

TRENDS



By Jennifer J. Salopek

Accentuate
the Positive.

T+D talked with *Kim Cameron, one of the editors of Positive Organizational Scholarship, published this month by Berrett-Koehler. Cameron is professor of organizational behavior and HR management at the University of Michigan Business School.*

Salopek What is Positive Organizational Scholarship?

Cameron Positive Organizational Scholarship, or POS, is a new movement in organizational studies and organizational development that focuses on that which is positive, flourishing, and life-giving in organizations. It investigates positive deviance, or the ways in which organizations and their members flourish and prosper in extraordinary ways.

Salopek What are its key concepts?

Cameron The title of the movement itself represents some of its core concepts. In particular, *positive* refers to an affirmative bias toward the elevating dynamics and outcomes in organizations. *Organizational* refers to the processes and dynamics associated in and through organizations. *Scholarship* refers to scientific, theoretically based, and rigorous investigation.

Unlike self-help approaches that prescribe relatively simple and uncomplicated techniques for achieving happiness, fulfillment, or effectiveness, POS focuses on developing rigorous, systematic, and theory-based foundations for positive phenomena.

Salopek What are its origins?

Cameron It parallels a new movement in psychology that has shifted from a traditional focus on illness and pathology—such as deviancy, abnormality, and therapy—toward a positive focus on human strengths, virtues, positive affect, and what makes life worth living.

My personal interest in POS began more than a decade ago when I was studying the effects of downsizing on organizations. I noticed that three-quarters of organizations were worse off after having downsized. But I discovered that

the few organizations that flourished after downsizing demonstrated something quite extraordinary, even virtuous. So, I decided to investigate that phenomenon more carefully.

At the same time, several colleagues at the University of Michigan were beginning to study other positive dynamics

in organizations. Two years

ago, we sponsored a conference to bring all those people together to share research findings, and common interests, and to explore directions for the future. The response was overwhelming.

Salopek Please explain more about the concept of positive deviance. How is it manifested in organizations?

Cameron Low-performing organizations are characterized by inefficiency, ineffectiveness, unprofitability, unethical behavior, and so on. “Normal” organizations exhibit healthy organizational behavior: efficient, effective, profitable, ethical. Positive deviance exists in orga-



Kim Cameron

nizations that are better than normal, better than healthy. They're difficult to describe because we haven't developed very good language to describe them, but they manifest virtuous, benevolent, flourishing, honoring behavior. Their outcomes are extraordinary.

Salopek How important are the actions of leaders—managers, supervisors, executives, and so forth—to creating an environment in which positive deviance can flourish?

Cameron Positive deviance is seldom observed in organizations, even though it's inherently inspiring and uplifting. Therefore, leaders and managers are key

and human well-being are key indicators of success. POS examines characteristics such as trustworthiness, resilience, humility, authenticity, respect, and forgiveness among employees, which lead to theories of excellence, transcendence, positive deviance, extraordinary performance, and positive spirals of flourishing. For the most part, organizational science has paid little heed to those kinds of phenomena up to now.

Salopek Companies exist to solve problems, meet needs, create the next, best widget. Isn't the POS approach a little naïve about the true pressures facing the business world?

ments as negative comments; low-performing teams use three times as many critical or negative comments.

Salopek Can you give some examples of POS in action?

Cameron Sure—a publicly traded dry goods manufacturer and retailer determined to become a “virtuous” organization. A policy was instituted that permits employees to be paid for volunteering 40 hours per year in community service activities. In addition, without any demand from consumers, employees, or regulators, the firm developed—at its own expense—nontoxic materials used in the manufacturing process so workers

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to ensuring that organizations nurture and enable positive activities.

Most organizations face enormous pressures to achieve financial results—profitability, revenue generation, balanced budgets, and so on. Most leaders, therefore, respond to these pressures with self-interest and a focus on problem solving. Selfishness, manipulation, greed, secrecy, and a single-minded emphasis on winning are not all that uncommon in organizations, and they lead to conflict, law suits, contract breaking, retribution, and disrespect in social relationships.

Salopek What are the positive dynamics that organizations could foster instead?

Cameron Positive Organizational Scholarship seeks to enable organizations to also focus on appreciation, collaboration, virtuousness, vitality, and meaningfulness—where creating abundance

Cameron Research results demonstrate the power of a positive or abundance approach to organizational change. For example, I have found in my own research that organizations that emphasize compassion, integrity, optimism, forgiveness, and trust are significantly more successful than typical firms. They're more profitable, more productive, more innovative, and they retain customers and employees to a significantly greater degree than most firms do.

A focus by managers on the strengths and positive attributes of employees leads to significantly higher-performing organizations than a focus on problem solving and employee weaknesses. Top management teams that have a higher positive-to-negative communication ratio are more successful than others. The highest-performing senior-level teams use five times as many positive com-

wouldn't be exposed to any harmful substances. It began to use organic materials in its products so that migrant farm workers wouldn't be unknowingly exposed to harsh chemicals, and renewable shipping packaging was instituted to reduce environmental waste.

In another example, a staff of 30 women in the billing department of a Midwest hospital is off the charts in terms of performance in DAR—the number of days it takes to collect a billed dollar. Twenty-one of the women in this group are single moms. They vividly describe how working in this unit has helped them learn how to love feedback and how to take feedback and learn from it, as well as how to play and have fun.

Salopek The workplace learning and development field often focuses on filling skills gaps and remediating shortcom-

ings. What implications does POS have for the training and development industry? How can t&d practitioners adopt an abundance approach?

Cameron POS can be an important resource for t&d practitioners through a variety of specific tools and intervention techniques. Some of these include assessment instruments measuring such factors as organizational virtuousness, organizational resilience, empowerment, capacity for compassion, and enablers of high-quality connections. Others include tools that help individuals focus on their strengths, attributes of their best selves, optimistic life plans, and positive energy. Still others are in-

as negative comments.

tended to help employees move from defining work as a job, through defining work as a career, to defining work as a calling. Instituting abundance language, implementing appreciative questioning, and encouraging gratitude journals and a personal management interview program are still other tools designed to apply POS concepts.

The point is that POS helps focus attention on the positive in individuals and organizations, as well as provides mechanisms to help them achieve extraordinarily positive performance.

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