

Chapter 3

Putting positivity and relational energy to work in higher education

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3.1 My Journey – an introduction

When I was first introduced to strength-based approaches for leaders and teams, these approaches intuitively made sense, they were to me the missing piece, enabling me to continue on a different path, (sensemaking), as a leader, as a colleague and as a human being. Since then, I have extensively studied and implemented strength-based approaches in my practice. During this journey I have also had the privilege to meet and learn from some of the leading experts in this field. In this chapter, I will briefly outline the path taken by these scholars and discuss the impact of strengths, relational energy and positivity within leadership, teams, and organisations. I will also put forward my plea to all of us privileged to work in Higher Education (HE) to role-model and embrace the life-enhancing ethos of humanisation (Devis-Rozental 2018). This will ensure we achieve our 'academic mission' to inspire students and create and share knowledge externally (Zomer and Benneworth 2011): From this, HE will play a leading role in building a future society based on strength and virtuosity. When virtuosity is recognised, celebrated, and encouraged, our organisations, campuses, and communities, will be kinder, more caring, forgiving, energised and productive (Cameron et al. 2003).

Strength or asset-based approaches, such as Appreciative Inquiry, and Positive Organisational Scholarship are a way of thinking that starts by identifying and building on what already works, rather than the more traditional approaches used within organisations that focus on identifying problems or deficits. Some explain this as positive and negative deviance, Cameron et al. (2003), suggest we think of deviance as on a continuum, with 'normal' in the middle, 'negative deviance' to the left and 'positive deviance' on the right. Within organisations, including healthcare and education, we tend to spend a good deal of time thinking about the negative side of the deviance continuum. We focus most of our time and effort on illness rather than wellness, on what has gone wrong in an organisation, rather than what works well in that organisation.

Virtuosity and abundance in the context of the organisation is a phrase also put forward by Cameron et al. (2003), to illustrate the best of the human condition. The virtues exemplify 'human goodness' and include pro-social behaviours, such as kindness, fairness, gratitude and care. Abundance in this context refers to striving for excellence through learning from what is positively deviant. All these traits are perfectly aligned with the humanising framework.

3.2 My Journey – a case for humanising HE

For me, the understanding of humanisation has been **my** journey, and indeed what makes us innately human is that we carry a view of living life from the inside (Todres et al. 2009, p. 69), based on our unique experiences and character. I say this to explain what to me now sounds like common sense – focusing on strength, virtuousness, and positivity, contribute towards enhancing life and humanise the organisations. Yet, I did not instinctively have this sense of ‘knowing’. Early in my career in finance, the study of the technical was all-important to gaining professional qualifications, and demonstrating ‘toughness’ was a route to career advancement; my role models tended to be those who excelled in technical prowess and ruthlessness toward getting the best deal. I am admittedly, slightly guilty here of over-generalising the nature of working in finance in the 1980 and 1990s, however, while I did experience pockets of kindness and support, many aspects of the practice were typical of those we know to be dehumanising, particularly, objectification and reductionism. I can indeed see parallels to the healthcare sector, which motivated Todres and his team to develop the humanising framework. Through their work in developing the framework, Todres et al., drew attention to de-humanising behaviours such as objectification - the separation of ourselves from others, for example, within a clinical environment - focusing on the patient as a series of symptoms, rather than considering the impact the illness or prognosis has on the person - the patient (Todres et al. 2009, p.70, for a full explanation of the framework see chapter 1).

Similarly, we feel dehumanised when others fail to see us and see only our role. This reduction of the whole person to a role, is played out within HE every day - when we complain about individual departments and fail to appreciate the obstacles they face, nor take the time to get to know the people behind the role. We also see approaches within HE that fail to treat students in a personalised way and objectify them as a homogeneous group. This matters equally to overall organisational performance, as we experience increasing market forces that compel the sector to become more ‘business-like’, it is essential we take steps to retain and build positive and personalised relationships within our HE communities (Cannella and Koro-Ljungber 2017).

Devis-Rozental (2018), has rightly called for the humanisation of HE, and presents a compelling case for doing so, through raising awareness of the role of socio-emotional intelligence in HE Scholars. Devis-Rozental (2018), in using a ‘tourist’ metaphor to describe the student experience of being a stranger in an unknown land, (this equally applies to staff), enables us to easily put ourselves in the shoes of others. In doing so, we better understand how being a stranger in an unknown land feels when that land is populated by locals who are friendly, kind, caring, supportive and positive. A far different land would be experienced if the opposite were true - the stranger was made to feel like another ‘cog in the wheel’, objectified, with no one offering support and care.

Virtuosity and strengths

Individuals who are motivated to support others and recognise the virtue in taking the time to understand, nurture and develop strengths in others are likely to be the individuals in an organisation who uplift and boost others (Cameron 2010). These traits are consistent with the aims of positive psychology, in supporting people to live fulfilling lives (Seligman 1986). Not only do we as individuals feel boosted when we are given the opportunity to discuss and make use of our strengths (Buckingham and Clifton 2001), we are more motivated and engaged in our work. Understanding of what brings joy, purpose, and fulfilment to 'others', engenders not only a sense of togetherness, of being part of a community - it brings with it an innate positivity and energy for life. My favourite way to think about this is to consider the 'heliotropic effect', that is the tendency for all living systems to lean towards a positive source of energy - much like the houseplant you place in a sunny window, the plant will turn towards the positive light of the sun and away from the dark (Cooperrider in Cameron et al., 2006).

We need only to take a moment of reflection to think about how this aligns with our own experiences. How do you feel after a meeting with your line manager, or a coffee chat with your favourite colleague? I can recall many such interactions, that would leave me feeling uplifted, energised, appreciated, and motivated to do a great job – and I can also remember interactions at work that would have the opposite effect. Interactions that have left me confused, depleted, and more ready to swap negative stories over the water cooler, than to feel energised and motivated to take on the world. It seems so obvious, right? If we build positive relationships and embed humanising practices, our workforce will be happier, motivated to work harder, we will unleash their creativity, their ability to solve problems, and importantly these approaches support our wellbeing.

3.3 What gets in the way?

When we consider what gets in the way of attending to asset and positive approaches, it would appear as El-Meligi (2005), suggests that have come to a somewhat muddled view of management practice and leadership. We have on the one hand management gurus such as Peter Drucker (2007, p. 79) suggesting that "the task of organisational leadership is to create an alignment of strengths in ways that make a system's weaknesses irrelevant". On the other hand, what we see happening in practice suggests we fix what is wrong and let strengths take care of themselves (Cooperrider and Whitney 2005). This, in turn, perpetuates our reluctance to move away from the cycle of 'deficit thinking' (Whitney 1998).

A detailed review of the historical context that surrounds management theory is outside the scope of this chapter. If, however, we do a quick look back to the early part of the previous century, and

the theories that evolved to support manufacturing and industry, we can still see the legacy of scientific management theories. These theories were developed with a key objective of maximising economic efficiency, at a time when the workforce was often dehumanised and considered to be an extension of the production line. During the 1930s the evolution of the human relations movement and its approach to workplace productivity, started to explore the link between productivity and employee satisfaction, still very much concerned of course with manufacturing. In 1967, Peter Drucker first began to talk about the alignment of strengths and the knowledge economy, understanding that theories and routines found within manufacturing do not easily translate to the knowledge economy, where agility, creativity and collaboration are the key drivers of success. If we then add to this the 'symbiotic communities', that characterise HEIs (Allen 2003), and the multiple drivers for change the HE sector faces, it is not surprising that traditional frameworks for leadership and management do not readily suit the needs of most HEIs (Farquharson et al. 2018). Neither do they necessarily suit the society we wish to build for the future, which gives the sector the 'double whammy', of needing both to find ways to better manage itself and better ways to develop leaders and practitioners of the future. There is a need to address the noticeable gap in our knowledge of the drivers of higher team performance (Wang et al. 2004). How we best motivate and nurture the workforce, is undoubtedly complex, and as Ramdas and Patrick (2018) comment, leadership is now the most researched and yet least understood term. This all then suggests a vacuum and clear role for HE to support scholarship within the arena of the positive organisation.

3.4 Leadership

From the start of this new millennium, there has been a steep rise in the number of peer-reviewed 'top—tier' literature published on emerging theories of the traits of successful leadership, (Dinh et al. 2014). There are contrasting views as to how helpful this focus on traits is, particularly, somewhat subjective traits such as charisma. Yukl (1999) cautioned against overemphasising specific leadership traits in so far as they draw our attention to the dyadic relationship between leader and follower, at the expense of advancing our knowledge more broadly across the organisation. In adapting the humanising framework for HE, leadership moves away from being 'above them' specific leadership traits that may or may not be deemed to be charismatic become mute, the role of the leader is to become 'part of them'. In building a humanised organisation, we are all part of a connected human system, where people matter, not just in words but in deeds. Central to this is collaboration, networks, and positive relationships. Positive relationships in the workplace are fuelled by relational energy – a driver of high team performance (Quinn et al. 2012).

3.5 Relational Energy

Relational energy - the energy we feel when we interact with people who uplift us, motivate us to work harder through the sheer joy and happiness they project. Other sources of relational energy, are the excitement you feel from being with others who love what they do, the positive habits they exhibit, and from being with someone who inspires you by their ability to ignite passion in a topic and those that seek and propose new ideas. The central tenant of strength-based approaches is the focus on abundance, virtuosity, and excellence - all sources of positive energy. This approach – while it does not replace a problem-solving approach – seeks to close the gap between acceptable performance and extraordinary performance (Cameron and Lavine 2006).

The construct of relational energy and its impact in the workplace is a relatively new area of study. However, many of the underpinning assumptions have been brought forward from previous works within fields such as neuroscience and psychology, including Barbara Fredrickson's (2001) seminal works, on her 'broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions'. Her work is particularly vital in drawing attention to the impact of negative emotions. When experiencing negative emotions, the mind focuses on the threat and limits our effectiveness, we become closed-minded, unfocused, decision making becomes difficult, and our ability to solve problems reduces, her beautiful use of imagery explains this perfectly:

Just as water lilies retract when sunlight fades, so do our minds when positivity fades.
(Fredrickson 2009, p.55)

It is then not surprising that we now see a growing body of evidence demonstrating that positivity within an organisational context is a predictor of performance and an untapped resource. The positive energy emanating from one person can have a direct and positive impact on the motivation of others at work (The Oxford Review). Several studies (Cameron 2006; Owens 2016) have found that positive energy significantly increases our:

- Resourcefulness
- Resilience
- Creativity
- Openness
- Productivity
- Capacity to learn
- Levels of engagement

Baker et al. (2003), found that positive energisers not only enhance the work of others, they noted that high performing firms, employed three times as many positive energisers than low performing

firms. As an emergent field scholars agree that more studies are needed mainly to discover the antecedents of positivity and other factors that come into play. That aside, the benefits from encouraging and amplifying positive energies are genuinely significant. So who are these positive energisers? If you look to people who display many of the characteristics listed below, you will find them:

- Embrace Change
- Enthusiastic
- Positive
- Problem solvers
- Solution-focused
- Energetic
- Creative and have lots of ideas

Tip: To confirm your suspicions that you have team members and colleagues who are positive energisers, who uplift, attract and boost others – go and talk to them and see how you feel afterwards.

I would like at this point to address concerns that positivity is related to extroversion and social skill, that somehow positivity and positive energy are something that only the confident and extrovert possess. This is not the case; positive energisers are those who have a sense of purpose, of contentment and take the time to understand and listen to others (Knowles 2017). Positive relational energy does not have to be noisily spread by those who enjoy being the life and soul of the party. Equally, it is ok not always to be ok, be curious about your emotions, and know when to ask for support, these are all facets of what make us human (Devis-Rozental 2018).

Within HE we do undoubtedly attend to the health and wellbeing of our workforce, with a variety of mechanisms, such as flexible working, assistance programmes and support for improving both physical and mental health. These actions are commendable and work to address maintaining energy at an individual level, addressing both physical and psychological energy (Owens et al. 2016). When other essential forms of energy such as physical and psychological energy are depleted, we experience, at worst burn-out or exhaustion, and at best disengagement and underperformance. Not so with relational energy, the more abundant this is, the better we and others feel (Cameron 2010).

3.6 Growing Towards the Sun – an example

Assume you are asked to review satisfaction surveys completed by students and you note that some academic programmes or courses, have achieved below-average scores, while other programmes consistently achieve scores of close to 100%. Using traditional problem-solving approaches, you would seek to identify the key problems causing the low scores, perhaps try to establish the root-cause and generate a range of solutions to address the 'problem'. Working with the programme team (this traditional approach inherently nudges us towards objectifying the team, as a 'series of problems'), you would implement the solution and in due course follow up to ensure that matters have improved. The underlying assumption: 'Problems to be solved' – if we find the problems we can 'fix them'. Scores may in time improve and performance reach satisfactory levels, the programme team, however, may feel overburdened dealing with the negativity of being a 'problem team', suffer depletion in both psychological and physical energy. It is likely that under these circumstances, performance will not go above ordinary levels to reach the extraordinary.

Conversely, using a strength-based or abundance approach, you would draw your attention toward the high scoring programmes or courses, celebrate and learn what factors have driven these extraordinary results. You are likely to find many 'positive energisers' within these teams, people who are driven by virtuosity and helping others grow. They will most likely be uplifted by helping others, to mentor and support lower scoring teams to not only improve but go onto replicate what they have learned from these colleagues who achieve these extraordinary results. The underlying assumption: 'Potential to be discovered – we can share with others and amplify the web of strengths across other teams. The high performing teams will grow stronger and develop yet more positive relationships with others.

The above illustrates the scenario of actions we have taken at Bournemouth University. We organised 'enabling excellence forums' based on strength based approaches to learning and supporting each other. We made it very clear when inviting team members from high performing teams that it was a celebration, and we were creating a 'positive space'. Participants felt safe to challenge assumptions, and correct and rewrite organisational dialogue, such as only academics with strong research profiles were ever promoted as teaching was less valued (absolutely, not correct, as there were many examples that disproved this assumption, yet for some the myth persisted). The group encouraged each other to seek out opportunities for career progression and to take risks in their practice. Importantly, the participants were uplifted and began to truly recognise their value. As a basis for the discussion during the forums, we took the five key core original principles of Appreciative Inquiry:

- **The constructionist principle** – that reality as we know it is partly dependent on our perceptions and personal experiences.
- **The simultaneity principle** – change begins the moment we ask questions
- **The poetic principle** – creating our world can drive endless learning
- **The anticipatory principle** – that hopeful anticipation creates positive action and transformation. And lastly,
- **The positive principle** – that positive questions lead to optimistic momentum and amplification

More recently added principles include themes of free choice, wholeness, and the transforming power of narrative (AI Commons in. Farquharson et al. 2018).

Our mantra for these sessions was ‘words make worlds’ – the more positively we frame the future, the more likely we are to achieve our goals and the ‘questions we ask are fateful’ (Cooperrider et al. 2005). Instead of using phrases, such as, ‘I was given the role of programme lead because no one else wants it’, or it is a poisoned chalice’, we amplified the positive. Encouraged by this the group talked about their role and its value to the organisation and its value to them, there was a noticeable change, confidence and energy increased. This feedback given to us by one of the programme leaders involved in our forum, really does sum up the power of positivity and interactions that energise.

“My experiences on different courses at different levels in different institutions helps me empathise with the challenges that others face. I do believe that the Enabling Excellence Forum serves a different purpose [to more formal procedure-based training]. I believe the Forum has the capacity to focus on the 'what-about-ism' that cannot be addressed in a structured training programme. While the majority of the role can be explained procedurally, the Forum allows for specificity, nuance and complexity, which is where I believe the 'excellence' resides. Furthermore, I believe that the Forum's focus on positivity is fundamental. As Goleman (1996, p.87) argues, "having hope means one will not give in to overwhelming anxiety". In my opinion, hope and positivity is unfashionable in HE. I think optimism indicates a shallow depth of thought, as if critical thinking should naturally result in pessimism. This manifests in a tendency to complain. Personally, I find our workplace to be one of the most privileged in society and I am grateful that I spend significant time engaging with a topic that I love.” (Dr James Fair, Principal Academic in Film)

The outcome from this example and other work we have undertaken at Bournemouth University (Devis-Rozental 2018; Farquharson 2018; Clarke 2018), has convinced me that focusing on strengths, positivity, relational energy, and virtuosity is extremely effective in building trust and collaboration. Best practice is being shared across teams, with noticeably increased confidence to try out new ideas. Positive energy is shared and visibly enthuses others. While more research is needed to evaluate the impact in terms of performance, there is no doubt that this is proving highly effective in building networks and collaborations.

3.7 Conclusion – our call to action

HEIs, have an opportunity to become a force for good, heeding the call to action from Julia Unwin (2020) in her recent independent inquiry for Civil Society Futures, for universities to do more to take their rightful place as 'anchors of society'. The sector needs to not only challenge the status quo in terms of traditional management practices within but also to embrace, create and share knowledge that demonstrates the benefits of virtuous practices. This presents us with an alternative perspective for leadership in promoting the benefits of relational energy and positivity, within a framework of humanisation, we have what is needed to enable (HEIs), to embrace the challenges and opportunities of the current time.

3.8 References

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