

## Positive Psychology and Positive Organizational Scholarship

by Dinnah Pladott, Ph.D.

My colleague, Dinnah Pladott, Ph.D., an executive coach who is an Associate of The McNeill Group in New York City, offered the following summary of an interesting new movement in Positive Psychology. Spearheaded by Martin Seligman, author of a book I have often recommended to clients, *Learned Optimism*, this new psychology is being used in business as well as personal settings. Seligman himself is a research psychologist, teacher, and writer, not an OD scholar. His primary interest now is in finding and applying PS interventions to adolescents; however, much can be learned from him that applied to business and life satisfaction for all of us. –Richard Banfield

The Seligman model of PS is divided into three segments: The pleasurable life, the good life, and the meaningful life. The "pleasurable life" is about accumulating as many kicks as you can—and learning how to savor and amplify them—things like shopping, eating, drugging, meaningless sex, etc. The research is finding that (surprise, surprise) having more pleasures does not increase life satisfaction.

The "good life" as defined by Seligman (Marty, to his friends), is about understanding and using one's core strengths/virtues in work and love and play. He, in conjunction with Chris Peterson, developed a VIA Signature Strengths Survey found at [www.authentichappiness.com](http://www.authentichappiness.com). Using one's strengths to the point of total absorption brings about FLOW—the concept pioneered by Mike Csikszentmihalyi. Having a life of high absorption does correlate to life satisfaction measures according to Seligman.

Lastly, the "meaningful life" is when a person uses his/her strengths for the purpose of something larger than him/herself. Choosing to live a life of faith, purpose, meaning, correlates to life satisfaction measures. Marty also sees this aspect of his model directly related to Positive Institutions—those organizations that promote positive character development and/or meaning. He's mostly focused on non-profits and religious organizations but others are applying it to for-profit organizations.

Seligman and others in Positive Psychology also highlight the factors NOT shown through research to connect to life satisfaction—like \$, climate, education, being on Reality TV, etc. From an OD perspective, the Business School at the University of Michigan has a study of Positive Organizational Scholarship dedicated aspects of Positive Psychology to organizations.

According to their new orientation, "Positive organizational scholarship" focuses on the dynamics in organizations that lead to the development of human strength, foster resiliency in individuals, make possible healing and restoration, and cultivate extraordinary individual and organizational performance. It investigates virtuous elements in organizations such as compassion, forgiveness, dignity, respectful encounters, optimism and positive affect, integrity, and wisdom. This emphasis parallels a new movement in psychology that is shifting from the traditional focus on illness and pathology (e.g., deviancy, abnormality, and therapy) toward a positive psychology that focuses on human strengths and virtues.

Identifying the factors that lead to joy and happiness, hope and faith, and "what makes life worth living" represents a shift from reparative psychology to a psychology of positive experience. 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 especially humane and extraordinary ways.

For more information go to:<http://www.bus.umich.edu/FacultyResearch/Research/default.htm>.

Recently, a variety of research projects and scholarly activities have begun to emerge, all connected together by a positive approach to organizational scholarship. These projects range from appreciative inquiry in organizational change to studies of courage, hope, forgiveness, and compassion in the face of organizational trauma. The boundaries of positive organizational scholarship are not clearly defined nor are they exclusive. Positive approaches to many research streams in the organizational sciences are likely to emerge and contribute to our understanding.

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