

TWO FOR ONE

Using Positive Psychology in teams

We're often asked if people can be simultaneously well and successful.
Lawyers want to know this too.

By Anouk Kelling and Gaynor Parkin



HIGHER RATES OF ILLNESS INCLUDING heart disease, depression, anxiety, and substance abuse have been found in the legal field compared with other professional services (Peterson and Peterson, 2009). Moreover, it seems that these poor health outcomes have something to do with both the study of, and work in, the legal profession.

A 2009 literature review conducted by Todd and Elizabeth Peterson highlights that rates of illness are no different between law students and their contemporaries before commencing studies. However, after just one year in law school more than 50% of students met criteria for depression.

Evidence from neuroscience and positive psychology compellingly demonstrates that feeling good is not only good for your health but good for individual and organisational productivity (Staw, Sutton and Pelled, 1994) and can predict future income (Diener, Nickerson, Lucas and Sandvik, 2002). There is no evidence to indicate that lawyers are any different to other professions in this regard.

Relevant theories

In her article *Strengthening the Positive Clinical Psychologist and Managing Director of Umbrella Health & Resilience*, Gaynor Parkin describes simple everyday activities that, when adopted as daily habits, boost individual well-being and productivity. The Broaden-and-Build Theory (see sidebar) explains how engaging in specific behaviours can give rise to a positive well-being spiral. In short, Broaden-and-Build explains that you can get two (well-being and productivity) for one (behaviour).

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), a theory of human motivation, stipulates that people experience greater motivation when they feel autonomous, competent and connected to others (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Kieger and Sheldon (2014) supports this premise in the legal realm.

The top four factors contributing to happiness and greater well-being at work for lawyers are autonomy (ie, being in control of oneself), relatedness (ie, connection), competence (ie, capable) and internal motivation. Moreover, research has also demonstrated that these factors correlate with performance (see Gagne and Deci, 2005, for a review of the literature).

It is widely accepted, however, that knowing “what” to do doesn’t always translate into the “doing”.

What gets in the way of people engaging in helpful, fulfilling behaviours? Motivation, persistence and conflicting demands are some common barriers. Climate and culture also play a major role in our behavioural choices, emphasising the importance of a supportive team environment for helpful behaviours. Moreover, some research shows that when more members of a team adopt a behaviour there are exponentially greater outcomes for the team.

So what can your team do?

Here are a few empirically tested strategies that target the drivers for lawyer well-being of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Try them with your team and see what impact they have. Also check in with others to see if there’s any impact on your team functioning or productivity.

Team initiatives using Positive Psychology

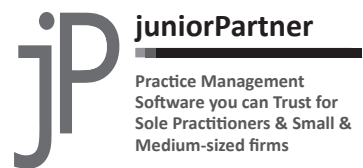
ADOPTING TEAM STRENGTHS

Using our strengths affords us myriad positive emotions; a sense of mastery, success and competence to name a few. Struggling with weaknesses does the opposite. We’re more likely to benefit from our strengths if we know

and fully understand our strengths and if we are using them. Peterson and Peterson found that law students who used their top strength were at reduced risk for anxiety and depression and were more satisfied in life.

TRY: Get everyone to take a mental (perhaps private) note of how competent and fulfilled they’ve been feeling at work. Then have everyone on your team complete the VIA strengths assessment www.viacharacter.org/survey/account/register and share your strengths. Have each member talk about when they’ve used their strength, how it worked, how they felt. How could people bring their strengths to bear on a current issue? Make a plan. After a trial period (maybe after a project is over) get everyone to re-rate their sense of competence and fulfilment to see if it has made a positive difference or not.

Keep in mind that the goal of a strengths discussion isn’t to make



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people change their strengths or to develop their weakness, it's about encouraging greater use of strengths.

GIVE TIME

In recent years, the concept of random acts of kindness has taken hold and research evidence consistently demonstrates that these acts boost happiness for the giver (Lyubomirsky, 2007).

Interestingly, a study from the Yale School of Management and Harvard Business School this year found that one form of giving – the gift of time – resulted in the giver having a sense of greater time affluence (than if they had wasted time, spent time on themselves or even been given extra time). That is, by giving their time away they felt more time rich. The theory is that in the giving time to others the giver feels more capable, more connected and derives more meaning from their activity, taking us right back into the psychological needs described by SDT and which Kreiger and Sheldon found as central to the happiness of lawyers.

TRY: Making wise choices about when and what you gift. Give when you have expertise or when giving allows you to use your strengths or is meaningful to you. If a request fails to meet at least one of these criteria, redirect the request to another team member, giving consideration to their strengths and passions. Give this a go as a team for a period of time and see what happens. How competent and connected did you feel?

FINDING TEAM MEANING

If the meaning you derive from turning up to work each day is drawing a paycheck or to

become a partner, you're less likely to be happy than your colleague who sees their work as an end, in and of itself (Wrzesniewski, 2003).

Kreiger and Sheldon (2014) found that lawyers who identify meaning in their work had greater psychological well-being. This is an interesting finding but it's disheartening to then discover that only a third of people do view their work as their calling (Wrzesniewski, 2003).

It also highlights the importance of "job crafting". Job crafting is the process of changing the actual tasks you do as well as your approach to those tasks, so that you are able to find meaning and purpose in carrying out those activities. When individuals are able to craft their job they experience improved well-being. Moreover, in her research Amy Wrzesniewski found that teams with more "calling" members experienced less conflict, greater faith and trust in management and a greater commitment to the team. Additionally, the more "calling" members in a team the more satisfied the teams felt with their work and with their colleagues.

So, you don't have to view *being* a lawyer as your calling to be well or even productive. You might derive meaning from developing more junior staff, supporting clients to have a sense of agency and power, or strengthening team connections by getting everyone to participate in the daily quiz.

TRY: Talk as a team about what activities you do that give you a sense of meaning and purpose. Discuss how you might "craft" your roles. Think about doing this on smaller projects too. Or: As a team talk about what you could do that would be meaningful to you collectively? How could

this be achieved? Measure your sense of engagement, agency and autonomy before and after this exercise and see if and how it changes?

DEVELOP TRUST

Why is trust important? Trusting colleagues allows us to reduce double handling and double checking. It allows us to confidently delegate and to feel comfortable in, for example, client and stakeholder meetings. This is essential, as it frees up resources for complex problem solving. Trust also allows us to be innovative as we can have confidence that reasonable small errors won't have disastrous consequences.

How do you develop trust in your team?

Go on a team getaway and fall, blindfolded into your colleagues' arms? However, it is difficult to see how this may relate to their ability to tell you they don't understand the jurisprudence or that they need more time to complete a document. Nor do these sorts of activities allow for new members of staff to readily develop trust in the team or for the whole team to develop effective habits.

WHAT'S AN ALTERNATIVE?

John Stephens and his colleagues at Case Western Reserve University explored the relationship between a particular style of communication, Emotional Carrying Capacity (ECC), team trust in each other and overall team resilience. They found, as expected, that communication style is integral to team trust and resilience and that ECC in particular supports higher levels of team trust and resilience.

TRY: As a team agree to a trial of ECC communication. You can avoid the looks of horror on your colleagues faces by avoiding naming the style and just explaining the three essential elements of communication. The first element is the frequent communication of emotions through verbal and non-verbal language (not big emotion, just genuine). Secondly, ECC requires the expression of both positive and negative emotions. Finally, that the communication is constructive (ie, not blaming).

As always, before using this strategy get a sense of where you're starting as a team. How much trust do team members feel with each other? Again this might be something people just take note of privately. Get everyone to check in with themselves again afterwards.

Broaden and Build: A Foundational Theory

Think about the last time you had a good laugh with members of your team before devising a legal strategy for a complex problem.

What was the flow of ideas like? Was the process the same or different to the time you approached the same problem after a morning of frustrations and setbacks?

It's readily understood that mastering challenging tasks, an experience many of us associate with our daily work, provides both a sense of achievement (good feelings) and new learnings (resource development) that allow us to deal with more complex tasks in the future.

However, the Broaden and Build Theory – the seminal work of Barbara Fredrickson – has now been empirically supported after countless studies to show that while achievement results in positive emotion, positive emotion itself broadens our perspective and allows us to see and think faster and more creatively (for more on Broaden and Build check out Gaynor Parkin's article on Thriving in *LawTalk* 850, pp20-22).

In our example, the behaviour – working on a challenging task – facilitates both positive emotion and productivity. This is key – one behaviour can fuel both outcomes. So why isn't this the case for the extremely hard working lawyer, who's working long hours and solving complex problems but feeling miserable?

GENERATE MORE POSITIVE EMOTION

As outlined in the Broaden and Build sidebar we know that experiencing more positive emotion is helpful for improving individual well-being and performance. The same has been found for teams.

While there has been some debate about the actual amount of positive emotion that is effective, high performing teams have consistently been found to experience and demonstrate more positive than negative emotion. This doesn't mean that everything is rosy all of the time but that overall the ratio of positive to negative is higher.

TRY: Talk with your team about what specific interventions would generate more positive emotion in your team. Celebrating successes? Connecting over morning tea? Team challenges or projects? Try out some of the ideas and see which are most successful, then plan to keep doing them.

Summary

Adopt an experimental approach to trying out these Positive Psychology interventions in your team. Test them out and see which ones have the best "fit".

Anouk Kelling is a clinical psychologist, facilitator and Director of Organisational Development at Umbrella (www.umbrella-health.com). She and her colleagues design and deliver well-being and resilience solutions to a wide variety of organisations. They are also keenly interested in evaluating the effectiveness of their work. Anouk previously held a leadership role in a large public organisation, where she led a successful frontline team.

Gaynor Parkin has worked for two decades as a clinical psychologist in New Zealand and the United Kingdom. She is the founding director of Umbrella, which provides workplace resilience training for a broad range of public and private sector organisations. Gaynor also lectures for the Psychology Department at Victoria University. Gaynor is the co-author of the book I've had it up to here: from stress to strength, published by Consumer NZ in 2008 and reprinted in 2011. Gaynor tests out the robustness of resilience tools when juggling her psychology work with the joys and challenges of parenting twin boys.

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