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the magazine of professional coaching

Positive Psychology

What the scientific study of happiness has to offer the coaching world, and vice versa

Integrating Positive Psychology into Your Coaching

The Power & Pitfalls of Positive Thinking

Positive Leadership in the Workplace



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Columns



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Features



Robert Biswas-Diener, Dr. Philos., CMC, is widely known as the 'Indiana Jones' of Positive Psychology because his research on strengths and happiness have taken him to such far-flung destinations as India, Kenya, Greenland and Israel. Robert leverages his expertise in positive psychology to create innovative trainings and coaching interventions for clients. He is the author of *Positive Psychology Coaching* (2007) and *Happiness* (2008), and the editor of a series of positive psychology workbooks for coaches and their clients.
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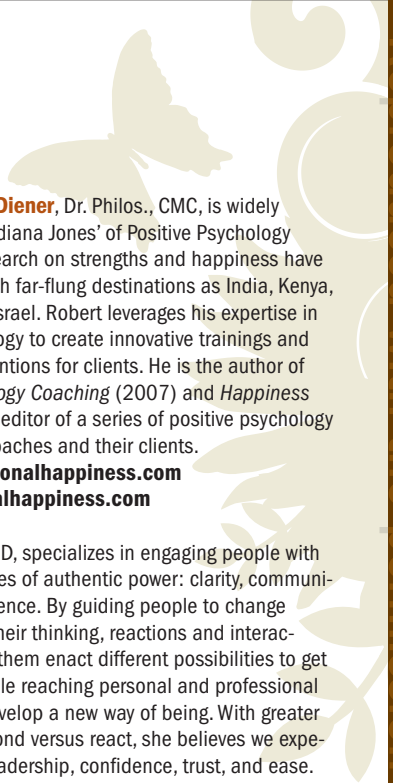
Laurie Dunn, PhD, specializes in engaging people with their three sources of authentic power: clarity, communication, and presence. By guiding people to change "blindspots" in their thinking, reactions and interactions, she helps them enact different possibilities to get results. Thus, while reaching personal and professional goals, people develop a new way of being. With greater freedom to respond versus react, she believes we experience natural leadership, confidence, trust, and ease. She enjoys bringing positive psychology, neuroscience, optimal health and motivation, universal leadership principles, and martial arts experience to her coaching.
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By Anne Lueneburger, PhD

Building On Strength

The impact of strength-based coaching on career and business success

In 1998 Martin Seligman became president of the American Psychology Association. After decades of traditional psychology focusing on fixing problems and repairing weaknesses, Seligman called for practitioners to focus on human strengths and virtues, and on “what goes right in life” (positive psychology).

In essence, positive psychologists research two key questions:

- Why do some of us thrive and live a life beyond ‘good enough’, despite the challenges that are part of life’s journey?
- What can we learn from their resilience to improve our own well-being?

Positive psychology is flourishing: the number of articles published in the field has increased more than tenfold over the past decade. Tal Ben-Shahar’s course in positive psychology is the largest class at Harvard, and when I attended the world’s first congress on Positive Psychology in Philadelphia this June, there were more than 1,700 attendees from over 50 nations.

The science of positive psychology provides coaching

“Positive psychology is the scientific backbone for strength-based coaching.”

with a theoretical foundation that clearly sets it apart from pop psychology (with its self-help books and empty promises on “how to become happy in three easy steps”). Positive psychology’s empirically validated interventions add to the depth and breadth of a coach’s portfolio, allowing us to promote constructive changes within our clients.

Strength-based executive coaching for success

Six months ago Sarah, an HR director with a major consumer goods firm, got in touch with me. She was desper-



ate to find an executive coach for Tim, a senior employee who had recently come into the company from overseas and was struggling to adapt to his new culture and work environment. Management wanted him operational as soon as possible.

She called me because she had heard good things from one of my clients about my strength-based coaching approach. As with many of my executive clients, however, there were three questions that she needed answered before deciding to take things forward:

1. What exactly can a strength-based coach do for us?

Positive psychology is the scientific backbone for strength-based coaching. Strengths are our natural talents: the interests we develop and the skills and knowledge we acquire. In short, they are what we are best at and what we most enjoy doing. Using one’s core competencies on a consistent basis allows us to tap into our full potential, driving peak performance and success.

Yet, be it societal conventions (where traditional focus is on overcoming weaknesses), a lack of trained leadership in organizations, or unfamiliarity with the strength-based model and its benefits, only about 30 percent of employees in the U.S. have the chance to do what they are best at (and enjoy doing most) on a regular basis.

Executive coaching produces a range of both tangible and intangible benefits, ranging from reduced learning curves to improved organizational culture and individual job satisfaction, to metrics such as cost reduction and increased productivity. In addition to these, the specific expertise of the strength-based coach adds particular value by clarifying misconceptions about the strength-

based model. A popular misconception is that capitalizing on assets implies ignoring weaknesses. A trained coach will work on identifying and developing strengths and on realizing and managing deficits.

2. What evidence is there that strength-based coaching works?

The return on an investment in strength-based coaching is significant. Studies increasingly produce tangible business outcomes in addition to less quantifiable evidence. These include:

INCREASED JOB SATISFACTION. Based on an extensive survey by Gallup in 2007, organizations with a “strength-based” leadership model see their employees six times more engaged than in “problem-solving-focused” organizations. Engaged employees in turn experience greater job satisfaction and are less inclined to leave the organization. Retaining talented employees has a direct impact on

“Using one’s core competencies on a consistent basis allows us to tap into our full potential.”

your bottom line – the American Management Association puts the cost of losing a senior executive at between a year and 18 months’ salary.

HIGHER INCOME LEVELS. Longitudinal studies show that magnifying “what’s best” boosts self-confidence levels, which in turn leads to higher income levels. On an organizational level, engaged employees positively influence productivity, leading to higher sales and revenues.

INNOVATION. The strength-based model fosters creativity where competencies are concentrated, resulting in more innovation. Individuals are allowed to build on their core strengths rather than using all their energy towards being “well-rounded,” a concept proven to result in run-of-the-mill performance.

RESILIENCE. Knowing and nurturing strengths develops resilience: an essential resource, particularly in the face of an ever-changing business environment. Mental and physical well-being results in positive emotions, and also generates health and success.

POSITIVE LEADERSHIP. Managers who are trained in the strength-based approach become more effective leaders, as their optimistic explanatory style – born out of the resilience described above – motivates their subordinates and prepares them to better cope with uncertainty and change. In fact, it has been argued that a positive presentation has greater impact on employee performance than the actual message content itself. Positive leadership serves both as a motivator and role model, driving on-the-job performance and improving overall organizational culture.

Optimistic managers are well placed to design effective teams. They acknowledge that it is not the individual’s needs that must be “well-rounded” – rather the talents of each team member need to be employed so that the overall team becomes a balanced and powerful mix, leading to peak performance.

Given the return on investment, it is no surprise that a growing number of successful global corporations have bought into the strength-based model. Training managers to spot

and develop strengths in their employees has become mandatory. Companies have created dedicated HR positions – such as “Global Head of Talent Management” at Starbucks, or “Director, Employee Capability and Empowerment” at Microsoft – and they offer external coaching for employees to hone their core strengths. An added bonus is that word gets around: organizations that foster excellence become magnets for talent.

3. How do positive psychology interventions fit into the business world?

Discussing positive psychology, the CEO of a global services provider recently declared: “The contributions to bottom-line are clear, but the language is too emotional for my taste; not grounded in business.”

Many strength-based interventions that fuel positive change are empirically rooted and validated in the science of positive psychology. However, organizations and their employees often struggle with parts of its terminology. Exercises such as ‘gratitude visit’, ‘three blessings’ and even the concept of ‘happiness’ are simply too removed from the everyday business language of ‘job enrichment’, ‘net present value’ or ‘ROI’.

Designing a strength-based portfolio for the business executive has therefore necessitated a change in the language, without altering the meaning. In my portfolio you will find ‘reciprocity’ instead of ‘kindness’, ‘appreciation’ instead of ‘gratitude’, ‘trust’ instead of ‘forgiveness’ and ‘capitalizing on success’ rather than ‘celebrating positive events,’ thus relating positive psychology directly to the business world.

Pearls of Learning

Returning to where we began ... Sarah entrusted me with her assignment and two days later I had my first productive meeting with Tim to begin the process. Several factors led to Sarah believing in me and in the strength-based program:

Firstly, I believe in the strength-based model. Aside from the empirical evidence, I have over 13 years of human resources experience in the business world: I have witnessed how powerful understanding and building on strengths can be.

Secondly, I anticipate and welcome critical questions. As a strength-based executive coach I am part of a (growing) minority. It is only natural that organizations and individuals exercise due diligence before hiring a new coach. In fact, it would concern me if this wasn't the case, as a definite 'buy-in' is crucial to progress during the coaching alliance.

Finally, I enjoy being an integral part of this process that puts my clients on top of their game. It is personally rewarding and energizing to come from a positive angle

"Most people think they know what they are good at. They are usually wrong ... And yet, a person can only perform from strength."

– Peter Drucker



and to look at the glass half full rather than half empty.

And so, back to Tim: Sarah's colleagues on the executive committee have now seen Tim in action and are capitalizing on his considerable strengths. Applying the strength-based model allowed them to focus on the abilities he demonstrated, rather than his potential weaknesses.

My coaching with Tim has also progressed well, and I can only concur with Sarah's assertion that the strength-based model has really brought out the best in him. It has ensured the best outcomes for Tim and for Sarah's business, and – if it were needed – is further proof of the considerable benefits of positive psychology.

By tapping into strengths rather than mitigating weaknesses, we can all achieve high performance and a career beyond 'good enough'. •

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