is good. The aspiration for fulfillment is ubiquitous, yet it has gone largely unnoticed in organizational studies and has seldom been studied scientifically.

Baumeister et al.'s finding that a dearth of research exists on the effects of the positive and good in psychology is equally typical in organizational studies. Seldom have investigations examined the factors that may lead to self-reinforcing positive cycles and to extraordinarily positive outcomes.

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

## References

- Baumeister, R.F., Bratslavsky, E., Finkenauer, C., Vohs, K.D. (2001) “Bad is stronger than good.” Review of General Psychology, 5: 323-370.
- Cameron, K.S. and Quinn, R.E. (1999) Diagnosing and Changing Organizational Culture. Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.
- Gottman, J. (1994) Why Marriages Succeed and Fail. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Losada, M. (1999). The complex dynamics of high performance teams, *Mathematical and Computer Modelling*, 30, 179-192.