



Strength-based Opportunities in Challenging Times

Eszter Molnar Mills MBA
First year PhD candidate
University of Debrecen Institute of Psychology

Key Strength-based Approaches



Positive psychology

- Study of positive emotion
- Positive traits (strengths)
- Positive institutions (where people flourish)
 - Seligman, 1999

Positive Organisational Scholarship

- Study of what is *“life giving, generative and ennobling”*
 - Cameron et al, 2003, p.10

Appreciative Inquiry

- Whole system approach to organisational development
- Positive change methodology using anticipatory, constructivist, simultaneity and poetic principles
 - Cooperrider and Whitney, 2001

Context for Strength-based Approaches



Positivity is not about positive thinking

- It does not deny the legitimacy (and importance of) negative occurrences, experiences and emotion, in fact many strengths (resilience / courage) only become manifest against the backdrop of negative experience
- Refers to a balance of experience of positive emotions to negative emotions
 - See Losada

It is not value neutral:

Positive Organisational Scholarship “*advocates the position that the desire to improve the human condition is universal and that the capacity to do so is latent in most systems*”

- Cameron et al, 2003, p.10

Positive Psychology is concerned with flourishing / optimal experience

- Seligman, 1999

Criticisms of Positive Approaches



- Lack of robust academic debate: preaching to the 'converted'
 - Lazarus, 2003
- Generalisation of causality from insufficient evidence
 - Held, 2004
- Conceptual challenges to strength classification
 - Buda, 2010

Positively Deviant Organisations



Achieve exceptional organisational performance, and whose outcomes dramatically exceed expectations (Lewis, 2012)

- Focus on the 'abundance bridge' as opposed to the 'deficit gap' (problem solving)
- Aim for excellence and the exceptional, not the minimum standard
- Show virtuous actions eg. trust, compassion, forgiveness.
- These are positively correlated to perceived performance and objective measures (profit margin)
 - Losada and Heasphy, 2004
- Have an affirmative bias – focus on best rather than the worst: eg . Strengths or capacity
 - Cameron, et al 2004

A DEVIANCE CONTINUUM from Cameron, 2003			
	Negative Deviance	Normal	Positive Deviance
INDIVIDUAL:			
Physiological	Illness	Health	Vitality
Psychological	Illness	Health	Flow
ORGANIZATIONAL:			
Economics	Unprofitable	Profitable	Generous
Effectiveness	Ineffective	Effective	Excellent
Efficiency	Ineffecient	Effecient	Extraordinary
Quality	Error-prone	Reliable	Perfect
Ethics	Unethical	Ethical	Benevolent
Relationships	Harmful	Helpful	Honoring
Adaptation	Threat-rigidity	Coping	Flourishing

Positively Deviant Organisations



Exceptional organisations show dramatically different outcomes following market crisis (airlines following 9/11)

Fast recovery and no long-term adverse effect from downturn

Key difference: reserves of financial as well as social capital, relational reserves

- Southwest: low-cost business model, substantial financial reserves, positive employee relations at 9/11
- No layoffs (ever – CEO on record taking share-price hit to save jobs)
- By February 2002 they were hiring
- Others downsized (eg. US Airline laid off 36% of its cabin crew) resulting in short-term financial benefit, but negative impact on organisational performance for years
 - Hoffer Gittell , et al 2005 for EERI

Rocky Flats case study



Contaminated nuclear weapons facility raided and closed by FBI

Estimated clean-up and closure 70 years and \$36billion

Actual clean-up and closure 10 years and \$6billion



1995



2005

Images: CH2M Hill

Rocky Flats Values



- Positive leadership at all levels
- Clear greater purpose
- Construct aspirational vision of future, then devise strategy to achieve it
- Stated abundance-based vision and belief therein
- Clear targets and metrics
- Life-style altering financial incentives (paid in scrip assuming extraordinary success)
- Deconstruct and learn from successes
 - (Cameron, 2005)

Individual Strengths



- Talents and strengths pose greatest opportunity for growth and success
 - Asplund 2007
- *“Individuals gain more when they build on their talents, then when they make comparable efforts to improve their area of weakness.”*
 - Clifton and Harter, 2003

Individuals' Strengths within Organisations



- Applying strengths daily leads to 44% higher probability of success on customer loyalty and employee retention, 36% on productivity measures
 - Harter, Schmidt and Hayes, 2002
- Probability of success 86% greater for managers with a strength-based approach
 - Gallup Organization, 2002
- Use of strengths creates positive emotion and well-being: Using signature strengths at work correlates with greater work satisfaction, personal well-being (and to meaning in life)
 - Littman-Ovadia & Davidovitch, 2010, Mitchell et al, 2009

Benefits of Positive Emotions



Broaden and build: Positive emotions are *useful* as they help:

- Overcome negative emotions (which carry specific action tendency)
- Increase creativity and problem-solving ability (incl Estrada et al, 1994)
- *Broaden* thought-action repertoire
- Increase motivation, energy and success
- *Build* personal resources
 - Fredrickson, 2002
- Also increases willingness to help others
 - Isen, 2002

Thank you



Any questions?