

Positive Organizational Scholarship from a Psychotherapeutic Perspective

Joshua Hollis, Mark Cogburn

Student Counseling Center, LSU Health Shreveport, Shreveport, USA

Email: joshua.hollis@lsuhs.edu, mark.cogburn@lsuhs.edu

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Abstract

Many organizational development perspectives and discussions adopt a medical or diagnostic viewpoint of organizational dysfunction, focusing heavily on the numerous deficiencies, mistakes, and other negative aspects of struggling organizations. While any organization has a fair share of problems to address, such an overarching focus on everything that is *wrong* with an organization can create a harmful cycle of pessimism, depression, and low energy that can be difficult to overcome. Positive Organization Scholarship (POS) practitioners, much like the skilled therapist, help organizations shift from a negative, limiting mindset into a positive, open mindset in order to facilitate positive change. This paper explores how cognitive reappraisal strategies common in psychotherapy could be used by POS practitioners to facilitate change and growth in the organizations they serve.

Keywords

Organizational Development, Positive Organizational Scholarship, Psychotherapy, Reframing, Reappraisal, Stoic Philosophy

1. Introduction

Positive Organizational Scholarship from a Psychotherapeutic Perspective

Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) is consistent with cognitive reappraisal strategies used in psychotherapy, which have been shown to reduce or dampen negative emotional responses to negative or stressful situations in individuals [1]. This paper seeks to explore how POS practitioners can utilize reappraisal strategies to effect change within a struggling organization, much like a therapist working with a client experiencing personal suffering and dysfunction.

These strategies, like many other tools and interventions from cognitive psychotherapies, draw heavily upon stoic philosophers such as Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius. In *A Guide to the Good Life: the Ancient Art of Stoic Joy* [2], William B. Irvine outlines several different reframing strategies suggested by the stoics in order to increase positive and diminish negative emotions. Many of these strategies fit nicely within the POS Organizational Development (OD) framework, especially considering that many OD interventions occur in the context of some difficulty or adversity an organization is experiencing. Some of them include 1) the “silver lining” framing, 2) the “storytelling” framing, and 3) the “stoic gods” framing.

POS is also rooted in the field of positive psychology and, as the name implies, focuses largely on the notion of “the positive” with an emphasis on how organizational strengths lead to greater human flourishing. This emphasis on flourishing in POS has brought attention to variables not previously considered in the organizational sciences, such as positive energy, moral capital, flow, inspiration, compassion, and calling [3]. While POS has become an umbrella term describing multiple OD approaches, it can be divided into four predominant themes:

- 1) The adoption of a “unique lens or an alternate perspective”;
- 2) A focus on “extraordinary outcomes” or “positively deviant performance”;
- 3) An “affirmative bias that fosters resourcefulness”;
- 4) The “examination of virtuousness or the best of the human condition” [3].

Like a cognitive psychotherapist, POS practitioners help their sponsors reappraise or reframe their circumstances to facilitate positive change. POS reframing strategies often include helping organizational members reinterpret challenges and obstacles as opportunities for growth and development [4]. In an increasingly more interconnected global economy in which individuals and organizations face existential challenges such as the Covid-19 pandemic, climate change, extreme income inequality, civil unrest, and increased political polarization, the need to reevaluate personal, organizational, and societal priorities is especially salient. The skilled POS practitioner can help their sponsors view challenges and crises as *opportunities* to redefine their values and priorities rather than completely negative and regrettable circumstances.

2. Methods

2.1. Shifting Metrics: Triple Bottom Line

The pursuit to identify alternative measures of success is not limited to individuals in therapy and idealistic politicians hoping to create a better society. Topics like sustainability, community, and environment have also become increasingly prevalent in organizational and institutional contexts since the 1990s when Elkington developed the now widely utilized concept of the organizational “triple bottom line” [5]. The triple bottom line (TBL) expands the organizational metrics of success beyond finances and is conceptualized by either the three P’s (people, planet, and profit) or the three E’s (equity, environment, and economy)

[5]. While profit is something for which most organizations and institutions need to account, TBL advocates for an increased focus on sustainability efforts and social justice. For publicly traded companies, this can often be more difficult and often requires the organization shift from a singular focus on shareholders to a more broadly defined category of stakeholders. This category includes any person or entity who might be directly or indirectly impacted by the actions of the organization, including employees, customers, community members, government agencies, etc. [6].

While this model could be a tough sell for shareholders and managers who are heavily focused on creating profits, there is some anecdotal evidence that the TBL model can have broader economic benefits for a company's traditional bottom line by allowing the company to find profitable niches and adapt to increased consumer demand for companies that are concerned with environmental and social justice issues [7]. This increasing demand is likely creating market advantages for some TBL or "conscious capitalist" CEOs and companies, like John Mackey and Whole Foods, and the success of such companies is prompting other organizations to reconsider their priorities, if only for the purpose of surviving in the current economic atmosphere [8]. Critics of TBL often point to difficulty in objectively measuring the "people" and "planet" aspects of the model, for which there are no universally standardized means. However, others have argued that this lack of rigidity in TBL's general framework makes it more broadly applicable to various types of businesses with different interests across the globe [9]. The authors of this paper believe that TBL provides POS practitioners a means of shifting metrics of success when working with struggling organizations, allowing them more flexibility in identifying opportunities to utilize various cognitive reappraisal strategies from Stoic philosophy.

2.2. Silver Lining Framing

This is perhaps the most commonplace reframing strategy that many people have some familiarity with, and it involves learning to intentionally shift one's focus away from negative aspects of a situation in order to embrace the positive. It is based upon the cliché, "Every cloud has a silver lining," meaning that, with effort and practice, one can learn to find something positive even in the most negative of circumstances [2]. One way to help individuals realize this as a possibility in their present circumstances is to have them consider something negative that occurred to them in the past—something that they would never want to repeat—that they ultimately benefitted or grew from personally in the long run. Nearly everyone will be able to recall some difficult circumstance, perhaps financial ruin or the death of a loved one and identify *something* positive that resulted from it. As a POS OD practitioner, this strategy can be utilized to help members of an organization envision potential positives that can arise from a difficult scenario, such as an organizational shift towards more ethical, humanistic values as proposed in the TBL.

2.3. Storytelling Framing

This strategy, as the name suggests, has people consider how an adverse situation could make for a good story in the future [2]. It capitalizes on the innate human tendency to create stories from difficult experiences in order to foster a sense of meaning and growth. This, like the other strategies, can have a dampening effect on negative emotions in real-time. It also creates an opportunity for people to consider their values and priorities by having them think about who they want to be (e.g., hero, villain, or coward) and how they would like to act (e.g., bravely, indifferently) in the face of their current challenge. In organizational settings, this method allows for organizational members to begin crafting new narratives about who they are as individuals and an organization. Skillful POS practitioners can help members identify storylines that emphasize how they courageously responded to an adversity while maintaining or recommitting to values like those found in the TBL.

2.4. Stoic Gods Reframing

While stoicism is a philosophy, not a religion, many stoic philosophers discussed the role of “the gods” in one’s life. It is uncertain whether the gods they identified correlate to any solidified metaphysical beliefs about the universe. Regardless, these gods serve as a wonderful literary device that fosters resourcefulness in the face of adversity. These gods functioned a lot like coaches who would follow humans around and intentionally place obstacles in their lives in order to facilitate growth [2]. This type of perspective capitalizes on innate competitive urges in many organizational members, and it is consistent with the POS goal of finding opportunities amid challenges [4].

3. Results

POS Research

A responsible OD practitioner, much like a responsible therapist, uses methods that have been shown to be effective empirically. While other OD perspectives such as appreciative inquiry also focus on positive aspects of people and organizations, POS has been heavily focused on research and the collection of empirical data about positive organizational phenomena since its inception [4]. At the center of much of this research is the “heliotropic effect,” which refers to organisms’ preference for positivity over negativity and proposes that the presence of positive stimuli in an organism’s environment is essential to the basic functioning of life [3]. Cameron argues that organizations, much like individual organisms are heavily reliant on positivity in order to survive, and that increased positivity in an organization can produce “upward spirals” that allow them to thrive and function at an optimal level. In other words, positivity breeds positivity which breeds even more positivity [10].

While this viewpoint has been criticized as Pollyannaish by some, a growing body of empirical research has shown that the institutionalization of positive

organizational practices like compassion, forgiveness, fostering meaningfulness, expressing gratitude, showing kindness, and caring for colleagues improved outcomes like profitability, productivity, quality, customer satisfaction, and employee retention [3]. While POS OD practitioners do not typically target outcomes like profitability and productivity as ends in and of themselves, these findings likely make POS OD more attractive to many in leadership roles.

POS OD interventions are typically designed to increase positive behaviors and emotions on various individual and organizational levels, focusing on 1) positive individual attributes, 2) positive emotions, 3) strengths and virtues, 4) positive relationships, 5) positive human resource practices, 6) positive organizational processes, 7) positive leadership and change, 8) a positive lens on problems and challenges, and 9) the expansion of POS into the broader community [3]. Increasing positivity on one or more of these levels can help establish an organizational “abundance culture” that results from improved interpersonal relationships, increased prosocial behavior, and enhanced organizational resilience. Members of this type of culture can shift their focus from basic survival to thriving, increasing the presence of individual well-being, creativity, and innovation in an organization [11].

4. Discussion

A shift from struggling to survive to thriving is a great outcome for therapy clients and POS OD sponsors alike. Throughout this paper, we have compared the POS OD practitioner working with a dysfunctional organization to a therapist working with a troubled client, in the process outlining a broad framework that the POS practitioner can use to affect positive change with their sponsor. This framework includes 1) identifying the problem, 2) reassessing values and priorities, 3) identifying strengths and opportunities, 4) constructively reframing negative circumstances, and 5) developing interventions based on empirical evidence. Furthermore, by adopting the TBL model, organizations can broaden their metrics of success to include social and environmental impact. This can lead to more socially responsible and profitable businesses, and a positive impact on society and the environment. These frameworks give the OD practitioner tangible tools to help their sponsor transform their organization into one that is more resilient, kind, and ethically responsible using POS OD interventions and principles, creating outcomes that are beneficial to individuals, organizations, and the broader society.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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