Introducing Business Communication Students
to the Power of Positivity: Providing one Approach

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ABSTRACT

When interviewed about requirements pertaining to new hires, an executive in the Human Resources Division of Men's Wearhouse responded, "We don't look for people with specific levels of education and experience. We look for one criterion for hiring: optimism. We look for passion, excitement, energy. We want people who enjoy life." Students who are being trained in today's business curriculum are constantly inundated with highly complex subjects such as analytics, finance, and subject related theory. Rarely are they introduced and/or trained in ways to maximize their potential for success regarding their professional outlook once entering the workplace. This paper discusses an approach to include positivity via Positive Psychology, studying "what makes life most worth living" as an enhancement to an undergraduate business curriculum focusing on 1) communication best practices, 2) building professional relationships, and 3) management techniques. Included in this research are professional development techniques that can be easily replicated by educators and/or practitioners.

Keywords: Business Communication, Positivity, Positive Psychology

INTRODUCTION

When interviewed about requirements pertaining to new hires, an executive in the Human Resources Division of Men's Wearhouse responded, "We don't look for people with specific levels of education and experience. We look for one criterion for hiring: optimism. We look for passion, excitement, energy. We want people who enjoy life" (Luthans, 2002). Students who are being trained in today's business curriculum are constantly inundated with highly complex subjects such as analytics, finance, strategy and subject related theory. Rarely are they introduced and/or trained in ways to maximize their potential for success regarding their professional outlook once entering the workplace. Further, there is a dearth of pedagogical examples in how to introduce positivity into the business curriculum. This paper presents a brief literature review of positivity research and provides one way of introducing positivity as an important concept into the business communication classroom.

POSITIVITY LITERATURE REVIEW

Abraham Maslow first coined the term, "positive psychology," in *Motivation and Personality* (1954). However, Martin E. P. Seligman jettisoned positive psychology as a new research approach in 1998, while President of the American Psychological Association (Ben-Shahar, 2007; in Olsen, 2015; Seligman, 2011). Thus, Seligman has been referred to as a pioneer of Positive Psychology (Srinivasan, 2015). Since then, a plethora of studies have centered around the concept of positivity and various outcomes, including individual, business, as well as student outcomes (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008; Becker, et al., 2015; Luthans, 2002; Lucas & Goodman, 2015; Luthans, Luthans, & Jensen, 2012; Luthans & Youssof, 2004; Newes & Stankiewicz, 2012; Olsen, 2015; Wright & Quick, 2009; Wu & Lee, 2017; Yammarino, Dionne, Schriesheim, & Dansereau, 2008). For a comprehensive literature review of positivity affect and success, refer to Lyubomirsky and colleagues' research (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005).

Positive psychology is "the scientific study of what makes life most worth living," according to psychologist Christopher Peterson. He reminds us that "…happiness is not simply the result of a fortunate spin of the genetic roulette wheel. There are things that people can do to lead better lives, although…all require that we live (behave) differently…permanently. The good life is hard work, and there are no shortcuts to sustained happiness" (2008). Seligman supports this idea by stating, "The very good news is there [are] quite a number of internal circumstances under your voluntary control. If you decide to change them (and be warned that none of these changes come without real effort), your level of happiness is likely to increase lastingly" (Seligman 2002a, p. xiv). Those who cultivate this positive mind-set are better able to conquer challenges; Shawn Achor calls this the "happiness advantage" (2012). Further, research supports positivity as a competitive advantage for those in the workforce as well as for those still in college.

Positivity and Business Outcomes

For many years, scholars and professionals have encouraged a positive approach in hiring, developing and managing human resources. Likewise, a wide variety of positive work practices have been studied and found to support enhanced organizational performance and, thus, competitiveness (e.g., Huselid, 1995; Pfeffer, 1998; in Luthens & Youssef, 2007). Michael Hitt and colleagues refer to this positive organizational behavior approach as providing a distinctive

competitive advantage through human capital (Hitt, et al., 2018). This is supported by Lyubomirsky and colleagues in their extensive review of the literature. They posit that happy individuals enjoy advantages over peers at work. Their cross-sectional review gives research evidence showing that happy people are "more likely to secure job interviews, to be evaluated more positively by supervisors once they obtain a job, to show superior performance and productivity, and to handle managerial jobs better. They are also less likely to show counter-productive workplace behavior and job burnout" (Lyubomirsky, et al., 2005). Further, they point to several studies that indicate happier people earn higher incomes (Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2004; Graham, Eggers, & Sukhtankar, 2005; in Lyubomirsky, et al., 2005).

The development of authentic leaders within an organization provides a foundation for increasing positive change across various levels and throughout organizations (Luthens & Youssef, 2007). Research supports authentic leadership in advancing human capital and producing positive and long-term organizational outcomes (George & Sims, 2007; George, Sims, McLean, & Mayer, 2007; & Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008). Individuals benefit from authenticity by possessing "more 'optimal' levels of self-esteem, higher levels of psychological well-being, enhanced feelings of friendliness, and elevated performance" (Grandey, Fiske, Mattila, Jansen, & Sideman, 2005; Kernis, 2003, Walumba et al., 2008). Walumba and colleagues suggest "when organizational leaders know and act upon their true values, beliefs, and strengths, while helping others to do the same, higher levels of employees' well-being will accrue" (2008, p 91). Further, this type of authentic leadership positively impacts follower performance (Ryan & Deci, 2001).

The outcomes of developing positive organizational potential may, in fact, become a pivotal determinant of corporate advantage through positive human capital (Newes & Stankiewicz, 2012). Individuals with positive emotions enhance personal wellbeing; this, in turn, improves resilience in dealing with problems, increases positive emotions, and fosters empathy as well as respect. This positivity can spread among colleagues in the organization as well as with clients and customers, thus changing culture and creating a more productive organization (Cialdini, 2007; Newes & Stankiewicz, 2012). Similar to the encouraging outcomes of positive psychology research in organizations, college students who exhibit positive affect experience greater success.

Positivity and College Students

As research continues to support that positive individuals are more engaged and productive in the workplace (Lyubomirksy, 2008b), Medlin and Faulk (2011) test this theory in the college classroom. One hundred forty-five undergraduate students completed a survey exploring the relationship between student optimism, employee engagement, and academic performance. Results from this study align with positivity research in the workplace; engagement, through increased optimism, positively affects student perception of academic performance. In turn, engagement increases retention rates. Consequently, colleges should focus on selecting activities that boost optimism and student engagement.

A common misperception is that positive individuals are generally more satisfied and, as a result, have little motivation to improve their life or positively impact the world. Research suggests the opposite is true; happier individuals outperform less happy people in almost every area of their life, including workplace performance, earning higher income, community involvement, and better relationships (Lyubomirsky, et al., 2005). The same holds true for

college students. Happier college students set higher individual goals than their less happy peers (Baron, 1990; Home & Arbuckle, 1988; Lyubomirsky, et al., 2005). Moreover, happier students feel more encouraged and energized after developing goals than less happy students (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2012; in Lyubomirsky, et al., 2005). Further, Trope and Pomerantz (1998) suggest that students who reported engaging in a positive experience were more willing to accept criticism about their flaws related to achieving significant goals. Not only do students benefit from goal setting in college, but they are more likely to continue practicing goal-setting in their future and in the workplace, which increases self-efficacy and self-esteem, provides structure, improves time management skills, and fosters stronger coping skills (Lyubomirsky, 2008b).

In order for business schools to stay relevant in the everchanging climate of higher education, it is crucial to maintain a focus on what is most important to organizations, such as human capital, as Bill Gates and others have publicly supported. Luthans, Luthans, & Jensen (2012) note that, while psychological capital (PsyCap) has been popular in the human resources management and organizational behavior discipline, business education hasn't received such attention. The authors argue students must cultivate the PsyCap components of hope, efficacy, resiliency, and optimism to set themselves apart from their competition and to be most successful in college and the workplace. Their research supports the positive relationship between individual psychological capital components and academic performance. In their exploratory study, a sample of undergraduate business students participated in a survey that assessed their PsyCap, GPA, and demographics. The authors reported that this exploratory study indicated a significant, positive relationship between the four core PsyCap constructs of undergraduate business students and their GPA. Thus, these researchers call for business schools to implement PsyCap into their curricular activities through short interventions or program design.

Further, while empirical studies support that organizations thrive based on applied positive leadership, there is little research on how universities are formally implementing positive leadership scholarship into the classroom (Donaldson & Ko, 2010). Lucas and Goodman (2015) provide one way to combine theory and application in the college classroom through a semester long, project-based learning simulation. Positive organization scholarship (POS) and leadership education integrated with engagement opportunities in an academic setting not only prepares students to implement positivity concepts in the workplace, but in turn, increases the student's well-being by embodying positive psychology practices.

Olsen (2015) provides another method to enrich the undergraduate business student experience by implementing positive psychology, specifically character strength, into the curriculum. To attempt to make the internship practicum course more impactful, the author directs students to read StrengthsFinder 2.0, complete the online StrengthsFinder assessment, write a paper reflecting on results of the strengths assessment, and submit a report detailing how the student applied their strengths at their internship. Students reported that they utilized their strengths, which increased self-awareness and self-efficacy. Internship supervisors were impressed by the intern's positivity and strengths, particularly noting the students' improvements as the semester continued. Not only does this curriculum promote happiness and develop strengths within students, it provides a unique and meaningful experience combining positive psychology principles with the internship practicum. Although there are numerous ways that positivity can be introduced into the classroom, the following is one example.

CLASSROOM IMPLEMENTATION

Organized into three main phases, the positivity module included in the Business Communication curriculum 1) introduced participants to the concept of positivity, 2) allowed participants to connect the ways in which positivity could impact their current productivity, and 3) encouraged the strategic inclusion of positivity in order to maximize success moving forward. At the conclusion of the semester course, participants were asked to reflect on their experiences. The reflection results will immediately follow this section on classroom implementation.

Phase One: Introduction to Positivity

Participants began the positivity session by watching "The Chore Wheel!" YouTube clip from The Office (The office US, 2016), a modern television show that comically depicts the daily lives of those in a common office setting. While the video was selected to be able to connect with the learning through a medium in which they actively engage, the purpose was to trigger students to open a dialogue surrounding the concept of positivity. Discussion about student reactions to the clip encouraged students to discuss the interaction between individuals as well as how positivity applies to communication best practices, to foster strong professional relationships, and to enhance personal management techniques. Questions include:

Communication Best Practices
- What communication styles were used throughout the clip?
- Which ones made you comfortable? Why?
- Which ones made you uncomfortable? Why?
- What could have been improved?
- What positive impact do you think the improvements would have on the culture?

Building Professional Relationships
- Describe the relationships between the individuals in the clip.
- In what ways could they adapt to maximize their relationships?

Management Techniques
- How could the skills of management be changed to foster a more productive culture within this organization?
- What do you think the outcome would be if the organization had a more positive culture?

Following the discussion on the triggering video, students viewed a Ted Talk, "The Happy Secret to Better Work" (Achor, 2011). Transitioning from a comedic approach to the impact of positivity supported by an academic analysis allowed for a natural progression of development from a personal to a professional analysis of the subject. The research outcomes reported in the video added credibility for students in absorbing the importance of this theory.

Phase Two: Connecting Positivity and Productivity

Shawn Anchor's Ted Talk focused on the principles of happiness, and how happiness precedes success, not the other way around. He provided researched solutions to create a more positive mind-set through expressing gratitude, performing random acts of kindness, and meditating. Students were then encouraged to connect positivity, happiness, communication, and workplace success by drawing, hand writing, or typing how they view the connections. After working on this activity approximately fifteen minutes, students shared their findings in their teams. These were already functioning teams of five or six students that were completing a small business development project. The use of already established teams allowed for efficient and effective communication in a small amount of time (approximately ten minutes). Students were then invited to participate in a variety of exercises that were described in the Ted Talk. Examples of the exercises completed included:

- Deep breath mediation with eyes closed, seated at one's desk, for two minutes
- Verbally describing the most meaningful experience that happened within the past 24 hours
- Writing down three things for which the participant is grateful

Following each exercise, students were asked to share their emotional and physical responses to each activity in a class discussion. Students were then assigned the task of applying the positive psychology concept of social support by writing an encouraging message (via email, GroupMe, Basecamp, or approved social media) to each of their teammates. Participants were required to recognize each other for one thing they had done well during the past week while working on their team project. Once completed, individuals were allowed to take a ten-minute break, in which they were allowed to leave the classroom to relax, recharge, and/or utilize the time as they deemed to be most beneficial to their well-being.

Phase Three: Including Positivity to Maximize Future Success

After participants returned to the classroom, they were encouraged to read the positive messages from their teammates that they had received. Large-group discussion followed asking students how they felt about what they had read. Further discussion continued to focus on why the encouragement of teammates was so important.

Reflecting back to the Ted Talk, students individually brainstormed about the impact of positivity in the workplace and the results it would have on their current team project's success. Within their small groups, the teams were assigned to write down and verbally share their insights to the following questions:

- How could positivity benefit the employer, co-workers, clients, and company culture within an organization?
- How could positivity impact the credibility of the employee who provided the encouragement?
- In what ways will your team utilize positivity to increase productivity?
- What results do you anticipate will come from increasing positivity for your team?

- What results do you anticipate will come from increasing positivity for you as an individual?

After the members of each team were successful in communicating their answers, the class once again watched the clip from The Office that was shown at the beginning of the class. Students were then asked (as a large group) to reflect on what the interactions between the actors might have been like in regards to 1) communication best practices, 2) building professional relationships, and 3) management techniques if the staff would have been trained on the inclusion of positivity into their daily workplace practice. The re-watching of the trigger video served as a post-test to the original watching where the instructor could gauge the impact that the day's session had on the classroom. This also allowed students to reflect on their learning from this positivity session.

Upon completion of the semester, students have the opportunity to give feedback on the quality of instruction based on their experience throughout the semester. Feedback within the course evaluation that included this positivity session contained references to this topic, such as **"**The professor was an engaging and interesting professor and her positivity kept class interesting." Another student stated that "She was a very positive professor!" An additional student wrote that, the professor was "caring and funny, brings a different, yet positive dynamic to the classroom." When asked to give reflection on the area of the course in which the participant found most meaningful, one student responded:

> I really enjoyed the positivity activity we did in class…[watching videos] and assessing our own positivity was a valuable activity. While the …[semester] can get busy, it is important to take a step back, and reflect on areas in life to appreciate everything you have.

Additional Curriculum Enhancements

Although the focus of this study highlights the implementation of positivity within a single lecture, additional pieces or modules can be easily adapted and placed into previous lectures in order to create a triggering effect, so students are primed to absorb the full content of the main lecture. Examples of additional activities that can help to support positivity include:

- Goal setting and vision boards
- Icebreakers: What are you grateful for today? What good news do you have to share?
- Importance of taking breaks
- Nutrition for college students on the go
- Resources for psychological services
- Stress identification and reduction tools

Educators and practitioners are encouraged to experiment (through trial and error) to determine the best combination of activities in which participants are exposed to elements of positivity. Throughout the year, stressors may increase; therefore, it is up to the discretion of the facilitator to help maximize the effectiveness of the timing of each activity.

CONCLUSION

This paper presented a brief literature review of positivity research and provided one way of introducing positivity as an important concept in the business communication classroom. It also suggests additional supporting activities that could be included in order help support the inclusion of positivity over time and throughout a series of educational lectures and/or professional development sessions. In the *Handbook of Positive Psychology*, Seligman reminds us that "The aim of Positive Psychology is to catalyze a change in psychology from a preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building the best qualities in life" (Seligman, 2002b, p. 3). The transferability of the introduction of positivity within the classroom can have lasting effects on those who are preparing to enter the workforce as well as those who are looking to advance their current positions within their organizations. Through the inclusion of positive psychology into an existing professional development curriculum, participants may enhance their learning as well as their ability to manage life's highs and lows, allowing them to maximize their future success.

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