A Multi-Dimensional Model for Positive Leadership

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to introduce a multi-dimensional model for positive leadership. Positive leadership is an outgrowth of positive psychology and findings from a review of the literature shows that leaders use five strategies to promote a positive organization. These five strategies and dimensions include (a) building a positive structure, (b) operating with a positive purpose, (c) establishing a positive climate, (d) developing positive relationships, and (e) engaging in positive communications. The outcome of positive leadership is happy employees, increased productivity, increased performance, enhanced customer service, and increased profits.

Positive leadership is a relatively new concept within the study of leadership theory and practice. It can be traced back to Martin Seligman when he was the president of the American Psychological Association in 1998. The theme of the APA convention in 1998 was "Prevention: Promoting Strength, Resilience and Health in Young People" (American Psychological Association, 1998).

During his president's address at the convention, Seligman outlined two areas that he believed psychology had not played a large enough role in towards bettering the lives of people. The first area was a focus on the "shameful plight of ethnic conflict" in the world and the second area was the need for what he termed "positive psychology" (APA Annual Report, 1998).

The term "positive psychology" stuck and researchers soon began to investigate and define this new paradigm. Following suit, a handful of researchers began to apply the elements of positivity and positive psychology to the discipline of leadership. This article is an attempt to present the current research and a multi-dimensional model for positive leadership.

Positive Psychology

In his address, Seligman stated that he thought that the discipline of psychology had placed too much focus on curing mental illness and not enough emphasis on making the lives of all people more fulfilling.   He went on to define positive psychology as a science that understands and builds the most positive qualities of an individual. These qualities include "optimism, courage, work ethic, future-mindedness, interpersonal skill, the capacity for pleasure and insight, and social responsibility" (APA Annual Report, 1998).

As an early pioneer in the realm of positive psychology, Seligman published his book *Learned Optimism* in 1998 and a follow-up book in 2002 entitled *Authentic Happiness*. He and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi began researching the topic of positivity with their initial research entitled "Positive Psychology: An Introduction." It was published in the journal, American Psychologist, in January 2000.

In their article, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) presented a brief historical overview on the discipline of psychology and shared how they believed that since World War II psychology focused too much attention on "pathology, weakness and damage" and not enough emphasis on "nurturing what is best." They argued that psychology still needed to work with human problems, dysfunctions, and abnormal behavior but that more energies were needed to exam the factors that "allow individuals, communities, and societies to flourish."

Positive Leadership

Based upon Seligman's address at the 1998 APA convention, researchers began to study the impact that positive psychology had on individuals and groups. Within these studies, investigators began to look more closely at leadership and the effect positivity had on their teams and organizations.   Leadership is defined as a process where an individual influences a group of people to achieve the goals of the organization (Northouse, 2013). Therefore, within this context, the author suggests that positive leadership is an approach where the leader uses positive strategies within five major areas to influence his/her followers to achieve the goals and objectives of the organization.

Positive leadership is a relatively new approach to leadership. It is based on the concept that workers are happier and more productive when they work in a positive environment. This is supported by extensive evidence within a meta-analysis that showed positive affect and positive organizational climate were correlated to an increase in happiness, productivity, and profitability (Lyubomirsky, King & Diener, 2005). Seligman and Schulman (1986) also found that insurance agents who had an optimistic explanatory style sold 37% more than their pessimistic colleagues. Similarly, Cameron, Mora, Leutscher and Calarco (2011) found in two separate studies that organizational performance was enhanced by the implementation of positive practices.

In their first study, Cameron et al (2011) investigated 40 business units within a large financial services company in the Northeast. Their findings showed a correlation between positive practices and financial performance, work climate, employee turnover, and organizational effectiveness. Findings from their second study, within 29 nursing units in the health care industry, showed a relationship between positive practices and lower employee turnover, improved patient satisfaction, and enhanced organizational climate.

The outcomes from these studies were consistent with the findings that Peters and Waterman (1982) uncovered in their research that became the best selling book entitled "*In Search of Excellence*." Peters

and Waterman (1982), in one of the most significant studies on organizational effectiveness, outlined the characteristics that existed in the most successful and excellent companies. One of their major findings was that the excellent companies believed that their employees were the root source for the company's quality and productivity. That while the leaders of these organizations required extraordinary performance from their people these companies were also very committed to their employees. The authors continued by saying that the excellent companies have managers who were upbeat (positive) in their interactions; focusing on shaping values and reinforcing behaviors through coaching and evangelism.

These studies show why it is so important for a leader to create a positive work environment. That when a leader creates positive relationships, and reinforces a positive work environment, the employees are more motivated to work hard and produce quality products and services. But positive leadership is more than just a leadership style; it is a leadership approach, it is a mindset. It is not, however, a Pollyannaish attitude that suggests an unreasonable or even illogical optimism. Positive leaders have high expectations for their employees, the quality of their products, and the quality of their customer service. They just approach their expectations with a positive, can do, attitude. They also recognize that sometimes a negative occurrence will happen, and when it does, these positive leaders attack these problems with a positive mindset.

According to Gladis (2013), positive leadership is best thought of as a strategy that promotes a mindset of positive mental wellbeing, meaning, and purpose. Because of the relative newness of the positive leadership approach, very little research has been conducted within this realm. The majority of the research surrounding positive leadership deals with positive organizational behavior (POB) and positive organizational scholarship (POS).

Positive organizational behavior refers to "the study and application of positively oriented human resource strengths and psychological capacities that can be measured, developed, and effectively managed for performance improvement in today's workplace (Luthans, 2002)." Whereas, positive organizational scholarship is the study of "positive outcomes, processes and attributes of organizations and their members (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003)."

These two types of academic inquiry help to describe the behaviors of the employees (POB) and the dynamics within the organization (POS). Understanding the strengths of the employees and the positive dynamics within a work setting can help the leader to create a positive organizational climate or work environment. Positively or negatively, leaders influence the behaviors and climate within the organization. Therefore, it is the goal of the positive leader to help influence positive behaviors of the employees, build positive relationships, and create an organizational climate where employees can thrive and flourish.

Creating this type of positive environment is what Gladis (2013) outlined in his book *Positive Leadership: The Game Changer at Work.* He presented three elements that a leader should focus on that help to create a positive mindset for the employees. These three elements include (a) getting social in your relationships with employees, (b) utilizing the strengths of the staff, and (c) creating a positive atmosphere for the employees.

Cameron (2012) outlined four leadership concepts that he believes leads to positive deviance within an organization. Positive deviance is a term used to describe organizational outcomes that are extraordinarily and significantly higher than the results obtained by the average organization. The four

leadership strategies that Cameron outlined were: (a) cultivating a positive climate, (b) building positive relationships, (c) having positive communications, and (d) seeking positive meaning.

The terminologies that Gladis and Cameron used differ slightly, but what they described as strategies for a positive leader was essentially the same. They both discussed focusing on a greater purpose, the importance of cultivating a positive organizational climate, building positive relationships, and engaging in positive communications. These four elements are included in the proposed model on positive leadership. Also included in the model is a fifth element, creating a positive organizational structure. Together, these five elements, or dimensions, are presented in the proposed model on positive leadership as depicted in figure 1.

A Proposed Model on Positive Leadership

Positive leadership and positivity are linked to happy employees (Lyubomirsky et. al, 2005), inspired employees (Peters & Waterman, 1982), enhanced customer service (Greenberg & Maymin, 2013), increased productivity and performance (Cameron et. al, 2011; Gladis, 2013; Seligman & Schulman, 1986), and increased profits (Gladis, 2013; Lyubomirsky et. al, 2005). This is because when team members and employees feel appreciated they tend to work harder and are more committed to the organization. This commitment and hard work, in turn, leads to an enhanced performance, which helps the organization to achieve their goals and objectives. It is for this reason that organizations should look to hire positive leaders who understand the variables that are associated with positive organizations. These variables are included within the five dimensions that are presented in the proposed model that is shown in figure 1.

Within the model, it is suggested that in order to create a positive organization, the leader should use five strategies that interconnect with one another and ultimately results in an extraordinarily successful organization. Each of these five elements, or dimensions, is essential if the leader wants to create the most successful organization possible.

At the top of the model, the leader is shown in a hierarchical organizational flow-chart relationship, overseeing the entire team, organization, or institution. The type of organization that is being viewed is presented in the center of the model and is influenced by the five dimensions that surround the institution.

An organization can range from a macro-level institution such as an entire industry to a micro-level organization such as a team. In the proposed model, the type of institution being viewed is generic in nature and is labeled as the "organization." However, this model can be adapted to any type of institution and the five dimensions adjusted to the specifics of the organization.

The five dimensions that surround and influence the organization include (a) building a positive structure, (b) operating with a positive purpose, (c) establishing a positive climate, (d) developing positive relationships, and (e) engaging in positive communications. These dimensions are shown in the model that is presented in Figure 1, and each dimension is explained below.
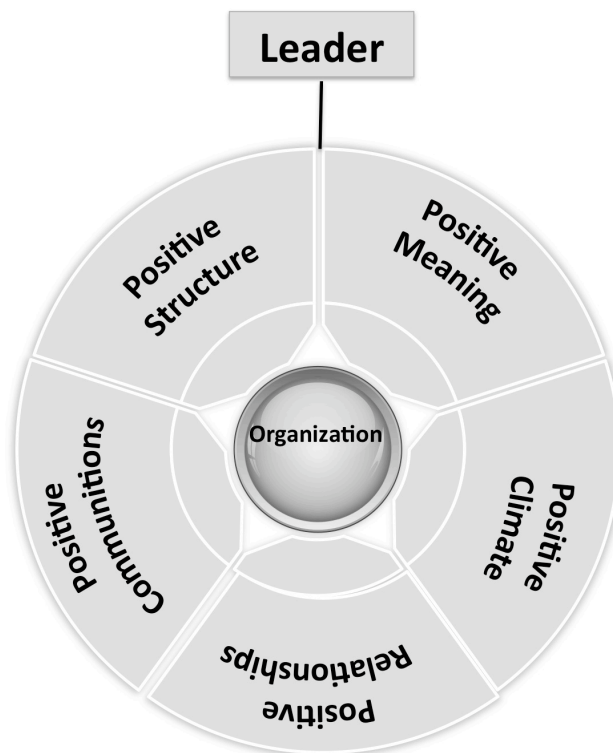
A Multi-Dimensional Model For Positive Leadership

Figure 1: A Model for Positive Leadership

Positive Structure

In the proposed model on positive leadership, it is hypothesized that in order to create a positive enterprise, the leader must first create a positive structure for the organization. This is the first responsibility, or dimension, for an effective and positive leader. This positive structure is the foundation, or base, for which the organization operates. Through a review of the literature, six major foundational elements were found to be associated with the structure of an excellent and effective organization.   These include: (a) Having a strong core ideology, (b) Hiring quality people, (c) Creating a vision for the future, (d) Having challenging goals and high expectations, (e) Focusing on organizational effectiveness, and (f) Promoting a strong team environment. These six foundational elements are presented below.

Strong core ideology. Adhering to a strong core ideology is hypothesized as the first element associated with the foundation of a positive organization. This ideology allows positive leadership to be established and to thrive. Collins and Porras (1994) in their book "Built to Last" found that the very best performing organizations had a strong core ideology. They defined a core ideology as the combination of strong core values along with a clearly defined core purpose. This connection between strong core values of the leader and organizational performance is supported by Hess and Cameron (2006) in their

book "Leading with Values." They shared that recent scholarship has found "that extraordinary individual and organizational effects are produced by an emphasis on virtues, values, and positivity." Therefore, having a strong sense of purpose and strong core values is hypothesized as the first foundational element of a positive organization.

Hiring the right people. Within these outstanding organizations, the literature showed that the very best organizations worked hard to hire and retain quality people, while removing the wrong people. This is hypothesized as the second component of a positive organizational structure – to hire the right people. In a study by Collins (2001), the greatest performing companies employed the right people who worked in the right jobs. This finding is consistent with another major study that investigated the structural components of exceptional organizations. In their study on the very best performing organizations, Peters and Waterman (1982) found that the management within excellent companies believed that people were their most important asset. These excellent companies "lived their commitment to people" and believed that the employees where the root source of their quality and productivity. Hiring and retaining quality people, who work hard and fit the culture of the organization, is hypothesized as the second ingredient for building a strong organizational structure.

Casting a Vision. According to Conrad (2013), creating and selling a vision for the future is a key responsibility of the leader. Numerous books and research articles on effective leadership support Conrad's suggestion. Therefore, casting a vision for the future is hypothesized as the third component of a positive organizational structure. To build a strong foundation, a positive leader needs to paint an upbeat and positive future for the company and their stakeholders. As they paint this positive future, the leader needs to make sure that the vision is tied to the values, mission and purpose of the enterprise. Collins and Porras (1994) suggested that there are two components that inter-play to create a well-conceived vision – core ideology and an envisioned future. The core ideology is the deep understanding of why the organization exists. This purpose of existence does not change over time. In fact, this deep understanding of existence is the foundation for what the company ultimately aspires "to become, to achieve, to create." It is based on these aspirations to "become", "achieve", and "create" that leads to significant change and progress toward attaining an organization's envisioned future. It is creating this vision for the future that is hypothesized as the third structural component for a positive organization.

Goals and expectations. Having challenging goals and high expectations is hypothesized as the fourth element of a positive structure. Having ambitious goals and expectations was one of the major findings in the research study entitled *Built To Last*. In the study, Collins and Porras (1994) found that the top performing companies had challenging goals, and the employees were committed to achieving these goals. The researchers termed this finding as "Big Hairy Audacious Goals (BHAG)." Collins and Porras described a BHAG as "a huge and daunting goal." They continued by sharing that BHAGs need to be "clear and compelling" and serve as a unifying focal point for the effort of the employees. These goals help to motivate the staff and stimulate the progress of the organization through the level of commitment the employees make to their goals. It is hypothesized that the fourth ingredient of a strong organizational structure is having challenging goals and high expectations.

Organizational effectiveness. It is hypothesized that focusing on organizational effectiveness is the fifth element of a positive structure. In a meta-analysis on organizational effectiveness, Hartnell, Ou, and Kinicki (2011) identified three categories of criteria that are consistently used in research to describe organizational effectiveness. These categories include employee attitudes, operational effectiveness, and financial effectiveness. Employee attitudes are the level of commitment an employee makes toward the company, and their level of job satisfaction. Operational effectiveness focuses on quality products and services, and financial effectiveness focuses on measures of success such as growth and profits.

These three categories are consistent with the findings that Peters and Waterman (1982) found in their study of the very best organizations. They found that management within the exceptional organizations valued their employees, focused on having quality products, strong financial management, and positive customer service. Therefore, focusing on organizational effectiveness is hypothesized as the fifth component of a positive organizational structure.

Teamwork. The final aspect for building a positive structure is for the employees to work together as a team. Creating a strong and cohesive group that works together for the betterment of the organization is hypothesized as the sixth element within a positive organizational structure. Moving a heavy flywheel, in the same direction, was a metaphor that Collins (2001) used for one of his findings that separated the good companies from the very best. His findings showed that the employees within the very best organizations worked together and when they "continued to push in a consistent direction" the "flywheel" would build momentum and this would lead to extraordinary results. It is hypothesized that working as a team is the sixth ingredient for building a strong organizational structure.

These six major foundational elements are hypothesized to create a strong organizational structure, which is necessary for creating an environment where positivity can be implemented and fostered. There could be additional components that correlate to a strong organizational structure, but the research suggests that these six elements are consistent among the best performing companies. Therefore, having a positive organizational structure is the first dimension within the proposed model on positive leadership. The second dimension of the model, having a positive purpose, is described in greater detail below.

Positive Purpose

Simon Sinek (2009), in his best selling book *Start With Why*, shared that leadership is a process where people are motivated to follow the vision of the leader by either being manipulated or by being inspired. Manipulation is the act of "deliberately influencing or controlling the behaviour of others to one's own advantage" (Mandal & Kocur, 2013). Conversely, inspiration is a process where a person behaves in a certain way because they are moved by the purpose or cause (Sinek, 2009). For outstanding organizational results, Sinek encourages leaders to find a way to inspire their followers. Finding and communicating this positive purpose, or cause, is the second dimension of positive leadership.

This concept of being inspired by something bigger, or something deeper in meaning, can come from a group who shares a common history, their values, beliefs, or way of doing things. Wherever this greater purpose comes from, it becomes core to the group's existence and identity (Raelin, 2006).

Porras and Collins (1994) found that the very best companies existed for a purpose higher than just making money. These organizations had a strong core ideology, or purpose, for their existence. These companies lived their core ideology and did not stray from their purpose. They defined an organization's core ideology as being a combination of their core values and core purpose. In other words, why does the organization exist? This understanding of core values and core purpose should inspire the employee to go the extra mile and take pride in their work. This in turn will result in happier employees, enhanced production, and increased profits.

Positive Climate

Researchers have studied organizational culture and climate for several decades. One of the first books that had a significant impact on management thought and discussed organizational culture was Chester

Bernard's 1938 book "*Functions of an Executive.*" According to Mahoney (2002), Barnard wrote about "two cultures" that existed within an organization. Since then, many researchers have studied culture and climate as it pertains to the work environment within an organization. Organizational culture is best thought of as the personality of the company, whereas the organizational climate is similar to the mood. Like a personality, a company's culture is difficult to change. Culture is entrenched by the values, beliefs, rituals, and principles that ensconce the members of the organization. However, like a person's mood, a climate can vary over time and can be changed.

An organization's climate is the perception the workers have of the environment within the work setting (Atkinson & Frechette, 2009). The climate is shaped by the policies, procedures, attitudes, behaviors, communication, and interactions of the employees. If the climate is negative in nature, it can lead to frustration, dysfunction, and absenteeism. However, if the climate is positive, it can lead to happy and productive employees. The goal of the positive leader is to create a positive climate, and maintain this positivity, until it becomes entrenched into the inter-workings of the organization and ultimately becomes the culture within the company.

Organizational climate is not the measure of how one employee feels about the work environment; rather the climate is how the organization's collective workforce perceives the work setting. This climate is an outgrowth of the attitudes, behaviors and emotions of the staff, and the policies of the organization (Kanten & Ulker, 2013). In fact, Momeni (2009) shared that more than 70% of employees' perceptions of organizational climate are shaped directly by their leader's style of leadership and behavior. When employees are treated well, and they feel appreciated, the climate is perceived as being positive. However, when the work environment is uncomfortable, controlling, and unpleasant, the climate is perceived as being negative.

Researchers have shown that positive climates lead to happy and productive employees. In turn, this leads to an increase in the productivity and profits for the organization. In his research, Goleman (2000) showed that there is a positive correlation between a positive organizational climate and the profitability of the company. Conversely, a negative climate leads to unhappy employees who feel a lack of motivation, decreased confidence, and a lack of job security. Most organizations, however, fall somewhere between these two extremes. But in the best performing organizations, the leaders work hard to develop a healthy, thriving and flourishing environment.

In order to create a positive climate, Cameron (2012) believes that leaders need to intentionally foster a work environment that is uplifting and promotes flourishing. He suggests that in order to create a positive organizational climate, the leader needs to develop relationships by promoting compassion, forgiveness and gratitude amongst the workforce. Gladis (2013) suggests that in order to create positivity amongst the team, leaders need to utilize the strengths of the members within the organization, focus on decreasing negativity, and encourage positivity. They need to shape the mood of the organization by practicing the positive emotions of gratitude, kindness, optimism, and love.

Creating a positive organizational climate and culture is the third of five strategies that a positive leader needs to focus on in order to build an extraordinary organization. The fourth strategy is having the leader build positive relationships with their employees.

Positive Relationships

A fourth strategy for creating positive organizations is through building positive relationships with your staff. In building strong relationships, Gladis (2013) shared that negative interactions are significantly

more powerful than positive interactions and therefore positive leaders need to provide three times more positive statements than negative statements in order to build healthy and flourishing relationships. He refers to a research study by Fredrickson & Losada (2005) that suggests that because negative interactions are so powerful, a 2.9:1 ratio of positive-to-negative interactions keeps a relationship in a neutral state. That in order to build a positive relationship, a leader needs to increase this ratio to 3:1. John Gottman, a professor emeritus at the University of Washington, found that this positive-to-negative ratio should be 5:1 for married couples to maintain a positive relationship (Gottman & Levenson, 1992). But researchers caution that too much positivity can also have a negative effect on relationships. That when a leader is too positive in their interactions, people sense that the leader is not genuine in their communications and therefore it becomes difficult to trust what they say.

Gladis (2013) goes on to write that people want to follow leaders who they can trust, who are caring and compassionate, who provide hope, and who provide stability. That in order to build these emotions, a leader needs to encourage positive engagement in a 360° manner. In other words, people in a work environment are encouraged to positively engage with their boss, their subordinates, their peers, and members of the entire team.

Cameron also believes in building positive relationships with others within the organization. However, Cameron explores this concept a little bit differently. Instead of having positive-to-negative ratios of 3:1 or 5:1, Cameron suggests that leaders need to be positive energizers and they should encourage their employees to become positive energizers. A positive energizer is someone who "creates and supports vitality in others" (Cameron, 2012). They elevate, uplift, motivate and make people better. Negative energizers, by contrast, deplete people of their good feelings and energy. Baker found that high performing organizations have three times more positive energizers than the average company (as reported by Cameron, 2012). Therefore, it could be argued that positive relationships amongst staff members, and positive energizers within an organization, can help to build a strong and effective organization. Building positive relationships within the organization is the fourth strategy that positive leaders can use to create a successful organization. A fifth and final approach for positive leadership is to learn how to communicate in a positive manner.

Positive Communication

Engaging in positive communications is the fifth strategy that leaders need to use in order to build a positive organization. Cameron (2012) described these positive communications as being affirmative and supportive in nature and these statements would replace any negative or judgmental-type comments. This strategy is similar to the "creating positive relationships" strategy that Gladis proposed. Both authors support their strategies with the concept of building positive relationships through positive communication. They cite research by Fredrickson and Losada that showed that positive communication requires a minimum of three positive comments for every negative statement.

Positive communication is a skill that leaders can develop as they learn to be very intentional with the words they select and the mannerisms they project. But in order for leaders to be proficient with the elements and techniques of positive communication, they also need to know the words and mannerisms that can be construed as being negative. Fowler & Dillow (2011), referred to John Gottman as the researcher who identified four types of negative interactions that lead to strained relationships. These negative interactions include: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling.

Instead, a positive leader needs to communicate by being genuine, authentic, and sincere (Cameron, 2012). Cameron (2013) suggests that positive interchanges need to be delivered in a manner that is

accurate and straight forward. That positive communication is not designed so the leader appears to be a "nice person." Rather, this accurate and straightforward message should be delivered in a genuine and sincere way so it effectively communicates the message and also helps the recipient to feel "valued, energized, and uplifted."

Being a positive communicator takes time, effort, and intention. It is not an easy process, but engaging in positive communication shows that the leader cares about the people within the group or organization. And when people feel appreciated and valued, they work harder and longer to help the organization achieve its goals. Positive communication is the final strategy that a leader needs in order to build a positive and successful team.

Summary and Discussion

Positive leadership was born out of the positive psychology movement. Research shows that positive leadership and positivity are correlated to happy employees, enhanced customer service, increased productivity, improved performance, and enhanced profits. These outcomes occur because when employees and team members feel appreciated they tend to work harder and are more committed to their enterprise. In turn, this results in increased performance, productivity, and profits. The proposed model on positive leadership hypothesizes that there are five variables, strategies, or dimensions that positive leaders need to focus on in order to build a positive organization. These dimensions include (a) building a positive structure, (b) operating with a positive purpose, (c) establishing a positive climate, (d) developing positive relationships, and (e) engaging in positive communications.

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