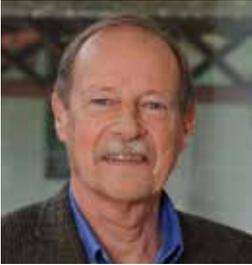


Being a Positive Force in Leadership



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'I was always looking outside myself for strength and confidence, but it comes from within. It is there all the time' **Anna Freud**

Introduction

During the Leadership Programme at Henley Business School, we encourage participants to take the opportunity to evaluate their own leadership effectiveness and consider how they might improve it. We believe this can be achieved through a deeper understanding of themselves as leaders. We also share a range of approaches to leadership for participants to consider. This paper shares one of these approaches and provides food for thought regarding our state of mind as leaders and how we can be a positive leadership force in any situation. We will review some of the current thinking on positive leadership and what has influenced it, as well as some case examples that illustrate the thinking. We will also share a practical tool for capturing and understanding your unique strengths, which makes it possible to have a positive impact on others and maximise your leadership potential.

In the late sixties the management guru Peter Drucker said, 'The unique purpose of organisation is to make strength productive [...] One cannot build on weakness. To achieve results, one has to use all the available strengths [...] These strengths are the true opportunities.' (Drucker, 1967) Leaders in organisations, who are constantly confronted by problems, threats and obstacles, often tend to focus on the negatives much more than the positives. Traditionally, organisations require the best leadership when problems, threats or obstacles are present. Consequently, negative factors receive more attention than positive factors. This paper intends to encourage you to consider adopting a positive leadership approach that focuses on the strengths of both organisations and individuals.

Current thinking and research

It is useful to review some of the current thinking and research about this positive approach to organisations and leadership and what has influenced it. This review has been grouped into related topics:

Positive psychology and positive organisational scholarship

For a number of years there has been a shift in organisational thinking and academic writing, from a focus on identifying and correcting the things that are wrong in organisations to identifying, understanding and maximising the potential of the things that work and are right. The rapid growth of positive psychology has fuelled this and what began as the study of positive emotion and was nicknamed 'the science of happiness' has been adopted by business schools and organisations. Positive psychology emerged in 1998 after the then-president of the American Psychological Association, Martin Seligman gave a presidential address, which criticised the focus and performance of psychology because it had neglected the study and application of the things that make life worth living. The time had come, he suggested, for a positive psychology that focused on what was right with people, including happiness, well-being and human strengths. The result was the positive psychology discipline,

which studies positive emotions, strengths and virtues, and how human strengths can contribute to better communities. Research findings showed that happiness at the highest levels arose from people living meaningful lives in which they felt they were accessing their unique strengths. It is interesting to note that the ex-British prime minister, David Cameron recommended the inclusion of a happiness measure in assessing the nation's economic and social health.

The focus on happiness extended into the work and organisational context as well. Various books, articles and research studies have looked at the effects of happiness and its role in maximising performance and achieving potential. A Bloomberg Businessweek (Coplan, 2009) illustrates that many companies are turning to positive psychology in their desire to thrive. It asserts that it is one thing to talk about the connections between a positive mental state and a healthy company when a business is running well, making a profit and grabbing new customers, but tougher times test entrepreneurs and success can come to those who use their strengths to find opportunity amid the 'rubble'.

Positive organisational scholarship and positive organisational development have now been well established at universities and business schools – research examines the best of organisations and the best of human behaviour in those organisations, applying a positive lens. There is a strong link here to the organisation change technique of appreciative inquiry (AI), developed in the 1980s by David Cooperrider and subsequently implemented in many large organisations. AI developed out of a growing dissatisfaction with change management practices, which relied heavily on problem-solving, and a desire to work with organisations in a more constructive, positive, life-affirming way. AI searches for the best in people, their organisations and the relevant world around them, and involves the '...systematic discovery of what gives "life" to a living system when it is most alive, most effective and most constructively capable in economic, ecological and human terms'. One of their key learnings was that organisations will grow and develop in the direction of what they persistently ask questions about.

Positive leadership

There are a number of writers focusing on the characteristics of positive leaders. Kim Cameron is one of the pioneers of the positive organisational scholarship discipline. He seeks to identify and explain strategies that can help leaders reach beyond ordinary success to achieve extraordinary effectiveness, spectacular results and 'positively deviant' performance.

Positive leaders are unusual, in his view in that they 'choose to emphasise the uplifting and flourishing side of organisational life, even in the face of difficulty – they counter the tendency toward negativity with an abundance of positivity' (Cameron, 2013). He bases much of his writing on research studies that show a positive climate at work is strongly associated with positive performance. He recognises that for positive leaders to focus on positive deviance does not mean that they ignore non-positive conditions or situations when mistakes or problems are present. He believes that some of the best of human and organisational attributes are exposed only when confronting obstacles, challenges or detrimental circumstances. Achieving positive deviance is not dependent on completely positive conditions – a role exists for both positive and negative circumstances in producing positive deviance. Cameron highlights three areas of focus of positive leadership:

1. A focus on positively deviant performance that exceeds the norm.
2. An affirmative bias, or an orientation toward strengths rather than weaknesses, optimism rather than pessimism, supportive rather than critical communication.
3. A focus on virtuousness, or the best of the human condition.

A McKinsey survey (Barsh et al, 2010) of 2,000 leaders over a six-year period sought to learn from leaders who are able to find the best in themselves and in turn inspire, engage and mobilise others, even in the most demanding circumstances. Informed by this, they developed a map of capabilities called 'centered leadership', which has five capabilities that, in combination, generate high levels of professional performance and life satisfaction: **meaning**, or finding your strengths and putting them to work in service of a purpose that inspires you; **positive framing**, or adopting a more constructive way to view your world and convert even difficult situations into opportunities; **connecting**, or building a stronger sense of community and belonging; **engaging**, or pursuing opportunities² disguised by risk; and **energising**, or practising ways to sustain your energy on a long leadership journey. 75% of the respondents in their survey who were particularly good at **positive framing**, thought they had the right skills to lead change, while only 15% of those who weren't thought so. They highlight this quote from one executive: 'Our senior team is always talking about changing the organisation, changing the mindsets and behaviour of everyone. Now I see that transformation is not about that. It starts with me and my willingness and ability to transform myself. Only then will others transform.'

Robert and Ryan Quinn, in their book *Lift* (Quinn, R W & Quinn, R E, 2009), talk about how we can 'lift' others by lifting our own hearts and minds, and in doing so become a positive force whatever our situation may be. When we experience 'lift' we try to be our **best selves**, allowing this best self to attract others to think and act in positive ways – or, we learn about others and see how others' interests can be integrated with our own in a mutually beneficial way. They assert that the pressures of daily life often drag us down from 'lift' into more normal states, when our influence is nowhere near as positive as it is when we experience 'lift'. They suggest that by becoming more aware of the unconscious ways in which we are holding ourselves and others back, we can become a positive force in any situation.

Case example: For five years, I was a member of a business leadership team responsible for Latin America and the Caribbean. The team shared a common belief that breakthrough thinking would result in significant performance improvement, as well a common belief that anything was possible. This was borne out by the fact that for the past five years they have been, and still are, achieving double-digit growth despite the harsh global economic climate that has prevailed during that time. Breakthrough thinking was actively encouraged by the president and embraced by his team. People within the organisation (and even key external business partners) were encouraged to think beyond the acceptable and to suggest 'unthinkable' targets, ideas and solutions. One method of capturing these was to allow an hour at every team meeting to discuss breakthrough ideas – they would be captured on a flipchart and then each one would be discussed (with everyone keeping their minds open to possibility), evaluated and either discarded or pursued. A value (revenue and profit) was placed on those ideas which it was felt it were worth pursuing and an owner assigned to each. Progress was reviewed at follow-up meetings. During the course of a year a number of these 'unthinkable' ideas were adopted and turned out to generate business growth.

Breakthrough thinking was also applied to the process of agreeing business targets with the global executive team: in addition to the 'official' annual revenue/profit targets agreed during the broader organisation target setting process, our business teams would agree 'breakthrough' targets, which were significantly higher, and which might even appear unattainable.

These targets were treated very seriously and the teams would make real stands to deliver on them. During both country and regional performance reviews discussions would focus on achievements against the breakthrough targets and opportunities to attain them. More often than not, the multiple country-based business teams within this regional organisation exceeded their official targets and either achieved, or came close to, their breakthrough targets. A major contributor to this was the encouragement of a positive frame of mind and the search for those 'unthinkable' ideas.

Wayne Baker, in his essay on breakthrough leadership describes extraordinary events – positive or negative – as ‘temporary openings for breakthroughs in personal growth, organisational development and human progress’. Extraordinary events are openings for breakthroughs because they suspend beliefs about what is possible and what is not, and the extraordinary eventually becomes routine. He uses the example of the first landing on the moon, and how space stations and space walks now seem ordinary to us. He says,

‘A breakthrough leader seizes the temporary openings created by extraordinary events to facilitate the expression of the human needs for believing, belonging, contributing and transcending. Organizations often operate as though people leave their beliefs, passions, fears, politics etc on the doorstep as they enter a corporate world of rationality, efficiency and reason. Breakthrough leaders recognize this as fiction, and create the space, opportunity and resources for the expression of human needs [...] Breakthrough leaders use the openings created by extraordinary events to explore a world of new possibilities – for themselves, for their organizations, for society.’

Leveraging strengths

Gurnek Bains and colleagues in their book, *Meaning Inc.* (Bains et al, 2007) illustrate how they found that by studying thousands of successful leaders it was possible to identify a few common attributes, but their overwhelming conclusion was that they were all different and unusual in some way. All of them possessed a single towering strength that made them distinctive in some way. From this, they developed their ‘spike’ model of leadership, which helped leaders focus on and make ‘Olympian’ their distinctive strengths while utilizing areas in which they needed support. Many businesses have embedded the notion of unique talents and individual spikes in the way they think about people and utilize their capabilities.

Goffee & Jones, in their book, *Why Should Anyone Be Led by You?* (Goffee & Jones, 2006) reject attempts to find a universal recipe for leadership, saying that attempts to imitate others, even the most successful leaders, are doomed to failure. In their view there are no universal leadership characteristics – what works for one leader will not work for another. They claim that those aspiring to leadership need to discover what it is about themselves that they can mobilise in a leadership context. They need to identify and deploy their own personal leadership assets. Effective leadership, in their view rests upon full self-knowledge.

A growing body of research points to the benefits of leveraging strengths as the key to optimising business performance: Gallup is a business consultancy and leader in the field of strength management (although best known for opinion polls, this constitutes only 5% of their revenue). Key findings from their research show that employees who know how to apply their strengths are more than 8 times more likely to know what is expected of them in work and are more than 15 times more likely to do what they do best every day. People who have the opportunity to do what they do best every day have a 38% higher probability of success on productivity measures. The Corporate Leadership Council, in a study of 19,000 employees drawn from 34 organisations across 7 industries and 29 countries, found that an emphasis on performance strengths was linked to a 36.4% improvement in performance, while an emphasis on personality strengths was linked to a 21.3% improvement in performance. In contrast, an emphasis on performance weaknesses was linked to a 26.8% decline in performance, and an emphasis on personality weaknesses was linked to a 5.5% decline in performance. Coaching conversations that focus on failure will lead, over time, to an unconscious air of disempowerment. If, however, our conversations are focused on what we do right, this will lead to high self-esteem, true freedom to succeed and the reality of everyone being able to release their full potential.

Case example:

Historically, the predecessor companies that formed Diageo in the 1997 merger used performance management processes, which placed a greater emphasis on identifying and developing action plans to address development needs or weaknesses. The processes were sophisticated and over time became very inclusive – there was a high level of dialogue and sharing between bosses and subordinates. However, the majority of time would be spent focusing on and monitoring the more negative aspects. Leadership teams met regularly to share information about their people and develop shared points of view about succession plans, people with high potential etc. These meetings, while effective, were also somewhat negative in their focus.

The creation of Diageo provided the opportunity to introduce a new way of thinking about this and implement a different culture and values. The Gallup and Corporate Leadership Council findings had been taken on board, and the focus shifted to designing a performance management process that reflected the emerging organisation's culture and values. This included a belief in releasing the potential of every employee, and that a high-quality global performance management system, consistently used by all and underpinned by great conversations, would be critical to achieving this goal.

Underpinning this was a philosophy that sustainable business performance comes from growing people's skills, capabilities and contributions. The aim was to create mutually fulfilling and enduring relationships between individual employees and the company by all managers partnering with employees to deliver business and personal growth. It was about encouraging great performance from individuals and the business through better, more regular conversations. It also required leaders to know their people, to focus them on the strategic priorities and to value them as individuals for their diverse and unique talents. Feedback we obtained from employees through surveys suggested that employees wanted a job that enriched their lives and that, to give their best, employees need to work for someone who inspired them. To create mutually fulfilling and enduring relationships between individual employees and the company, three elements must be present: inclusion (i.e. recognition of the unique contribution of each individual and their differences), partnership and respect for personal lives – with inspirational leadership underpinning and connecting all three. The process consisted of four elements:

1. Big hopes: What's important to me? What's important for Diageo?
2. Performance commitments: What am I going to deliver for the business this year? What behaviour/capabilities will be important?
3. Partnership commitments: What will I do to make sure I achieve my performance and future development goals? And what will my manager do to support me?
4. Career conversation: My aspirations and possible next steps.

All four elements require conversations that flow into and inform the next step. In parallel, a coaching capability programme was implemented across the entire organisation – this was called 'high performance coaching'. All managers and employees went through the programme as a way of embedding a coaching culture across the organisation.

Coaching conversations became focused on strengths and development actions around maximising strengths. Our belief was that to focus on weaknesses rather than strengths was to expend our energies on what was not working, rather than getting full benefits from what was going well. We also believed that conversations focusing on failure would lead, over time, to an unconscious air of disempowerment. Focusing on what we do right would lead to high self-esteem, true freedom to succeed and the reality of everyone being able to release their full potential.

High performance coaching has now been complemented by a further programme called 'breakthrough performance coaching', which focuses on the identification of breakthrough performance opportunities.

Using this process, as well as the coaching capability development, enabled us to embed a strengths-based focus across the organisation, and in our view unlock many opportunities for breakthrough performance.

Alex Linley, a psychologist who is an author and international speaker on strengths and positive psychology, has written, co-written and edited more than 80 research papers and a number of books on the subject.

He highlights recent research on positive psychology that shows the potential benefits of using your strengths. He summarises these by indicating that people who use their strengths more are happier; are more confident; have higher levels of self-esteem; have higher levels of energy and vitality; experience less stress; are more resilient; are more likely to achieve their goals; perform better at work; are more engaged at work; and are more effective at developing themselves and growing as individuals. He points out that when people are asked how they would rate themselves on any number of positive characteristics, almost everyone rates themselves as being above average – despite the fact that patently this can't be true: some of us must be below average, by definition. What it does indicate though, is that we all want to be better than average – average isn't good enough. He highlights five fundamentals of the strengths approach:

1. A focus on what is right, what is working and what is strong.
2. Strengths are part of our human nature, therefore every person in the world has strengths and deserves respect for their strengths.
3. Our areas of greatest potential are in the areas of our greatest strengths.
4. We succeed by fixing our weaknesses only when we are also making the most of our strengths.
5. Using our strengths is the smallest thing we can do to make the biggest difference.

Linley recognises that this focus on strengths can be counterintuitive, because we all have an inherent negativity bias, which we carry with us from our evolutionary past. He maintains that much of this focus is wasted and leaves us with a significant opportunity cost – the cost of failing to pay attention to, identify and build what works. He encourages us to catch ourselves when we slip into focusing on the negative, to take off 'the critical, evaluative spectacles that we tend to wear'.

Analysing your best self

Having looked at some of the thinking and research and some illustrative cases, we can now look at a practical tool that can be used by leaders to help diagnose, understand and leverage strengths.

The Reflective Best Self Exercise™ was developed at the University of Michigan Ross School of Business' Center for Positive Organizations and has been found to be very useful in helping us identify our strengths – the very things that make it possible for us to have a positive, even extraordinary, impact on others. The Reflected Best Self Exercise™ has been used by participants on the Leadership Programme for a number of years now, providing them with powerful and valuable current feedback about how people experience them when they are at their best. Using this best-self feedback process can help you capture positive information about your talents and highest capabilities, and help you to uncover the strengths and positive attributes that are perceived by others.

Here's how it works. First, identify 10 to 20 people you know well. These might be colleagues, friends, family members, customers or anyone who has had extended contact with you. It is important to gather input from a variety of sources, not just work-related, in order to help you develop a much broader and richer understanding of yourself as experienced by others. You ask each of them to write three short anecdotes about you in response to a question about how, in their eyes, they have observed you at your very best. While it may feel uncomfortable initially asking for this kind of feedback, it is worthwhile, because the power and impact of the feedback you will receive is significant, sometimes humbling and will influence your self-confidence, as well as possibly identifying some areas of strengths you may not be aware of. It will also help you put in place a plan to ensure that you are using your strengths and being at your best as often as possible.

You can construct a simple and personalised feedback request form to send to people, which might include examples of what you are looking for from them. Here is an example:

Example

As part of my leadership development I am doing some work to help me understand who I am and what I do when I am at my best. I am asking people who know me well to provide me with three examples of when I was at my best in their eyes. I would like to invite you to help me with this exercise.

This will require you to think about your interactions with me to identify those incidents or behaviours when I was at my very best in your eyes and the behaviours you saw me demonstrate.

Please give three examples of these times in writing. I am including some examples of what a story might look like below, as a guide only:

Examples (as a guide only):

- 1.** One of the ways you add value and make important contributions is:

The capacity to persist in the face of adversity.

For example, I think of the time that:

We were past our deadline on a major report. Frank resigned and we were left short-handed. Instead of getting discouraged, you became more focused than I have ever seen anyone get. I think you went 48 hours without sleep. I was amazed that you could produce such a quality product under those conditions.

- 2.** One of the ways you add value and make important contributions is:

Helping others to focus on global issues.

For example, I think of the time that:

We were working on the strategic plan. You introduced information on trends in the European market. None of us had seen this information or considered the non-US implications. You kept pushing us to think in global terms.

The stories and examples identify your unique strengths and talents as seen through others' eyes. They will be universally positive in nature. Read them and look for commonalities across the responses. Create themes where you find a commonality and link examples to the themes. You may find it useful to use a table like this:

Commonality/theme	Example given	My interpretation
1. Creative	1. Finding new solutions for old problems.	My ideas tend to be bold, creative and innovative.
	2. Guided the company transformation.	I tend to bring a new vision to the old.
2.		
3.		
Etc		

Taken together, these examples illustrate not just a catalogue of your competences, but a living, breathing portrait of the positive impact you have on others and your surroundings. These help you identify strategies for capitalising on your strengths. By using your strengths, you are able to create a constructive experience for others as well as a positive experience for yourself. The additional benefit of this process is that it strengthens relationships with the feedback-givers. You can then summarise the key themes from this and write a 'best self' description or 'portrait'. Write a few paragraphs describing yourself when you are at your best, capturing the insights and themes you have identified from your feedback responses.

You might now be thinking, 'How can this be used to enhance the quality of my work and life? How might I incorporate my best self into my current job, relationships and future career plans? Which situations will increase my competitive advantage? Can those situations also help me grow and develop? How do I manage my limitations?' One step you can take to start answering these is to consider your best self 'enablers' and 'blockers' – the things that either helped or hindered your ability to be at your best. They can be personal, including the attitudes, beliefs and behaviours that affect your ability to leverage your best self in a given context, or situational, i.e. any contextual factors like organisational standards, systems and practices that promote or inhibit you leveraging your best self. Think about these enablers or blockers and see if they reveal any insight, then make a list of what you think they are under the headings of Enablers and Blockers.

Using these insights and also considering your personal goals and areas where you think you need to develop further, you can establish a personal development agenda and action plan for how you can work towards the positive vision of yourself you have identified. What can you do to improve the conditions or relationships that enable you to be your best? How can you work around or lessen the blockers you identified? List the concrete steps you want to take: in the next one to two years what actions will you take to enact your best self both at work and outside of work? Writing your action plan may be difficult, but you now have a better sense of the strengths that support your best self and can embark on the journey to bring your best self to light.

Acknowledgement:

For further information on the Reflected Best Self Exercise™ and other related tools, refer to the Center for Positive Organizations at the Ross School of Business, University of Michigan website: <https://positiveorgs.bus.umich.edu/tools/>

'To attain a good life, we must strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us' Aristotle

Final thoughts

Do we really know what our strengths are? If you think about it carefully, you can probably spot the things that you really look forward to doing; the things that make you feel like the 'real you' – fully alive, fully engaged and fully immersed in the activity. Some of us don't need to think about them – we just know – but others might have to think a little more carefully about them. For all of us though, when we do find the strengths that make us feel this way, we take an important step towards being more productive and fulfilling. Both Linley and Goffee & Jones (2006) talk about 'being yourself – better' or 'being yourself – more – with skill'. We should accept the notion of getting rid of the blockers that interfere with us accepting ourselves for the best that we can be and be open to the potential of our own growth and development – to find our 'spikes' and make the most of them.

Do we know the strengths of our colleagues and team members at work? Alex Linley encourages us to do 'strengthspotting' as we go about our daily activities – spotting the strengths in ourselves and others.

The telltale signs of a strength can include: a real sense of energy and engagement when using the strength; losing all sense of time because one is so engrossed in the activity; rapidly learning new information, activities or approaches related to the strength; a repeated pattern of successful performance when using the strength; exemplary levels of performance; and feeling a yearning to use the strength.

Do we ensure that as leaders we create the conditions that enable others to succeed? Do we provide the context to enable them to perform? Do we build alignment and foster outstanding teamwork? Do we really know our people and do we invest time in their growth? Do we value and model great people management? Do we make the most of the diversity that they bring? I always found it useful when thinking about the people who worked for me to ask myself if I knew what the individual 'genius' of each of them was – their distinctive capabilities and strengths – and also whether I was leveraging their 'genius' as a leader. It was a good way of challenging whether I was living up to my own standards of leadership and releasing the potential of every one of my team.

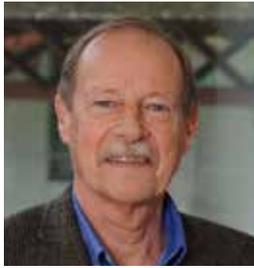
The final word goes to Kim Cameron (2008), who suggests that positive leaders can enable extraordinary performance by fostering the following: a positive work climate – where positive emotions predominate over negative emotions in the workplace; positive relationships – which serve as enablers of positively deviant outcomes; positive communication – when affirmative and supportive language replaces negative and critical language; and positive meaning – when people feel that they are pursuing a profound purpose or work that is personally important.

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Graham also runs his own independent coaching practice, which focuses on individual and leadership development, building on his many years of experience coaching senior leaders in the corporate environment. He has a BA Hons in Industrial & Organisational Psychology and is a Graduate Member (MBPsS) of the British Psychological Society (BPS).

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