

Positive feelings at work

In the latest in our series looking at the emotions likely to be dealt with during coaching, **Gladeana McMahon** focuses on positive feelings

"The greatest discovery of my generation is that human beings can alter their lives by altering their attitudes of mind."

William James (1842 – 1910)
American psychologist
and philosopher

Every day offers individuals in the workplace the opportunity to be the best they can be. New challenges such as the credit crunch mean it is important that organisations and individuals make the most of their collective and individual talents.

How people behave at work is influenced by the way they think and feel. Demoralised and unhappy individuals are likely to be less creative and productive than those who are engaged, happy and motivated¹.

Traditionally, psychology has focused on overcoming psychological and emotional problems². However, the latest development of positive psychology is different in that it focuses on understanding how to achieve excellence. Positive psychology promotes the role of positive emotions and individual strengths that are linked to successful outcomes³.

It is not just the practical, technical or intellectual skills the individual possesses but the psychological and emotional responses that he engages in that

make the difference between someone going through the motions and someone truly engaged in the process of achieving excellence⁴.

People driven by fear or perfectionism may be successful to a point. However, such emotions come at a price for the individual, those he works with and the organisation. He is limited by his emotional responses, which may manifest themselves through a poor work/life balance and the longer-term difficulties that often ensue such as a lack of creative thinking and poor team or colleague relationships.

All of these, in turn, affect the profitability of the individual from an organisational perspective⁵.

Positive psychology focuses on making what's good even better. It does not discount individual development needs but, rather, seeks to place the emphasis on the way people use their existing talents to best effect⁶. Positive psychology and cognitive behavioural coaching are linked in that both seek to

help the individual identify and use his abilities to best advantage while minimising self-defeating thoughts, feelings and behaviours⁷.

The research base for positive psychology provides evidence that developing positive emotions has a number of desirable payoffs. For example, in mental health⁸; improving and maintaining physical health⁹; increasing life expectancy¹⁰; improving attentiveness, perception and thinking abilities¹¹, and in increasing a person's resilience when faced with challenging life events¹².

Apart from helping employees be healthier, with fewer days off sick and a lesser likelihood of experiencing stress related problems, positive emotions have been found to improve the profitability of teams¹³.

The three pillars of positive psychology

Martin Seligman, the founding father of positive psychology, has listed three central themes that he has called pillars: positive experiences, positive individual traits and positive institutions⁷.

Positive experiences

"Positive experiences" encompasses what Seligman declares as *positive subjective experience*, which is divided into three parts – the past, the present and the future. The past considers experiences of well-being, contentment and satisfaction. The present relates

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to the individual's experiences of happiness. The future focuses on experiences of optimism.

Positive individual traits

Positive character traits enable the individual to experience a 'good life' that is characterised through the expression of aspects such as vocation, wisdom, integrity, meaning and future mindedness.

Positive institutions

"Positive institutions" relates to organisations and communities that foster positive experiences. It is this aspect that is likely to be of interest to organisations as a way for them to foster a culture of optimum output.

Coaching using positive psychology

As with all forms of psychological coaching, there are many different strategies that both the individual and the organisation can engage in to enhance performance. The strategies include recognising and using strengths; developing positive communications; understanding the role of past-, present- and future-orientated thoughts, attitudes and behaviours, and developing realistic optimism and resilience.

When positive psychology and cognitive behavioural coaching



Characteristic	Meaning
Being the best you can be	Functioning at peak performance allows the individual to develop and grow.
Innate ability	More like being biologically pre-programmed to be good at something. The brain has what it needs to help think, feel and act in certain ways. Tasks are made easier by existing abilities.
Congruence	The strength is in line with the individual's personal values. When he experiences congruence, he feels at one with himself.
Makes you feel alive and full of energy	When using his strengths, the individual feels full of energy and enjoys what he is doing. The person needs to replenish his physical energy but enjoyment of the activity means he does not tire readily.

Figure 1: Characteristics that underpin strengths

are used together, the aim is to help people recognise and use their existing strengths while countering those aspects that may be self-limiting, such as the negative thinking styles that may hold them back¹⁴.

Identifying and using strengths

The concept of individual strengths is one of the keys to developing positive individual and organisational traits¹⁵.

Statements like 'playing to your strengths' recognises that people have aptitudes and talents. For a strength to be strength, the question is "why am I good at...?" Strengths have a number of characteristics, as outlined in Figure 1 left¹⁶.

When all four characteristics are present, individuals are using

their strengths. However, the term 'workaholic' describes someone, good at what he does, who has fallen into the trap of using his signature strengths in a negative, rather than a positive, manner.

Playing to your strengths

Positive psychology aims to help people identify individual strengths. There are 24 of these, grouped under six headings called virtues. The six virtues and their meanings are outlined in Figure 2 right.

Once an individual knows what his strengths are, he can then decide whether he is using them to the greatest advantage.

To help individuals identify their unique strengths, they are often directed to visit www.authentic happiness.com to take



what is called the VIA Signature Strengths Questionnaire. Registering is free and it takes about 20 minutes to complete the online questionnaire. At the

end, the person is given a detailed report, ranking his strengths together with a more detailed explanation of them.

Finding strengths in others

It is also important to be able to recognise and value other people’s strengths and consider how to complement and work with these. We live in a society and are interacting with people all day, every day. The meeting of strengths can provide a powerful force for establishing the kind of environment at work that is likely to be more productive as well as enjoyable¹⁷.

If strengths are the ways in which individuals act in day-to-day life, virtues are more spiritual in nature. For example, the six headings (wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance and transcendence) are all virtues but the component parts are the ways in which they are expressed through individual strengths in day-to-day life.

Recognising and acknowledging other people’s virtues helps to:

1. Discover complementary strengths in others
2. Provide models of ways of being that the individual wishes to emulate
3. Build productive and meaningful relationships by being able to acknowledge the virtues of others.

Virtues and associated strengths	Meaning
Virtue: Wisdom and knowledge Strengths: Creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, perspective	The ability to acquire knowledge and to use it to best advantage.
Virtue: Courage Strengths: Bravery, persistence, integrity, vitality	Finding ways of overcoming obstacles that help get the most from life.
Virtue: Humanity Strengths: Love, kindness, social intelligence	Looking after others and their wellbeing
Virtue: Justice Strengths: Citizenship, fairness, leadership	Creating a healthy society through fairness and justice
Virtue: Temperance Strengths: Forgiveness and mercy, humility, prudence and self-control	Ways of providing protection against the excesses of life
Virtue: Transcendence Strengths: Appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humour, spirituality	Identifying and honouring meaning and purpose

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An individual is asked to think of all the people he works with and to write out a list of the virtues and strengths he believes each has. He then identifies the specific behaviours he values and considers how these complement his own strengths, and how having such individuals around adds value. In addition, attention is given to ways in which individual and collective skills can be integrated to ensure maximum advantage to all.

Understanding others as well as oneself is a key to building successful, profitable and rewarding relationships.

Work on strategies to build up weaker strengths

A person can also tackle weaker strengths head on.

Once he has decided which strengths he would like to develop, a list is made of these. If there is more than one strength on the list, these are rated according to their relevance and importance, using a 0 – 10 scale (0 = not that important and 10 = very important). Trying to change too much at once can be counterproductive, as this can lead to the individual overloading himself. Having a hierarchy of strengths to be developed and approaching their development systematically is more likely to lead to the successful attainment of the desired strength¹⁸.

Figure 3 on the next page provides an example of how someone might go about developing his strengths associated with the virtue of wisdom and knowledge.

Figure 2: The six virtues

Everyone has strengths, some more developed than others. It is possible to develop new strengths and, by recognising your own strengths as well as those of others, improve your productivity, motivation and work satisfaction.

Positive psychology now makes it possible to study the science of success, enabling people and organisations alike to identify, and benefit from, the pursuit of excellence. ■

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Strength associated with the virtue of wisdom and knowledge	Activities
Creativity/originality/ingenuity	Think about ordinary work-related aspects and find new ways of tackling tasks. Take time to look around and identify individuals whom you admire – what do they do? What do they say? How do they behave? Put aside two hours to consider a work-related problem in a new way – eg brainstorm ideas, create a Mind Map of your ideas rather than just thinking in your traditional linear fashion
Judgement/open mindedness/critical thinking	Choose something you have done in your life, a decision you have made or an action taken, and critically appraise this. What went well and what could you have done differently? Take an issue you feel strongly about and find alternative arguments against what you believe.
Curiosity/interest/openness to experience/novelty-seeking	Read books and articles to expand your knowledge. Try something you have never done before.
Love of learning	Join an evening class for a subject you have always been interested in. Find an interesting article on a work-related topic and discuss this topic with your colleagues. Find out if there are training opportunities within your own organisation that you could take advantage of.
Perspective	Write down your own view of the world, of people and of your working life. What does this suggest to you? Find a person, living or dead, that you admire and find out how he or she lived their life.

Figure 3: Developing the strengths associated with wisdom and knowledge

Gladeana McMahon is vice president and Fellow of the Association for Coaching, director of professional coaching standards for Cedar Talent Management and co director for the Centre for Coaching. She can be contacted via www.gladeanacmahon.com