Introducing Character Strengths into Diverse Organizations Positive Education as a Catalyst for Personal and Cultural Growth

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Objectives

This investigation involved a creative exploration into ways of introducing character strengths into three organizations and their subsequent impact. The programs included:

- A training program for educators of marginalized youth
 The "Changing Lives for Better Futures" Program
- Sessions with a professional Australian Football League team
 The "Bringing out your Best" Program
- A staff strengths exercise at the authors' own practice "Walking the Walk"

These interventions were inspired by the presentation of Professor Chris Peterson and Professor Nansook Park at the 2011 IPPA World Congress on creative ways of introducing Positive Psychology across a university setting: the "What Makes Life Worth Living" theme semester at the University of Michigan in the Fall Semester of 2010.

Method

In each organization, the assessment and exploration of character strengths was to be used in conjunction with Positive Psychology principles taught and applied in a classroom setting.

- In each setting, participants completed the 240-item VIA Survey of Character Strengths online and printed results
- PERMA model

The format of delivery varied across settings.

Results

Results are reported in the form of qualitative observations.

Primary conclusion:

Positive Psychology interventions based on character strengths can be readily and creatively applied in a wide range of organizations for relatively little cost with clear positive impacts on organizational culture, staff motivation and wellbeing and improved performance in some areas.

Support of organizational leaders is a key.

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Changing Lives for Better Futures Education program for marginalized youth

- Seven full-day workshops
- For youth educators across three agencies for marginalized youth
- Each workshop covered mental health related topics
- e.g. depression, trauma reactions, alcohol and drugs, conduct problems, brain impairment, dyslexia, homelessness
- Positive Psychology principles and strategies used
- Staff completed VIA survey. Students used VIA Youth Survey
- Experiential exercises e.g. meet with those sharing top strength
- Discussed their own creative applications
- Presenter visited agencies; attended some youth education classes

"One homeless student with a severe trauma history and depression discovered his top character strength of "Justice", employed it in Student Council elections, and a week later got a job and secure housing." Youth Educator

Observations

Written participant feedback: response to open questions

Half of staff participants highlighted following outcomes:

- Validated educators' experience and capability
- Led them to have more focus on strengths
- Gave them language to better focus on strengths
- Mental health training also useful
- Spontaneous observations of positive changes in students
- "Happier" and more "motivated" or "engaged"
- Students better recognized own strengths
- One student informed author had discontinued drug use

"Strengths Certificate" – staff initiative

Graduation ceremony was transformed by staff awarding a "Strengths Certificate" and describing how the recipient demonstrated that virtue throughout the year. Recipients appeared more proud of this than graduation certificate.





Bringing Out Your Best Australian Football League team

- Initial 75-minute seminar
- For players, coaches and support staff
- Introduced Positive Psychology themes and their relationship to performance and wellbeing
- All participants completed VIA Survey after seminar
- Four subsequent 45-minute sessions (groups of 6 to 14)
- Discussed top 2 character strengths
- Optimism v. pessimism
- Core components of "clutch" performanceInternal v. external motivation

"I want to show we have got something to help them be better people." Football manager

Observations

- Bolstered relationship of new coach with players.
- Many players negatively affected by previous harsh and seemingly rigidly critical coaching regime

 New senior coach had a top strength of "Capacity to Love". Coach's strength and program for wellbeing convinced players that change was genuine and could be trusted.

- Bolstered cohesion of coach/player leadership group
 Over half had "Teamwork" among two top strengths
- Initial number of planned sessions expanded
- Plan to include administrative staff in future
- Future input to focus on developing within-club leadership group to innovate further uses of strengths



What are our own character strengths?

Walking the Walk Psychology practice

- All staff completed VIA Survey and printed results
- Included psychologists and administrative staff
- Met in groups of four to seven
- Listed each person's top five strengths on whiteboard
- Staff guessed who each list belonged to
- When told correct answer, described how that fitted

Observations

- Bolstered cohesion, group identification and cultural identity
 12 of 18 staff have "Curiosity" as a top 5 strength
- Many spontaneously expressed benefits
- "Uplifting"
- "Feeling valued" and "showing appreciation"
- "Fun and novel way of connecting"
- Likely contributed to best year of staff retention and performance
- "Strengths Envelope"
- Spontaneous initiative at Christmas party
- Psychologists gave Christmas cards to administration staff and principal psychologist describing how top strengths fitted

Imagine opening a "Strengths Envelope" like this at your staff Christmas party – a gift on the spontaneous initiative of your colleagues.

