

## RESEARCH BRIEFS

### Research Edge

*This feature is designed to summarize current research in exciting new areas with an eye toward highlighting key implications for managerial practice.*

*Dean McFarlin, Research Briefs Editor*

### **Is Positiveness in Organizations Always Desirable?**

*Timothy A. Judge and Remus Ilies*

The earliest writings of philosophers pondered the virtues of positive thinking and the pursuit of happiness. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argued that happiness is the highest good humans can achieve and that the use of reason and rationality was essential to its achievement. Though these arguments have certainly been challenged by later philosophers, the pursuit of happiness and fundamental belief in its virtue have been central features of Western civilization for ages.

Surprisingly, psychologists and management scholars have been slow to embrace positiveness as a topic, particularly as it relates to employees in organizations. Sigmund Freud, among others, cast a long shadow over psychological thinking in his dark view of the inner meaning of human nature. Recently, however, the situation has begun to change. First, as we will review shortly, scholars have started to study personal traits that seem to have positive implications. Second, psychologists Ed Diener, Martin Seligman, and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi have initiated a movement to study "positive psychology." This movement has held conferences, funded research, and awarded prizes in the domain of positive psychology. Finally, social psychologists have increasingly focused on what might be labeled positive interpersonal processes. For instance, research has found that people enhance their own feelings of well-being by sharing positive experiences with others and, as a consequence, treat others more positively because they themselves are in a positive mood.<sup>1</sup>

Beyond its role in philosophy and psychology, another lens through which to focus on positiveness is organizational life. Does positiveness matter to those who manage or lead people in organi-

zations? And if so, what implications does emphasizing positiveness have for employees in terms of their happiness and general well-being? In this article, we discuss the implications of positiveness for organizations, managers, and employees. We begin that process by describing how positiveness is exemplified through positive traits and positive states (i.e., feelings).

#### Positive Traits

One way to view positiveness is through a trait approach. In other words, are there individual differences in positiveness (i.e., do people differ in how positive they are)? If so, what are the characteristics or traits that separate people in terms of positiveness? As it turns out, people do indeed differ in positiveness, just as people differ in how tall they are or in their hair color. In fact, thanks to studies of identical twins raised apart, we now know that roughly 50 per cent of the variability in personality is inherited. What that means is that about half of who we are (in terms of personality) is genetically hard-wired. Of course, these genes come from our parents. And one trait that has been extensively studied in twin research is emotional stability. Often labeled by its negative pole, neuroticism, emotional stability reflects our ability to exhibit emotional control, be resilient, and display optimism. Like other traits, about half of the differences between people in emotional stability are due to genetic differences. Consequently, one way in which people clearly differ is the extent to which they are positive, affectively stable, and unworried.

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Closely related to emotional stability is a trait called positive self-concept. Individuals with a positive self-concept possess emotional stability, believe in their self-worth (high self-esteem), see themselves as generally capable of accomplishing things (high generalized self-efficacy), and feel they are in control of their lives (internal locus of control). As you might suspect, these people make good employees. Indeed, in our research we have

found that employees who have a positive self-concept tend to perform better, are more satisfied with their jobs, and are more motivated in their work. In short, it seems that positiveness does vary between people. Moreover, people who are positive are also happier and perform better on the job.

### Positive States

That said, there is more to positiveness than just trait-based differences between people. To more fully understand the implications of positiveness for employees and organizations, we must also examine the feelings experienced by people on a day-to-day basis. Clearly, positive feelings, such as positive moods and emotions, are influenced by personal characteristics and traits (i.e., positive people experience positive feelings more often than less positive people). Nevertheless, these feelings are also influenced by discrete events that happen at work, such as receiving performance feedback, succeeding at a challenging task, or achieving a difficult goal. In turn, positive moods and emotions have important implications for both organizational outcomes and for employees' happiness, health, and general well-being. Needless to say, these implications have bottom-line consequences and should, as a result, be of keen interest to management.

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When employees are in positive moods, they typically are more creative, more motivated to perform at a high level, and more helpful toward their co-workers. Positive feelings also lead to increased job satisfaction which, in turn, has positive influences on important organizational outcomes such as commitment to the firm and job performance. For service organizations, the feelings experienced by employees when they interact with the customers are especially important. In a nutshell, employees transmit their moods and emotions to customers via a mechanism called emotional contagion.<sup>2</sup> And when employees are transmitting positive emotions, it tends to elevate the mood of customers, leading to more satisfied customers who are also more likely to return for service.

Feelings experienced on the job are also important for the happiness and well-being of employ-

ees. Though psychological well-being has been typically assessed by asking people how satisfied are they with their lives, daily or momentary emotional experiences and reactions on the job should also be considered when assessing well-being. Furthermore, emotional experiences have a more direct impact on employee health outcomes than do general evaluations of their jobs. In contrast, these general evaluations have a more direct impact on employees' decisions than do daily or momentary emotional reactions experienced at work.<sup>3</sup> Employees who are often frustrated and angry at work, for example, are also more likely to experience stress on the job. This can lead to high blood pressure and other undesirable health outcomes. On the other hand, employees who have concluded that they are highly dissatisfied with their jobs are more likely to decide to leave the organization, rather than experience negative health consequences. Turning to the positive side, employees who frequently experience pleasant and energetic feelings at work should be better able to cope with health problems or other non-work pressures. And highly satisfied employees will often make decisions that reflect the positive view they have of their jobs (e.g., they may decide to take on bigger challenges and new responsibilities in their jobs).

Emotional experiences and evaluative satisfaction are, of course, related in that employees' feelings at work influence how they evaluate their jobs and their lives. The point here is that emotional experiences and their influences on happiness and well-being are not completely captured by employees' satisfaction with their jobs and lives. Consequently, we need to consider the emotional states experienced by employees at work as an important phenomenon.

### How Can Positiveness Be Cultivated in Organizations?

Given that individuals differ in their positiveness, one of the ways in which organizations can promote positiveness is to hire positive people. Obviously, this is already being done to some extent. Many consulting firms offer personality tests on which applicants respond to questions designed to assess their positive outlook. For example, consider the following items from the Core Self-Evaluations Scale:<sup>4</sup>

- I am confident I get the success I deserve in life.
- Sometimes I feel depressed. (r)
- When I try, I generally succeed.
- Sometimes when I fail I feel worthless. (r)

- I complete tasks successfully.
- Sometimes I do not feel in control of my work. (r)
- Overall, I am satisfied with myself.
- I am filled with doubts about my competence. (r)
- I determine what will happen in my life.
- I do not feel in control of my success in my career. (r)
- I am capable of coping with most of my problems.
- There are times when things look pretty bleak and hopeless to me. (r)

(Note: r = reverse scored)

Applicants who score highest on these questions can be selected into the organization. So, for instance, if we have ten finalists for two positions, and they are otherwise equally qualified for the job, we would select those individuals most likely to endorse the above items (scores are collapsed across all items).

According to research, the benefits of such a selection process are clear. Positive self-concept predicts job performance, motivation, and job satisfaction. Consequently, by implementing this selection process we are, in effect, selecting a happier, more productive workforce. This may be a good policy. However, there are some practical difficulties. First, the astute reader may wonder, "Why in the world would applicants respond truthfully to these items when they realize they are being selected based on their responses?" Indeed, research indicates that applicants can and do fake answers. But research also clearly indicates that faking may not be much of a problem. In short, when people do fake their answers, it doesn't seem to undermine the validity of the tests.

Why might this be the case? If faking is akin to presenting yourself in a socially desirable fashion (in this case, as a more positive person than you actually are), and doing so increases the odds of your being hired, then perhaps the tendency to present yourself more positively will continue once you are on the job. The point is that the same impression-management dynamic that causes people to "put on a happy face" in a job interview or when completing an employment test may continue to operate after people are hired. After all, applicants who are all smiles before being hired are unlikely to improve their chances of landing valuable work outcomes (e.g., pay raises, promotions) by suddenly turning into curmudgeons on the job.

As we have said, identifying the characteristics of positive people is one perspective that can be used to assess the importance of positiveness for

organizations. The other perspective focuses on employees' feelings at work. If the "positive people" perspective helps firms select happy and productive employees, then the "positive feelings" perspective helps managers identify what they can do to influence their employees' feelings on the job. So what can managers do to cultivate the experience of positive moods and emotions by their employees?

First, certain work characteristics and organizational climate factors tend to enable such positive experiences. Giving employees autonomy in performing their jobs and empowering them to make decisions should produce positive emotions such as interest, pride, joy, confidence, and enthusiasm (autonomy and empowerment would also decrease frustration and anger on the job). Matching employees with jobs should lead to positive feelings just as challenging work (when matched by employees' skills) should trigger peak experiences of interest, motivation, and joy (what Csikszentmihalyi calls flow).<sup>5</sup> Likewise, creating and maintaining an organizational culture that values employees should increase employees' emotional attachment to the firm. This should, in turn, foster positive feelings at work as well as increase the self-worth that employees derive from organizational membership.

Second, managers can influence the feelings experienced by employees at work by paying attention to the discrete events that trigger emotional reactions. As proposed by Affective Events Theory, events that happen at work have affective implications because they influence employees' moods and emotions.<sup>6</sup> For example, supervisors treating subordinates fairly, offering instrumental support for completing tasks, and providing praise and rewards for a job well done are all events that should induce positive feelings among employees. In our own research, we have found that positive performance feedback (telling people that their performance meets or exceeds desired goals) enhances motivation through the positive feelings generated by the feedback. This finding suggests that rather than focusing on sub-standard performance (i.e., giving negative feedback) and correcting improper behavior, managers would be better served by praising high performance. Perhaps the practice suggested by the adage "Catch them doing something good" not only makes employees feel good but is also good for business.

### The Negatives of Positiveness

"*Emotional Labor.*" Despite all the positives we have mentioned, research also suggests that re-

quiring employees to put on a happy face can be psychologically costly in terms of stress, burnout, and job dissatisfaction. The mortician, the airline ticket agent, the toll collector, and the store clerk all operate under "display rules" where they are asked to smile and be positive, even in the face of nastiness from customers. Clearly, organizations have a right to expect friendly behavior from their employees because it is good for business (who wouldn't prefer service with a smile rather than a snarl?). Yet an enlightened manager might weigh this organizational right against the possible cost to employees. Although snapping at customers is probably never a good idea, managers might teach employees how to express their emotions in constructive ways (e.g., politely telling a customer "no" in response to an unreasonable request, rather than barking at the customer or knuckling under). This is an emerging area of research, with its own set of problems and issues. Nevertheless, it does suggest that attempts to build a positive workforce may, surprisingly, take a toll on employees who are asked to conform to happy "display rules."

*The Limited Predictive Validity of Positive Traits.* On the one hand, traits reflecting a positive self-concept have validity in predicting performance, satisfaction, and other important work outcomes. On the other hand, it is hard to be incredibly enthusiastic about this finding since the validity coefficients in question are relatively small (i.e., around .20-.30). Indeed, as Schmitt recently commented, "The observed validity of personality measures, then and now, is quite low even though they can account for incrementally useful levels of variance in work-related criteria."<sup>7</sup> Although we are not yet ready to endorse Schmitt's "quite low" assessment, neither are the validities of personality measures "quite high." In essence, while selecting applicants on the basis of positive self-concept might enhance organizational effectiveness, it is hardly a panacea.

*Can Employees Be Too Positive?* The question here is whether by emphasizing positiveness, the firm risks creating a "Stepford Organization." The benefits as well as the costs of positiveness continue to be debated. In one camp are scholars who claim that positive thinking and even positive illusions are beneficial in the workplace. They argue that positive people, even those with a false positive self-concept, are better adjusted (happier) and more motivated on the job. In the other camp are researchers who contend that employees who have an unrealistically positive self-concept are viewed as exploitive (i.e., self-centered, manipulative) by their peers and actually have lower levels of well-being. In the workplace, if the price of getting a positive co-worker is paid in the coin of

selfishness and narcissism, it is one most co-workers would be unwilling to bear. Overall, the debate about whether the *illusion* of self-esteem is helpful at work continues, and some scholars have argued that self-esteem itself has few benefits and, in fact, that the pursuit of self-esteem is harmful.

We think the evidence is clear that self-esteem is positively but moderately related to various outcomes that most people view as important. People with high self-esteem tend to be more satisfied with their work and their lives and tend to perform better at their jobs. It is true that these relationships are not terribly strong, so we cannot say that self-esteem is a magic ingredient to life success. But by the same token, it is just as wrong to proclaim that self-esteem has no benefits.

As for the argument that the pursuit of self-esteem is harmful, Crocker and Park contend that when people seek to raise their levels of self-esteem, there are short-run benefits but long-term costs. The key to this argument is *how* people seek to raise their self-esteem. Generally speaking, people pursue self-esteem by attempting to "validate their abilities or qualities in the domains in which self-worth is invested."<sup>8</sup> Consequently, employees might pursue self-esteem by seeking to validate their self-worth through effective job performance. So what is wrong with that? Crocker and Park argue that to make self-esteem contingent in this way is costly in terms of: (1) loss of autonomy (people work because they feel they have to, rather than because they want to); (2) loss of relationships (people become focused on themselves at the expense of others); and (3) increased risk of depression (when people fail, it undermines their overall sense of self-worth). These arguments are controversial, and the evidence marshaled in support of them is often indirect and sketchy. However, they do raise an interesting perspective—whether society's pressures to be positive have, in a sense, created a monster that is manifested in the pursuit of self-esteem.

Consider narcissism. Narcissists are individuals who have a high opinion of themselves, are self-centered, are given to grandiose fantasies, and are interpersonally manipulative. One could scarcely think of a more biting insult than to label someone a narcissist, yet the advantages and disadvantages of narcissism continue to be debated. There is little dispute that narcissists engage in certain negative interpersonal behaviors when their self-concept is threatened, have a tendency to emphasize winning over relationships, are susceptible to self-serving bias (i.e., they make internal attributions for success and external attributions for failure), and are repelled by intimacy. Yet, at the same

time, it is far from clear that narcissists are unhappy. Indeed, a team of researchers recently conducted several studies showing that narcissists tend to be happier—largely because they have higher levels of self-esteem.<sup>9</sup> So whether narcissism is good or bad may depend on your perspective—good for the narcissist, bad for the people who are pawns on the narcissist's chessboard

### Benefits of Negative Thinking

Remember the retort, "I'm not cynical, I'm just realistic"? There actually is some evidence that depressed people are more realistic in estimating contingencies of actions. As a result, they are better able to judge the consequences of their actions.<sup>10</sup> Put another way, when making accurate decisions is important, being positive may actually be a disadvantage. On the other hand, depressed people also exhibit memory decay to a greater degree than non-depressed people, especially when they are put under mental strain. Consequently, we cannot say that depression represents a major cognitive advantage. Rather, it simply may be that people who are depressed or more negative in general are, in fact, sadder but wiser in making certain judgments.

### Some Final Thoughts

We began this article by noting that although the pursuit of happiness has preoccupied philosophers for centuries, only recently has it begun to attract the attention of psychologists and management scholars. In this essay, we have made a case that positiveness, as reflected in positive individual traits and positive feelings experienced at work, is important for employees' happiness and well-being, as well as for the organizations that they work for. Since positiveness, happiness, and organizational outcomes are interrelated, we believe that positiveness and happiness should preoccupy not only philosophers and psychologists, but also managers and organizational leaders. Positiveness can be cultivated by recruiting and selecting more positive people, by creating and maintaining organizational conditions that foster positive feelings, and by managing work events that have emotional influences on employees' feelings. But we must also caution about overemphasizing positiveness. Employees with an overly positive self-concept may negatively impact their peers. Likewise, negative feelings are not always a bad thing in organizations, particularly when it comes to making important decisions.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Langston, C. A. 1994. Capitalizing on and coping with daily-life events: Expressive responses to positive events. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 67(12): 1112–1125.

<sup>2</sup> Hatfield, E., Cacioppo, J., & Rapson, R. L. 1994. *Emotional contagion*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Kahneman, D. 2004. *Measuring well-being: Experience and evaluation*. Keynote address to the inaugural Gallup Leadership Institute summit on authentic leadership, Omaha, NE.

<sup>4</sup> Judge, T. A., et al. 2003. The Core Self-Evaluations Scale (CSES): Development of a measure. *Personnel Psychology*, 56(2): 303–331.

<sup>5</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, M. 2003. *Good business: Leadership, flow, and the making of meaning*. New York: Penguin.

<sup>6</sup> Weiss, H. M., & Cropanzano, R. 1996. Affective events theory: A theoretical discussion of the structure, causes, and consequences of affective experiences at work. In B. M. Staw & L. L. Cummings (Eds.), *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 18. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press: 1–74.

<sup>7</sup> Schmitt, N. 2004. Beyond the Big Five: Increases in understanding and practical utility. *Human Performance*, 17: 347–357.

<sup>8</sup> Crocker, J., & Park, L. E. 2004. The costly pursuit of self-esteem. *Psychological Bulletin*, 130(3): 392–414.

<sup>9</sup> Sedikides, C., et al. 2004. Are normal narcissists psychologically healthy? Self-esteem matters. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 87(9): 400–416.

<sup>10</sup> Alloy, L. B., & Abramson, L. Y. 1979. Judgment of contingency in depressed and nondepressed students: Sadder but wiser? *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 108(4): 441–485.



**Timothy A. Judge** is the Matherly-McKethan Eminent Scholar in Management in the College of Business, University of Florida. His Ph.D. is from the University of Illinois. Previously, he worked at Kohl's Department Stores and served on the faculties of the University of Iowa and Cornell University. His research interests are in the areas of personality and emotions, job attitudes, leadership, and careers. Contact: [timothy.judge@cba.ufl.edu](mailto:timothy.judge@cba.ufl.edu).



**Remus Ilies** is an assistant professor of management in the Eli Broad Graduate School of Business at Michigan State University. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Florida and holds an M.B.A. from Iowa State University. His research interests include individual differences, employee well-being, emotions, attitudes, leadership, and motivation. Contact: [ilies@msu.edu](mailto:ilies@msu.edu).

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