



# Applying Positive Psychology to Business Coaching in a World of Change

High stress economic conditions are putting increasing pressures on businesses and their employees. The positive psychology coaching strategy lifts spirits and helps people think in terms of their full potential, rather than dwelling on the negatives.

Business talk today concerns the multi-faceted impact of the recession and struggling economy on workforces trying to cope in environments marked by cutbacks, increased workloads, concerns about job security, and other stresses. In turn, the Human Resources professionals must spend considerably more time dealing with human fears on a routine basis and are as often the messengers of bad news as they are of good news. This is an environment that can take an emotional toll that interferes with the ability to maintain a positive outlook and erodes self-confidence. Offering a strategy for overcoming the negative mindsets is business coaching based on positive psychology principles. The coaching program uses a scientifically-rooted approach to developing and maintaining positive mindsets, helping people recognize their potential, and improving business results through workforce development.

The positive psychology paradigm is based on the scientific study of the power of positive thought processes and mental strengths to enable people to overcome adversity, anxiety, and low confidence levels. Applying psychology in the business setting is not a new idea, but it has taken on new importance in an environment that is best described as volatile, uncertain, and stressful. Human Resources professionals are frontline leaders who daily deal with critical issues like workforce reductions, compensation issues, disciplinary procedures, and many other difficult situations involving employee relationships and personal issues that impact work performance. Employees are trying to remain productive despite experiencing high anxiety levels. Every day corporations are announcing new layoffs, heightening the fear. In this setting, everyone is a candidate for coaching on the power of positive mindsets.

## Nurturing Strengths Rather Than Identifying Weaknesses

Positive psychology coaching in the business setting identifies, develops, and nurtures people's best qualities and strengths and helps them find their ideal roles

where use of those personal assets can be maximized. It helps people be optimistic about the future, a much needed quality in difficult economies. A well-structured program re-engages employees by teaching methods for overcoming negative mindsets. This is a form of cognitive-behavioural therapy that has proven adaptable to various settings. Positive organizational behaviour (POB) principles used as workplace interventions and management practices are an offshoot of positive psychology used in counselling settings.

Positive psychology takes a different approach than other types of psychological programs. Rather than identifying deficits and ways to overcome them, it focuses on people's assets and how to develop their full potential. From the get-go, it depends on zeroing in on the positive to help people develop strategies for practicing optimism, maintaining mental and emotional balance, strengthening a commitment to goal achievement, and so on.

That is what positive psychology can achieve, but there is still the matter of how it applies to business coaching programs. There is a difference between a "feel good" motivational program, typically found in business settings, and positive organizational behavior coaching. Positive psychology assesses, measures, and records efforts in order to judge the returns on investment. One of the nice features of this approach is that it is a training program that can be defended with hard data and provides accountability for results, which executives demand when considering training and development program funding. It is challenging to convince senior managers that a coaching program designed to create positive emotions is a hard-core business strategy. Yet, positive psychology fills training gaps because it considers the whole person rather than just their productivity. Personal growth is encouraged, leading to people rising to challenges by relying on their renewed confidence and optimism. It is a holistic coaching approach that considers a person's physical performance and emotional state and the means for achieving superior workplace performance by increasing self-awareness and fostering positivity.

One of the many advantages of this coaching style is that it can be applied to everyone in the organization, from the executive level to lower-level staff, because personal happiness is not the purview of senior managers. Management theorists frequently discuss the importance of every organizational member buying into the culture and vision and exercising position leadership. Anxious people have difficult concentration on job performance, leaving enormous productivity gaps and undeveloped leadership. Positive psychology shifts people's focus from anxiety to strengths and personal vision.

### Turning Coaching Program Upside Down

Though the principles of positive psychology coaching can be applied in general development programs, formal management coaching should rely on professional, accredited coaches since the program blends an evidence-based approach and scientific principles. Professional coaches have specialized assessment and reporting tools that are quite different from traditional business coaching tools. The positive psychology tools assess existing strengths rather than identifying

weaknesses. It flips commonly accepted coaching principles upside down. For example, the Values in Action strengths survey is a questionnaire that measures human strengths. The questionnaire has been donated to the public domain so managers can spend some time getting comfortable with the type of factors that Positive Psychology considers.

In fact, the founder of positive psychology, Dr. Martin Seligman, maintains the Authentic Happiness\* website which is accessed by over 2 million global users. Coaching people to increased happiness addresses three pathways. The Pleasant Life is through emotions; the Engaged Life is through connection with internal or external activity; and the Meaningful Life is through personal meaning. When a coach works with a staff member like the Human Resources Director, the ultimate goal is to assist the person with finding what has meaning to that individual and then connecting what is personally intrinsically rewarding to job performance, effort, mindset, and so on. If it sounds a bit esoteric, remember that this is a scientifically based program with measurable results.

In strained business environments, there is a natural tendency for staff members to put up defenses and become disengaged. This is during a time when businesses need each and every member to be at the top of their game. Positive psychology offers a method of re-engaging staff by helping them find and rely on their personal traits, strengths, and capabilities. Ultimately, it is about being happy and translating that happiness into quality performance in work and personal lives.

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