Uses and Application of Positive Psychology in Management Education Delivery

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Abstract

Positive Psychology is the scientific study of what goes right in life from birth till end and at all stages in between. It is a branch of psychology which enquires into those things which make life worth living. It focuses on areas of experience mainly at three levels namely a) subjective level (subjective 'states' and positive emotions b) Individual levels (study of positive behaviours and traits which go to make what is known as 'character strength') and c) group or societal level.

Study of 'what goes right' and what 'makes life worth living' must be the core of all teaching in general and management education in particular. The heart of education is education of heart itself. For management educators, exposure to Positive Psychology is almost inescapable. It deals with several concepts and techniques that help make delivery close to heart, mind and psyche of students.

Positive Psychology as developed by Martin Seligman and Christopher Peterson is relatively a young science. Every teacher needs to be trained on these lines as a part of faculty development. Martin Seligman and Christopher Peterson have identified 24 virtues which make for 'character strength.' An understanding and application of at least few of those virtues will help teachers rise above the ordinary mass. Teachers who are exposed to Positive Psychology will be better equipped in dealing with their students in terms of coaching, mentoring and building muscles of responsibility.

Positive psychology forays into institution building exercises too. It addresses issues like development of civic virtues, creation of healthy families, study of healthy working environments and positive communities. It helps teachers understand importance of developing the flow in themselves and the students, identifying positive emotions, positive affectivity, happiness, and so on.

The full paper deals with these issues and many other and seeks to provide an insight into positive psychology for personal growth, professional excellence and organizational commitment and responsibility.

Keywords: Positive psychology, Institution building, Mentoring, Professional excellence

Introduction

Management education delivery systems determine the quality of inputs, employability of the students and the goodwill of the institutions themselves. Industries often criticise the product in the students, as inferior and below the market expectations. Institutions on the other hand, blame on various external factors such as lack of student-industry interface, paucity of experienced teachers, unclear industry expectations, absence of employer relevant curriculum and so on.

It is often commented that India has been able to produce world class students but not world class teachers. Teachers in various disciplines, who have moved abroad and are stationed at foreign university campuses, are again doing well. Why then, our teachers are not doing as much as is expected of them?

Content v/s Context

When it comes to offering management courses, we are inferior to none content-wise. What we lacked all these days is an approach to teaching itself. The contextual relevance of our teaching methods holds the key to student acceptance and employability. Positive Psychology as an approach to management

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teaching is capable of getting rid of many of the ills our present system is fraught with. In this paper, an attempt is made to present how uses and application of Positive psychology can be integrated in our teaching and delivery systems.

What is Positive psychology?

Martin Seligman is said to be the father of Positive Psychology. Seligman, Martin and Csikzentmihalgi (2009) state that focus of Positive Psychology is the scientific study of positive human functioning and flourishing at a number of levels such as biological, personal, relational, institutional, cultural and global. Management education is by far, of universal application. It knows no bounds and hence it works on transforming a student into a global citizen. Personal and relational nuances play a key role in this transformation process.

Positive Psychology is the scientific study of **what goes right in life** through one's life. It helps us examine those things that **make life worth living**. Positive Psychology enters the heart and soul of management education as it seeks to search for those qualities that allow individuals, communities and societies to **thrive and flourish.**

Focus on Weaknesses

Positive Psychology calls for as much focus on weaknesses as on strengths. It trains the teachers as to how they could convert weaknesses into possible strengths. The strength of a chain lies in its weakest link. Once we identify the weak link, we have the strength bouncing back. The theme line of Positive psychology is **build the best, repair the worst.** Positive Psychology recognises and identifies **disease, disorder and distress** as authentically as it deals with human **goodness and excellence.**

Dimensions of Positive Psychology

Among others, Positive Psychology focuses on three areas of human experience.

a. At subjective Level: It takes a close look at positive, subjective **states** or positive **emotions** such as happiness, joy, satisfaction with life, relaxation, love, intimacy and contentment. It may

be noted that these are the 'states' which enable all kinds of accomplishment including learning. These 'states' lead to constructive thought about **self** and the **future**. Ancestors of optimism and hope are constructive thoughts themselves. A management teacher must examine as to whether his/her class room delivery and performance leads to such constructive thoughts in the minds of his/her students. Positive, subjective 'states' include feeling of energy, vitality and confidence.

b. At the individual level: Positive Psychology deals with the study of individual traits and enduring behaviour patterns. Individual traits include courage, persistence, honesty and wisdom. Management teachers who are exposed to understanding and techniques of Positive Psychology are well placed in identifying the above individual traits of their students. The more the teacher understands, the more compassionate he is likely to become. In the space of such understanding, the teachers are able to drop their own **ego** and look at the issues with new perspectives.

c. At the group or societal level: Positive Psychology is as mush beneficial to teachers as it is to managements. It guides them through development, creation and maintenance of **positive institutions**. When the teachers sensitise themselves with issues of institution building, they are likely to feel accountable for what they do or do not do. Ideas of Positive Psychology will act as a **self monitor** in them. More specifically, at the group /societal level, Positive Psychology works on the following.

  - Development of civic virtues

  - Creation of healthy families

  - Study of healthy environments

Scope of Positive Psychology

Positive psychology encompasses altruism, empathy, building enriching communities, creativity, forgiveness, compassion, job satisfaction, personality development, psychotherapy, authentic happiness, Zen meditation and so on. It also covers the art of broadening our response options and mobilising social resources for the future. Management teachers need to learn

the art of responding to student questions and there by building pacing and rapport with them.

Positive Emotions

Emotion theorists emphasised more on negative emotions than the positive. Positive Psychologists however, dwell more on positive emotions. Several studies reveal that positive emotions **alert us to dangers.** When we are positive, we tend to become more vigilant to situations around us. Psychologists like, Barbara Fredrickson harped more on positive emotions. Positive Psychologists point to the fact that response options narrow down to a few or just one when we are under the seize of negative emotions. For instance, a teacher who suffers from negative emotions may not be quite willing to explain a phenomenon with so much of details or variations. Negative emotions will also lead to what is known as **decision proneness.**

Positive Affectivity

When psychologists studied moods, their focus used to be more on bad moods such as irritability, anxiety, depression and such other. Paul Meehl (1975) took a radical view and went on to explain as to how some people are endowed with more cerebral 'joy-juice' than others. People with such 'joy-juice' are found to be having more capacity for experiencing positive feelings than others. Psychologists liked to term this capacity as' **hedonic capacity'.** Popular personality trait of **extraversion** is linked to people with hedonic capacity. In terms of Positive Psychology, hedonic capacity is now referred to as '**positive affectivit**y'

People high in positive affectivity are socially active. They seem to be having more friends, more acquaintances and more social interactions. Management students are expected to be groomed on these lines. Future jobs that await the management graduates are built on the basis of above compulsions and requirements. This is a challenge for our management teachers. They have to identify the future job profiles, requirements and prepare students accordingly. Study of and orientation to Positive psychology more than helps the teachers in their task of preparing students for future positions.

Positive Psychology in Work Place

Teachers who have to play the onerous role are naturally hard pressed and work stressed. United States department of labour conducted a survey in the year 2009 which revealed that about 84% of employees did some or all of the work at their work place. Majority of US working population was found to be spending its waking hours outside its houses. This survey was an eye opener to employers that they should make work place stress free and enjoyable. Positive Psychology which enquires into what makes people happy, productive and contributing becomes relevant here. Teachers need a good and inspiring work atmosphere on the same lines. It is therefore, the responsibility of the institutions to take care of this need. Positive psychology enjoins upon teachers to work towards institution building and institutions towards creating a stress free and inspirational atmosphere for the teachers to work and contribute. The roles of both the parties are mutually inclusive and rewarding.

Laffaldana M T and Machinsky (1985) linked job satisfaction with job performance. Positive Psychology in work place helps shift the attention from negative aspects such as work violence, stress, burnout, job insecurity to superordinate goals of the institution.

Positive Education

'Positive Education' is an approach that focuses on individual strengths and personal motivation requirements. Positive Education is one of the many tools at the disposal of Positive Psychology. Traditional teachers attempt to say what they know and what they are prepared for. They tend to keep in mind '**average student'** and then move the class ahead around the 'average students'. They are stuck with 'one category of students, one type of material and one teaching technique. Here we can draw a clear distinction between positive schooling teachers and 'one size fits all' type of teachers. Positive Psychology trains and motivates teachers to use techniques that focus on the well being of all individual students. Teachers with Positive Psychology orientation convert teaching and learning into a cooperative process and they learn **to respect their students.**

Character Strengths

Positive Psychologists regard a good character as a group of positive dispositions and characteristics. Martin Seligman who is hailed as father of Positive Psychology along with Christopher Peterson devoted considerable time for designing a cluster of virtues, numbering 24, which go to make 'character strength'. It is said that Peterson spent 3 years on this particular task. In his book, 'A Primer in Positive psychology[1], Peterson commented as follows ' I believe that people possess signature strengths akin to what Allport (1961) identified decades ago as personal traits. These are strengths of character that a person owns, celebrates and frequently exercises. In our interview with adults, we find that almost everyone can readily identify a handful of strengths as very much their own, typically between two to three'.

Martin Seligman and Peter Peterson classified those 24 virtues under the following classifications.

Strengths of wisdom and knowledge

1. Creativity: Thinking of novel and productive ways to conceptualise and do things
2. Curiosity: Taking interest in ongoing experience for its own sake, exploring and discovering
3. Open-mindedness: Thinking things through and examining them from all sides; weighing all evidences fairly
4. Love of learning: Mastering new skills, traits and bodies of knowledge
5. Perspective: Being able to provide wise counsel to others; ways of looking at the world that make sense to oneself and to others
   Strengths of courage
6. Bravery: Not shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain, acting on conviction even if unpopular
7. Persistence: Finishing what one starts, persisting in a course of action in spite of obstacles
8. Integrity: Presenting oneself in a genuine way, taking responsibility for one's feelings and action
9. Vitality: Approaching life with excitement and energy; feeling alive and activated
   Strengths of Humanity

10. Love: Valuing close relations with others, in particular those in which sharing and caring are reciprocated
11. Kindness: Doing favours and goodness to others
12. Social intelligence: being aware of the motives and feelings of other people and oneself
    Strengths of Justice
13. Citizenship: Working well as a member of a group or team, being loyal to the group
14. Fairness: Treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice; not letting personal feelings bias decisions about others
15. Leadership: Encouraging a group of which one is a member to get things done and at the same time maintain good relations within the group
    Strengths of temperance
16. Forgiveness and mercy: Forgiving those who have done wrong; accepting the shortcomings of others, giving people a second chance, not being vengeful
17. Humility/modesty: letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves, not regarding oneself as more special than one is
18. Prudence: Being careful about one's choices, not taking undue risks, not saying or doing things that might later be regretted
19. Self-regulation: Regulating what one feels and does; being disciplined, controlling one's appetites and emotions
    Strength of transcendence
20. Appreciation of beauty and excellence: Appreciating beauty, excellence, and skilled performance in various domains of life
21. Gratitude: Being aware of and thankful of the good things that happen, taking time to express thanks
22. Hope: expecting the best in future and working to achieve it
23. Humour: Liking to laugh and tease, bringing smile to other people, seeing the lighter side
24. Spirituality: Having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose, the meaning of life, and the meaning of the universe

Positive Psychology – Uses and Applications

Teaching Happiness

It is said that truth is good but happiness is always better. But without truth there is no happiness. Positive psychology oriented teacher will not compromise on expectations and student performance. He will help them become what he wants them to be. Communicating expectations is an art by itself. If the students were to know what is expected of them they will strive and enjoy striving. Many a teacher is not too sure about **what to expect** of their students. They do not verbalise the expectation even if they have one. The expectations should be really high and challenging. Higher expectations also come to fruition provided they are well communicated to the performers. As the teachers raise the difficulty level of an assignment, performance also rises with due communication and offering of help. Evidence based research and proven techniques from positive psychology show that when students are **'happy'**, they **learn** better and faster. Key variables of positive psychology such as happiness, learned optimism, motivation, flow and mindfulness can be **learnt** as they can be **taught.** If something has not been done even once all these days, it can be done **now**. Happiness is also learnt habit. As Aristotle said " We are what we do repeatedly. Excellence then is not an act but a habit". Positive Psychology focuses on this aspect of 'doing repeatedly'. We smile not because we are happy, we are happy **because we smile**. A teacher who **works on what works** gets the results that he seeks out from his students.

State of Flow

A flow is asset for a teacher, student, public speaker, actor and practically everybody in this world. Flow and fear do not go together. Flow emerges as fear subsides. Flow is a mental state in which a person doing a job does it fully absorbed, immersed and involved. According to Csikszentmihalyi, flow is completely focused attention. In flow there are three key variables namely the task, the teacher and the student. Establishing the learning environment and removing the distractions go a long way. When a student is in a state of flow, he is able to harness his emotions and equate learning as a service. This state of learning is worship by itself. Helen Keller once said "I thank God for my handicap. It is through Him that I have found myself, my work and my worth". Positive Psychology enables a teacher to flow with the flow of his students. In that space of rapport, the material distinction between the teacher and the taught loses its rigour and formality. As we rise higher, the directions such as South, North, East and West become immaterial. Daniel Goleman (1990) observes that hallmark of flow is a feeling of spontaneous joy, even rupture, while performing a task. Teachers need to enjoy the flow in themselves and then learn to identify the same in their students. Most of the class room activities connected with management education can be designed to bring forth the flow. Even complex ideas and concepts can be learnt as if it is a play. Flow therefore leads to playfulness and mindfulness.

Savouring

Students of management are expected to 'deliver' results at the hands of their future employers. As the saying goes, employers are not interested in our 'labour pain', they just want to see the babies. There are many MNCs who require their employees to meet the bosses almost every hour and brief them as to what is happening. We judge ourselves by what we are capable of, others judge us by what we have already done. It is very essential that management teachers do take time to train themselves in coping strategies and pass on the learning to students. Positive psychology makes a distinction between coping and what is known as **savouring.** In coping we experience the pressure and helplessness. Coping is essentially a survival strategy or one of crisis management. Every time there is a problem, someone just struggles to come out of it. Savouring on the other hand is a choice in which someone undergoes the present difficulty in anticipation of future results. Such positive expectation keeps the performer is a state of readiness for the present and future as well. If a post graduate students decides to give his best during two years, he is bound to reap forty years of future career. This is just one example. There are so many issues about which we can savour. A good teacher is one who makes an intervention in his student's priorities and guides him on the need

for savouring. Guiding the students on importance of savouring is key to **coaching** and student **mentoring.**

Capability vs Competence

The aim of education is often misunderstood and accordingly students are misguided. Richard David Bach, American writer, once wrote "Learning is finding out what you already know. Doing is demonstrating that you know. Teaching is reminding others that they know just as well as you. We are all learners, doers, and teachers". Positive Psychology teaches us life-science in the sense that it helps us distinguish between apparently similar concepts and see the **distinction.** For instance, let us take the case of two expressions: Competence and Capability.

Competence is what individuals know or are capable of doing in terms of knowledge, skill and attitude. Capability is the extent to which individuals can adapt to change, generate new knowledge, and continue to improve their performance. Positive Psychology works more on building capability in students rather than just enhancing the competence. Management education must seek to convert students into multi faceted and multi-skilled business managers among other things. In other words, management education must focus on nurturing the following commitments on the part of students. They are:

1. **Challenging the process**: Today's students are tomorrow's leaders. The ability to question the things powerfully is most important of all. They should be courageous and resourceful enough to search out challenging opportunities to change, grow, innovate and improve. Willingness to take risk and learn from accompanying risks helps them stand in good stead during difficult times.

2. **Inspiring a shared vision**: Students must be trained on not just coping strategies but beyond that. **Savouring is** what Positive Psychology talks about in this context. It is the ability to envision an uplifting and ennobling future and withstand the present challenges and controversies. The key to success lies in taking others along. To get along, one must go along. Enlisting others in common vision by appealing to their values, interests, hopes and dreams matters a lot.

3. **Enabling others to act**: Students should be trained in the art of making others succeed. In an organisation, best results come out of cooperation, coordination and collaboration. Value of collaboration is learnt when people demonstrate team spirit and work in a team.

4. **Modelling the way:** It is the courage and commitment to **set examples.** The personal image of the teacher leads to credibility. When teachers are seen as credible, students just accept them and even **follow** them. Teachers' personal habits, grooming, turn out etc go a long way in modelling the path.

5. **Encouraging the heart:** Willingness to recognise individual contributors and celebrating team accomplishments has an enduring value in relationship. Relationship is a mirror in which we can see ourselves. Management educators need to look at the ethical dimensions in their students' personality and coach them from time to time. Teachers should drive the values of character, commitment, conviction, courtesy and courage deep down the students' psyche.

Positive Psychology – Working Way Up

In an educational setting, ideas and benefits of positive psychology can be made use of as follows

Life Time Value

As a part of regular curriculum, students can be exposed to lessons that will help them sustain and practice the values for a life time. Lessons on positive mental attitudes, sound physical health, harmony with nature, freedom from fear, hope of achievement, faith, willingness to share, love of labour, open-mindedness, self discipline etc must be offered at least two hours a week regularly. Teachers who have inclination for learning, sharing and helping could be trained specially. Students could be encouraged to go through a host of books on life-lessons over a period of time and share the thoughts in regular forums. Similarly students could be trained on the art of accurate thinking. Through application of self-discipline, students will learn how their thoughts can be influenced, controlled and directed. The power of thoughts has control over every cell

of the body. Mind management, self management and stress management go together. Management teachers may evince keen interest in these areas and extend services to their students. The focus should be on exposing students to feelings of energy, vitality and confidence.

Creation of 'Positive Institutions'

Positive psychology lays stress on building responsible people, organisations and net work in and around the institutions. In that sense, the delivery of education is assignment of responsibilities. Students can be encouraged to go out into open settings and extend services. For instance, students could be encouraged to take part in the group discussions of Self Help Groups and eventually help form groups. They can be exposed to the mechanism of developing thrift and lending to group members. Prime Minister has already given a clarion call for cleanliness drive on a war footing. Students can be encouraged to choose a given area and launch the cleanliness program on a sustainable basis. Students should be encouraged to run many of the student related initiatives all by themselves. Attendance and punctuality is presently teacher driven compulsions. Students can be encouraged to take this upon themselves and take forward. This will reduce on-site surveillance on the part of teachers and administrators and increase student participation. Ideas of Corporate Governance can be implemented at the educational institutions with student leadership and initiatives.

Managing Future Through Positive Emotions

One of the most obvious gains from lessons of Positive Psychology is that we can handle the pressures, threats, uncertainties **though positive emotions.** As the saying goes, there is nothing to be afraid of, everything is to be **understood**. In such understanding, there is faith and **no fear**. Positive emotions alert us to **dangers.** Students who lag behind in studies need not sulk; they just need to work their way up. It is important that, more than the students the teachers need to be exposed to this idea continuously. The areas of concern are admissions falling short of expectations, student

indiscipline, placement not taking place, paucity of industry-exposed teachers and so on. All these issues need to be handled by people with positive emotions. When teachers are equipped with tools of Positive Psychology, so can be students over a period of time. Positive Psychology can change our very approach to **problem areas** and enhance the quality of decisions and supervision on a day to day basis. Needless to say that the quality of teaching will move on a higher spiral in an atmosphere of this kind.

Faculty Development Programmes

It is possible to run management education keeping the heart, mind and soul in focus. This does not mean that we should give a go by to the existing modules. It is said that heart of education should be education of heart. Teachers need to be exposed to ideas of Positive Psychology in a big way.

Research Approach

Positive Psychologists regard a good character as a combination of various positive dispositions and characteristics. Martin Seligman and Christopher Peterson identified 24 such virtues over a period of time. These virtues keep changing as time changes. People who were exposed to this list of virtues admitted to having atleast three to four of them as their own. Management educators may undertake research and inventories the virtues that make people thrive and succeed. Ideas of such findings should be shared with students and colleagues. Students also should be exposed to such surveys. Some of these characteristics are universal. It helps us understand why some people generally succeed while others generally fail. Since Positive Psychology encompasses institutional building also, studies can be extended to institutions which run management education. It would be useful if the study comes out with common institutional ethos and ethics which make them succeed or otherwise.

Conclusion

Management is essentially an enabling and ennobling process. Management education holds the key to management and leadership excellence. A sound

and well rounded management education delivery system is the need of the hour. Positive Psychology which is a study of **what goes right in life** can be the best fit in designing and delivering future programs. It works at subjective level, individual level and societal level. Its focus on **character strength** lends itself for several studies in any of those twenty four areas virtues that go to make it as **character strength**. Management education system that integrates Positive Psychology is sure to work on the heart, mind and soul of individuals who

study and the organisations for which they work for at a later stage. It helps build individuals, values and institutions.

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