

THE POSITIVE REVOLUTION IN CONSULTING

Observations from the conference "The Power of Positive Change", held in Orlando, Florida, from September 16 to 19, 2007

By Ruth Seliger

"In your job, do you mainly get to do what you are actually best at?"

"What issue do you address most frequently when talking to your employees:

- their shortcomings?
- their strengths?"

In the US, the Gallup Institute asks thousands of executives and employees questions like these on a regular basis. The results have barely changed through the course of the years:

Employee review sessions mainly focus on problems and weaknesses:

- In 36% of all review sessions, the employees' weaknesses are addressed
- 40% indicate "not talking about such things at all"
- only 24% of those interviewed address employees' and executives' strengths.

This result is all the more astonishing considering that the motto "strengthen strengths and weaken weaknesses" has not only been the order of the day for years, but because extensive research is available on positive approaches, which is testimony to the fact that working on strengths, developing them and taking them seriously is much more likely to lead to success than working on weaknesses.

The Gallup Institute has found, in a survey of almost 200,000 employees working in approximately 8,000 teams in 36 different companies, that the entire team and the entire organization are demonstrably most likely to succeed if employees have the opportunity to capitalize on their strengths.

Despite findings like these, problems, weaknesses and shortcomings seem not to have lost any of their appeal. We still strive to "work" on our weaknesses, to "eliminate" them, hence giving them a lot of attention.

The Positive Revolution Started Long Ago

These past years, an extensive field of research and practical application dealing with the correlation between strengths, satisfaction and the success of people and organizations has been evolving, mainly in the US. These schools of thought have now evolved into a positive development, but had, until today, worked in the same areas without any interaction. At the conference in Orlando, these communities had their first public meeting.

■ Positive Psychology

One of the pioneers of the positive development is Martin E.P. Seligman, a clinical psychologist and professor at the University of Pennsylvania. An internationally renowned expert in depression research, Martin Seligman decided, after 20 years of studying depression and anxiety and publishing his reference work, "Learned Helplessness", to focus his research activities on the question of human happiness and satisfaction.

Using the same scientific methodology he formerly employed to study the dark sides of the human soul, their circumstances of emergence and their manifestations, Martin E.P. Seligman has, for almost ten years, been studying the bright sides of the human soul, their manifestations and circumstances of emergence: happiness. He published his

findings in his best-selling book "Authentic Happiness", which has been translated into 20 languages.

His findings have proven that people showing positive emotions (optimism, joy, satisfaction with life) are clearly more successful in their professional lives, more satisfied in their personal lives, have a longer and a healthier life and show better intellectual performance than people showing negative emotions.

Martin P.E. Seligman has proven that happiness can be measured and that it can be cultivated. Physiologically, positive emotions can be measured on people's face (the perception area of the eyes) or by looking at brain activity. Happy people also behave differently than unhappy people: their social involvement and their altruism are above average. Increased social activity leads to more happiness.

Happiness does not only refer to isolated moments of happiness or other positive emotions, but to a lifelong attitude and a state of mind. All studies conducted by Martin E.P. Seligmann are long-term studies covering all phases of life.

Martin Seligmann defines happiness and life satisfaction on three conceptual levels:

- Positive emotions: the ability to approach life with optimism, trust, appreciation and joy.
- Commitment: the willingness to use one's own strengths for the benefit of others.
- Meaningful life: refers to feeling part of something that you believe is larger than you are.

As a psychologist, Martin Seligman focuses on individuals. Other schools of thought of the positive development study organizations, leadership and the interaction between positive personal factors and organizational factors.

■ **Appreciative Inquiry (AI)**

AI was developed 20 years ago by David Cooperrider, a professor at the Case Western University in Cleveland, Ohio, Diana Whitney and other organizational researchers and management consultants. Appreciate Inquiry has been applied in consulting and in organizations for a long time (see also our Train Mail 1/2007: "How does an organization become a happy organization?")

AI is the philosophy and methodology of highly resource and solution oriented positive change management. As a philosophy, AI relies on the systemic-constructivist assumption that living systems, especially organizations, grow in the direction of what they persistently ask questions about.

The questions that precede all processes of change and which provide a direction to the process are thus the pivotal point of AI: when asking questions about resources, potentials and skills, we will end up discovering them and using them for the process of change.

Every AI process of change starts with questions, or, more precisely, with an interview. These questions address actual positive experiences and especially positive stories lived in every organization, which provide a lot of insight into successes and resources.

AI has mainly led to the development of four tools for positive change management:

- Variations of a resource-oriented **interviewing technique**, on the basis of which interview guidelines for different subjects and organizations are compiled. These appreciative inquiry interviews can be conducted in very different ways: as one-on-one interviews during large events or workshops, as an interviewing method for self-study and diagnosis of organizations, etc. The crucial point about this is that these interviews incite people in organizations to enter into dialogue.
- The tool of **storytelling** is all about systematically collecting stories that are told in organizations. This helps bring stories about success, highlights, achievements and strengths into the collective consciousness. At the same time, whenever stories are told collectively, new stories begin to unfold in the organization in question.

- AI has developed a special **process model** for the methodology of processes of change. It is a five-step cycle: 1. defining the focus of change or the objective of the process of change, 2. discovering the resources and strengths available in the organization for this process, 3. dreaming about a collective and strong vision of the future, 4. designing a new organizational model and, finally, 5. delivering concrete steps and measures to make this vision a reality. This procedure applies to all methods, whether it is one-on-one interviews, small workshops or large conferences.
- To achieve major processes of change, a **methodology** developed specifically **for large groups** comes into play: the AI Summit. It allows up to several hundred people to participate in the process and to contribute to the process of change. The tools used at AI Summits are AI interviews, storytelling and the process model. AI Summits emphasize the fact that processes of change always involve the entire system.

Relying on these three tools, AI pursues the three main intentions of interventions:

1. Accentuating strengths and resources, making them perceivable and readily available
2. Interconnecting strengths to allow the development of a new "chemistry of strengths", paving the way for positive change
3. Expanding strengths, skills and potential and broadening them even beyond the system in question.

Most recent AI developments are a result of the last mentioned intervention goal. Some years ago, David Cooperrider started working in the field of politics and ethics and founded an organization that studies companies, counsels them and tries to change them in light of the question if and to what extent they, as powerful players in public life, contribute to well-being on this planet.

■ **Strengths-Based Management**

In 2002, the Gallup Institute published research findings in the Journal of Applied Psychology proving what everyone had surmised: committed employees are more successful, profitable, customer-oriented, trustworthy and more loyal than less committed employees.

The question that followed from these findings was the following: how can we make employees be more committed? The Gallup Institute provided four answers to this question:

1. Make your employees be responsible for the results they obtain.
2. Teach your employees to identify their strengths, to accentuate them and to expand them.
3. Make all your reviewing and remuneration systems contingent on the identification, strengthening and expansion of your employees' strengths.
4. Define and develop all positions in a way to allow employees to make the maximum use of their strengths.

These ideas and findings are the underlying concept of Strengths-Based Management.

Gallup has collected a large amount of data that was compiled to become a very special tool: the Clifton Strengths Finder. This tool specifies 34 strengths that are indicative of success for organizations and employees and that can be used as a benchmark tool by all organizations to review their own strengths profile.

Marcus Buckingham is one of the best-known Gallup authors. Thanks to his numerous books, he has made the concept of strengths-based management internationally known. The objective and intention of Strengths-Based Management is creating strengths-based and strengths-oriented organizations with a positive corporate culture - not for moral or

ethical reasons, but because it has been proven to make organizations more successful, efficient and profitable.

■ **Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS)**

The Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan is home to POS, an academic discipline. One of its leading representatives is Kim Cameron. POS studies extraordinary performance within organizations and the question how managers can make their organizations become more efficient and effective.

POS has two large areas of research and activity:

1. On the one hand, the positive attitude of employees and its effects and performance on productivity is studied
2. On the other hand, positive phenomena in organizations, such as positive deviance and unique highlights and achievements as well as their interrelations are analyzed: how do these phenomena originate?

This is how POS links questions of employee satisfaction to appreciative leadership, morals or organizational innovation and creativity and studies its interrelation from the perspective of organizational efficiency and success.

POS is similar to the other positive approaches introduced above in that it is based on the assumption that positive attitudes can be studied empirically and that their effects on organizations can be proven.

POS partially relies on Martin Seligman's Positive Psychology to describe personal strengths and virtues. But POS also looks for benchmarks to define positive organizations as a factor that facilitates successful work: which standards, values, structures etc. do organizations need to have in order to provide the environment that will enable strengths in individuals and accentuate professional excellence?

Just like other studies about Positive Change, POS has unequivocally established a correlation between personal satisfaction and positive results obtained in organizations.

Kim Cameron, for example, has observed that communication at successful organizations is clearly more positive than at others: less negative feedback, less discouraging remarks, less conflict.

When measuring the efficiency of organizations, Kim Cameron recommends no longer measuring the difference between "actual" and "target" values (which is a negative deviance), but instead measuring the range between a standard situation or a situation of average success and outstandingly positive deviance within an organization. In doing so, efficiency can be both measured and the potential to increase efficiency can be defined.

The Orlando Conference: Coming Together for the First Time

The four academic disciplines described above had coexisted and evolved without interaction for many years. Despite personal contacts between certain representatives, there had never had a joint public appearance. The Orlando conference was thus a historical opportunity for a first public dialogue about Positive Change.

David Cooperrider was the initiator of this first and one-time event. He organized a conference that provided the right setting for the leading experts in Positive Change to describe common grounds and differences.

More than 500 participants from more than 30 countries attended this extraordinary event.

David Cooperrider, Martin Seligman and Marcus Buckingham were the main speakers and presented their approaches to positive change within organizations and in the world.

While they did work out some differences between their approaches, it became apparent that they shared the following belief: focusing on sources of energy, on sources of strength and on those things that make the world a little better.

Thanks to numerous workshops - I had the honor of presenting one of them - and interesting input provided by people working in research and its practical application, this conference was not only a dialogue between the different academic disciplines, but also a dialogue between people working in different regional and theoretical fields who share the conviction that a paradigm shift is not only required in systemic consulting, but also in the general understanding of leadership and management.

The conference was defined by a powerful collective enthusiasm, which inspired all of the participants.

This first public meeting of three out of four of the major representatives of Positive Change will certainly be the beginning of a new development that will fundamentally change the way we provide consulting services and the way leadership is understood within organizations. We still have a long way to go because the main focus still lies on problems, deficiencies, shortcomings and weaknesses.

The Common Ground of the Four "Positive Communities"

Now that the four communities have interacted, there are indications of what might change in the future:

■ Focusing on strengths, resources and potential

This is the most evident common ground shared by the four communities. At first sight, the change in perspective addressed here might seem very straightforward, even obvious. However, having applied Appreciative Inquiry for a long time, I know how difficult it is for most people to do without the negative prism they have gotten used to. Problems and deficiencies are incredibly appealing and take up a lot of energy. Problems and deficiencies have a voice that constantly calls for "repair" and "rectification". Very often, this voice is louder than the voice addressing strengths and skills we all have within us.

■ Positive change is more than mere "problem solving"

We know from systemic consulting that long-term change always means changing the fundamental patterns of a system. That is nothing new.

But Positive Change can and wants to go beyond a "mere" shift in patterns. Positive Change takes the entire system to the next level. It maximizes a system's potential and in doing so, makes organizations progress in their development. A new kind of power arises within organizations thanks to the permanent focus on strengths, enabling organizations to take yet another giant leap and opening up unexpected possibilities. By employing Positive Change, organizations not only do things differently, but also take the

entire organization to the next level.

■ **Addressing the aspect of "life" in living systems**

As a systemic consultant, I am very well aware of the rigor of systemic thinking, its reticence about ethics, morals and issues like energy. Even though rigor, structured thinking, order and complexity are major characteristics of systemic thinking, the theory of living system is, after all, missing something that gives life to these systems. This aspect is now (once again) becoming the focus of attention.

Issues like energy, lively stories, joy and appreciation have now found their way into research, consulting and management. They are being regarded as decisive factors for success and being studied and confirmed as such.

■ **Ethics**

Awareness of one's own responsibility for a collective whole, experiencing meaning as being an integral part of that whole, commitment to others - these are some of the new virtues that are also being scientifically proven to be decisive both for a happy life and for successful organizations.

Therefore, a shift is taking place, away from the concept of a materialistic, number-oriented perspective to a value-based perspective.

This is not surprising considering that there had been development in this direction these past years, manifesting itself in CRS (Corporate Social Responsibility), among others. Many examples, including the concept of "Zweite Bank", testify to the fact that it can pay off economically to create a value-oriented organization.

■ **Happiness is valuable**

According to Martin Seligman, happiness is not only measurable and "achievable", but it is also a valuable resource that increases any organization's success. Wherever "flow" experiences are part of the job, there is no need to worry about employee loyalty. Disloyalty, demotivation, burnout, information disclosed to individuals outside the company or high employee turnover lead to significant financial damage. Happy employees save their organizations a lot of money.

■ **Scientific research**

The entire field of positive research and practical application is always at risk of being dismissed as esoteric, impractical and unrealistic. Issues like happiness, joy and strengths barely fit into today's mechanistic world.

This is where scientific research on happiness, efficiency and strength-based management contributes greatly to providing a solid theoretical base for these movements and trends. Positive Change is not a movement that arose "on a whim" or even brought developed by a religious sect.

After having been carefully guarded, the boundaries between "work" and "private life", "person" and "organization" and "rational" and "emotional" are now beginning to blur.

Summing it up...

Positive Change is not a new therapy and not a new management trend either. Positive Change is a shift in perspective, away from the old, mechanistic and linear concept of being able to "repair" people and organizations as long as one can identify their "faults". In this sense, this movement is part of the systemic approach, especially of resource-oriented consulting.

However, the Positive Change movement, positive management, leadership and organizations go even beyond this approach. Ethics, liveliness and energy have now come to play an important role within living systems.

This makes both consulting and leading more joyful.

I believe in personally contributing to the expansion of this "positive community", to networking and thus making this community a more effective one.

For additional information, we recommend the following web sites:

- To access information about the conference and its speakers, please visit the following web site: <http://www.2007aiconference.com/>.
- **Happiness Studies**
<http://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/>
- **Appreciative Inquiry**
<http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/>
<http://www.aiconsulting.org/> or
<http://www.taosinstitute.net/>
- **Business as an Agent of World Benefit**
<http://worldbenefit.case.edu/>
- **Strengths-based Management** <http://www.gallup.com/consulting/61/Strengths-Development.aspx>
- **Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS)** <http://www.bus.umich.edu/Positive/>

As a matter of course, you will always find additional practical examples, activities and projects on our web site at www.train.at.