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Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Applied Positive Psychology

Finding happiness at work and at home

sowing seeds

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Introduction

Public service organisations in Wales are constantly striving to deliver the highest quality services in the most effective ways, focusing on using all resources available in the best ways possible and by using tried and tested methods to make this happen: strategic planning, restructure, streamlining, service design, job planning and so on.

While all these 'hard' systems support organisational development, there is a growing body of research that suggests a more inside-out approach to improving performance of individuals and organisations. This edition of Sowing Seeds introduces the concept of positive psychology, and offers some top tips for using this, not only in the workplace but also in our everyday lives.

The 'science bit'

"Always look on the bright side of life"

(Monty Python)

Success – we read about it, talk about it, write it into our strategies and plans, set targets to determine it and our politicians, the media and service users hold us to account for it and we think that when we achieve it both personally and professionally we will be happy.

According to the latest neuroscience research it is actually the other way around and that it is our happiness that leads to our success. In his 2011 book, 'The Happiness Advantage', Shawn Achor presents the idea that success flows from happiness and he is in good company, other psychologists from across the globe are creating a ground swell of evidence based research to prove how the power of positive psychology in our home and working life can benefit us as individuals and families. By taking this approach we can also impact on the job we do, the people we work with and ultimately our organisations.

Martin Seligman, the founder of positive psychology, and his work on Values in Action and his latest research into the concept of flourish, Langer and her work on ageing, Carl Dweck and the concept of mindset, goals and how to give feedback and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and the concept of flow which Academi Wales has been using with the public service and with the Managing Change Successfully programme over recent years, all provide useful evidence based techniques for applying positive psychology in aspects of our lives.

"When organisations institute positive practices they achieve significantly higher levels of effectiveness – including productivity levels, financial performance, staff engagement and user satisfaction"

(Cameron Journal of Applied Behavioural Science)

Our behaviours matter

The belief that our behaviour matters is essential to our wellbeing and a foundation of positive psychology. Many of the modern psychologists started their careers focusing on the illness model of mental health. It was Seligman who wanted to know how psychology could be used as a 'wellness' approach to help high functioning people to become even better and to flourish in all aspects of their lives.

Case study – Learned helplessness

Fire and Rescue Service

In a public service organisation with more than 6,000 emergency vehicles, the decision was taken at executive level that the Chief Officer would take daily responsibility and control of their movements. In the short term and during periods of high stress situations this worked well, however during the average daily activities and normal running of the service, the removal of the decision making process led to a reduction in the staff thinking for themselves, feeling a lack of influence and inability to impact on decisions. The outcome in the organisation was increased absenteeism and reduction in engagement and overall wellbeing. The organisation was operating in a state of 'learned helplessness'.

Learned helplessness in our organisations is real, we only need look at the most recent staff surveys and national workforce surveys to give an insight into engagement and empowerment levels. How can we help people move to a more positive outlook and learn optimism instead? How do we change

our behaviour, even in the smallest way to get a more positive result?

Research shows that optimism wins time over time in life – glass half full – and focusing on 'what went well' (see *Top tips, page 11*) rather than on the stresses of the day is proven to increase our feelings of happiness. Every time we remember what went well our brains get a small release of dopamine and strengthen the reward and happiness circuits, believing life will get slightly better by our own actions triggers an upward success spiral.

When we focus on our recent successes, the learning centres of the brain quite literally open up and we are much more likely to see opportunities. This change in our brains also manifests physically; when we sense fear or are worried we tend to narrow our eyes and close ourselves down, we become physically smaller. By contrast when we feel confident we hold our heads higher, our eyes open wider and the field of vision actually becomes wider as the learning centres of our brains open up to possibilities and opportunities. There is a place for negative but it must be held in proportion to the positive.

Our ability to learn optimism is increased when we know where to place our attention, if we look for opportunity we are more likely to see it. In 1956, George Miller at Harvard discovered the concept of 7 ± 2 (seven plus or minus two). The cognitive part of our brain, the pre-frontal cortex, is only able to focus on seven pieces of information at any time, well $7 +$ or $- 2$ because a genius might be able to focus on nine and if you've had a bad start to the day or are worried about something your capacity might be reduced to five.

In 1956 George Miller did not have access to the MRI technology we have today and more modern findings suggest that we can actually hold four ideas, two choices and one activity in our mind at any time. The four ideas are held almost like thumbnail images and the two choices limit may explain why we find it difficult to deal with the huge amount of choice we have today. One activity is all our brains can actually focus on which brings into question the pressure of modern job roles which require us to multitask more and more to get through the workloads of the day. When we see someone who seems able to do more than one activity and hold more than four ideas in mind we now know they have handed over one of the activities to the more ancient parts of the brain and made that skill unconscious, this allows our brain to consciously choose to focus on another activity and if this is one that creates a positive outcome for us we are on track to learn optimism (see *Top tips, Choose positive outcomes, page 11*).

“Smile and the world smiles with you”

(Stanley Gordon West)

‘Behaviour begets behaviour’, or put another way, ‘smile and the world smiles with you’. We are programmed to mimic others, especially those similar or of higher social status to ourselves, this is why trends spread, why organisations have cultures and dress codes and why we like people like us. How we think directly impacts on the body, this is why our behaviour matters so much, if we feel a sense of control our wellbeing improves and we have a chance to learn optimism.

Our body and mind are the same system, the thoughts in our mind directly influence the cells in our body, so it’s not surprising to find that the most stress related illnesses are found at the lowest levels of our organisational structures, those who can often feel they have the least say and control over their destiny. Increasing our sense of personal control, involvement and say over what happens to us is the route to a positive outlook and wellbeing (see *Top tips, Increase personal control, page 11*).

Case study – Regaining personal control

Nursing/care homes

When older people are admitted to nursing and care homes, they can lose their independence – often personal privacy is comprised, determined by staff levels and a daily rota, and someone else decides when and what they eat. This loss of independence and personal control has been proved to have a negative impact on the rate of decline. In public services we endeavour to keep people independent and in their homes as long as possible. Where no option other than a care home exists, giving residents the smallest of choices has a positive impact on maintaining life control and independence, this can include allowing residents to choose when they have visitors and letting residents choose to look after a pot plant can add as much as seven and half years to life.

Our communications matter

The belief that our behaviours matter is essential for us to move to a space of learned optimism, the effects of this are both reinforced and increased when we also focus on our communication by changing the positive:negative ratio of our conversations.

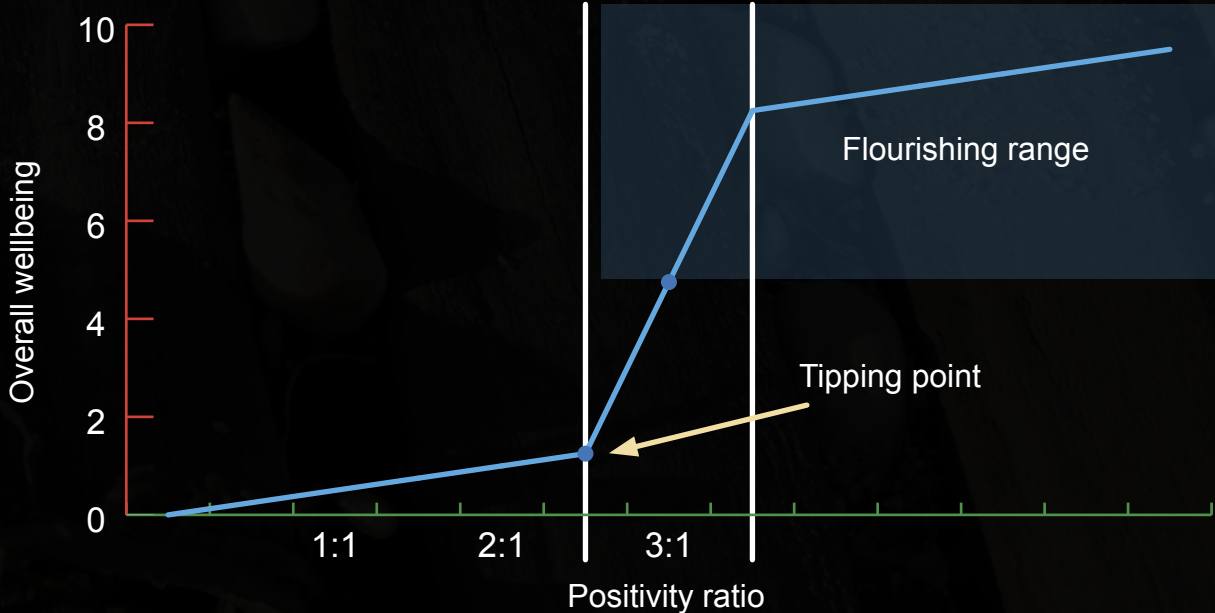
Marcial Losada found during his research at the University of North Carolina that most workplaces had a ratio of 1.25:1 positive:negative comments, meaning that for every 1.25 positive piece of feedback or discussion a negative discussion or criticism would also be heard. Through a range of mathematics and linguistics, Losada determined that the ratio needed to be 3:1 or higher to have a positive effect. Organisations that have implemented the practice have been able to reduce accidents, increase positivity and increase staff satisfaction, improving bottom line results. Google, Apple and IBM all invest in the concept.

It should be noted that the ratio is 3:1, not 3:0 and that this is the place for the negative. We have an automatic network in our brains for the negative, the ancient parts of our brains evolved over millions of years to respond to threats without thought or delay. We have no similar system for the positive and opportunities in life, and we know from modern research that builds on Miller's 1956 study, how much smaller the capacity of the pre frontal cortex part of our brains really are.

“Life gives us the negative, it's up to us to find the positive”

(Professor Barbara Fredrikson)

3:1 positive comments are the tipping point and by using the Losada Ratio to increase communication, including non-verbal communications such as nodding the head in support, can transform the workplace (see *Top tips, Using 3:1 at work, page 11*).



**Case study – Using the positive:
negative ratio**

Secondary School Education

In order to focus the behaviour of secondary school children, a number of comprehensive schools in West Wales have adopted a suite of positive psychology and mindfulness approaches with their students. Students are asked to write down three things they admire about each other and to focus on each others strengths and qualities, these are then fed back and students encourage each other to be the best of themselves. The combined approaches within the schools have resulted in increased attendance rates, improvement in grades and exam results and engagement and wellbeing levels of the students.

The Losada Ratio applies at home as well as at work, at home however the ratio is higher, needing a 5:1 positive:negative ratio of interactions. To maintain close supportive and loving relationships, five positive interactions are needed for every negative reaction.

Our relationships matter

The belief that our behaviours and our communications matter are two of the essential parts of applying positive psychology into our lives, our relationships play an important part in our ability to turn these new behaviours into habits, this is true of our relationships at home as well as in the workplace. We are one whole being and our behaviours spill from one environment into the other.

Based on his initial research into personal relationships, the work of John Gottman is now also being applied to work based relationships. Gottman identified a number of patterns that cause problems in relationships – it is important to note that Gottman identified that men and women tend to act differently in these patterns, these are generalisations and are therefore not always true but the research does show gender bias.

Nearly all arguments start with ‘the harsh start up’ comment, this could be something the other person forgot to do, a dismissive comment or perceived ‘put down’, once this takes place Gottman’s pattern known as the ‘Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse’ begins.

- 1. Criticism** – the research shows that women are more likely to follow the harsh start up with a criticism. Emotional intelligence suggests men become more quickly emotionally overwhelmed and cannot cope with the threat caused by the critical comment.
- 2. Contempt** – men tend to respond to criticism with contempt, perhaps the requested task was too menial or they

would have carried it out in their own time. The criticism is often rebuffed with a contemptuous comment.

- 3. Defensiveness** – the next reaction is defensiveness and an attempt to explain the request for the initial action. Again more often seen by Gottman from women, but far from exclusively theirs, the contemptuous remark causes the other party to justify and explain their behaviour.
- 4. Stonewalling** – generally a more male trait because by this stage emotions have been raised and as a coping method one or other of the parties shuts down. Stonewalling ends the conversation because one or both parties now refuse to interact.

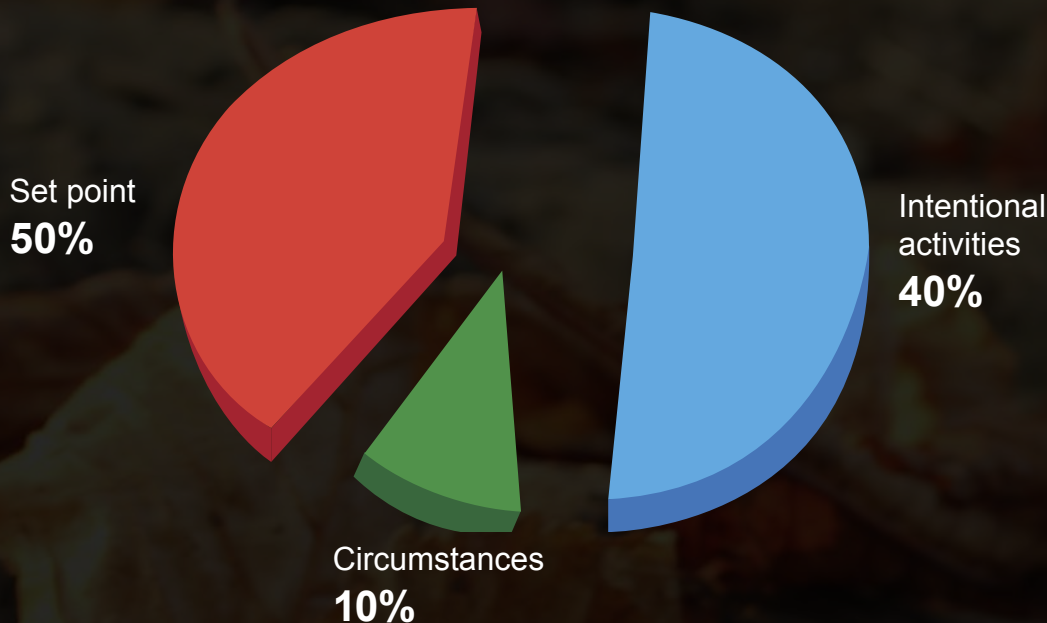
We can often see stonewalling behaviour in the workplace, this may be caused by a relationship from home or work, our feelings often stay with us long beyond the interaction that caused them.

To increase our positive:negative ratio and to be able to reach the 3:1 and 5:1 we must practice avoiding ‘the harsh start up’ and understand the feelings that form part of the full meaning of positive psychology. Barbara Fredrikson suggests that happiness and positivity are made up of ten feelings: joy, gratitude, serenity, pride, interest, hope, love, awe, inspiration and amusement. We need to bring these into our relationships both at home and work if we are to create learned optimism and avoid the four horsemen pattern.

Conclusion

Our happiness matters

What determines happiness?



The basic formula is: set point + voluntary actions (intentional activities) + conditions (circumstances) = happiness.

We have a genetic happiness set point, some people have higher set points than others but all set points are moveable within a certain range and equate to about 50% of our happiness. If you want to learn about your set point (your personal positivity ratio) the website of Prof Barbara Fredrickson allows you to answer a few questions and will help you track your ratio over time – www.postivityratio.com.

The second part of our happiness is concerned with the conditions or circumstances of our life and our day to day experience and make up around 10% of our happiness, these conditions include aspects such as a roof over our heads, friends and social needs and our job.

The final part of the formula, around 40%, is from our intentional activities – the voluntary actions we choose to do. These include hedonistic activities, experiences and mastery activities such as playing instruments, gardening and so on.

Learning to be happier is a state available to all of us, we need to make the effort in our behaviour, our communication and our relationships. Changing and shaping these takes practice and forming them into who we are everyday will make us happier and more successful both personally and professionally.

Tops tips for everyday use at home and in work

To help us to create and sustain a more positive approach this final section provides a series of 'top tips' taken from the research and evidence currently available, using these whenever possible at home and in work can dramatically increase everyone's happiness and success.

- **What went well?** – look for gratitude in the day, identify three things that went well (however small) – set a routine time and include those closest to you in the gratitude process – anyone of any age with any type of personality can express what they enjoyed about their day
- **Choose positive outcomes** – focus on choosing activities that have positive results – identify opportunities and success milestones and celebrate the outcomes through the gratitude process
- **Increase personal control** – find activities that increase personal control – offer choice however small, responsibility for looking after something or someone, the chance to lead, make decisions, determine own working patterns/ environments
- **Using 3:1 at work** – give three pieces of positive feedback to every piece of negative feedback, include verbal and non-verbal communication and focus on three strengths and/or qualities and one thing that could be done better
- **21 the magic number** – the number of days (or repetitions) required to form a new habit is 21, get others to help reach the magic number, write it down, talk about it, take action – the new habit will soon become part of 7 ± 2 behaviour
- **Healthy body, healthy mind** – walking 10,000 steps a day increases the chances of remaining healthy – finding a way to increase exercise at home and in the workplace will contribute to a positive mind
- **The butterfly effect** – give one piece of specific and authentic praise each day and kick start the butterfly effect – as a manager spread a positive feedback culture throughout your organisation
- **Learn to play against yourself** – comparison against others is limiting, set personal goals and share them with close colleagues and loved ones – achievements are multiplied and positive effects spread

If you would like to learn more about positive psychology and its use in the workplace, visit the Academi Wales website: www.academiwales.org.uk

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