Editorial

Positive organizational behavior: Engaged employees in flourishing organizations

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Summary   This editorial introduces a special issue of the Journal of Organizational Behavior on *positive organizational behavior* (POB). POB emphasizes the need for more focused theory building, research, and effective application of positive traits, states, and behaviors of employees in organizations. We argue that in order to make a substantive contribution to organizational science, POB will need to show the added value of the positive over and above the negative. In addition, the emerging concept of employee engagement is briefly introduced. The papers in the special issue describe exciting positive organizational behavior studies that each tap into an interesting direction in which POB research might go. Copyright © 2008 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Introduction

More than ever before, managers would agree that employees make a critical difference when it comes to innovation, organizational performance, competitiveness, and thus ultimately business success. What can organizations do to attract and keep creative, dedicated, and thriving employees who make organizations flourish? Which working conditions inspire employees to be engaged, give their best, go the extra mile, and persist in the face of difficulties? Instead of traditional organizational structures that heavily rely on management control and economic principles of cost reduction, efficiency, and cash flow, the focus in modern organizations is on the management of *human capital*. Currently, organizations expect their employees to be proactive and show initiative, collaborate smoothly with others, take responsibility for their own professional development, and to be committed to high quality performance standards. Thus employees are needed who feel energetic and dedicated, and who are absorbed by their work. In other words, organizations need engaged workers.

This is illustrated by Ulrich (1997), who writes in his seminal book "Human Resources Champions": "Employee contribution becomes a critical business issue because in trying to produce

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more output with less employee input, companies have no choice but to try to *engage* not only the body but the mind and soul of every employee'' (p. 125). Obviously, this objective is not achieved with the prevailing four D's approach (damage, disease, disorder, and dysfunction) that focuses on preventing poor performance, low motivation, unwell-being, ill-health, and disengagement. Something more is needed—a radical shift, away from the four D's, and this is where *positive organizational behavior* (POB) comes in. This special issue includes five POB articles that focus on a wide range of positive behaviors of engaged employees in flourishing organizations.

Positive Organizational Behavior and Scholarship

The field of POB has emerged from the recently proposed positive psychology approach. Psychology has been criticized as primarily dedicated to addressing mental illness rather than mental ''wellness''—the four D's approach. This prevailing negative bias of psychology is illustrated by the fact that the amount of publications on negative states outnumbers that on positive states by a ratio of 14:1 (Myers, 2000). The purpose of Positive Psychology ''. . .is to begin to catalyze a change in the focus of psychology from pre-occupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building positive qualities'' (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5). Thus, positive psychology studies the strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive.

Like positive psychology, POB does not proclaim to represent some new discovery of the importance of positivity, but rather emphasizes the need for more focused theory building, research, and effective application of positive traits, states, and behaviors of employees in organizations (Luthans & Youssef, 2007). That a more positive approach is needed not only in psychology, but also in management and business is illustrated by Walsh, Weber, and Margolis (2003) who reported that in the business press over the last 17 years, compared to positive terms (e.g., compassion, virtue) negatively biased words (e.g., beat, win) have increased four-fold during the same period.

According to Luthans (2002), POB is interested in ''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'' (p. 59). Luthans has argued that inclusion criteria for POB are being theory and research based, measurable, developmental, and manageable for performance impact in the workplace. Wright (2003) counterbalanced this utilitarian and management-driven view by arguing that the mission of POB must also include the pursuit of employee happiness and health as viable goals *in themselves*. We would like to add that, as argued by Zwetsloot and Pot (2004), employee health and well-being is becoming a business value of strategic importance. For instance, instead of ''costs,'' occupational health and well-being measures are increasingly considered sound ''investments'' in employees who yield direct economic benefits to the company. Seen from this perspective, the organization-centered view of Luthans (2002) and the employee-centered view of Wright (2003) can be integrated into a positive business value model of employee health and well-being. An approach that has been labeled ''Integral Health Management'' (Zwetsloot & Pot, 2004) that constitutes a win–win situation for both the organization and its employees.

Typically, POB studies individual positive psychological conditions and human resource strengths that are—in one way or the other—related to employee well-being or performance improvement. This may involve, for instance, the predictive validity of general mental ability and emotional intelligence for sales performance. Research may also focus on the cognitive capacities of creativity and wisdom, and the affective capacities of work engagement and humor. POB studies also examine the role of states like self-efficacy, optimism, hope, resilience, and other personal resources in coping with

organizational demands or in fostering performance. Further, POB-researchers are interested in peak performance in organizations and examine the conditions under which employees thrive.

Researchers who simultaneously started the *positive organizational scholarship* (POS) movement have provided a conceptual framework for organizing and integrating their research on positive organizations (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003). POS is defined as ''the study of that which is positive, flourishing, and life-giving in organizations. Positive refers to the elevating processes and outcomes in organizations. Organizational refers to the interpersonal and structural dynamics activated in and through organizations, specifically taking into account the context in which positive phenomena occur. Scholarship refers to the scientific, theoretically derived, and rigorous investigation of that which is positive in organizational settings'' (Cameron & Caza, 2004, p. 731). Similar to POB, but different from positive psychology, the primary emphasis of POS is on the workplace and on the accomplishment of work-related outcomes. Although partly overlapping, POB is primarily concerned with individual psychological states and human strengths that influence employee performance (Luthans, 2002), whereas POS is primarily concerned with the positive aspects of the organizational context that influence employee's thriving (Cameron, 2005). In a way, this special issue builds a bridge between POB and POS because in most of its contributions a positive individual perspective (POB) is combined with a positive organization perspective (POS).

Before introducing the five articles that are included in this special issue, two illustrations are provided of the viability of a positive approach to organizational behavior: the added value of POB and processes over and above negative behaviors and processes, and the emergence of employee engagement.

The Added Value of Positive Organizational Behavior

Failing to recognize the positive aspects of work is inappropriate and as Turner, Barling, and Zacharatos (2002, p. 715) have argued ''. . .it is time to extend our research focus and explore more fully the positive sides, so as to gain full understanding of the meaning and effects of working.'' However, in order to make a substantive contribution to organizational science, POB will need to show the added value of the positive over and above the negative. For instance, if work engagement would be the perfect opposite of burnout, there is little to be gained from engagement research beyond what is already known from burnout research (see below). Moreover, we agree with Tetrick (2002), who convincingly argued that it is very unlikely that the same mechanisms that underlie employee ill-health and malfunctioning constitute employee health and optimal functioning. Hence, POB may contribute by supplementing the traditional negative model with a distinct wellness model that focuses on POB. By not exclusively focusing on the positive side but by taking a more comprehensive perspective that includes positive *as well as* negative aspects, criticisms of POB's one-sided positivity bias and its separating positive from negative experiences and emotions are counteracted (Fineman, 2006).

Meanwhile, several recent POB studies have convincingly shown that positive organizational phenomena can make a unique contribution to explaining variance in organizational outcomes over and above negative ones. A ground-breaking study making this point is Fredrickson and Losada's (2005) study among business teams. They empirically validated that positive communication and expressions of support among team members clearly distinguished flourishing teams over languishing teams. Specifically, in their observational research with 60 management teams, the authors identified 15 teams that clearly produced better results (as indicated by profitability, customer satisfaction, and 360° evaluations by superiors, peers, and subordinates) based upon their speech acts. Positive speech was coded for encouragement, support, and appreciation, while negative speech was coded for disapproval, cynicism, and sarcasm. Sixteen teams with mixed verbal interactions had average performance, while

nineteen teams with negative verbal interactions showed inferior performance. Moreover, results showed that the successful teams exhibited verbalization of more positive effect and a wider range of ideas and initiatives, while teams with average or no success were more constrained in the range of effect and ideas. The poorest performing teams were tightly bounded, uncreative, and generally negative in outlook.

Other examples of recent POB studies investigated how the *combination* of stressful and motivating job characteristics influences negative and positive aspects of well-being. According to the *job demands—resources (JD-R) model* (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004) working conditions can be classified in two general categories (i.e., job demands and job resources) that are applicable to virtually all occupations. Basically, job demands require effort and are therefore related with physiological and psychological costs, such as fatigue, whereas job resources foster personal growth, learning, and development, and have motivational qualities. Bakker, Demerouti, and Euwema (2005), in their study among about 1000 Dutch college teachers, hypothesized and found that job resources buffered the impact of job demands on burnout (exhaustion and cynicism). Specifically, they found that job demands such as work overload, emotional demands, physical demands, and work–home interference did *not* result in high levels of burnout if employees experienced job resources, such as autonomy, performance feedback, social support, or coaching from their supervisor. Psychologically speaking, different processes may have been responsible for these interaction effects. That is, autonomy may have helped in coping with job demands because employees had discretion on when and how to respond to their demands. In a similar vein, social support and coaching from the supervisor may have buffered the impact of job demands on levels of burnout because employees received instrumental help and emotional support. Finally, feedback may have been beneficial because it provided employees with the information necessary to maintain their performance.

Two other studies using the JD-R model have shown that job resources are particularly salient when job demands are high. Hakanen, Bakker, and Demerouti (2005) in their study among Finnish dentists hypothesized and found that job resources (e.g., skill variety, peer contacts) were most beneficial in maintaining work engagement under conditions of high job demands (e.g., workload, poor physical environment). Similar findings have been reported for Finnish teachers working in elementary, secondary, and vocational schools (Bakker, Hakanen, Demerouti, & Xanthopoulou, 2007). It was found that job resources buffer the negative relationship between pupil's misbehavior and teacher's work engagement. In addition, it was observed that job resources particularly influence work engagement when teachers are confronted with high levels of pupil's misconduct. For example, supervisor support, an innovation culture, appreciation by colleagues, and a positive organizational climate were important job resources for teachers that helped them cope with demanding interactions with pupils.

In conclusion, studies using the broaden-and-build theory and the JD-R model illustrate how POB can outweigh negative behavior. Such theoretical approaches and empirical findings clearly add to our overall knowledge regarding organizational behavior and its outcomes.

The Emergence of Employee Engagement

As noted above, today's organizations are in need of engaged employees. This is not only illustrated by best-selling books that convincingly make this case (Covey, 2004; Gratton, 2000), but also by the fact the keyword ''employee engagement'' yields far over 2 million hits on the World Wide Web. Moreover, virtually all major consultancy firms offer ''assessment tools'' that identify ''drivers'' and subsequent programs ''to boost employee engagement''. In contrast, entering the keywords ''employee engagement'' and ''work engagement'' in *PsychInfo* yields only 61 scientific articles and chapters.

Obviously, there is a large discrepancy between corporate interest in employee engagement and academic research and writing. This is yet another reason why this special issue is timely.

Three approaches to employee engagement exist. First, it is conceived as a set of motivating resources such as support and recognition from colleagues and supervisors, performance feedback, opportunities for learning and development, and opportunities for skill use. The so-called ''Gallup-12'' questionnaire operationalizes employee engagement in this way. A meta-analysis of studies using this measure in almost 8000 business units of 36 companies (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002), showed that levels of employee engagement were positively related to business-unit performance (i.e., customer satisfaction and loyalty, profitability, productivity, turnover, and safety). The authors conclude that engagement is ''. . . related to meaningful business outcomes at a magnitude that is important to many organizations'' (Harter et al., 2002, p. 276).

Secondly, employee engagement is conceived in terms of commitment and extra-role behavior, for instance, as ''a psychological state where employees feel a vested interest in the company's success and perform to a high standard that may exceed the stated requirements of the job'' (www.mercerhr.com), or as ''personal satisfaction and a sense of inspiration and affirmation they get from work and being a part of the organization'' (www.towersperrin.com). Clearly, this seems like putting old commitment wine in new engagement bottles.

The third approach defines engagement *independently* from job resources and positive organizational outcomes—such as commitment—as a positive, fulfilling, affective-motivational state of work-related well-being that is the antipode of job burnout (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Based on this conceptualization, a brief work engagement questionnaire has been developed that consists of three interrelated dimensions: vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006). Theoretically speaking, both engagement as well as burnout can be integrated in an overarching comprehensive framework: the JD-R model (see above). This model assumes two processes (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004): (1) a health impairment process in which burnout mediates the relationship between job demands and poor resources on the one hand, and negative health outcomes on the other hand; (2) a motivational process in which engagement mediates the relationship between job resources on the one hand, and positive organizational outcomes—such as organizational commitment—on the other hand.

The JD-R model nicely illustrates the point made by Tetrick (2002) that different mechanisms underlie employee ill-health and malfunctioning (the health impairment process) as compared to employee health and optimal functioning (the motivational process). In addition, various studies have demonstrated associations of employee engagement with meaningful organizational outcomes such as in- and extra role behavior (Schaufeli, Taris, & Bakker, 2006), intention to leave and organizational commitment (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), financial turnover at the end of the work shift (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2007), academic performance (Schaufeli, Martinez, Marques Pinto, Salanova, & Bakker, 2002), and service quality as rated by customers (Salanova, Agut, & Pieró, 2005).

In conclusion, studies on employee engagement add to our understanding of positive organizational processes in organizations—also vis-à-vis negative processes—and show the relevance of the concept for organizational outcomes. As such employee engagement is a promising new avenue for future POB research.

Overview of Articles in This Special Issue

This special issue is devoted to a selected number of exciting POB studies that each tap into an interesting direction in which POB research might go. Giardini and Frese (2008) follow a multi-level

approach to investigate how financial consultants' emotional competence affects their management of affective responses in service encounters. They develop and test a two-level model in which emotional competence is related to consultants' own and to their customers' state positive effect. Customers' positive effect, in turn, is related to customers' specific and general evaluations of the service rendered. This study demonstrates that the positive psychological state of the employee influences that of the customer. This means that, potentially, such positive states pay off for the company as was shown by Salanova et al. (2005) who found that customer loyalty was a function of service personnel's levels of engagement.

Muse, Harris, Giles, and Feild (2008) use two organizations to investigate whether employees' use and perceived value of a work-life benefit package is associated with their positive attitudes and organizational behaviors. Grounded in social exchange theory and the norm of reciprocity, they develop and test a model identifying differential relationships of benefit use and perceived benefit value with employee attitudinal and performance outcomes. Results support the hypothesis that providing work-life benefits employees use and/or value is part of a positive exchange between the employee and employer. This exchange is positively related to employees' feelings of perceived organizational support and affective commitment to the organization and reciprocation in the form of higher levels of task and contextual performance behaviors. This study demonstrates the fruitfulness of changing perspectives by not focusing on the negative aspects of work-life balance—such as work–home interference—but by studying work-life benefits and flourishing in both work and family domains (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006).

Lilius, Worline, Maitlits, Kanov, Dutton, and Frost (2008) explore the contours and consequences of compassion at work. Findings from a pilot survey indicate that compassion occurs with relative high frequency among a wide variety of individuals, suggesting a relationship between experienced compassion, positive emotion, and affective commitment. A complementary narrative study reveals a wide range of compassion triggers and illuminates the ways in which work colleagues respond to suffering. This narrative analysis demonstrates that experienced compassion provides important sensemaking occasions where employees who receive, witness, or participate in the delivery of compassion reshape understandings of their co-workers, themselves, and their organizations. This study demonstrates the usefulness of a newly introduced positive concept—compassion at work—for sensemaking of employees in organizations.

Luthans, Norman, Avolio, and Avey (2008) investigate whether the recently emerging core construct of positive psychological capital (consisting of hope, resilience, optimism, and efficacy) plays a role in mediating the effects of a supportive organizational climate with employee outcomes. Utilizing three diverse samples, results show that employees' psychological capital is positively related to their performance, satisfaction, and commitment and that a supportive climate is related to employees' satisfaction and commitment. The study's major hypothesis that employees' psychological capital mediates the relationship between supportive climate and their performance is also supported. This study demonstrates that integrating various existing constructs into a new higher-order construct might advance our knowledge on POB. A similar synthesizing approach was used by Bono and Judge (2003), who integrated neuroticism, self-esteem and locus of control into a higher-order construct the so-called ''core self-evaluation.'' More recently, Harrison, Newman, and Roth (2006) demonstrated that *overall* job attitude (job satisfaction and organizational commitment) provides increasingly powerful prediction of more *integrative* behavioral criteria (focal performance, contextual performance, lateness, absence, and turnover combined).

Finally, in their theoretical article, Walter and Bruch (2008) develop a dynamic model of the emergence of positive affective similarity in work groups. It is suggested that positive group affective similarity and within-group relationship quality are reciprocally related in the form of a self-reinforcing spiral, which is driven by mechanisms of affective sharing and affective similarity-attraction between

group members. This ''positive group effect spiral'' is proposed to continuously strengthen both the similarity of group members' positive effect and the quality of their interpersonal relationships in a dynamic process. Further, Walter and Bruch embed the positive group effect spiral into a framework of contextual factors that may diminish or strengthen its functioning. This article demonstrates that, rather than assuming simple cause–effect relationships, POB research would benefit from investigating dynamic, reciprocal relationships that might unfold into ''upward spirals'' (Fredrickson, 2003).

We hope that this special issue will inspire and encourage researchers to expand their research horizon to investigate engaged employees in flourishing organizations.

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