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**Advocating for a Positive Workplace**

- Home
- Join EAPA
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- Visit EAP Career Central
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- Search CEAP Directory
- Search Member Directory
- About Employee Assistance
- About EAPA
- EAPA Members Only
- CEAP Certification / Credentialing
- EAPA Learning Center
- Annual World EAP Conference
- Journal of Employee Assistance
- e-MemberNews
- Advertising / Marketing Opportunities
- Contact Us
- Log Out

[Home](#) > [Journal of Employee Assistance](#) > [Read a back issue](#) > [Vol 39 no.1 - 1st Quarter 2009](#) > [Advocating for a Positive Workplace](#)

**Advocating for a Positive Workplace**

EAPs can play a leadership role in helping employers promote employee well-being and identify and enhance workers' existing strengths.

by Chet Taranowski, Ph.D., CEAP

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With the gradual retirement of the Baby Boom generation and the resulting struggle to find new talent, improving the quality of workplace life will become an important competitive consideration. Nurturing a positive organizational climate that promotes workers' well-being is crucial to engaging employees.

Few companies are fully aware of the importance and productivity rewards of a positive culture, and fewer still know that there are tested options for improving the emotional climate of the workplace. Developing a positive workplace culture can be addressed via two strategies. First, managers must make a serious attempt to minimize excessive stress, which interferes with employee performance and contaminates the quality of life outside the office. Second, efforts must also be made to develop a work climate that promotes well-being and supports the use of employee strengths. This article will examine the second strategy.

**Implementing Positive Psychology**

How can organizations move beyond remediation of negative factors and promote an environment where employees excel? Positive organizational behavior (POB) is a new field of inquiry addressing this question. POB is defined as "the study and application of positively oriented human resource strengths and psychological capacities that can be measured, developed, and effectively managed for performance improvement in today's workplace" (Luthans 2002). This research has arisen from the positive psychology (PP) movement, the mission of which is to encourage the study of both individual and collective strengths (Peterson and Seligman 2004).

The study of PP and POB offers several new opportunities for EAP workplace interventions. If implemented, these empirically supported strategies can reduce workplace stress and ultimately decrease behavioral health problems. More broadly, the interventions have the potential to increase the well-being of all workers.

For example, interventions might include encouraging managers to pay closer attention to the meaning and rewards employees derive from their work and to identifying each employee's unique talents and matching them to related work assignments (Buckingham and Clifton 2001). Other empirically supported tactics include instilling greater hope in individuals and teams, encouraging the practice of realistic optimism, promoting resiliency, and helping employees increase their sense of self-efficacy (Luthans, Avolio, and Youssef 2006).

**Finding Meaning in Work**

Several important issues are relevant when addressing the concept of meaning in work. Many employees fail to perceive their workplaces as contributing any real value to society aside from providing them with financial sustenance (Csikszentmihalyi 2004). Further, the American workplace has rarely viewed helping employees improve their well-being as an important goal.

Neglecting societal responsibilities and ignoring workers' quality of life are two critical opportunities for improving an organization's human climate. If a workplace can connect its mission and goals to greater societal causes and to its employees' personal development, it is likely to reap increased employee productivity and engagement.

Unfortunately, most American companies miss opportunities for facilitating greater employee well-being. For example, it is common for companies to neglect helping workers understand how their efforts contribute to the organization's greater mission. Furthermore, many job demands are set at high levels, thus obscuring the value of work tasks (Csikszentmihalyi 2004). Taking time to clarify this simple link between individual effort and corporate success can add greater meaning to an employee's day-to-day assignments.

Employers also miss opportunities to help workers take greater ownership of their jobs, by failing to solicit or accept employees' input into how tasks are performed. Although efficiency studies have made great contributions to the process of streamlining work, there is also a place for individual creativity. Encouraging a sense of employee job ownership will heighten workers' engagement and productivity.

Finally, employers miss opportunities to develop workers because they fail to assign them tasks that can help employees grow both personally and professionally. Understanding each employee's unique goals can help managers be strategic in assigning tasks consistent with individual career targets.



#### Creating Opportunities for Flow

Flow is a concept originally conceived by a psychologist named Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. According to this concept, humans continually become more complex organisms; we seek intellectual and emotional growth so as to be able to respond to a greater variety of challenges. There are both personal and work-based opportunities for maximizing learning and complexity, and when these are introduced at just the right level of difficulty, an individual will experience them as meaningful and even peak moments.

This rewarding experience has been termed "flow." Csikszentmihalyi determined that flow has several critical components, including clear goals for a task, immediate feedback about performance, and an optimal balance between opportunity and capacity. The overall process leads to deeper concentration and an enjoyable sense of loss-of-self. Although flow experiences are challenging, individuals typically rate them as more gratifying than typical leisure time pursuits or other pleasures (Csikszentmihalyi 2004).

Flow can be experienced at work, either by searching for complexity in a host of increasingly difficult job tasks or by just trying to do the same assignment more effectively. Having a supportive environment, being able to control some aspects of the work, and manageably increasing the difficulty of the challenge are all secrets to flow.

Unfortunately, few jobs have clear goals and fewer still meaningfully involve workers in setting the goals. In addition, contemporary jobs seldom provide adequate, frequent, and constructive feedback. Since workers cannot monitor outcomes well, they find it difficult to recognize whether they are increasing their mastery of assigned tasks.

#### Enabling Workers to Flourish

Positive approaches to the workplace have become possible due in part to the publication of *Character Strengths and Virtues* by Martin Seligman and Christopher Peterson (2004) and *Now, Discover Your Strengths* by Marcus Buckingham and Donald Clifton (2001). Although each book presents similar concepts, *Discover Your Strengths* has a sharper workplace focus. The ideas it suggests are simple: recognize that people have different strengths, find out what workers do well, and facilitate the use of their unique talents as often as possible.

Although maximizing strengths may seem like an obvious strategy, consider that employee talents are rarely identified or considered relevant in assigning tasks. Until recently, in fact, we lacked a vocabulary to precisely describe human strengths. Whereas workplace training (when it is even present) has tended to focus on remediating weaknesses, a strengths-based model teaches workers strategies to maximize their existing talents.

The first step in a strengths-based approach is identifying personal assets. An assessment can be made through observation or simply by asking employees what they do best or enjoy doing. Psychometric tests are also available to identify "signature strengths" (e.g., see Seligman 2002).

What value does this simple strategy of maximizing strengths have for EAPs in their work with individual clients? By helping employees recognize talents they may never have identified, EAPs can encourage them to use their strengths in novel ways. Positive psychology research suggests that the simple practice of finding new ways to use character strengths will lead to a greater sense of subjective well-being (Seligman, Steen, Park, and Petersen 2005).

#### Developing Psychological Capital

One of the most interesting books to come out of POB research is *Psychological Capital* by Luthans, Youssef, and Avolio (2003). The book summarizes empirical studies on organizational environments where positive human characteristics are enabled. The studies show that careful attention to key factors creates conditions likely to optimize both employee performance and personal well-being. The human strengths to be maximized include the following:

1. Self-efficacy: Fashioning a workplace where employees feel confident about their abilities.
2. Optimism: Creating an environment where workers make positive attributions about the impact of their own and their team's efforts.
3. Hope: Building an expectation for success. Hope enables employees to move toward goals and motivates them to formulate workable strategies for reaching these goals.
4. Resiliency: Helping workers respond flexibly in the face of setbacks. This characteristic will empower them to "bounce back" to attain success.

Research examining self-efficacy has demonstrated a strong relationship between an employee's confidence in his/her skills and superior job performance. Managers can employ many strategies to create a culture that nurtures self-efficacy. One option, mentioned earlier, is simply allowing workers to do what they do best. Employees will succeed both because their jobs have been correctly matched with their talents and because of the greater confidence they have when using well-honed skills.

There is also a rich literature on encouraging realistic optimism. Optimism is an explanatory style that attributes positive events to a person or team and his/their skill sets. An optimist would attribute the successes to effort rather than luck.

Why does optimism work? Since optimists expect the best outcome, they tend to be more future-focused. Optimistic workers persevere in the face of obstacles. Seligman's self-help book on this topic, *Learned*



Optimism (2006), is an excellent starting point for understanding optimism.

Interesting research has also been conducted on the value of hope. The most influential author on this topic is a psychologist named C. Rick Snyder (see Snyder, Rand, and Sigmon 2005). Snyder saw hope as comprising two components: the "agency" or willpower to achieve a goal and the ability to form "pathways" or strategies to attain that goal. In other words, to feel the emotion of hope, an individual must have both the faith that the goal is attainable and the ability to generate plans to reach that goal.

How does a manager facilitate hope? Modeling hope to employees is one strategy. If a worker lacks the faith to achieve, encouraging him or her to establish goals and generate strategies to reach the goals also facilitates hope.

Resilience describes a worker's ability to renew his or her quest to achieve a desired outcome after a setback. How can a manager influence resiliency in workers? Luthans, Youssef, and Avolio (2006) suggest several strategies: helping workers feel positive about their work organization, building a sense of trust, treating workers with fairness and respect, and helping employees derive a broader sense of meaning from their labor. Resilience may be facilitated by linking workplace goals to personal goals. Individuals will be persistent in moving toward a goal if they believe a task extends them to a higher personal or social purpose.

The implementation of POB strategies requires great attention to the development of workers. Unfortunately, although the chief function of supervisors is managing relationships, few managers have received support for teaching interpersonal skills. Supervisors themselves may lack abilities and consequently do a poor job of modeling important strengths.

To develop the psychological capital of their organizations, managers will require greater assistance in implementing coaching strategies for human development. A progressive EAP ought to already be teaching constructive confrontation and business communication skills. Raising the level of interpersonal skills in managers can fit nicely with EAP services and significantly increase the importance of EAPs.

#### A Leadership Opportunity for EAPs

Historically, employee assistance has contributed to improving office culture by addressing the influences of employee alcoholism and behavioral health problems. Beyond providing these individual interventions, progressive EAPs have advocated for more broad-based strategies—for example, helping managers be more effective supervisors by providing training and consultation on topics such as clear and respectful communication.

For EAPs to have a greater impact, we must broaden our vision. By advocating for a more civil, meaningful, and, consequently, more successful workplace, we have an opportunity for leadership in promoting the concept of a positive workplace.

Of course, it would be no more possible to eliminate all stress and frustration from work than it would be to eliminate all pain or disease from human life. However, companies that begin to address the challenge of improving workers' well-being will be better able to attract talent. Consider, for example, that workplaces can no longer guarantee lifetime job security. If an employer is forthright in admitting this truth, it can compensate by offering increased opportunities for well-being and professional growth. Workers, believing their skills are being developed in a hospitable environment, can feel confident they will be able to compete in the ever-shifting job market of the future.

By advocating for worker well-being, employee assistance professionals have the potential to greatly benefit all workers and take EAPs far beyond our essential work with "troubled employees" alone. By promoting a more positive workplace, we can potentially prevent stress that may trigger dysfunction in vulnerable individuals. Better yet, we can further lead our client organizations toward the goal of becoming more psychologically habitable environments.

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[Top of Page](#)