Managers Effectively Using Positive Psychology and its Attributes of Flow, Mindfulness, Mindset, Optimism, and Happiness

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Abstract

Astute managers are always exploring ways in which to enhance job performance and satisfaction. The newly developed field of positive psychology is an excellent source for managers to do so. Positive psychology provides attributes that managers can use to reach their full performance potential regarding work and personal satisfaction. Flow maximizes managers' work accomplishments through a stimulating and personally rewarding process. Mindfulness and mindset help managers to live in-the-moment of their interactions with others in order to truly understand what is taking place while working effectively and building positive relationships with others. Optimism and happiness prompt managers to have positive emotions that translate into personal and job satisfaction as well as enhanced job productivity.

Keywords: positive psychology, flow, mindfulness, mindset, optimism, happiness

1.0 Context

Effective managers are always looking for ways to improve performance. It is equally important that managers feel good about their jobs, enjoy the specific work they do, and have positive feelings flowing from interactions with fellow workers and those whom they supervise. While effective managers likely already incorporate many of the concepts of the *positive psychology* movement, an up-to-date review of that movement's attributes is beneficial to use as points of reference for enhancing job performance and satisfaction.

2.0 Positive Psychology

According to Seligman (2011), who coined the term in 1998, positive psychology is the scientific study of the positive aspects of the human experience. Positive psychology focuses on strengths enabling managers to thrive and reach their full potential at work and in their personal lives. It emphasizes positive emotions, meaningful purpose, positive relationships, authentic engagement with others, satisfaction, and general mental health well-being (Seligman, 2008). This compares to what has often been represented by the study of psychology through negative attributes of human weaknesses and general mental illness factors.   In the context of manager's responsibilities, the major aspects of positive psychology are: (a) embracing the challenges of the job with a passion and being energized to successfully meet them; (b) learning from setbacks or adversities at work, and not letting them cause discouragement; (c) engaging staff and other stakeholders in developing goals and job targets and taking actions to complete them; (d) viewing staff members as a major asset for achieving high quality and timely work; (e) focusing on building positive and meaningful relationships with all staff and stakeholders; (f) finding fulfillment and excitement in using creativity to solve problems and being more productive on the job; and (g) looking beyond oneself to help staff members and others find satisfaction and enjoyment in their work, which will ultimately benefit the work unit and organization (Bartz, 2017). This article examines the positive psychology attributes of flow, mindfulness, mindset, optimism, and happiness regarding the work environment of managers.

2.1 Flow

> Flow is when people are so involved in an activity
> that nothing else seems to matter; the experience is
> so enjoyable that people will continue to do it even
> at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it
> (Csikszentmihalyi, 2018, p. 1).

Experiencing flow is advantageous to managers because it causes them to stretch skills and talents, and even to develop new ones. Flow enhances job productivity and helps managers *be their best*. In the context of positive psychology, flow is essential to managers' overall well-being.

Csikszentmahayi (cited in Weiten, Dunn, & Hammer, 2012) describes flow as the holistic sensation of managers when they try to act with total involvement. When they are "in flow," managers feel in control of their actions, and there is little distinction between self and the challenging work at hand. When they engage in flow, managers are intrinsically rewarded from moment to moment and are completely immersed in what they are doing. When this totally engaged state of focus evolves, time seems to slip away, and distractors dissipate. When managers engage in flow, they and the challenges at hand are totally and enjoyably absorbed (Charan, 2017, p. 165). Most importantly, this enables managers to be extremely productive and experience maximum job satisfaction.

Flow represents the "sweet spot" of where the challenge at hand is on the outer edge of, or perhaps just beyond, a manager's skill level (Stulberg & Magness, 2017, p. 50). This is called the *challenge-skill balance* because the skills stretch to meet the challenge. An overwhelming challenge brings a major frustration, while too little challenge brings boredom (Tse, Fung, Nakamura, & Csikszentmahayi, 2018, p. 284). The challenge-skill balance causes managers to "be their best." Controlled stress causes managers' adrenaline to "kick-in" and requires them to stretch their skills and apply creativity and innovation in solving problems. In such situations, while some doubt and uncertainty may be present in managers' minds, they are not deterred, but motivationally inspired to successfully achieve the tasks required of their job.

Work is an excellent environment for managers to experience flow if they craft the environment to accentuate: (1) clear goals, (2) specifically-defined performance roles for self and staff members, (3) frequent feedback for self and staff members (formal and informal), (4) minimal distractions, (5) high expectation for concentrating on producing work, and (6) congruency of the work's difficulty with managers' and staff members' talents and strengths (Seligman, 2002, p. 175). Seligman (2002) offers these ingredients for managers to establish more flow experiences in the work environment: (1) identify your signature strengths, (2) choose work that lets you use them every day, (3) recraft your personality to use your signature strengths more, and (4) make room to allow staff members to recraft work within the bounds of your goals to maximize enriching their skill levels or strengths to challenges (p. 176).

Boredom is the enemy of managers who are striving for the flow experience. Hence, it may be beneficial for managers to "bundle together" the mundane tasks that they do on a daily basis within a common time period, thereby allowing a more conducive environment for flow to happen outside of this time frame. Most managers have a "peak performance time" in the work day in which they are more motivated and produce their best work (Pink, 2018). This is an excellent time for managers to eliminate—or minimize to the extent possible—distractions and completely focus on a job challenge that will prompt the "flow state" (Hemmings, 2018).

2.2 Mindfulness

> Mindfulness is the basic human ability to be fully
> present, aware of where we are and what we're
> doing, and not overly reactive or overwhelmed
> by what's going on around us (Boyce, 2018, p. 6).

Mindfulness means that managers are consciously focusing on being aware of what others are thinking and feeling in a given situation, as well as analyzing their own thoughts before speaking or taking action. Sometimes managers are on "auto pilot" and not thinking much about others and all the factors that give context to a situation. Mindfulness is performing effectively in-the-moment by processing what others say, understanding their motives, and focusing on what the manager wants to accomplish in the situation.

It is predicated on a manager not necessarily doing work differently but looking differently at what they are already doing (Weiss, 2018).

Meditation is also a part of mindfulness. The modern-day multitasking and digitally-connected manager occasionally need to call "time out," clear the mind, and focus attention on one thing at a time through meditation. Meditation has moved beyond the yoga mat into offices or any quiet place. It emphasizes managers reducing stress and anxiety through relaxation. Meditation focuses upon thinking clearly about a specific problem or issue and removing noise, clutter, or a multitude of other issues from the brain.

Mascarelli (2017) suggests these steps for newcomers to meditation: (a) find a quiet place and schedule a regular time; (b) identify what motivates you to focus on today's meditation; (c) focus on a single issue at a time; (d) although numerous thoughts may enter your mind, continue to focus on what you set out as your point of concentration; (e) relax, feel comfortable, and do not self-judge; (f) be patient; and (g) start with short sessions of several minutes and build up to 30-60 minutes.

2.3 Mindset

Examples of Dweck's Mindset (Fixed vs Growth)

ability is static	ability can be developed
● avoids challenges	● embraces challenges
● gives up easily	● persists against obstacles
● sees effort as fruitless	● sees effort as necessary
● ignores useful criticism	● learns from criticism
● is threatened by others	● is inspired by others' success
	(Dweck, 2016)

Managers can believe that factors such as intelligence and personality are unchangeable (fixed mindset) or believe that these factors can be nurtured and developed (growth mindset) for professional and personal enhancement (Dweck, 2016). This represents the proverbial nature vs. nurture debate that has been discussed for centuries. Managers are impacted by both, but the growth mindset will likely enhance their expertise, performance, and job satisfaction (Bartz, 2016). Managers challenging themselves to develop existing attributes and being willing to put forth the needed effort is key to maximizing the growth mindset. Purposefully engaging in developmental activities indicative of the growth mindset is essential to managers in maximizing their potential and enhancing achievements.

To nurture the growth mindset, managers need to focus on: (a) having purpose drive their work; (b) dealing "head-on" with deficiencies instead of hiding from them; (c) perceiving setbacks as learning opportunities for future successes; (d) viewing staff members as collaborators and stressing the team approach; (e) nurturing a burning desire to keep learning new knowledge and skills; (f) finding inspiration from successes of others and learning from them; (g) understanding that everyone can change and grow through passion, effort, application, and experience; (h) being ready to take risks, confront challenges, and keep working to get better, even when feeling distressed; and (i) when relationships with people in the work environment go wrong, perceiving such situations as learning experiences and identifying positive actions for future relationship-building (Dweck, 2016).

Dweck (2016) cautions that managers can inadvertently fall into a false growth mindset via two misunderstandings: (1) Managers identifying attributes they like about themselves and calling them collectively a growth mindset. (If these attributes are, in fact, indicative of a fixed mindset, adhering to them is counterproductive to acquiring a growth mindset.) and (2) Growth mindset for managers is solely about effort and praising effort. Managers putting more effort into fixed mindset attributes will not result in a growth mindset. New strategies are needed. Dweck (2016) reminds us that, simply put, "growth mindset is about believing people can develop their abilities" (pp. 214-215).

The Arbinger Institute (2016) in <u>Outward Mindset: Seeing Beyond Ourselves</u>, describes mindset as being inward or outward. A manager's mindset is essential to enjoying the job and performing exceptionally well. Mindset is how a manager views oneself, staff, and others according to the Arbinger Institute. With the inward mindset, managers are usually self-centered and pay little attention to the needs and wants of staff and others pertaining to what needs to be changed and improved in the work setting (Bartz, 2017). Managers with an outward mindset see staff and others as similar to themselves, whose efforts and work matter to everyone.

With the outward mindset, the approach to establish and meet job targets is viewed as a collaborative effort that considers the creative and innovative ideas of all staff involved and causes an environment in which staff eagerly share ideas. Table 1 provides specific comparisons of the inward and outward mindsets for managers in the context of working and being productive with staff and others.

2.4 Optimism

There are two fundamental ways of looking at adverse events that happen to a manager. The manager can: (1) imagine the worst and wallow in self-pity; or (2) view such events as temporary, surmountable, and challenges to overcome. Pessimists believe that an adverse event will last a long time, make the person helpless, and is his/her fault. Optimists view an adverse event as only a temporary setback that does not permeate all aspects of their lives and, in most situations, is not their fault. They are not fazed by the defeat but are motivated to try harder to overcome obstacles causing the situation. Being a pessimist or optimist can be habit-forming and become engrained in a manager's character (Seligman, 2006). Pessimists are likely to give up more easily and get depressed when facing an adverse event.

Pessimism can be a difficult syndrome to break. However, with proper training optimism can be learned through a new set of cognitive skills. When adversity is encountered, an individual has rapidly-occurring thoughts about the event. These thoughts are almost instinctive and driven by a person's beliefs that are often habitual. People may not even realize they have these beliefs unless they pause to analyze the situation. Beliefs flow from feelings and drive behaviors, which lead to consequences for their actions (Seligman, 2006). When an individual acts on these beliefs, prompted by adversity, the actions have consequences.

These consequences could cause constructive or positive developments in the adverse situation, or cause dejection and prompt a manager to "give up." The point is that beliefs play a crucial role in how managers deal with adversity through their behaviors and the consequences flowing from these behaviors. An optimist views an adverse event in the following manner: (a) the event has merely caused a temporary setback; (b) whatever caused the adversity is confined specifically to this particular event and no other happenings in the person's life; (c) the results flowing from the adversity are not the fault of the person, the particular circumstances of the event, or caused by others; (d) the event likely happened for multiple reasons, many of which the individual could not control; (e) the optimist is unfazed by what others might perceive as defeat from the adverse event; and (f) the optimist perceives an adverse event as a challenge to try harder and do better in the future (Seligman, 2006).

2.5 Happiness

Virtues are the set of characteristics that form the foundation of one's character. Happiness flows from engaging one's strengths and virtues with others in an authentic manner. Managers need to stress the use of their virtues in good and bad times (Seligman, 2002). As the old saying goes, "actions flow from character." Virtues like confidence, hope, trust, honesty, and relationship building with others serve managers well, especially when times are difficult.

Seligman's model for happiness is represented by PERMA—Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment (Positive Psychology Melbourne, 2017). Positive emotions include the manager being optimistic about the here and now, as well as seeing positives in the past and future. Enjoyment through intellectual stimulation and creativity will aid the manager in experiencing positive emotions. Engagement means that managers participate in work activities and tasks that fully challenge them to learn, grow intellectually, and feel good about their experiences.

Relationships refer to managers socially connecting with others through authentic and meaningful interactions. It is especially important to have positive feelings about relationships with others at work during difficult and challenging times. Meaning refers to managers truly understanding the important and positive impact their work has on staff, other stakeholders, and the organization. Further, it includes feeling good about their present and future jobs and careers and enjoying experiences related to them in the context of accomplishments and relationships with others.

Accomplishments represent managers having achievement goals and being ambitious and motivated to accomplish those goals. Such goals should include activities which prompt managers to excel in performance and reward their efforts by seeing the benefits flowing from accomplishments.

Managers should feel proud of their work accomplishments and the important contributions they make to the work unit, organization, and stakeholders (Positive Psychology Melbourne, 2017). The rewards of positive psychology through these "happiness factors" are motivational to managers and prompt positive adrenaline to create behaviors in which they can be their best.

3.0 Concluding Thoughts

Flow, mindfulness, mindset, optimism, and happiness are attributes of positive psychology that aid managers in performing at peak levels. These positive psychology attributes cause increased self-satisfaction in the context of work performance, job satisfaction, and feelings about self. They also increase managers' effectiveness in work with the staff they supervise, stakeholders throughout the organization, and their contributions to the organization.

Table 1. Comparing Inward and Outward Mindset for Managers Toward.Staff and Others

Inward Mindset	Outward Mindset
1. Strives to control people	1. Strives to cause staff and others to be fully responsible and engaged in work
2. Often blames others when things go wrong	2. Takes responsibility for actions of oneself and staff in the work environment
3. Is narcissistic	3. Displays modesty towards staff and others
4. Consistently defends one's position	4. Works collaboratively with staff to solicit their opinions and collectively develop the best solutions for problems
5. Focuses on protecting oneself in interactions with staff and others	5. Focuses on building positive relationships with and among people in interactions with staff and others
6. Uses behaviors that sometimes try to manipulate staff and others in an attempt to improve one's own image	6. Strives to facilitate "committed behaviors" collectively with staff and others to improve work produced and achieve goals
7. Shows minimal regard for how to create "collective results" among staff and others	7. Is motivated about how to work with staff and others collaboratively and for others to collaborate with each other and oneself
8. Views staff and others in a context as to how they can help oneself achieve goals	8. Focuses on the needs and challenges of staff and others to create a work environment that prompts individual and team cooperation
Inward Mindset	**Outward Mindset**
9. Assumes that to simply change one's behavior is the best way to enhance the work productivity of staff and others	9. Understands that changing how oneself views staff and others is more beneficial to everyone in comparison to merely focusing on changing behaviors toward staff and others

10. Focuses on how to make oneself "look good" for work produced, even at the expense of staff and others	10. Sees, thinks, and works on how to improve job performance through collaboration with staff and others that incorporates their needs and wants, and gains recognition for them
11. Often creates competition between staff and causes them to work independently of each other	11. Focuses on the staff as an entity which has collective belief of working with each other for the common good of the work unit and organization
12. Focuses mainly on the job responsibilities of oneself	12. Assists staff and others in identifying their interests and being motivated to successfully achieve what they need for the betterment of the work unit and organization
13. Focuses on getting the work "out the door" with little concern for its benefits	13. Focuses on the meaning and purposefulness of the work and the positive impact it can have on the work unit and organization
14. Is inclined to step in, take over, and direct the work of staff and others when not pleased	14. Helps staff and others understand what they need to do; provides developmental training, when needed; and furnishes the necessary resources to accomplish the goals of the work unit
15. Creates conflict that keeps staff embattled with each other (divide and conquer for control)	15. Focuses on preventing and resolving conflict among staff and others
Inward Mindset	**Outward Mindset**
16. Focuses on personal and professional goals and behaviors to protect and advance oneself	16. Focuses on the goals of the work unit and organization, and objectives and behaviors that take staff and others into consideration.
17. Advances one's own agenda at the expense of staff	17. Focuses on working together with staff and others for collective results to benefit the work unit and organization
18. Identifies what can be taken from others to achieve objectives for oneself	18. Identifies what can be given to help staff and others successfully achieve their work objectives
19. Oftentimes tries to control the behavior of staff and others for self-benefit through power, authority, and fear	19. Relinquishes power and authority to empower staff's and others' abilities to be responsible and accountable for their work (Bartz, Thompson, & Rice, 2017)

4.0 Footnote

Based in part on the following articles: Bartz, D.E. (2017). Utilizing positive psychology to enhance job performance and satisfaction for school administrators. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 7(5), 1-6; Bartz, D.E. (2017). Applying positive psychology to school administrators. *International Journal of Education and Social Science*, 4(8), 1-13; Bartz, D.E. & Rice, P. (2017). Managers using positive psychology to maximize productivity and job satisfaction. *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, 8(7), 1-6.

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