

# Workplace Well-being

The case for  
positive leadership



By Louisa Jewell and Shannon Polly

**E**ighty-eight thousand. That is the average number of hours a person will work in their lifetime. That is a long time to spend working for a bad boss.

Life has become complex and this places higher demands on our psychological resources than were required in simpler times. We need leaders who can uplift us, not knock us down.

Typically what we find is that employees are more concerned with their own well-being at work, while employers are more interested in worker productivity. Now, through the efforts of psychologists and researchers that study positive psychology, we have a growing body of empirical research – the “proof” we

have been craving for years – that improving employee well-being at work also translates into better business performance.

Positive psychology is the scientific study of well-being and what makes individuals and communities flourish. Martin Seligman, the founding father of positive psychology, outlined four pillars that contribute to well-being: positive emotion, meaning, engagement, and positive relationships. Focus on improving any one of these areas in your life and you are most likely to be happier and more fulfilled.

A positive leader is one who advocates for employee well-being while at the same time striving for higher levels of perfor-

mance. Leaders who focus on improving the psychological resources of their people will find that they perform better, bounce back from adversity quicker, and achieve higher level goals. If you are a coach, consultant or leader who wants to promote positive and productive work environments, here are some ways you can leverage the findings in positive psychology to improve employee engagement and performance.

## Promote Positivity

There is a growing body of evidence that positive emotions experienced at work have the capacity to transform organizations. While we often think that positive emotions are just fleeting and momen-

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tary, Dr. Barbara Fredrickson, psychologist and leading researcher on positive emotions, discovered that positive emotions actually build psychological, physical and social resources ultimately improving our resilience and happiness over time.

Working with Marcial Losada, Fredrickson determined that a ratio of positive to negative emotions at or above 3:1 will characterize individuals in flourishing mental health. Losada also researched how positivity ratios affect team performance. Observations of more than 60 different business teams revealed that high performing teams had unusually high positivity ratios, at about 5:1. The research also found that positive emotions are not just an end state in themselves, but also a means of creating expansive emotional spaces with the ability to strengthen the quality of social connections among team members.

### Increase Meaning

National surveys at Whydidiyougo.com asked thousands of people across Canada why they love their jobs. One thing was clear: People who felt their work was important and meaningful reported higher levels of job satisfaction.

Work does not necessarily have to be virtuous; it just needs to be meaningful for the person who is performing the task. Chris Peterson, a leading researcher in positive psychology, conducted three studies of adults with respect to good character at work, love and play and asked respondents to think of their most fulfilling job. What people most valued was a job that was congruent with their own strengths. Thus when we find ourselves in authentic alignment we are free to operate at our best and morale is high.

### Focus on Strengths

Gallup surveyed thousands of business units and hundreds of thousands of employees and correlated responses to

performance indicators such as employee turnover, customer service ratings, productivity and profitability. The surveys found that there is a direct correlation between employee engagement and business performance. Further, multiple year engagement studies showed that the differences in employee engagement amounted to differences in dollar value productivity of more than \$1,000 per person, which

could mean millions for some large organizations.

One way leaders can improve engagement is by focusing on employee strengths. Organizations that scored higher than average on the statement, “At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day” have a 44 percent higher probability of success on customer loyalty and employee retention, and a 38 percent higher probability of success on productivity measures.

### Build Positive Relationships

According to Jane Dutton and Emily Heaphy of the Ross School of Management, when people have high quality connections at work, they share information and knowledge more freely, which accelerates learning and development for higher team productivity, ultimately strengthening organizational performance.

Daniel Goleman of *Emotional Intelligence* fame also studied various leadership styles and found that the ‘Coaching’ style of leadership contributed to improved organizational climate. Why? Because ‘Coaching’ leaders who focus on the personal development of their employees are in constant dialogue with their people, which improves every component of climate. If there is one thing we have learned from studying positive psychology, it is that relationships matter.

The empirical evidence is clear: organizations that improve employee well-being will reap the financial rewards of improved performance. Coaches have an opportunity to have a significant impact on well-being in the workplace because goals such as creating positive work environments, improving engagement and meaning for people and building positive relationships have been on the coaching agenda for decades. Hopefully the growing empirical evidence being delivered by positive psychology researchers will be enough to convince the leaders at the top that being positive pays. •