

Research Application Summary

**Positive work approaches and their influence on institutional high performance and staff wellbeing: A review**

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**Abstract**

The traditional management theory and training approaches that focused on business failure and labor ineptness have swamped up management excellence today. This warped approach to personnel management in organizations, which is reactive and focused on problem fixing only led to a sharp focus on weaknesses of the management models prevalent in African institutions. This has ineptly sacrificed a focus on opportunities existing within the work force. Maximizing workforce opportunities and benefits depends on how strategically the center of management excellence focuses and utilizes positive work approaches. Positive organizational approaches was founded on the understanding that all goal directed systems work by themselves towards achieving growth and development in an organization. Accordingly, positive work psychology acknowledges that a focus on the negative is the result of empirical finding that accounts for significantly larger variance in the functioning of individuals as well as social systems and organizations. With the pace at which the work environment is rapidly evolving, today's workforce requires that organizations adopt approaches that respond rapidly and competitively to issues at hand. This paper reviews and shares the author's perspective on the above issues.

Key words: management models, organisation management, personnel management

**Résumé**

La théorie traditionnelle de la gestion et les approches de formation axées sur l'échec des entreprises et l'inattention du travail ont accablé l'excellence en gestion aujourd'hui. Cette approche déformée de la gestion du personnel au sein des organisations, qui est réactive et axée sur la résolution des problèmes, a seulement conduit à mettre l'accent sur les faiblesses des modèles de gestion qui prévalent dans les institutions africaines. Cela a inutilement sacrifié un accent sur les possibilités existantes au sein des ressources humaines. La maximisation des possibilités et des avantages des ressources humaines dépend de la façon dont le centre d'excellence en gestion se concentre stratégiquement et utilise des approches positives du travail. Les approches organisationnelles positives ont été fondées sur la compréhension que tous les systèmes dirigés par objectif travaillent par eux-mêmes pour atteindre la croissance et le développement dans une organisation. Par conséquent, la psychologie positive du travail reconnaît qu'un accent sur le négatif est le résultat d'une découverte empirique qui explique une variation significativement plus grande dans le fonctionnement des individus ainsi que des systèmes sociaux et des

organisations. Avec le rythme auquel l'environnement du travail évolue rapidement, les ressources humaines d'aujourd'hui exigent que les organisations adoptent des approches qui répondent rapidement et de manière concurrentielle aux questions en jeu. Cet article examine et partage la perspective de l'autrice sur les questions ci-dessus.

Mots clés: les modèles de gestion, la gestion du personnel, la gestion de l'organisation

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## **Introduction**

The growing interest in the study of positive workplace approaches and behaviours has been attributed at least in part to the increasing awareness of positive organizational scholarships (POS). The POS focuses on the dynamics that lead to developing human strength, producing resilience and restoration, fostering vitality, and cultivating extraordinary individuals, units and organizations (Cameron *et al.*, 2003). Positive organizational scholarship is based on the idea that comprehending to the ways to “enable human excellence in organizations will unlock potential, reveal possibilities, and facilitate a more positive course of human and organizational welfare” (Cameron *et al.*, 2003). This explains why most African institutes and organizations today are adopting proactive interventions in management in order to promote greater productivity and performance in organizations, by focusing on positives rather than negatives among employees as a strategy to improve performance (Baumeister *et al.* 2001). Utilizing these approaches follow a dynamic process, with identification of high performance experiences being the first entry point to their implementation and identifying a period of high performance within the organization. The assessment also focuses on teasing out the primary enablers of such an experience and how such a phenomenon can potentially be reproduced and sustained at various levels including; individual, organizational and at community level.

The work environment over the last two to three decades has consistently and rapidly evolved due to a globalization effect with labor movement across countries and organizations. This has been made easy and facilitated by advances in technologies and other factors including an increase in the number of women in the work force, among others. These transitions in the work place have led to workforce where psychosocial risks have increased in priority. There is a high need to keep employees happy, healthier and satisfied with their jobs as well as exploiting limited resources in organization for optimum productivity. However, getting these realized requires a sound understanding of positive work place approaches that can be deployed by organizations and how organizations can make them work for them rather than against them. These issues are reviewed in this paper.

## **Literature review**

Practicing communities have been interested in assessing human strengths for decades. School counsellors approach their work from a developmental perspective looking for the ways children successfully navigate transitions and effect changes in their lives. Some counselling psychologists subscribe to “hagiology” (Super, 1955), which emphasizes

“normalities even of abnormal persons, with locating and developing personal and social resources and adaptive tendencies so that the individual can be assisted in making more effective use of them.” Rehabilitation and health psychologists spotlight the resources needed to cope with physical changes, recover from illness, and find benefits in disability. Social workers, operating from a strengths perspective (Saleebey, 1996), value information about weakness and strength when making decisions about cases (Hwang and Cowger, 1982). The same approaches and types of tools used to make sense out of the presentation and experiences of mental illness can be used to highlight and measure potent elements of strengths.

Professionals in these practice communities have attested to the value of capitalizing on the strengths they have identified in their clients. For example, Wright and Fletcher (1982) noted that management often distort reality when they identify only problems without uncovering the potentials in employees. The focus of their study was to uncover clients’ external strengths as well as internal strengths. External strengths included resources such as family, social and co-workers’ networks, other significant influences such as community or church groups. The clients’ internal strengths included psychological factors such as motivation, coping, values, acceptance and cognitive resources. Indeed Saleebey (1996) concluded that everyone possess strengths that can be extracted to improve the quality of their lives and organizations productivity. Saleebey (1996) found out that all environments and employees contain resources therefore, organizations who engage in collaborative exploration with their employees can discover these strengths. Similarly De Jong and Miller (1995) suggested using solution-focused approach to uncover the strengths of clients in social practice.

There is today emerging evidence of the use of strengths-based approaches with children, young people and families. Indeed some studies have identified an association between personal strengths in young people and academic success, self-determination and life satisfaction (Park and Peterson, 2006). Early and Glenmaye (2000) found that the use of the strengths perspective in families not only helped the family identify resources for coping, but also helped them use existing strengths to sustain hope and a sense of purpose by setting and achieving goals in line with their personal aspirations, capabilities, and visions of a possible life. Similarly, MacLeod and Nelson (2000), in a review of 56 programmes, found evidence to support the view that an empowerment approach is critical in interventions for vulnerable families. A strengths perspective shows how the practitioner can work positively towards partnership, by building on what parents already possess. Seagram (1997) also found positive effects of solution-focused therapy undertaken by adolescents who had offended. Young people who had received therapy recorded significantly more optimism for the future, greater empathy and higher confidence in their ability to make changes in their lives. This highlights that eliciting and reinforcing a person’s belief in their ability to successfully achieve a goal is a useful component of change.

**Well-being.** Social scientists have devised many tools to tap people’s perceptions of

their existence—their subjective view of their life experiences. From this, two general meanings of well-being have evolved. Emotional wellbeing is the state of positive feelings (e.g., happiness) experienced and of perceptions (e.g., satisfaction) of one's life (Diener *et al.*, 1999). Psychological well-being research specifies dimensions of positive functioning and social well-being (Keyes, 1998), and this includes aspects such as conducive working environment, belonging, job security and safety, etc. Employee's well-being is a key factor in determining an organization's long-term effectiveness and many studies show a direct link between productivity levels and well-being of the workforce.

### **Positive work place approaches in modern times**

**Personnel selection and job fit.** In today's modern management approaches, Organizations and institutes are investing in getting the right people on board to stay with organizations. Focuses are shifting from fixing problems to promoting excellence, flourishing and strengths in employees (Seligman and Csíkszentmihályi, 2000). Organizations are benefiting from a number of research initiatives that were carried out in positive psychology, particularly with respect to strengths, job design, and work identity (directly related to personnel selection and company fit; Dutton *et al.*, 2008). These elements can be essential to minimizing rate of turnover in Organizations, which can be highly expensive to a company in terms of financial costs and loss of intellectual capital (cf., Mitchell *et al.*, 2001). Choosing the right people is obviously an integral part of having a successful company, and in the modern practices, several factors are being considered, including personality, complementarity of strengths and tapping of talents within the company to fit with the company's structure, strategy, goals, and mission.

**Employees' engagement and empowerment in organizations.** The linkages between job satisfaction, self-efficacy, high performance and employees engagement is inseparable in most organizations today (Nakamura and Csikszentmihályi, 2000). This is also reducing rate of poor performances (Fredrickson, 2001). Engaging employee at work place is becoming one of the biggest competitive differentiators in business for purpose of talent mobility and research shows that building a highly engaged workforce takes combination of many things, each impacting people in different ways. And with the influx of younger workers and the proliferation of technology at work, the whole environment has to be more flexible and transparent. Some Organizational behavior literature shows that there is a greater likelihood that employees will engage in positive deviant behaviors once they are psychologically empowered in the working environment (Spreitzer and Doneson, 2005). Empowerment enables employees to participate in decision making, helping them to break out of stagnant mindsets to take a risk and try something new' (Spreitzer and Doneson, 2005).

Organizational behavior researchers point out that the pervasive influence of norms provides a means of control over what people say and do' (Spreitzer and Doneson, 2005). And, companies making their employees empowered have led to much financial and psychological gain: supervisors who reported higher levels of empowerment were seen by their subordinates as more innovative, upward influencing and inspirational (Spreitzer and Doneson, 2005).

**Mentoring and coaching of employees.** One of the primary ways of developing “home-grown” talent, providing on-the job-training, and integrating individuals into the company, is through mentoring and coaching, an approach most organizations are adopting and investing in heavily today. In addition, mentoring and coaching has been used to increase diversity in firms by helping employees capitalize on their unique strengths and insights to thrive within the company to typical mentoring functions like protection, and informal training (Kram, 1985; Ragins, 2007). Models of mentoring programs are being developed by most organizations and institutions today, as described by Davis and Nakamura (2010). This has created positive work environment, build teams, and enabled people to bring their talents and capacities to bear within the organization. With increasing demands in the workplace, and a greater need for knowledge work, innovation, and creativity, organizations will need to find ways to enable their employees to do and be their best in order to contribute to high performance of organizations.

**Employees’ motivation and wellbeing.** Bartol and Martin (1998) considers motivation as a powerful tool that reinforces behavior and triggers the tendency to continue. In other words, motivation is an internal drive to satisfy an unsatisfied need and to achieve a certain goal. Employee motivation has been shown to influence to a significant degree the organizational high performance and their own wellbeing. As Kalimullah (2010) suggested, a motivated employee has his/her goals aligned with those of the organization and directs his/her efforts in that direction, continuously looking for ways to improve their work.

Motivation takes both monetary and non-monetary forms (Sara *et al.*, 2004). Financial rewards have the capacity to maintain and motivate individuals towards higher performance, as individual may use the money to satisfy their needs. Therefore, pay has significant impact in establishing employees’ diligence and commitment. Studies have also shown that not only pay can boost productivity and improve performance in the long term significantly (Whitley, 2002). Moreover, focusing only on non-monetary aspect might deteriorate employees’ attitude, as they might pursue only financial gains.

Non-financial factors that have a positive influence on motivation include rewards (bonuses, promotionns), social recognition, performance feedbacks, sense of belonging, staff involvement, trust and confidence in employees by management, etc. which are being embraced by organizations and in turn influence positively on the performance of the employees. In the current highly competitive environment, motivated and qualified workforce is essential for any company that wants to improve on its performance and employee’s wellbeing. Therefore, no wonder, companies irrespective of their sizes and markets segments are strive to retain the best employees, by understanding their motivating factors, acknowledging their important role and influence on organizational effectiveness

## **Conclusion**

It is no secret that the 21st Century workplace is a different world. Developments in

technology have paved the way for a number of changes, including globalization, the rise of the knowledge worker, uncertainty, and the creation of significantly more niches. In order to keep up with such a fast paced system, organizations need to rely more heavily on creativity, innovation, and capitalize on the unique intellectual and personal strengths of their employees. In turn, this requires an organizational structure that allows for more cross-talk and flexibility, task designs that take advantage of human capital, and an organizational strategy that gives the company a unique, competitive edge and requires creative solutions and the ability to either move with the tide or create a new current.

In all cases, this requires strategic decisions that shape the goals and mission of the company, which will in turn affect the company's structure, human capital needs, management practices, etc (Donaldson, 1996; Rousseau, 1997). To do this, organizations need to germinate the right capacities in the form of people who can develop a company's competitive edge, strategic plan through its creative, motivation and satisfied workforce.

This paper presents a learning point to ponder on by institutions and their management specifically to appreciate and take advantage of the existing opportunities in employees and fully utilize the limited existing resources. There is also need to appreciate and exploit positivity in the functioning of organizations including the self-reinforcing nature of positivity. Authentic leadership roles is key in maintaining and adopting these approaches in organizations in order to strive and achieve high performance targets and goals.

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