

# Applying Positive Psychology in Project Management

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## Abstract

In this paper we will argue that Project management is missing the link with recent developments in the field of psychology and is therefore missing opportunities to improve the effectiveness of project managers when it comes to behavioral competences. The main development that is missed by the project management field is the development of the scientific study of positive psychology. In this study we describe the most relevant results for project management of positive psychology and give guidelines for the practical use of these knowledge. Most important findings include that positive affect leads to far better performing teammembers. Four important approaches to improve individual and teamperformance are described: the stimulation of positive goals, positive emotions, positive relations and a strength based approach. We conclude by stating that project managers should use the results of positive psychology research in order to improve their effectiveness.

## Keywords

Positive psychology, behavior, behavioral competences, leadership, project management.

## 1. Introduction

The field of project management is a field that can use the insights of many other professional and scientific fields. E.g. when it comes to the technical competences it can rely on the developments in the field of Business Administration. When it comes to the behavioural competences the field of psychology is the main source of information. As has been stated in during the last IPMA conference in Helsinki, the behavioural competences are increasingly seen as crucial for a successful project. It is therefore surprising to see that one of the most profound recent developments in psychology, the rise of positive psychology, is missed in the project management field. For example: searching the International Journal of Project management editions of the last 10 years on 'positive psychology' leads to no hits at all (25<sup>th</sup> of May, 2010), and so far we know of only one project management course where positive psychology is an explicit part of the content.

This is even more surprising when we look at the characteristics of a project. The project management Institute (PMI) defines a project as follows: 'A project is a temporary endeavour undertaken to create a unique product or service'. This means a project is characterised by (among others): the temporary and unique nature of the work that is done. And from an organisational view: the work is done without the formal powers of the line manager (Zwikael, 2009). These characteristics show the difficulties of managing a project, it is temporary, often with a new group of people, who have to form a team, which can lead to intense group dynamics. It is unique, asking for creativity and problem solving (and often conflict handling) and the project manager often has no, or little formal power, asking for good motivation techniques.

Positive psychology is defined as 'The scientific study of positive experiences, and positive individual traits, and the institutions that facilitate their development' (Duckworth, Steen and Seligman, 2005). It's focusing on 'positive' questions like 'why are people happy', 'what are the benefits of being happy' or 'why are people flourishing at their work'. The answers to these questions are very useful for project managers since they provide us with insight in crucial project management problems like 'how do I motivate without formal power?' Or 'how can I stimulate creativity to deal with the unique challenges that many projects face?'

## 2. Positive psychology, the new research field in psychology, an introduction to the field

Positive psychology is formally coined by Martin Seligman, the former President of the American Psychological Association with his presidential address at the yearly conference of the APA in 1998 (Seligman, 1998). Until that moment the main aim of psychology was to cure psychological diseases and to solve other problems. But solving the problems of people, like a depression, doesn't make them happy; it just makes them not unhappy.

Seligman argued that this is important but that there is another side to the story as well (Seligman, 2005). This other question is why people are happy and flourish. Until his famous speech there was very little research on this topic and it was scattered and fragmented. After his speech a growing number of people and organisations started to research topics in this new field.

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A part of the research is specifically focused on the relation between positive psychology, work and organisations. This is done using different names and accents, like the Positive Organizational Behaviour (POB) movement, with a focus on building human strengths, with Fred Luthans as pioneer ( Nelson and Cooper, 2007). Another movement is the Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) movement with Kim Cameron as leading figure, POS searching for positive human deviance in organisations (Cameron, Dutton and Quin, 2003).

For the last years the number of publications in this field is growing and the supporting infrastructure is developing with two peer reviewed magazines (journal of Positive Psychology and the journal of happiness studies), With its own organization (the International Positive Psychology Association, IPPA), its own conferences (like the European and the World Conference on Positive Psychology) and various research centres dedicated to this topic (e.g. the Positive Psychology Centre at Pennsylvania University or the PEPLab at the University of North Carolina).

## **2.1 Basic assumption**

The basic assumption of positive psychology is that you should focus on what goes well, instead (or next to) a focus on what goes wrong (Seligman, 1998). This doesn't mean that we should totally neglect problems, but people are tending to weight negative aspects as more important compared to positive aspects (Seligman, 2005; Wright and Lopez, 2005), which lead people to pay little attention to what goes well.

As Albert Einstein said: 'We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.' If you want to find solutions, you should search for solutions, not for problems. The idea is that solving problems does normally not lead to excellent project teams or happy people, it just leads to project teams without problems. To make people and teams flourish you have study what goes well. A study on the performance of bowlers showed that bowlers who watched themselves being successful improved significantly more than those who saw them self fail (Kirschenbaum, 1984). Solution Focused Working (Glass and Psychol, 2009) and Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider and Sekerka, 2003) are a good examples of this practice.

Extra evidence is provided by research suggesting that positive and negative emotions are not two sides of a continuum but are actually to different continua (Seligman, 2002). One continuum for positive emotions and another one for negative emotions. The implication is that reducing negative emotions does not automatically lead to positive emotions. The same counts for behaviour in project teams, when you reduce the number of 'negative behaviours' there's not an automatic increase in positive behaviour, and there is no automatic flourishing of an excellent team.

## **3. Most important results for project management**

Research in positive psychology leads to interesting results, the question is, whether it produces results that are relevant for project management as well? In this chapter we will answer this question.

The most important result of the positive psychology research is the overwhelming amount of evidence that shows a relationship between positive affect and positive results for workers.

It turns out that positive affect leads to more productive workers (Zelenmski, Murphy and Jenkins, 2008), they spent less time on sick leave, worker more hours and are less likely to leave for another job (Price-Jones, 2010). Staw and Barsade (1993) showed in an experiment that managers who have a positive disposition are better both in decision making and in interpersonal tasks.

Various studies show that positive emotions lead to the perception of 'lower boundaries' between people (Johnson and Frederickson, 2005; Waugh and Frederickson, 2006). People tend to feel more related to one another, which is of course stimulating cooperation e.g. in project teams. Other studies show that positive affect, reduces the perceived distance between in group and out-group, and people are more likely to include others in their group (Dovido, Gaertner, Isen en Lowerance, 1995; Isen en Daubman, 1984, Uruda and Miller, 2000; Webster, Nelson, 2005), and other social and prosocial behavior (Lyubomirsky, King and Diener, 2005).

Especially the studies that show that positive affect leads to more sociable behaviour and a decrease in perceived distance between self and others are interesting for project managers, since these effects will stimulate collaborative behavior, which is important for (project) team success (Hoegl and Gemuenden, 2001).

Other studies show that positive affect leads to better negotiation skills (Carnevale and Isen, 1986) and less conflict (Barsade, Ward, turner and Sonnenfeld, 2000).

Since projects are dealing with unique problems, it's important that creativity and problem solving among project members (and project managers) is being stimulated. Positive affect, leads to better problem solving, higher creativity and a better performance on complex mental tasks (Estrada, Isen and Young, 1997; Isen, Daubman and Nowicki, 1987). Although some studies suggest that people in a negative mood solve logical problems better (Melton, 1995), see (Lyubomirsky, King and Diener, 2005 and Seligman 2002) for a discussion on this topic.

Another interesting result comes from George (1990) and George and Brief (1992). In their studies they show the positive effect of positive emotions on group effectiveness and satisfaction. These conclusions make positive emotions an interesting topic to improve project team performance and project success.

Other positive effects of positive affect are a higher income, better supervisory evaluations, higher job satisfaction and a better task performance (Lyubomirsky, King and Diener, 2005).

Overall, we can conclude that positive emotions lead to a better performing project member and project manager. Positive emotions are not (only) the result of more successful behaviour, but are the source of successful behaviour as well, as is shown in experimental and longitudinal studies (Boehm and Lyubomirsky, 2008). Positive emotions lead to a broader perspective on the world around us and can stimulate positive relations and better skills (Frederickson, 2001). They are the opposite of negative emotions (e.g. stress and fear) that lead to a narrowing of our perspective and a reduction of positive relationships and skill application. This leads us to an important question, how can this knowledge be applied in project management?

#### **4. The application of positive psychology in project management**

Glebar and Carmeli (2009) state that team dynamics are positively related to project management performance. The knowledge of positive psychology can be used in various ways to improve individual and team performance of project management teams.

The large empirical evidence can be organized in 4 categories which are relevant for the field of project management: positive meaning, positive emotions, positive relations and building on positive strengths.

##### **4.1 Positive goals, which provide meaning to the job**

One important feature for project members to fulfil their work in a positive way and to increase the chances of high performance and flourishing is the definition of inspiring project goals that are linked with the personal goals of these persons (Prat and Ashforth, 2003; Wrzesniewski, 2003). A project should have meaning for the project members, a purpose more than earning money. Having goals in life and especially meaningful goals leads to increased positive affect, with the results as described before.

A second positive effect of well chosen goals is that it improves intrinsic motivation, which is often seen as more powerful than extrinsic rewards.

For the performance of the team members it is important that the goal the team is working on is meaningful to them and linking to their purpose in life. This means that it relates to higher values. E.g. the goal to organize a conference without problems is not providing a lot of meaning. The goal to organize a conference where people can learn about a topic and improve their professional lives can be meaningful to people.

A second step is to link concrete actions within the project taken on a daily basis to the meaning of the project. This gives daily business meaning and assures that the meaning of the project stays in focus.

##### **4.2 Positive emotions, to improve performance**

As described earlier, positive emotions lead to a lot of different positive effects. This observation puts the role of the project manager in a different perspective. The project manager is not only responsible for proper planning, good contacts with stakeholders etc., but he should take responsibility for the emotional state of his project members (and himself!) as well (Cerny, 2009). This is different from the current competences as described by IPMA, even the behavioural competences, it is actually an extra competency of a good functioning project manager.

Since positive emotions can be so powerful, investing in them can be very fruitful. Invest in positive emotions in teams, especially when cooperation is important or when negotiations, conflicts or creativity is on the agenda. Stimulation of positive emotions can be applied during the whole project to increase a broader perspective on problems and to increase cooperation between team members. This can be fruitful during stressful periods as often seen in projects (Aitken and Crawford, 2007; Gallstedt, 2002; Asquin, Garel and Picq, 2010), when people tend to narrow their perspective and therefore are often less capable to creatively solve problems. People tend to cope with stress in a better way when they experience and show positive emotions (Folkman, 1997; Martin, Kuiper, Olinger and Dance, 1993).

A simple but proven intervention is to deliberately pay attention to positive experiences that are happening like good things that happen (Seligman, Steen, Park and Peterson, 2005), experiences you can be grateful for (Emmons and Cullough, 2003) or acts of kindness (Otaka, Shima, Tanaka-Matsumi, Otsui and Frederickson, 2006). Describing and counting them has proven to result in an increase in positive emotions.

Another way to influence the emotions of project members is by using emotional contagion. Emotional contagion is the process in which group members copy the feeling that other team members show non verbally (Ashkanasy and Ashton-James, 2007). This can be used by project managers to influence the emotions of their team. A project manager who shows positive emotions, creates positive emotions among group members.

### **4.3 Positive relations, to stimulate cooperation in the team**

Positive emotions lead to better and more positive relationships, it is easier for people to cooperate. An interesting study by Losada and Heaphy (2004) shows the positive effects of a positive working environment. Losada and Heaphy studied communication in management teams. They compared successful management teams with less successful management teams, looking at feedback from both employees as managers, client satisfaction and profits. The teams with the highest scores on team performance used the most 'positive' language (supportive, encouraging, helpful, compliments, appreciative). The most successful teams had a ratio of 5.6:1 between positive and negative language statements. The lowest performing teams had a ratio of 0.36:1.

The study of Losada and Heaphy shows the effect of the stimulation of positive relations within teams and the direct effect on the productivity (profitability) of these teams.<sup>2</sup> They did not find a complete lack of negative language in the successful teams, there was critical feedback and criticism in the high performing teams, but these negative language was outnumbered or compensated by positive language. Frederickson and Losada (2005) later discovered that a ratio of 3-9 positive statements versus 1 negative statements is related to the highest performing teams.

Another interesting aspect is pointed out by Kim Cameron (2008), he shows that positive relations are primarily effective when people have the ability to give instead of receive. The contributions that are made to others lead to the positive effect of social relations. It is therefore useful as a project manager to promote helpfulness among project members.

### **4.4 A strength based approach, to fully use the capacities of team members and motivate them**

An important element of positive psychology is the focus on what goes well, on strengths instead of weaknesses (Clifton and Harter, 2003). This perspective is translated in what is called the strength approach. The main idea is that putting your strengths to work is far more productive and rewarding compared to working on your weaknesses (Mroz and Quinn, 2010). Working on strengths will give the project member a change to excel, working on weaknesses only a change to become competent.

The focus on strengths seems to be effective through three different mechanisms.

The first is the optimal use of qualities of the person, when you focus on strengths of people you are capable to use project members in the most productive way.

The second one is the motivating result of using ones strength. For most people it is more motivating to be good at a job instead of being mediocre or bad at it. This is true as long as there still is some challenge in the task.

The third one is the self fulfilling prophecy of labelling. An experiment by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) is providing evidence for this last mechanism. The researchers divided a school class at random in two groups, one group was labelled as above average intelligent and the other group was labelled as below average intelligent. The teacher was provided with a list with smart and dumb children, without knowing that they were divided at random. After a year the 'smart' students significantly performed better compared to the 'dumb' students. The effect is explained by the different approaches of the teachers, who were treating the smart students in a different (more stimulating) way compared to the dumb students, thereby making the focus on strength versus weaknesses a self fulfilling prophecy and showing the effect of labelling on strength (Wright and Lopez, 2005). The same result is likely to happen when a project manager focuses on the strengths of his project member.

For project managers this means that they should be well aware of their own strengths (Morris and Garrett, 2010) and of the strengths of their project members. This can be done by formal tests like the VIA<sup>3</sup> or the Strength finder<sup>4</sup> from the Gallup group, or by interviewing and observing people.

But this is not all; project managers should build tasks around people, instead of building people around tasks. This leads to a new perspective on the division of work and the way the work breakdown structure (WBS) is being translated into tasks for project members. Not the WBS is the starting point for planning, but the strengths and availability of individual team members. And project managers should be aware of the feedback they give. When a strength based approach is being used it's important to focus feedback on the improvement of strengths, rather than the improvement of weaknesses.

## **5. Discussion and conclusion**

The positive psychology movement provides useful knowledge to improve the understanding and practice of project management. The lack of attention of the project management community for this development is therefore a pity. But still there are questions and problems to be solved.

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<sup>2</sup> Losada en Heaphy used advanced statistical methods in order to establish casual relations instead of correlation.

<sup>3</sup> VIA survey freely assessible through: <http://www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu> or <http://www.viacharacter.org>.

<sup>4</sup> Only assessible with a special code provided with one of the Books of the Gallup group about strengths.

The first problem is that positive psychology is profiling itself as a scientific movement. The advantage of this approach is that it provides a very good foundation for knowledge development. There is relatively little research on the application of this scientific knowledge.

A second problem is the risk of simplicity. Positive psychology is deliberately focusing on positive exceptions and positive emotions. This perspective has proven to be fruitful but can be dangerous when copied in a simplistic way. Project management (and actually the whole world) is not only about positive emotions and positive exceptions (otherwise it wouldn't be called 'exceptions'). When using the benefits of positive psychology we shouldn't abandon the knowledge from traditional psychology (see Held, 2004).

Using positive psychology is asking for a shift in perspective for many project managers. It asks them to put far more emphasis on the search and development of strengths. It asks for a project manager who can divide work based on strengths instead of dividing on basis of work breakdown structure and it asks for a project manager who knows his own strengths and weaknesses. It also asks for a project manager who deliberately influences the emotions of his project members and who invests in the use of positive language and a positive attitude towards his project members, all in order to improve the teamwork and the individual performance of his project members. And as an extra bonus, using the knowledge of positive psychology doesn't only improve projects, but it increases the happiness of the project managers and project members as well. And that's a goal worth pursuing on its own, whether it pays off or not.

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