

**Leading to Grow and Growing to Lead:  
Some Lessons from Positive Organizational Scholarship**

Gretchen M. Spreitzer  
Michigan Business School  
Room E2550  
710 Tappan St.  
Ann Arbor, MI 48014  
(734) 936.2835  
[spreitze@umich.edu](mailto:spreitze@umich.edu)

Adam M. Grant  
Department of Organizational Psychology  
University of Michigan  
525 E. University  
Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1109  
(248) 330.6161  
[amgrant@umich.edu](mailto:amgrant@umich.edu)

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## **Leading to Grow and Growing to Lead: Some Lessons from Positive Organizational Scholarship**

The purpose of this paper is to use the lens of Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) to offer new insights to how to grow leaders. We reframe the “Assess/Challenge/Support” model of leadership development created by the Center for Creative Leadership through a POS perspective. In leadership development, the CCL model is typically implemented by (1) focusing on performance gaps, (2) closing the gaps by introducing discomforting challenges, and (3) having the organization provide formal support (e.g., through mentoring). A POS perspective, drawn from recent research on thriving (or growing) at work, takes a complementary but unique approach by (1) leveraging strengths instead of gaps, (2) providing challenges through positive jolts rather than hardships, and (3) co-creating support through the development of microcommunities. We suggest that this complementary approach can create healthy and sustainable growth because it creates high energy and learning. We close the paper by recognizing some of the complications in taking a POS approach to growing leaders.

## **Leading to Grow and Growing to Lead: Some Lessons from Positive Organizational Scholarship**

What is more vital to a company's long-term success than its ability to cultivate leaders? In an era in which demand for high quality leadership exceeds the supply, exemplary organizations are those that grow leaders at all levels of the organization by developing their leadership pipelines (Charan, Drotter, & Noel, 2000). Companies such as General Electric and Unilever are envied for their success in growing leaders. How do they do it?

Conventional wisdom on developing leaders calls for assessing leadership competencies based on observable indicators of success to identify strengths and performance gaps, offering developmental challenges to close the gaps, and providing support to nurture leaders to grow (McCauley & Velsor, 2003; McCall, 1998). This Assess/Challenge/Support (ACS) model (developed by the Center for Creative Leadership; McCauley & Velsor, 2003) has worked successfully in leadership development activities around the world. Interestingly, the ACS model is typically implemented along the following lines: (1) the assessment of leadership competencies focuses on identifying performance gaps, (2) the challenge focuses on creating discomfort and hardship to break people out of their comfort zones (i.e., no pain, no gain; McCauley & Van Velsor, 2003), and (3) the organization is charged with creating the right support mechanisms, such as providing formal mentors and training for skill development (Conger & Fulmer, 2003).

Although these implementation trends have often been associated with successful leadership development, we suggest that they reflect an incomplete picture of effective

leadership development. What if we turned these implementation trends on their head? What if, instead of focusing on performance gaps, we focused on leveraging strengths in assessment? What if, instead of creating discomforting challenges, we offered positive jolts? What if, instead of charging the organization with providing the right support to facilitate growth, we encouraged leaders and employees to co-create their own microcommunities of support?

In this paper, we explore these three alternative approaches to leadership development through the application of a Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) lens. Toward this end, we first introduce the essence of POS and illustrate how the application of a POS lens may bring new insight to conventional wisdom on leadership development. In particular, we draw on new theory on thriving at work to better understand how to grow leaders at all levels of the organization. We then discuss the upsides, as well as the complications, of leveraging strengths, providing positive jolts, and co-creating a supportive context. The complications, in particular, help us to craft an agenda for future research on leadership development.

### **An Introduction to POS**

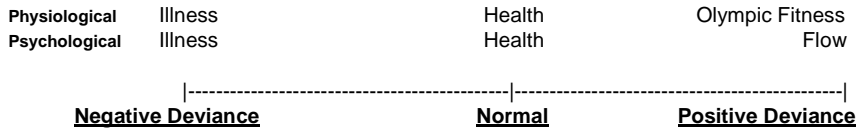
POS is a new discipline of organizational research—drawing on the fields of organizational studies, psychology, and sociology—which focuses on the generative dynamics in organizations that promote human strength, resiliency, healing, and restoration (Cameron, Dutton & Quinn, 2003; Luthans, 2002a). Indeed, its name embodies the core values of the movement: “Positive” addresses the discipline’s affirmative bias; “Organizational” focuses on the processes and conditions that occur in

organizational contexts; and “Scholarship” reflects the rigor, theory, scientific procedures and precise definition in which the approach is grounded (Bernstein, 2003). A POS perspective assumes that understanding how to enable human excellence in organizations will unlock potential, reveal possibilities and move us along a more positive course of human and organizational welfare. POS draws from a full spectrum of organizational theories to understand, explain, and predict the occurrence, causes, and consequences of positive phenomena. Research findings to date indicate that positive dynamics at the individual and organizational levels can lead to exceptional individual and organizational performance (Cross, Baker, & Parker, 2003; Cameron & Caza, 2004; Losada & Heaphy, 2004).

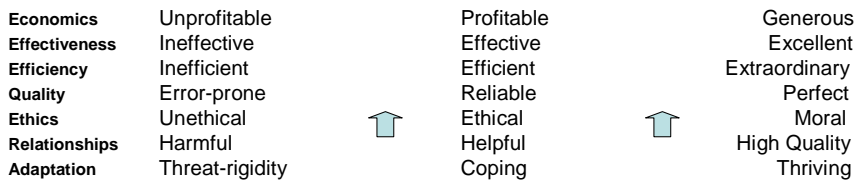
At its core, POS investigates “positive deviance,” or the ways in which organizations and their members flourish and prosper in extraordinary ways (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2004). As illustrated in Figure 1 (adapted from Cameron, 2003), positive deviance is reflected in the ideas on the right side of the continuum. More than 97% of psychological research in the last 50 years has focused on the left and middle points of the continuum (i.e., how to overcome mental illness to get people back to normal: Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). A great majority of medical research is likewise focused on the left side of the continuum (Cameron, 2003). And in organizational research, a substantial proportion of research has also been focused on the left side of the continuum -- solving problems, surmounting obstacles, and closing deficit gaps. We know considerably less about the right side of the continuum. Accordingly, research within the domain of POS is aimed at correcting this imbalance and building knowledge about the extraordinary.

**Figure 1**  
**A Continuum Illustrating Positive Deviance**

Individual:



Organizational:



Research on human thriving at work, which aims to understand processes of human growth in organizations, is one effort to redressing this imbalance. Based on its focus on growing, in the next section of the paper, we draw on this new body of research on thriving at work to offer some insights from POS about growing leaders. While the thriving model is about facilitating human growth in general, we believe it has particular insights into growing leaders. Rather than focusing on a narrow slice of high potential employees, in this paper, we focus on the possibilities for employees at any level or any position to grow into informal leaders. For as John F. Kennedy once wrote, “Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other.”

**What is Thriving?**

We draw on the work of Spreitzer, Sutcliffe, Dutton, Sonenshein, and Grant (2004: 4) to define thriving as “the psychological experience of growth in a positive

capacity (i.e., a constructive or forward direction).” To be more specific, consider these narratives from two employees about their experiences of thriving at work:

One social worker described thriving as: “I know thriving as I feel it. It is like going forward. It is not staying in place. It is not stagnant. You are moving forward; not necessarily in job titles or positions, but just being able to move forward thinking and in the activities that you are engaged in and in your mindset, all of those things”.

A mid-level manager in a large metropolitan non profit described thriving as “being energized, feeling valued, and that what you do is valued... Thriving is being productive...being open to the challenges presented and to learn and grow and having those opportunities to grow”.

Both of these employees describe thriving as a sense of heightened capacity and growth.

According to Spreitzer et al. (2004), both complexity and vitality are essential components of thriving. Complexity is manifested both cognitively—in terms of belief systems becoming increasingly integrated and differentiated (Carver, 1998) —and behaviorally, in terms of increasingly sophisticated patterns of action (Zaccaro, 2001). Increased integration and differentiation are proposed to engender a sense of psychological growth through a deeper understanding of the self and the world.

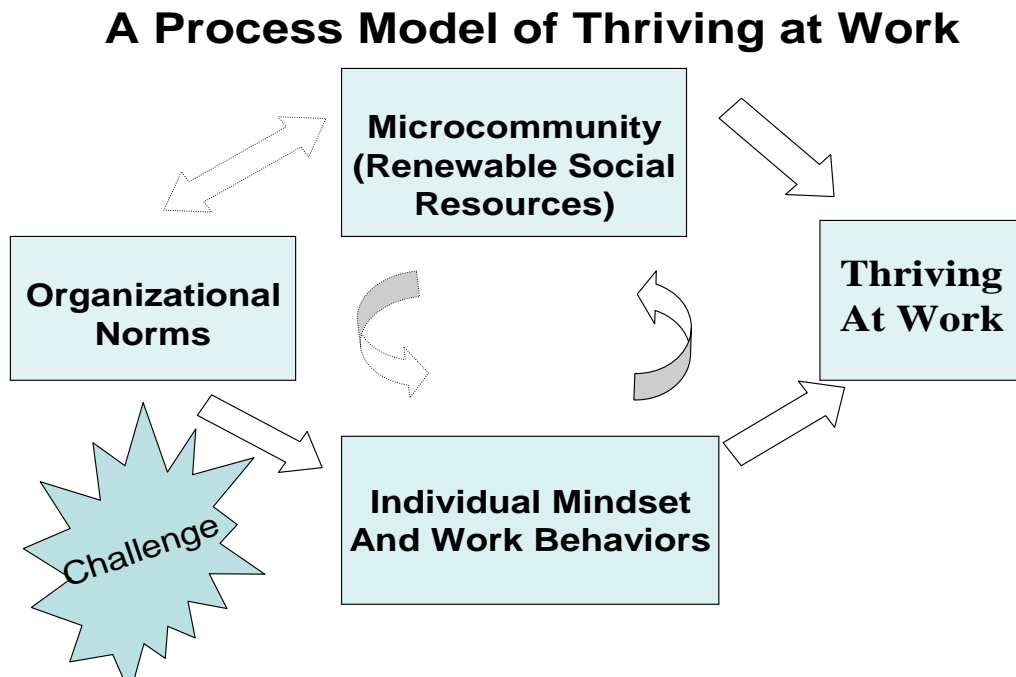
Along with increasing cognitive and behavioral complexity, thriving also entails a sense of positive energy or vitality (Nix, Ryan, Manly, & Deci, 1999). If one is growing more complex, but feels depleted and burned out, one is not thriving. When thriving, individuals feel alive and vibrant – they have a zest for life (Miller and Stiver, 1998). In summary, then, “Thriving is a process of human growth manifest in increasing complexity AND vitality. Through increasing levels of complexity and vitality, thriving encompasses the cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of human functioning” (Spreitzer et al., 2004: 7).

## **The Process of Thriving at Work**

Indeed, if thriving can offer insights into what it takes to grow leaders, the important question becomes, “What can leaders and organizations do to facilitate thriving?” The process model of thriving, depicted in Figure 2 (adapted from Spreitzer et al., 2004), suggests several different pathways for thriving to occur. In this model, three sets of factors— (1) organizational norms, (2) individual mindset and working behaviors, and (3) renewable social resources—contribute to thriving at work. Organizational norms reflect the dominant way that work is accomplished and include such things as how decisions are made, how information is shared, and the extent to which interactions are infused with trust and respect. Individual mindset and working behaviors reflect the ways that individuals experience their work context and how they carry out daily work activities. Renewable social resources are features of the microcommunities that support and enable individual growth. And all of these pathways are embedded in a context of positive challenge that stretches people to grow. The more that these pathways develop roots in a given organization, the better the organization’s capability to grow leaders.



Figure 2



#### **Insights from the Thriving Model for Growing Leaders**

This process model of thriving at work offers some insights on growing leaders. We return to the Assessment/Challenge/Support model of leadership development described in the beginning section of the paper to situate our insights. First, in terms of assessment, the thriving model suggests the importance of leveraging strengths rather than focusing primarily on performance gaps. A key function of the box in the thriving model labeled “individual mindset and work behaviors” is building competence. Leveraging strengths builds competence through identifying areas of unique skill and talent (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001; Luthans, 2002b).

Second, in terms of challenge, whereas traditional leadership development accentuates the ways in which leaders learn from difficult experiences or hardships, a

thriving lens suggests the importance of positive jolts as a stimulus for learning (Roberts, Dutton, Spreitzer, Heaphy, & Quinn, forthcoming). Positive jolts are a different form of challenge; they stretch and energize people to take risks and try new things. While people can learn from hardship, they often feel paralyzed in the face of threat and miss opportunities for personal growth. In contrast, positive challenges provide a greater potential for growth because people are motivated by the stretch opportunity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Third, in terms of support, where traditional leadership development places responsibility for leadership development squarely on the organization, a thriving lens encourages the co-creation of support through the building of microcommunities. The assumption here is that individuals have distinctive insights into understanding what contexts elicit their best selves (Roberts et al., forthcoming). If the organization takes responsibility for creating the development environment that it thinks is best, chances are that the organization will fail to tap into the variables that energize and enable someone. Individual employees are uniquely aware of the appropriate contexts for developing their full potential.

In the sections that follow, we further develop these three counterintuitive insights from the thriving model to show why they may be generative in growing leaders.

### **Leveraging Strengths: Leaders Building Possibilities for Greatness**

“A good leader inspires others with confidence in him (sic); a great leader inspires them with confidence in themselves.” –Unknown

Leaders must help future potential leaders to develop their unique strengths and talents in order to generate energy and builds efficacy (Luthans, 2002b). A strengths perspective questions a pervasive assumption in leadership development: focusing on a person's area of weakness provides the greatest opportunity for growth (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). Instead, the assumption underlying a strengths-based approach is that improving areas of weakness will bring individuals to average, not excellent, performance. To achieve greatness, people must find their own paths to excellence through leveraging their unique strengths and special talents. For example, Spreitzer, Quinn, and Fletcher's (1995) study of peak performance episodes reveals that every individual follows a slightly different pathway for achieving excellence. No two pathways are identical. When individuals deviate from their own pathways to imitate someone else's pathway, performance tends to suffer.

As an example, consider the case of golfer Tiger Woods. He is known for his incredible swing and his accurate long drives. From an early age, his father and coaches recognized this core strength and developed it. Although he is rated as the number one golfer in the world, he ranks only 186<sup>th</sup> in the "sand saves" statistics. It may seem that his overall skill repertoire is not complete, but the reality is that he rarely needs to make a sand save because his drives and approach shots are so phenomenal. However, if we were to apply the lessons from conventional leadership development to Tiger Woods, the following chain of events would likely occur. His performance review would focus on this specific gap in his skill repertoire (with less emphasis on his core strength of accurate, long drives). He would be instructed to go to training courses on sand saves. His practice time would be devoted to improving his sand saves. The likely result would be

some improvement in his sand save skill, but also frustration, demotivation, and perhaps even reduced performance on his signature strengths. Clearly, a key factor in his success has been leveraging his core strength of accurate long drives, not gaining competence in each skill in the game.

So why is leveraging strengths so powerful for leadership development? First, leveraging strengths is akin to finding an individual source of sustained competitive advantage (Quinn, Dutton & Spreitzer, 2003). According to Barney (2001), competitive advantage occurs when an organization has resources that are valuable, rare, difficult to imitate, and without substitutes. Although competitive advantage is typically discussed as a strategy for organizations, it can also be applied to individuals. If one leverages personal strengths that are valuable to the organization or society, rare (not common to other people), difficult to imitate, and without substitutes (like technology), a person can be perceived as a valuable commodity because no one else can offer the same contributions. Thus, leaders should help others to leverage strengths because this builds a person's competitive advantage as a potential future leader.

Second, leveraging strengths creates more vivid and elaborate possible selves (Roberts, et al, forthcoming). Knowing one's strengths suggests new possibilities for the "hoped-for possible self" (Markus & Nurius, 1986). These images of hoped-for possible selves shape professionals' capacities to successfully construct and project images of competence and credibility to key constituents (i.e., colleagues and clients) (Ibarra, 1999). Crafting a viable professional image through understanding of one's strengths becomes critical for eventual career success. In short, when leaders help others to identify and

nurture their strengths, they build awareness of possibilities, generate hope about the future, and expand courage for action to become their hoped-for possible selves.

### **Complications in Leveraging Strengths**

Leveraging strengths does not mean ignoring weaknesses (Quinn, et al., 2003). We recognize that people are often required to operate with a basic level of competence in their areas of weakness. Therefore, Buckingham and Clifton (2001) advocate managing around weaknesses. This may mean finding someone else to do the tasks one does poorly. Other times, it may mean putting in enough effort to develop one's area of weakness to an acceptable level of performance.

In addition, leveraging strengths does not mean becoming arrogant. Prior research by Crocker (2002) has shown that an excessive focus on self-esteem has significant costs for individuals; overconfidence can impede learning and lead individuals to focus on validating their abilities, rather than carrying out their tasks. In order to avoid these costs, leveraging strengths must be in service of a goal other than feeding one's ego. It is important to reiterate that leveraging strengths still involves managing around weaknesses, which often implies dependencies on others whose strengths are another's weaknesses. Thus, a strengths focus may require humility in order to remain in a learning mode and to develop interdependent relationships with others who have complementary strengths.

### **Positive Jolts: Leaders Stretching People Through Appreciation**

The second insight that POS can offer pertains to challenges that provoke leadership development. People feel challenged when they encounter situations that

require skills and abilities beyond their current competencies (McCauley & Van Velsor, 2003). Typical challenges include setting difficult goals, making tough job assignments, managing destructive conflict, or dealing with losses, failures, or disappointments. The rationale is akin to “no pain, no gain.” All of these challenges connote a type of negative jolt that moves people out of their comfort zones and disrupts their normal routines (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993). While people can grow in significant ways in the face of hardship, another common response to threat is paralysis or rigidity. In the face of adversity, individuals often close down and regress to past learned behaviors, rather than grow (Staw, Sandelands, & Dutton, 1981).

Unlike threatening challenges that imply the real potential for failure or harm, positive jolts imply the possibility of gains, and thus energize individuals (Tomaka, Blascovich, Kelsey & Leitten, 1993). One type of positive jolt is appreciation (Roberts et al., forthcoming). For example, many professions and organizations offer awards for early career contributions. Or when a valued colleague leaves an organization to take a different job, people often share their appreciation for all the person has contributed at a formal goodbye gathering. The appreciation induces positive emotion such as elevation (Haidt, 2003), which facilitates a person’s ability to see the self differently (Fredrickson, 1998). Like gratitude, appreciation stimulates reflection and action because it disrupts expectations for the future (Emmons, 2003). Appreciation also engages generative physiological changes, helping individuals move toward a more positive image of themselves (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1999).

## **The Reflected Best Self Assessment (RBS)**

One example of a positive jolt that is increasingly used in the service of leadership development is an assessment called the reflected best self (Quinn, Dutton, & Spreitzer, 2003). The assumption behind the RBS is that we all have blind spots that make it difficult for us to see our full spectra of strengths and contributions. The RBS asks participants to obtain short descriptions of who they are and what they do when they are at their very best from a diverse array of significant people in their lives. They are then instructed to look for commonalities across the different sources of feedback and compose portraits of their best selves that capture the insights in the data.

This positive jolt often deeply moves participants because the descriptions are a form of appreciation. This type of genuine feedback is rarely given, especially in organizational contexts. Roberts et al. (forthcoming) demonstrate how the RBS stimulates growth because it builds three sets of critical resources that enable people to break out of their comfort zones (Roberts et al., forthcoming). First, the RBS evokes positive emotions. Fredrickson (1998) has demonstrated that positive emotions broaden individuals' thought-action repertoires and build their capacities to act. Hence, positive emotions leave people open to pursuing new opportunities for growth. Second, the RBS strengthens individuals' relationships with those providing feedback, producing relational resources that can be drawn on during times of difficulty. These relational resources can be a form of social support. Supportive relationships provide security and safety (Edmondson, 1999) for individuals to process and affirm a clear sense of their own possibilities (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). Third, the RBS process produces a heightened sense of agency and efficacy to help people move forward, embrace challenge, and grow.

In short, as a consequence of generating these three sets of social resources, the RBS moves people toward a state of well-being where they feel intensely alive and authentic (Quinn et al., 2003).

### **Complications Regarding Positive Jolts**

Of course, not all positive jolts help people grow. Sometimes individuals relish in the good feeling engendered by the positive jolt and fail to take action in any significant ways. What are characteristics of positive jolts that do engage individuals to grow? At a most basic level, the positive jolt must be seen as being authentic, having substance, and evoking positive emotion. Otherwise, people may not experience it as valid. For example, imagine a newly promoted manager who wanted people to feel appreciated, and chose to end every interaction with his subordinates with, “Keep up the good job! You are doing great!” The first time the manager uttered these words, subordinates felt elevated. They felt gratitude for the warm words about their performance. But soon they found that this positive feedback came every day and without distinction. It quickly lost its meaning to subordinates and become more dysfunctional than motivating. Now, instead of serving as an effective positive jolt, it is experienced as routine psycho-babble.

In addition, positive jolts are more likely to facilitate growth if they come from multiple, trusted sources. For example, if multiple people give the same specific positive feedback independently, the jolt will be felt more strongly. For example, a new assistant professor was told by a number of different people who did not know each other that she has the potential to be an outstanding executive education teacher. Because the positive feedback came independently from multiple respected sources, she perceived it as a



positive jolt, much more so than if it had come from a single source. This is one reason why the RBS feedback, in drawing on people from different walks of life, is so potent.

Finally, positive jolts are likely to engender growth to the extent that they come at opportune times. For example, positive jolts that come just before, or at the time of, a critical transition are more likely to motivate personal change than the same jolt offered at the wrong time. A transition is a time when people are in flux – when what made one successful in the past is now a potentially derailing weakness (Ibarra, 2003). A manager working as part of a team to complete a major project before a deadline may not be open to a positive jolt without the time or energy to process it. On the other hand, the same manager who is between projects and considering a career change will likely be much more receptive to a positive jolt.

### **Co-creating Support: Leaders Stimulating Social Resources**

Traditional organization theory and research emphasizes the role of the leader in defining the context, culture, and norms (e.g., Stinchcombe, 1965; Schneider, 1987; Ginnett, 1990). Although leaders often do play a vital role in designing the organizational context (O'Toole, 2001), here we focus our attention on the leader's capability to shape the context in collaboration with employees – that is, to co-create a context for maximal support. To paraphrase Lao Tzu, “The wicked leader is he who the people despise. The good leader is he who the people revere. But the great leader is he who the people say, ‘We did it together.’” Co-creation is about creating support together.

Drawing on Spreitzer, et al. (2004), we propose that leaders promote thriving and cultivate leadership by encouraging employees to develop microcommunities within the organization. A microcommunity is an informal social group that individuals form at

work to support their projects and activities (Little, 1999). These microcommunities provide a set of renewable social resources that enhance employees' capacities to lead. Specifically, in the process of thriving, employees draw on four renewable social resources from their microcommunities: shared knowledge, positive meaning, positive emotions, and positive connections (Spreitzer, et al., 2004). The leader's role is to stimulate and nurture these four resources.

### **Shared Knowledge**

Leaders can create a common knowledge base so that individuals know about how things work and how different pieces fit together into integrated system. With common knowledge, individuals can quickly uncover problems and issues as they arise (Spreitzer, et al., 2004). A common base of knowledge also helps people to integrate and coordinate actions across a diverse array of people. When people share common knowledge, they are in a position to grow because they can act without waiting for approval from others, as relevant information is shared. Armed with broader information and the "big" picture, individuals can focus on larger organizational contributions as well as on narrow tasks.

Leaders can also create shared knowledge by making information widely available about individual skills and expertise. For example, leaders can foster knowledge sharing directly by cataloging and publicizing information about employee expertise across the organization. A broadly accessible database of each employee's work experience, background, and skills may allow employees to seek each other out when they need information. Why is this important? Bunderson and Sutcliffe (2002) found that intrapersonal functional diversity, or the extent to which team members had

broad experiences in different areas, was predictive of information sharing and performance in management teams. Equipped with common knowledge, employees will be able to build microcommunities in which valuable information is shared.

### **Positive Meaning**

Positive meaning is about having a sense of purpose through one's work (Spreitzer et al., 2004). We articulate two pathways for leaders to do this. First, it is well understood that a superordinate vision or purpose facilitates goal alignment, cooperation, and communication (e.g., Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, & Sherif, 1961; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996; Hackman, 2002; Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Alternatively, leaders can emphasize the meaning of the role and the job (Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, in press), as well as the project, group, and organization. In this way, leaders give employees multiple lenses for finding positive meaning. As such, employees will engage their microcommunities in efforts to draw on each of these frames as they search for positive meaning.

Second, by encouraging employees to build microcommunities with flexible roles and projects, leaders increase the incidence of positive meaning in microcommunities. According to Pratt and Ashforth (2003), employees derive their identities at work—and thus positive meaning—from their roles and their memberships. They suggest that psychological safety (Kahn, 1990; Edmondson, 1999)—the belief that one can take interpersonal risks and express the self without negative repercussions—is critical for employees to find positive meaning.

Leaders can promote the discovery of positive meaning simply by explicitly supporting the development of microcommunities. Because it constitutes an individual's

informal group of contacts and colleagues at work, the microcommunity is a harbor of psychological safety for employees. Even if job-prescribed roles and projects are not flexible, the microcommunity allows for flexible role orientations (Parker, Wall, & Jackson, 1997), job crafting (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), and the adoption of personal projects (Grant, Little, & Phillips, 2004). For example, when an altruistic investment banker encourages his coworkers to volunteer at a homeless shelter over the weekend, he is able to lead his microcommunity in a value-congruent project. Because value-congruent roles and activities are inherently meaningful (McGregor & Little, 1998; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999), it is likely that individuals will find positive meaning through their microcommunities. In this way, leader support and active encouragement of microcommunities with flexible roles and projects may inspire employees to generate positive meaning and take on leadership roles.

### **Positive Emotions**

Leaders can also fuel the growth of leaders through positive emotions, or affective states targeted at an event or object (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Two leadership strategies are relevant to augmenting the presence of positive emotions in microcommunities. The first is for the leader to directly express positive emotions. George and Bettenhausen (1990) argue that leader positive moods have a substantial influence on the behavior of groups. Similarly, Luthans and Avolio (2003) and Eden (2003) contend that leader expression of hope is a potent driver of positive emotions throughout an organization. Thus, leaders can foster positive emotions in others by expressing positive emotions.

Second, leaders can encourage thriving and develop leaders by espousing the expression of positive emotions. Barsade (2002) proposed that along with leaders, individuals who express intense emotions often have powerful effects on others' moods. Because individuals tend to weigh negative cues more heavily than positive (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001; Rozin & Royzman, 2001), leaders must express positive emotions so that negative emotions do not dominate the organization. When leaders encourage the expression of positive emotions, mood contagion may ensue across the microcommunities in the organization, thereby creating opportunities for growth.

### **Positive Connections**

Finally, in order to enable thriving, leaders are also charged with cultivating positive connections—high-quality interpersonal bonds—in microcommunities (Spreitzer et al., 2004). Expressing and encouraging positive emotions can lead to the development of positive connections. For example, compassion (Bateman & Organ, 1983; Worline, Dutton, Frost, Kanov, Lilius, & Maitlis, 2004), trust and respect (Campbell, 1990), and gratitude (Emmons, 2003) facilitate positive connections in organizations. Likewise, positive connections often arise from perceived similarity (Cialdini, 1993). When leaders share information about themselves and create opportunities for people to interact in informal, social events like company picnics or barbeques, they will be increasingly likely to discover common interests. Therefore, leader actions may help enable positive connections in the thriving process.

### **Complications in Co-Creation**

It is important to note that the leader's role is not only to *stimulate* these renewable social resources, but also to *regulate* the renewable social resources. More

specifically, in the next sections, we articulate the ways in which excessively high levels of shared knowledge, positive meaning, positive emotions, and positive connections can be detrimental to thriving.

***Downsides of Shared Knowledge.*** First, as human beings, we are limited in our capacities to process information, and too much information can lead to cognitive overload and reduced knowledge (Welford, 1976; McCormick, 1979). Indeed, when faced with too many choices, individuals tend to disengage or experience regret for forgone opportunities (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000; Schwartz, 2000; Schwartz, Ward, Monterosso, Lyubomirsky, White, & Lehman, 2002). These findings indicate that excessive information can be deleterious to thriving, both by hampering vitality and by limiting an employee's ability to deal with complexity.

Second, Bunderson and Sutcliffe (2003) discovered a nonmonotonic relationship between team learning orientation and business unit performance: learning orientation is adaptive, up to a particular point. Teams that overemphasize learning may be trapped in experimentation, or deliberative mindsets (Gollwitzer & Kinney, 1989), at the expense of carrying out the work. Thus, both the cognitive overload and excessive experimentation lenses suggest that it is important for leaders to regulate the amount of knowledge sharing that occurs in microcommunities.

***Downsides of Positive Meaning.*** Leaders must also regulate the amount of positive meaning in microcommunities. First, positive illusions (Taylor & Brown, 1994) may underlie employees' perceptions of meaning (Grant, 2004). Imagine that a microcommunity discovers positive meaning in "saving the organization" by ousting a leader. If this action is in fact contributing to the organization's demise, discovered

positive meaning will prevent increases in cognitive and behavioral complexity, and thus to the thriving of the microcommunity members. Hence, seemingly innocuous positive illusions quickly become destructive delusions.

Additionally, extremely high levels of positive meaning may lead an employee to feel a tremendous sense of pressure (Grant, 2004; Spreitzer, Kizilos, & Nason, 1997). For example, the ostensibly positive meaning of saving the organization may, in actuality, be a burden that leaves the weight of the world on an employee's shoulders. Meaningful activities are not necessarily those that are manageable (Little, 1989, 1999; McGregor & Little, 1998). When demands surpass abilities and challenges surpass skills, employees experience anxiety, strain, and sometimes burnout (Karasek, 1979; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Vitality, a critical component of thriving, will suffer as a result. In sum, because extraordinarily high degrees of positive meaning may entail positive illusions and/or pressure, it is prudent for leaders to ensure that positive meaning is grounded in reality and manageable.

***Downsides of Positive Emotions.*** Like shared knowledge and positive meaning, positive emotions, too, can exist in surplus. If positive emotions are sufficiently ubiquitous that they eradicate negative emotions, the value of negative emotions may be lost. We briefly describe two empirical studies that attest to this value. George and Zhou (2002) demonstrated that under conditions of high perceived recognition, rewards for creativity, and clarity of feelings, creativity was *positively* related to employee *negative* moods and *negatively* related to *positive* moods. Analogously, Verbeke and Bagozzi (2002, 2003) found that the negative emotions of guilt and embarrassment can actually motivate the repair of relationships at work. Taken together, these lines of research

accentuate the importance of negative emotions to thriving at work. This indicates that leaders may find it fruitful to regulate the positive emotions in microcommunities in order to find an appropriate balance between positive and negative (Losada & Heaphy, 2004).

*Downsides of Positive Connections.* It may also be necessary for leaders to regulate positive connections in order to enable thriving. When an individual's microcommunity is replete with positive connections, employees may spend their time socializing rather than completing their tasks (Bramel & Friend, 1987; cf. Jehn & Shah, 1997). In turn, task focus may decline. Although vitality may be present, such distractions may impede the increases in cognitive and behavioral complexity that are central to thriving. Leaders may therefore find it advantageous to ensure that positive connections are not impeding work processes.

The bottom line then is that while each of the renewable social resources can enhance thriving, excessive levels of any single shared resource may have deleterious effects on individuals' ability to grow.

### **Compensatory Social Resources**

A second complication in treating the leader as a stimulator and regulator of renewable social resources is that these resources may be compensatory. In order to thrive, employees may not need all four resources. Indeed, a leader who is low in dispositional positive affect and extraversion may not benefit from expressing positive emotions. Intrapersonal consequences may include excessive autonomic arousal and burnout (Little, 1999, 2000) and low well-being and poor performance (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). Interpersonal consequences may involve being perceived by others as inauthentic



(Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Such a leader may be better suited to focus on stimulating and regulating shared knowledge and positive meaning. In short, we believe that the most productive steps for leaders to take toward promoting thriving are those that are consistent with their strengths (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001).

### **Conclusion**

Ralph Nadar once said, “I start with the premise that the function of leadership is to produce more leaders, not more followers.” We not only agree with Ralph but also go one step further in focusing on developing the leadership potential in all employees. By creating a thriving workplace, organizations build energy and learning both which are so crucial to growing leaders.

In this paper, we offer some lessons for leadership development from the blossoming theoretical perspective of POS through the lens of thriving. Because the thriving approach energizes leaders to develop their full potential as human beings, we believe that developing leaders through this approach will reduce the potential for burnout and depletion. Given the focus on leveraging strengths, leaders are developing their authentic selves. This increases the probability of sustained growth over time and reduces the probability of leader derailment (McCall, 1988). Moreover, the critical focus on co-creating microcommunities means that leaders have resources that they can build *and* draw upon to sustain their growth.

At the same time, it is important to note that thriving approach is not a panacea. It comes with its own set of complications. However, a thriving approach to growing leaders is best implemented as a complement to the more traditional approach advocated

in CCL's Assess/Challenge/Support Model. By fleshing out alternatives such as our thriving approach, we hope to identify more pathways for growing leaders.

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