Increasing job satisfaction: coaching with evidence-based interventions

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Positive psychology offers a number of tools that coaches can use with groups and individuals to raise job satisfaction and engagement. This article describes ways to apply five empirically validated positive interventions: searching for the positive core; intentionally increasing positive emotion; establishing conditions for flow; handling negatives more resiliently; and celebrating positives more effectively. Explanation of each intervention includes its theoretical background, practical ways to adapt it to specific workplace settings, and illustrations from real experience.

Keywords: job satisfaction; positive interventions at work; resilience; positive emotion; flow; Active Constructive Responding

Positive psychology unites disparate lines of theory and research about what makes life most worth living (Peterson & Park, 2003), including what makes work satisfying and engaging. Psychologists test theories using empirical methods, such as laboratory research, longitudinal studies, and analyses of vast data collections (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003; Snyder & Lopez, 2005).

Positive psychology has yielded a number of 'positive interventions', or intentional actions to increase human well-being, and has collected empirical evidence of their effectiveness. Coaches can augment their practices with interventions validated by research and in turn, augment positive psychology with nuances based on practical knowledge of specific domains. Coaches work with diverse people on a wide range of goals, but often in settings where controlled studies cannot be established. Both fields can benefit from a close working relationship.

This paper describes the practical application of five broadly applicable and extensively validated positive interventions. It demonstrates by example how to match interventions to the needs of an organisation, how to present them in ways that stimulate interest, and how to collaborate with members of the organisation to adapt interventions to their needs. While the treatment of each intervention is necessarily brief, references include deeper explanations, theoretical underpinnings, and more extensive examples.

The practical experience described in this paper occurred in the group coaching of several teams within a large multinational information technology corporation. Most of the teams, ranging in size from 10 to more than 100 people, had low job satisfaction ratings that managers wanted to improve. Participants included software engineers, computer programmers, project managers, and support staff located in three sites in the USA. They reported feeling frustrated, overworked, and worried about job security. They were very

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interested in exploring positive psychology ideas, quick to see the relevance of positive interventions to their own situations, and resourceful in finding ways to adapt the interventions to their specific needs.

Setting the stage by generating interest

Before introducing positive interventions to prospective participants, I generated optimism and curiosity by showing them both the power they have over their own job satisfaction and the importance of their well-being to business outcomes.

Managers were intrigued to learn that there are well-established correlations between employee well-being and the bottom line. From over a million employee interviews and associated company data, Gallup researchers have identified twelve questions related to working conditions, such as 'At work, do you have the opportunity to do what you do best every day?' Answers to these questions are predictors of employee motivation and are positively related to employee retention, customer satisfaction, productivity, and profit (Harter, Schmidt, & Keyes, 2003, p. 215; Wagner & Harter, 2006). Other researchers have found similar relationships between subjective well-being and career success (Boehm & Lyubomirsky, 2008). Tsai, Chen, and Liu (2007) tested a model for the linkage between employee positive emotions and job performance. Dutton (2003) links job performance to high-quality connections at work. Managers responded to this information with skeptical openness. Several already had an informal understanding of the business value of employee well-being but had been discouraged by the limited effectiveness of earlier efforts to improve the workplace climate.

Discussions with the general working population often started with negative litanies about work. Jobs are going overseas. Schedules are unreasonably intense. The appraisal system is discouraging. Once they could see that taking action did not require them to deny the things that worried and angered them, they became intrigued to find ways to make work more fun, satisfying, and engaging.

Selecting positive interventions

There are many positive interventions available, including some described in books for the general public (Ben-Shahar, 2007; Lyubomirsky, 2008; Seligman, 2002) and others specifically created for organisational settings (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003). My goal was to select a small number of interventions that would represent broad coverage of what is known about human well-being; contribute directly to organisational needs; and require only small investments of time by most of the participants.

I considered only interventions that had already been extensively validated. I looked for ones that address at least one of the three orientations to well-being proposed by Seligman (2002) and validated by Peterson, Park, and Seligman (2005):

1. positive emotional experience including satisfaction about the past, enjoyment in the present, and optimism about the future;
2. deep engagement in challenging and worthwhile activities; and
3. meaning gained by working toward a higher purpose.

Then I considered whether they contributed to outcomes valued by this organisation. Finally I selected a set that were mutually reinforcing, relatively easy to explain, and required only modest behavior changes since participants were working under intense time

pressure and were therefore reluctant to invest more than a few hours working directly with me. In general it is helpful to have some interventions that show beneficial changes with low implementation costs to reinforce optimism that things can get better.

The outcomes highly valued in this organisation included:

1. increasing energy and vitality so that people could get more done with less overtime;
2. faster recovery from negative events such as sales fluctuations and unexpected plan changes;
3. increased innovation and ability to find solutions to knotty technical problems;
4. increased teamwork and collaboration among large groups spread across multiple sites and working in different time zones; and
5. skills growth and career development.

Table 1 shows the mapping between the selected interventions and both the orientations to well-being and the work place outcomes. To implement a similar selection process, I suggest first updating the valued outcomes to fit the needs of your organisation, then reflecting on the relative importance of the three orientations, and finally considering what you can do within your time and expense constraints. The positive interventions in this paper emphasise positive emotional experience over meaning. With more time, I would add an intervention to help people articulate the meaning of their work because meaning has such a strong impact on human well-being (Seligman, 2002). I would also pay direct attention to identifying and exercising individual strengths (Linley, 2008), which we addressed only indirectly in two of the interventions.

Each of the selected interventions is described below in terms of its theoretical background, information sources, suggestions for putting in practice, and examples from my experience. I found that people were very willing to hold brainstorming meetings to adapt the interventions to their environments. I include possible brainstorming prompts below, as well as examples of brainstorming results from the meetings I held.

Finding the positive core

Finding the positive core comes from Appreciative Inquiry, an organisation development approach to transformational change (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). 'The positive core' is 'the best of what has been and what is' (p. 16). Organisations often launch change processes by focusing on what is wrong, which tends to narrow vision, induce exhaustion, and

Table 1.   Positive intervention selection criteria.

Positive intervention	Orientation to well-being	Workplace goals
Find positive core	Positive emotion, Meaning	Increase energy and teamwork
Intentionally create more positive emotion.	Positive emotion	Increase teamwork, innovation, and resilience
Increase conditions that enable flow.	Engagement	Increase energy, innovation, and skills.
Deal effectively with negative situations.	Positive emotion	Increase resilience.
Celebrate positive situations effectively.	Positive emotion	Increase energy and skills

fragment people into separate self-protective groups (Barrett & Fry, 2005). In contrast, inquiring about strengths and past successes produces themes and stories that inspire and energise people.

To explore a group's positive core, you can interview people individually or in roundtables, or you can have them interview each other in pairs. I used the following questions based on work by Cooperrider and Whitney (1999, p. 8):

1. Without being modest, tell me what it is that you most value about your organisation and yourself at work.
2. Describe a time in your organisation that you consider a highpoint experience, a time when you were most engaged and felt alive and vibrant.
3. What are the core factors that give life to your organisation at its best? What are the things that you would not want to change?
4. What do you want more of in your community? What dreams do you have for its greater health and vitality?

Interviews can be positive interventions in and of themselves, since they help people realise what is already working for them. You can also look for common themes in your notes and present them to the group for validation. Table 2 gives an example of positive core themes that I derived from verbatim comments. Teams can use the themes as useful reminders of strengths and dreams, for example in kickoff meetings for new projects.

Intentionally increase positive emotion

According to Fredrickson's 'broaden and build theory' (1998, 2001), positive emotions such as joy, interest, contentment, pride, gratitude, and humor broaden behavioral repertoires and build durable resources such as resilience and social connectedness. This intervention involves finding intentional actions to increase the routine experience of positive emotions.

Table 2. Positive core themes.

Theme	Sample comments
Strong sense of teamwork	Loyalty and willingness to help in times of crunch All pitch in and help – no back-stabbing People working so close, so cooperative, not giving up till problem solved
Remote sites acting as one team	Balance different cultures to get the best of all Geographic range helps us provide top notch customer service
Strong sense of shared and valued purpose	What we do matters to the larger world We have influence.
Leadership with proper focus	Constructive focus on what's right and what's needed to make it happen, not on how to fix broken things. Well-planned deliverables – good use of our time
Exploration and taking risk	Imagination bounded by pragmatism and business High energy, space to think, outlandish comments valued

I recommend finding a way to describe the importance of positive emotion that makes sense to your particular group. Here's an example that worked well for software developers:

> Imagine a design meeting involving multiple constituencies with conflicting goals. If the most powerful group prevails, the other groups will put no energy into making the solution work and may spend energy undermining it. How do you find a solution that all can accept?

> Since positive emotion makes people more open-minded and creative, spending time to establish shared positive emotion at the beginning of the meeting can increase the probability of finding an acceptable middle ground.

We talked explicitly about the conditions that affect the emotions that people experience during the day. We also talked about how negative emotions are more salient than positive ones. For example, people tend to focus on what is going wrong at the moment and not take time to acknowledge what goes right. To combat the overshadowing nature of problems, leaders decided they could share their broader view of group progress to help others see beyond their own setbacks.

There is always a danger that a focus on positive emotion will be interpreted as disallowing negative feedback. So it is important to help people see that they can be honest about what is not right. Without appropriate negative feedback, people do not get the information they need to improve and may begin to doubt the sincerity of positive feedback. We therefore discussed what makes negative feedback effective. According to Fredrickson and Losada (2005), it is specific to a situation, includes suggestions, and is not personal.

Possible brainstorming prompts include:

- What actions can we take to increase the level of positive emotion in our day-to-day work lives?
- How can we make sure negative feedback is still given when needed?
- How can we make negative feedback more effective?

Ideas that emerged from brainstorming included starting meetings by celebrating things that are going well, creating more opportunities to laugh together, and broadly sharing appreciation from customers. There was great interest in Rath's (2006) statement that people with a best friend at work are seven times more likely to be engaged in their jobs.

Enable flow

Flow is the state of being so intensely involved in a challenging activity that one loses self-consciousness and may lose track of time. Frequent experiences of flow at work lead to higher productivity, innovation, and employee development (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993, 2004). I found that most people have experienced flow and miss it when it is not happening. While flow cannot be achieved on command, there are qualities of activities that make the experience more likely. According to Csikszentmihalyi (1993), these include:

1. *Clear goals* with easily discernable expectations and rules;
2. A high degree of *concentration* on a limited field of attention for sufficient periods of time;
3. Direct and immediate *feedback* on successes and failures in the course of the activity, so that behavior can be adjusted as needed;
4. *Balance* between ability level and challenge making the activity neither too easy nor too difficult;
5. A sense of personal *control* over the activity.

After discussing the importance of the balance between ability and challenge, I found people very interested in Csikszentmihalyi's flow channel diagram in Figure 1 as a visual aid in job coaching discussions between employees and supervisors. While people generally understood the need for this balance, most did not realise how often adjustments are required because challenges and skills are dynamic and change at different rates. Points A2 and A3, boredom and anxiety, tend to be where people disengage from their jobs and start looking elsewhere for satisfaction. A supervisor can point to the flow channel picture and ask, 'Where are you right now? If bored, let's acknowledge increased skills and discuss ways to increase challenge. If anxious, let's find ways to boost skills, such as finding an appropriate temporary mentor, finding a partner with appropriate strengths, breaking the task into manageable pieces, or finding a role model.'

We also talked about the importance of understanding and exercising personal strengths as a means of increasing the probability of flow (Linley, 2008; Seligman, 2002).

A possible brainstorming prompt is:

- What actions can we take as a group to increase the frequency of flow experiences?

One group brainstormed about finding time for concentration because they felt their days were so fragmented by meetings that they had little time for focused attention. They generated numerous ideas for improving meeting practices.

Wesson and Boniwell (2007) describe additional ways to increase the likelihood of flow.

Deal effectively with negative factors

People wish many things about work were different. For example, some people yearn for the job security of earlier decades. When people focus on factors they cannot change, they start to believe they can do nothing to make things better. To combat such discouragement, I found it helpful to teach resilience skills (Reivich & Shatté, 2003; Schneider, 2001; Seligman, 1998), particularly *reframing*, or selecting interpretations of events that lead to creative responses and optimism rather than helplessness and anger. Reframing requires imagination and lends itself well to group brainstorming. Here are steps that people can use for reframing:
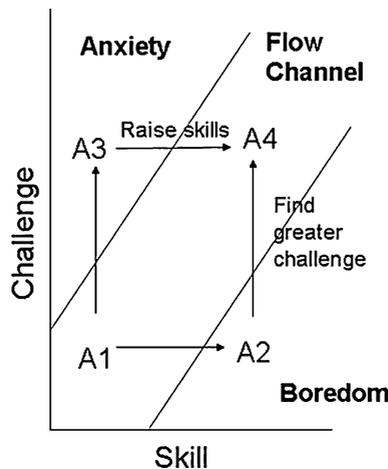

Figure 1. Flow channel. Reprinted with permission from Csikszentmihalyi (1993, p. 70).

1. Watch for times when you are complaining about things you cannot change;
2. Summarise your instinctive negative reaction briefly;
3. Brainstorm alternative reactions that could also be true and that leave you in a more positive position. Perhaps start with really absurd interpretations that make people laugh, creating a positive emotion that broadens the scope of ideas considered;
4. Notice how you take back control of your own state of mind.

The example below shows the results of reframing by a group that had been venting about annual reviews:

Instinctive reaction: Reviews are way too tough, make it too competitive; working extremely hard and not getting what you believe you deserve is demoralising.

Reframed reaction: Focus on what's really important to you and put the rating in perspective. Only you know what makes you happy. Prioritise your career and life based on that.

Actionable items:

1. Work with manager to define a job that you actually WANT to do and ENJOY doing based on your strengths and skill set;
2. Ask for time for education and/or opportunities to work with other groups;
3. If position and money are your motivation and you don't mind the sacrifices it will take, work with your manager to focus your career path to get where you want to go.

When a group understands reframing, one person can interrupt venting and challenge the rest to think about other ways to interpret the situation.

Celebrate good events effectively

When good things happen, how much joy and energy do people experience? In many work environments, the answer is precious little. Finding more effective ways to celebrate goal achievement can lead to greater personal satisfaction and greater trust among team members (Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004).

It is helpful to teach people the value of 'capitalising' or intentionally elaborating on positive events with other trusted people. Retelling a positive event out loud makes it easier to remember and enhances the good feelings associated with it (Gable et al., 2004). The way others respond is also important. Gable et al. describe four ways to respond as shown in Figure 2. A response can be either active or passive and either constructive or destructive. Only active and constructive responding yields benefits to the relationship.

Active Constructive = Drawing the person out "That's great news! Tell me more."	Active Destructive = Quashing the event "More stress! I don't envy you."
Passive Constructive = Giving quiet and flat support "That's nice."	Passive Destructive = Ignoring the event "Listen to what happened to me."

Figure 2.   Four ways to respond to good news. Based on Gable et al. (2004).

For a short video clip that explains active and constructive responding, see Seligman (2008).

People may need to learn how to give more effective praise. Praise that focuses on specific behavior, such as 'You worked hard last week to get so much done!' or 'You thought of a terrific way to help that person,' is much more effective than global assessments, such as 'You are so smart!' or 'You are so kind!' Carol Dweck (2006) has shown that specific praise is more motivating, increases confidence more, and is more likely to lead to mastery behavior, while generalisations promote avoidance of challenge and fear of failure. People can practice giving effective praise by observing themselves for a period of time, detecting any global assessments, and rephrasing them in more specific terms.

Possible brainstorming prompts include:

- What can we do to get more out of positive events?
- How can we give more effective positive feedback?

One group decided to end meetings with round robin reviews of successes, giving everyone a chance to celebrate out loud. Another group established a large project map for people to mark their own progress and observe the progress of others.

Conclusion

Employee well-being and engagement are related to business outcomes such as higher customer loyalty, profit, productivity, and employee retention (Harter, Schmidt, & Keyes,

Table 3. Positive intervention summary.

Positive intervention	Theory	Example actions
Search for the positive core	Appreciative Inquiry	Ask questions about the best of what is. Look for themes and collect stories.
Intentionally create more positive emotion.	Positive emotion *broadens* behavior and *builds* resources.	Start and end meetings positively, Encourage laughter and friendships.
Increase conditions that enable flow.	Flow is a highly desirable state that enhances job satisfaction.	Set reasonable goals Conserve time to concentrate Establish means of frequent feedback
Deal effectively with negative situations.	Realistic optimism and resilience are beneficial and can be learned.	Limit venting. Acknowledge negative things. Practice reframing.
Celebrate positive events and situations effectively.	Reviewing positive events out loud makes them more salient; Specific praise is better than generalisations.	Celebrate positive events in words. Help others relive good events. Show approval with specific praise.

2004). Empirically validated positive interventions can lead to greater employee well-being, help organisations flourish, and thus contribute directly to the bottom line.

Many workers exhibit learned helplessness (Peterson, Maier & Seligman, 1995) concerning their jobs, believing they have no control and whatever they do is futile. They remain passive in harmful situations even when they have the power to change things for the better.

Coaches can remind people that they are not helpless. Even though there are distressing aspects of any job that cannot be changed, individuals still have the ability to choose where they put their focus, remember strengths, interpret things positively, and choose responses that energise them rather than deplete them. The interventions described in this paper are summarised in Table 3. They are based on universal principles of human well-being. They are not specific to this business environment, nor even specific to business. They could work equally well in schools or hospitals. Coaches can help groups understand how these principles apply to them and how to implement such interventions in ways that are practical and effective in their particular work environments.

Changing habits requires conscious practice until new behaviors become established. To achieve lasting change, ongoing coaching may be required to remind people repeatedly of the choices they can make.

Notes on contributors

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