

**LIVING BY THE GOLDEN RULE:  
POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY EXERCISES  
FOR THE WORKPLACE**

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Summary: This working paper describes thirteen exercises based on positive psychology theory and research designed to improve relationships among people in the workplace and make them more appreciative and respectful of one another.

We all want to think of ourselves as good people, and most of us probably believe that we are. But goodness resides not in what we endorse so much as in what we do, and it can be exceedingly difficult to act in a moral way toward others when harried or hassled, or when people do not recognize, appreciate, or reciprocate our efforts.

It can also be difficult to do good when we do not know exactly what to do, and here the new field of positive psychology is helpful. For the past six years, we have devised and tested simple exercises that embody and convey research-based lessons about how to live the psychologically good life. If enacted on an ongoing basis—and this qualification is critical—these exercises lead people to be happier and less depressed, with consequent success in a variety of life's domains.

The single best predictor of individual well-being is good relationships with other people. Good social relationships trump income, status, educational attainment, and the like, and this is true whether one is at work or at home. Accordingly, many of the positive psychology exercises we have created entail how we treat others. How can we all just get along and thereby reap the benefits?

What determines how well we get along with other people is clear, and more than fifty years of research by psychologists confirms common sense notions that people get along—like each other and become friends—to the degree that they see one another as competent and pleasant individuals with shared goals and purposes. In the workplace, this means according fellow workers autonomy, treating them with respect, and valuing what they do. This means seeing them as individuals and not as interchangeable parts. This means being polite, supportive, and kind.

Many of these lessons can be subsumed under the golden rule: “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you” (Matthew 7:12), which summarizes the teachings of Jesus as well as Confucius and the Buddha. Indeed, it is impossible to find a religion or philosophical tradition that does not endorse the golden rule.

How does one live by the golden rule, especially in the workplace? What follow are exercises in which people are instructed to do simple things on an ongoing basis. There is no doubt that the

sincere enactment of these exercises will make a person happier—more content, more fulfilled, more at peace. There is also good reason to think that at least in the long run, these exercises will have similar effects on their targets. And the ultimate goal is to make a workplace a better one, not just in a bottom-line sense but more importantly in a moral sense, and this goal too is reachable.

Details of rolling these out need to be provided in accordance with the realities of a given workplace, but possibilities include their introduction in (i) a series of brief workshops and discussion of them in follow-up meetings; (ii) self-paced Internet modules and chat-board discussion; and (iii) written pamphlets with telephone or e-mail follow-up.

Follow-up is critical because our experience with exercises like these is that they all “work” in the short run but are sometimes not self-sustaining. In particular, other people may not cooperate in obvious ways, and trouble-shooting is therefore crucial to sustain motivation. Also, follow-up allows ongoing evaluation—formal or informal—of the program.

Here are some of the exercises that are possible:

- **Responding in active-constructive ways** – When someone tells us about good news, how do we respond? We may be disinterested, or we may caution them about the possible cloud around the silver lining. Instead, in active-constructing responding, we do exactly like that: take an interest, be supportive, and share in the good feelings. There is time later for caution and skepticism, but research suggests that positive comments need to outnumber negative comments by three to one for relationships to flourish.
- **Learning things about one’s coworkers** – Part of treating people as individuals is to know about them as individuals, and this exercise asks that someone find out a personal detail every day about someone with whom they work: names of their children’s pets, their favorite hobbies, books they have recently read, and so on. As these details accumulate, so too will appreciation of the person as an individual.
- **Letting someone else shine** – Many projects and endeavors at work entail working with others, and sometimes praise ensues. This exercise asks individuals to let someone else shine in these cases: make the final presentation and take the credit.
- **Being a good teammate** – A more general exercise in the workplace is to reflect on the coworkers with whom it is most fulfilling to work, and try to be like them. Volunteer for unpopular tasks. Contribute positively in meetings, as opposed to rolling one’s eyes, criticizing, and being negative. Help others do their jobs..
- **Opening doors for others** – No one succeeds simply on their own, no matter what rugged individualists may believe, and in this exercise, people are asked to make opportunities for success available for their coworkers. For instance, a coworker can be nominated for an award or recommended for a promotion. And if a door can be opened, and the coworker can go through it, one should not make a big deal out of it in the “look what I did for you” sense.
- **Secret good deed** – Much as we like credit for our kind acts, the real test of the goodness of a deed is whether it is undertaken with no thought of reward or recognition. So, in this exercise, the person is instructed to do a good deed on the sly every day for a coworker. Empty a trashcan. Leave an apple on a desk. Pass on

anonymous praise to a coworker's supervisor. Resolve a problem raised in a phone call instead of taking a message for someone else. Buddhists believe that secret good deeds create humility in us all and cultivate karmic good will, because the lesson eventually learned is that others may well be helping us and that we may not even know how.

- **Knowing one's own strengths** – Success at work entails getting to do what one does well. The first step is knowing one's own strengths, and in this exercise, individuals take available surveys to identify their strengths of character, their talents, and their values. Then they are encouraged to use these strengths on a daily basis at work.
- **Knowing the strengths of one's coworkers** – In this exercise, individuals are helped to identify what their coworkers do particularly well and to think through how this knowledge can be used to good effect in working with these people.
- **Giving the gift of time** – The only nonrenewable resource we have is our own time, and when we give it to someone else, we are accordingly giving a priceless gift. In this exercise, individuals are asked to give freely of their time to another person at work at least once a week, without glancing at one's wristwatch or being resentful.
- **Writing a gratitude/appreciation letter** – Is there someone who impresses you at work to whom you have never expressed how you feel? In this exercise, individuals are asked to write a note or card to such a person expressing gratitude or appreciation. The letter should be specific and if possible hand-delivered to the person who reads in the presence of the writer. If the recipient is someone with whom the person does not always get along, all the better.
- **Letting go of grudges** – This is a private exercise in which individuals are asked to think of coworkers they resent or dislike, either because of past misdeeds, simple jealousy, or for no particular reason at all. If individuals can do it sincerely, they are asked to let go of the grudge they hold, appreciating that they are doing themselves a favor. There is no need at all to tell the annoying that a page has been turned. Individuals should simply act and feel differently.
- **Being zestful** – Research shows not surprisingly that people filled with zest and enthusiasm love their work, regardless of what it may be. Furthermore, research suggests that fitness and health set the stage for zest. In this exercise, individuals are encouraged—indeed, given permission—to attend to their physical well-being at work: no skipped or hurried lunches, no junk food, no break-free days, no taking the elevator rather than the stairs. Strategies for doing these healthy activities are spelled out.
- **Recrafting one's job** – This is the most difficult exercise because it requires the cooperation of one's supervisor and indeed the entire workplace. But given what people have learned about how to make themselves and others more civil, happier, and more productive, how can the demands and requirements of one's job be recrafted or rearranged so that people have better days at work?