

Positive Leadership Creates Exceptional Performance Shawn E. Quinn

A nuclear production facility needed to be cleaned up and closed (Cameron & Lavine, 2006). “The company receiving the contract to dismantle and clean up the Rocky Flats Nuclear Arsenal completed the assignment 60 years ahead of schedule, \$30 billion under budget, and 13 times cleaner than required. This company’s achievement far exceeded every knowledgeable expert’s predictions of performance (Cameron, 2008).” This is an exceptional example of performance outside of normal expectation. The question is, what did this company do differently? This is one of the questions the field of Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) sets out to answer.

What is Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS)?

Positive Organizational Scholarship is a leading edge movement in organizational studies, based at the Center for Positive Organizations at the **Stephen M Ross School of Business, University of Michigan**.

POS looks at the dynamics in organizations that lead to the development of human strength, foster resiliency, make possible healing and restoration, **and cultivate extraordinary individual and organizational performance.**



POS has three general areas of focus as described in the book *Positive Leadership* (Cameron, 2008)

- **Positive Deviance** which can be defined as, “successful performance that dramatically exceeds the norm in a positive direction.”
- **Affirmative Bias** which is defined as, “an orientation toward, for example, strengths rather than weaknesses, optimism rather than pessimism, supportive rather than critical communication.”
- **Virtuousness** which is defined as, “the best of the human condition and that which human beings consider to be inherently good.”

What are a few examples of outcomes in more specific POS studies?

Research tells us the following facts about **positive energy** (Baker, 2003).

- Those who positively energize others are higher performers.
- Position in the *energy* network is four times the predictor of performance compared to position in *informational* networks.
- Positive energizers tend to enhance the work of others. People who interact with or are connected to energizers also perform better.
- High performing firms had three times as many positive energizing networks than low performing firms.

Research tells us the following fact about **positivity and senior teams** (Losada 1999, Fredrickson & Losada 2005).

- The degree of positivity in the conversations of your top management team predicts the level of organizational performance.

Research tells us the following facts about **leveraging strengths** in organizations (Gallup).

- Identifying people's strengths (and what they do right) and building on them creates more benefit than identifying weaknesses (or what they do wrong) and trying to correct them.
- Managers who spend more time with their strongest performers (rather than the weakest performers) achieved double the productivity.
- In organizations where workers have a chance to "do what they do best every day," productivity is one and a half times greater than in normal organizations.

Research tells us the following facts about **virtuousness and downsizing** in organizations (Cameron, Bright & Caza 2004).

- Organizations with more virtuousness in their practices and culture recover from downsizing more quickly and perform better.
- Statistically significant relationships exist between organizational virtuousness (as indicated by things such as integrity, optimism, forgiveness, compassion and trust) and both objective performance (e.g. financial and quality) and perceived performance (e.g. employee engagement and turnover).

Does POS ignore the negative?

POS focuses on doing research and developing management practices that are meant to increase employee and organizational flourishing. This creates a particular focus on positive aspects of individuals and organizations (e.g., strengths and virtues) as well as positive processes of individuals and organizations (e.g., processes that create and expand resources). However, a focus on the positive does NOT mean that POS ignores negative states and conditions in work organizations. Rather, the research suggests that understanding the positive helps build and encourage individuals and organizations that can increase their capacity and capability for dealing with negative and challenging conditions.



Where can I find other POS resources to take action?

- The University of Michigan Executive Education offers a course on Positive Leadership (<http://execed.bus.umich.edu/Programs/Positive-Leadership.aspx>).
- LIFT Consulting offers a number of assessments, workshops, teambuilding exercises, speaking engagements and organizational development consulting from a PO lens (www.leadingwithlift.com).
- The Center for Positive Organizations has a website that gives helpful information for researchers, provides tools for practitioners and offers other resources (<http://www.bus.umich.edu/positive/>).
- Daily blog by one of the founder of the Center for Positive Organizations that centers on leaders creating a Positive Organization (<https://thepositiveorganization.wordpress.com/>)
- The Center for Positive Organizations is forming a HR Consortium for HR Directors around enhancing culture and HR practices (Please see contact info below if you have interest in learning more).

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