

High performing schools are virtuous schools

Marcus Wicher

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Values have long held centre-stage in schools as the guiding lights that lead towards the development of a positive organisational climate and culture.

While these *espoused* values provide schools and organisations with guidance around the preferred ways to behave and act, they can be abstract and can easily become words that hold little or no meaning. By understanding the impact that organisational virtues can have on wellbeing and performance, we are able to better understand the positive qualities that truly enable our schools to function at their moral, human and social best; if our values are the *what* in terms of what we strive for, virtues are the *how* (Cameron, Bright and Caza, 2004 & Gupta, 2016).

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(Cameron, *et al.*, 2004). Cameron, *et al.* (2004) defines organisational virtuousness as including, “individuals’ actions, collective activities, cultural attributes, or processes that enable dissemination and perpetuation of virtuousness in an organisation” (p.768). In addition to this, Cameron, *et al.* (2004) has identified three specific attributes of organisational virtuousness that are important to consider when evaluating the impact that virtuousness has on organisational performance; moral goodness, human impact and social betterment. The cultural attribute of moral goodness has Aristotelian roots where ‘Goods of First Intent’ are pursued on the basis that it is “good in itself and is to be chosen for its

own sake” (Metaphysics, XII: 4). Organisations that prioritise human impact are known to pride themselves on the active promotion of employee wellbeing, meaningful work and positive relationships. Whereas activities associated with achieving positive social impact are completed for the benefit of others and without the expectation of payment, promotion or reward (Aristotle, 1106a22-23). The definition of organisational virtuousness is entwined with a definition of Positive Organisational Scholarship that is focussed on the study of positive organisational outcomes, processes and attributes (Cameron, Dutton & Quinn, 2003). This in-turn aligns to Aristotle’s (1995)



definition of wellbeing, *eudemonia*, which is focused largely on living a life of virtue and the pursuit of one's *daemon* or best possible self.

A case for organisational virtues

With limited literature and evidence to connect virtuousness and organisational performance, Cameron, *et al.* (2004) surveyed a total of 18 different organisations in which they were required to characterise themselves in accordance with a very broad set of virtuous concepts. A factor analysis (a process of identifying interdependency amongst a large set of variables (i.e. virtues)) was then applied to the survey responses to identify specific virtues (factors) that are most associated with organisational virtuousness. The results of this analysis identified five factors of organisational virtuousness that had strong correlations with positive organisational performance: organisational forgiveness, trust, integrity, optimism and compassion. When schools are high in virtuousness, it is reasonable to predict that there will be increased levels of teacher innovation and retention, student engagement and parent satisfaction (Cameron, *et al.*, 2004, p. 781).

“Displays of virtuousness by leaders are especially likely to become characteristic of the organisation as a whole”

(Cameron, *et al.*, 2004, p. 771)

Virtues amplify and buffer

The benefits of virtuousness within organisations relates to the amplifying and buffering effects of virtues. Cameron, *et al.* (2004) identifies three positive consequences that relate to the amplifying effect of virtues; increased positive emotions, improved levels of social capital and a higher prevalence of prosocial behaviour. In instances where virtues have been amplified, researchers have observed employees demonstrating improved levels of “commitment, participation, trust and collaboration, all of which contribute significantly to organisational effectiveness” (Cameron, *et al.*, 2004). Acts or expressions of kindness, compassion and gratitude rarely go unnoticed, whereby there is often a contagious reciprocity that accompanies these virtuous deeds. In simplest terms and as humans, *‘We reap what we sow’*.

Virtuousness also provides a buffer against the negative events, experiences and personal traumas that can occur within and outside of an organisation. In a similar way that positive emotions amplify positive employee behaviours, increased positive affect has the capacity to enhance an individual's personal resources to cope and respond during times of hardship, stress and illness (Fredrickson, 2004). In schools, virtues can also buffer against the day-to-day stresses associated with workload, deadlines, student behavioural issues, parental expectations and change. With higher levels of social capital and prosocial behaviours, employees are more likely to support each other



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Virtuous behaviour inspires positive emotions such as love, empathy, awe, zest and enthusiasm... the sine qua non of managerial success and organisational excellence.
Fineman, 1996, p. 545”

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and behave in ways that promote workplace harmony. A focus on developing the virtue of optimism will also enable individuals to view challenges in a more balanced, pragmatic and solutions-focused way. This in-turn increases resiliency against the negative health effects that are often associated with stress, anxiety and depression (Seligman, 1991).

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Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi (2000)

Where to start?

Optimism – not an optional leadership trait

Developing the virtue of optimism presents organisations with a number of potential

Organisational Virtues

A virtuous path that leads to organisational flourishing

Virtues & High Performance

The virtues that have the strongest correlation with positive organisational performance are:

- 1 Forgiveness
- 2 Trust
- 3 Integrity
- 4 Compassion
- 5 Optimism

Amplifying & Buffering Effects

There are 3 positive consequences that have been identified that relate to the amplifying effect of virtues; increased positive emotions, improved levels of social capital and a high prevalence of pro-social behaviour. In instances where virtues have been amplified, researchers have observed employees demonstrating improved levels of “commitment, participation, trust and collaboration” (Cameron *et al.*, 2004). Virtuousness also buffers organisations from negative effects such as stress and trauma (personal and work-related), illness, workload and change.

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Marcus Wicher (2017)

benefits. Optimism within schools is particularly important as teachers and school leaders have a responsibility to promote a culture of hope and optimism whereby there is a genuine belief that all students can experience learning success, that students will overcome difficulties and that students, through their education, can pursue their dreams and aspirations. Students that are hopeful believe in themselves, they pursue goals without the fear of failure and they have a belief that they can make a difference in the world. Hopeful and optimistic students also approach obstacles with a solutions focused mindset that sets them up for success; as such, they are less prone to mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression (Lopez, 2010).

In terms of wellbeing, optimistic individuals are more likely to cope during times of adversity, they are more likely to actively pursue

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meaningful and challenging life goals thus enjoying greater levels of life satisfaction, they are less prone to burnout and stress disorders and optimists also tend to be more engaged in their life and make the most of the opportunities that come their way (Scheier and Carver, 1992).

To promote a culture of optimism and hope within the community, a strategy that involves a combination of interventions such as Best Possible Self journaling, goal commitment and coaching is recommended (Lyubomirsky, 2008).

Best Possible Self Journal – amplify your most positive qualities

The Best Possible Self intervention is a visualisation exercise that involves creating a detailed mental image of yourself at your best in all of the key areas of your life; at work, in relationships and with family, pursuing passions and realising your dreams (Lyubomirsky, 2008; King, 2001). As a positive intervention, the Best Possible Self exercise cultivates a sense of optimism while providing a buffer against negative health effects associated with stress, anxiety and burnout.

It is recommended that the Best Possible Self intervention be combined with both goal commitment strategies and coaching. This will enable individuals, as they take the first steps towards their best possible self, to build a sense of agency while creating pathways towards goal attainment (Lyubomirsky, 2008 & Lopez, 2010). By providing staff with the opportunity to be coached by a peer or member of the leadership team, schools are supporting the development of positive collaboration, social support (for goal attainment) and opportunities to achieve goal success, which according to Ryan and Deci (2000), is critical to psychological health and wellbeing. With our teachers established as leaders of learning, they will be in the best possible position to positively influence the optimistic mindsets of students and their parents – thus cultivating a community mindset of hope and opportunity.

Appreciative inquiry – a bold, symbolic statement of trust

It is generally accepted that relationships and organisations thrive when trust is high. Trust is also identified as a critical ingredient in effective collaborative teams whereby individuals are more willing to contribute, accept feedback and take positive professional risks (Cameron, *et al.*, 2004). While leaders may consider themselves trustworthy individuals, certain leadership approaches such as those that involve top-down decision-making and a lack of consultation can erode organisational trust. Mayer, *et al.* (1995)

notes that trust is supported when there is a close congruence of individual employee values and the cultural values of the organisation. With an alignment of values, trust can also be built by enabling employees to authentically contribute to the strategic direction of the organisation.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) which was first developed by David Cooperrider, is a strengths based approach to change management that considers the best of what is before dreaming, designing and delivering what might be. AI promotes a strong sense of ownership and collective responsibility; people feel valued and in-turn trusted to make valuable contributions towards the strategic direction of the organisation (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). An AI Summit involves engaging employees and leaders in the 4-D process of *discovering* the best of what is and has been in the past, collecting stories of success, employee engagement, feelings of trust, strength and empowerment; *dreaming* what might be possible if all of our hopes and aspirations were realised; *designing* ways in which these dreams could be realised and; *delivering* what will be the first steps towards this aspirational vision (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005).

In schools, Appreciative Inquiry can be used within teams, across the whole staff or in ways that engage the broader community (students, staff and parents) in change. While AI was not developed as a trust building or enhancing strategy, it requires leaders to make bold and symbolic statements of trust, whereby it is acknowledged that the best ideas, innovation and strategy exist not within the leader but within the collective strengths of all employees.

Best-fit matters

The positive psychology literature and research provides leaders with a broad range of strategies and interventions that are closely aligned to the previously described organisational virtues. Strategies to support and promote *forgiveness* have been shown to produce relational, mental health and physical health benefits (Parks & Schueller, 2014); acts of *compassion* and kindness can lead towards more meaningful social and personal connections which are critical in terms of positive mental health (Lyubomirsky, 2008) and; *integrity* has been associated with improved self-esteem and subjective wellbeing (Harter, *et al.*, 1996; Harter, 2002). It is important to note however that not all strategies and interventions will have the desired effect with all people. Choosing interventions that are aligned to your organisation's values and needs is essential. A 'Person Activity Fit' diagnostic assessment such as the one provided in Lyubomirsky's (2008) 'The How of Happiness', is a simple yet useful tool that can assist leaders

in choosing the most appropriate approaches for their organisation. While examples of these interventions and strategies have been provided for *trust* and *optimism*, it is recommended that organisations employ, over time, a broad range of approaches and that leaders, with an open mind and non-judgemental attitude are committed to the long-term promotion of virtues and employee wellbeing.

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Marcus Wicher is currently the principal at Auburn South Primary School. He is passionate about driving positive organisational change and improving the health and wellbeing of school principals. He is the principal co-chair of the PYP Victoria Network, a member of the Bastow Educational Leadership Institute's advisory council and mentor and coach to beginning principals. Marcus is currently enrolled at the University of Melbourne where he is completing a Master of Applied Positive Psychology.
email: wicher.marcus.t@edumail.vic.gov.au
LinkedIn: <http://linkedin.com/in/marcus-wicher-474aaa56>



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