



TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

Magazine of the Irish Institute of Training and Development



Una Halligan

Chair, Expert Group on Future Skills Needs

CASE STUDY

Transfer of Learning at Lake Region Medical. Find out how this medical devices manufacturer in Wexford developed systems to create and sustain a learning environment

TRAINING

Frist Aid Prison Programme: Ireland is the first country in the world to introduce the Red Cross' Community Based Health and First Aid in Action programme in a prison setting

WORKPLACE

Positive Psychology Workplaces
Would you like to create a happier workplace? Focusing on strengths and positivity is a good place to start.
Sarah Lewis

ORGANISATION

The New Science of Building Great Teams. How we communicate could be so much more important to success than what we communicate.
Professor Alex 'Sandy' Pentland, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)

How can I Create a Happier Workplace?

I'm looking for ideas to boost the general mood where I work. People are performing well but with cutbacks and fewer resources, people are going through the motions rather than being motivated and energised about work so the atmosphere is pretty flat. Considering the long hours we all spend together, I'd appreciate your advice on how to create a happier workplace

Training Manager, Dublin

"...Managers need to create many little moments of feeling good, to counterweight all the bad news that can be around - aiming to help people experience 'positive affect' at least three times more often than they do 'negative affect.'"



Answer by Sarah Lewis, chartered psychologist and author of 'Positive Psychology at Work'

This is a challenge faced by many organisations at present, and you are well advised to be attending to motivation and morale before they become a major issue. It sounds as if you are already detecting a falling-off in levels of active, positive engagement at work. While engagement is affected by various factors, I thought I'd major on the two key areas of positivity and strengths - this is because boosting positivity should help create a happier workforce, while helping people understand and use their strengths boosts engagement.

Positivity

In 2004 two researchers, Losada and Heaphy, demonstrated that feeling good helps produce good performance. In their research the teams that offered each other at least three times more praise than criticism were the most successful. The research was conducted in such a way that we can be confident the finding is causal not just correlational.

Since then Barbara Fredrickson has made a study of what good emotions do for us, and Shawn Achor has brought all the research together in his great book 'The Happiness Advantage' also available on YouTube as a Tedx talk. The result is conclusive: happiness leads to success.

Essentially managers need to create many little moments of 'positive affect' or feeling good, to counterweight all the bad news that can be around - aiming to help people experience 'positive affect' at least

three times more often than they do 'negative affect'. Here are some ideas for boosting mood states in the workplace.

Success Stories

Start meetings with a round of success stories. Before you get into the meat of the meeting, usually a litany of problems and challenges, start by giving people the opportunity to share the best of their week.

Share the magic ratio

Educate your staff about this research. Explain that they need to keep the ratio of positive to negative comments and experiences above 3:1 and preferable 6:1 if they want to feel good and perform well. Encourage people to do this for each other, to be quick to offer praise to colleagues and slow to criticise.

Use Diamond Feedback

Diamond feedback is when you both report the behaviour you saw that you thought was good, and give the praise. For example, 'I listened to how you handled that customer call. The way you admitted our errors and thanked her for letting us know was really good. I could hear that you saved a customer we might have lost. That's worth a lot of money to us. Well done, that was great work.' People find this kind of positive feedback both easier to give and to receive. It is authentic and grounded in a shared reality.

Other mood boosters

Unexpected pleasant surprises, such as buns and chocolate are old stalwarts, and they work. Celebrate successes; develop your own in-team rituals for how you do this. Encourage laughter and humour and playfulness, they all boost mood. Maybe initiate a fitness club of some sort - lunchtime running perhaps, as exercise

boosts mood. And create opportunities for people to use their strengths.

Strengths

Another finding coming through from the positive psychology research is that helping people understand what their natural strengths are and how to use them aids both positivity and performance. Using strengths is energizing and engaging for people. The more you can help people find ways to use their strengths at work, the more likely it is that they will become engaged and self-motivated in their work. But first they need to know their own strengths profile.

Identifying Strengths

There are a number of strengths identifying tools around, particularly the strengthscope psychometric, which also has a great set of support cards. However in a low tech way, we can just ask people 'When are you at your most energised at work?' 'What feels really easy and enjoyable for you that others sometimes struggle with?' and most interesting of all 'What can you almost not, not do?'

Working with Strengths as a Team

Once you all understand your own strengths find ways to use them more at work and, equally important, ways to do less of the work that drains you of energy. Find someone to delegate it to for whom it plays to their strengths. Within the team, start to match tasks to personal strengths profiles rather than 'role

description'. When people have to do things that really don't play to their strengths their rate of work slows, their energy levels and creativity drop, and their mood declines. Minimise these effects by really capitalising on the strengths in your team.

Job Crafting

As an individual you can reconfigure how you achieve your job objectives so that it plays to your strengths. You don't have to do it exactly the same way the person before you did. You need to work out the best route for you, playing to your strengths. Be sure to warn or negotiate with others about how you want to tackle the task so they understand your thinking and don't just think you are doing it 'wrong' because you are going about it differently.

As the Leader

As the leader this means you have to be prepared to recognize that different people may do the same job differently. You may also want to encourage people with complementary skills to team up in their delivery. An obvious sub-team is often some one who loves forming relationships with someone who loves creating order out of bureaucratic chaos. Each can help the other with the meeting or the paperwork that makes their heart sink.

Increasing Your Opportunities

Make sure other people know your strengths, so that they can call on you for opportunities that play to your strengths.

These tips barely scratch the surface of the interesting research and ideas emanating from the field of 'Positive Psychology at Work' so reading around the subject or using tools like the Positive Psychology Concept Cards can really help. For example, the cards offer bite-sized explanations of twenty core positive psychology concepts, with questions to help understand them and suggestions of how to integrate the concept at work.

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About the Author

Sarah Lewis M.Sc. C.Psychol is an associated fellow of the British Psychological Society and a principal member of the Association of Business Psychologists. She is an acknowledged Appreciative Inquiry expert, a regular conference presenter and a published author, including 'Positive Psychology at Work' (Wiley) and 'Appreciative Inquiry for Change Management' (KoganPage). Sarah specialises in working with organisations to co-create organisational change using methodologies such as Appreciative Inquiry, and the practical application of positive psychology.

