

Issue #71: Turning Trying Times to Thriving Times

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What is positive psychology?

Psychologist Martin Seligman formally recognized positive psychology as a subdiscipline of psychology in 1998. Put simply, positive psychology is all about what is “right with you” rather than what is “wrong with you.” The field of psychology has a long history of identifying pathologies, whereas positive psychologists focus on utilizing individuals’ strengths and helping people achieve a higher quality of life. Positive psychology has been an especially useful field in the context of intervention development. Interventions can be individual- or group-based, and can focus on a number of topics, including gratitude, meaning making, humor, forgiveness, and hope. A [recent meta-analysis](#) showed that such interventions have a small to medium effect on well-being and several other variables. A positive psychological lens can also be applied to workplace contexts.

What is positive organizational psychology?

In 2003, the field of positive organizational psychology arose at the [University of Michigan](#). These psychologists are interested in what keeps employees engaged and organizations thriving, and view work as an opportunity to increase well-being rather than harm it. Some areas of interest to positive organizational scholars include:

- Job crafting: individuals changing how they view or conduct work in order to derive more meaning from it⁽¹⁾
- Mentoring: formal or informal relationship in which a mentee gains information, experience, and support from a more experienced mentor or mentors⁽²⁾
- Social support: the provision of emotional and/or job-related resources by coworkers, supervisors, or the organization as a whole⁽³⁾
- Job embeddedness: combination of social ties at work, perceived fit with the job, and perceived cost of leaving a job⁽⁴⁾
- Engagement: energetic, focused, and sustained attention to work⁽⁵⁾
- Resilience: the ability not just to recover, but to thrive after facing adversity⁽⁶⁾

By studying employees’ positive emotions, meaning, and social connections, scholars can understand what it means to [flourish at work](#). Taking steps to help employees flourish is likely to improve employee creativity, organizational commitment, and job performance.

Practical applications

There are several ways one can practically incorporate a positive psychology lens in the workplace. Here are a few practical tips specific to an organizational context:

- Selection & Onboarding
 - In addition to hiring based on technical job qualifications, consider qualities such as resilience, humility, and [grit](#).
 - Be mindful of the “Inclusion” aspect of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion efforts. “Tokenism,” or merely hiring minority employees without efforts to meaningfully include and engage them in the organization, can do more harm than good.
- Training & Performance Management
 - Offer opportunities for both formal and informal learning. The bulk of learning that takes place in organizations is informal.

- Allow for and encourage errors during training.
- Give feedback for development purposes rather than merely evaluative purposes.
- Reward employees for mentoring and other prosocial behaviors, not just job tasks.
- Work Design
 - Allow for adequate work breaks. Breaks are important for well-being and creativity, even if it looks like they don't contribute to the "bottom line."
 - Upgrade to ergonomically-friendly office equipment, as resources allow.
 - Implement flexible work options to allow employees to conduct their best work and remain committed to the organization. Have a formal policy and make clear that there is no penalty for using these flexible options.
 - Give employees autonomy in how they do their work.
- Climate
 - Increase surface- (e.g., demographic) and deep-level (e.g., beliefs) diversity within teams.
 - Reinforce norms of respectful treatment to make employees feel valued.
 - Foster psychological safety by encouraging team members to speak up and listening when they do.
- Leadership
 - Adopt a [growth mindset](#) when it comes to your employees; that is, believe that your employees have the capability to grow and learn.
 - Model health promoting and respectful behavior (e.g., avoid sending emails during non-work hours).
 - Build trust by allowing employees autonomy.

Learn more:

- [University Pennsylvania Positive Psychology Center](#)
- [University of Michigan Center for Positive Organizations](#)
- [Oxford Handbook of Positive Organizational Scholarship](#)

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