

# Positive organisational behaviour and workplace performance in turbulent times

Prof Yvonne du Plessis



The current turmoil in the global economic environment has a domino effect on organisations where there is a tendency of giving more attention to management and employee dysfunctions and work place problems.

The work place is thus increasingly becoming a place where survival is the essence, never mind success, which calls for above the norm performance for the survivors. Often in situations of economic downturn negative performance is recognized and reprimanded, overruling the good performance.

More focus is placed on monitoring "what is going or went wrong" instead of exploring the "basic behavioural science task forces" approach of "what is going or went right" according to Luthans. In general there is a great deal more to learn from "doing things right" than, trying to prevent individuals and organisations from repeating previous mistakes. In the South-African context old ways of

doing things have become obsolete in the face of brand new challenges brought about by for example, laws enforcing training and development and employment equity.

However, these challenges do not necessarily enhance work place performance. According to Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, a desire for knowledge of what makes life worth living and what constitutes quality of life at work or its development exists among scholars, employers and employees alike.

The time has arrived to focus on the real world where only popular motivational bestsellers tend to be positively orientated. Managers and leaders, researchers and organisational behaviour specialists should

shift towards an appreciative set of assumptions and attributes about health, motivation, capacities, potential and social functioning – referring to 'the strengths perspective.'

**Positive organisational behaviour refers to this positive approach of scrutinising desired behaviour in the work place and may be considered to be the first steps in building the much required bridges across the rift between negative and positive behaviour and impact on work place performance, especially in tough times.**

According to Strümpfer, more recent work in Western psychology shows the paradigm of fortology (strengthening) has ancient origins. According to Walsh researchers of positive psychology have a practical and theoretical data warehouse of more than 2 000 years on which to draw.

The tendency of academics and graduate students, as commented by Gordon Allport, to disregard old literature deprives them of surprising fresh insightfulness of some of the writings of earlier generations.

The value of such foundational knowledge is crucial in today's search for elements of positive work engagement and appropriate behaviour in the work place.

Arien van der Merwe mentions that at the turn of the century there has been an awakening to the wellness lifestyle phenomenon where balance and harmony are sought amongst all levels of human existence. POB interlinks well with this concept as talented employees seek work places which reflect a culture in line with their own values, ethics and beliefs.

**The emphasis has shifted towards seeking out positive elements to which employees can relate as they are human beings not human doings, according to Van der Merwe.**

There is a clear relationship between positive feelings and behaviour of employ-

ees and performance says Luthans, but the Organisational Behaviour field has seemingly given little attention to managerial and organisational contributions in the creation of work places conducive to POB.

**Top management's most significant influence on positive organisational behaviour can be seen by means of creating a positively induced organisational culture as it guides how strategy will be implemented.**

Examples of such organisational culture contributions are leadership styles, attitudes towards change, creating opportunities for training and development, performance management style and management of conflict, stress and burnout.

Organisational culture according to Deal and Kennedy's definition is "the way things get done around here." They measured organisations in respect of feedback and risk.

**Using these parameters, they were able to suggest four classifications of organisational culture namely:**

- **The Tough Guy/Macho culture** – quick feedback and quick rewards, but very stressful environment for employees.

- **The Work Hard, Play Hard culture** – few risks with rapid feedback, high quality customer service focus, but bogged down by buzzwords, jargon and team meetings.
- **The Bet Your Company culture** – big stakes decisions are made, but it takes years to know the results.
- **The Process culture** – little or no feedback where employees are bogged down with how things are done in stead of with what has been achieved.

Unfortunately very little focus is placed on measurable positive behaviour and how it relates to their organisational classification.

Charles Handy on the other side focused his views of organisational culture based on the distribution of power, designated roles, tasks associated matrixes and personal influence. However, individual differences in performance make this approach less useful in the search for clear measurable criteria for POB.



Another approach to organisational culture is the contribution made by Johnson which described a cultural web identifying a number of elements which are leveraged to influence the culture. These elements are:

- **The Paradigm:** what the organisation is about; what it does; its mission; its values
- **Control Systems:** the processes in place to monitor what is going on. Role cultures would have vast rulebooks. There would be more reliance on individualism in a power culture.
- **Organisational Structures:** reporting lines, hierarchies and the way that work flows through the business.
- **Power Structures:** who makes the decisions, how widely spread is power and on what is power based?
- **Symbols:** these include the logos and designs, but would extend to symbols of power such as car parking spaces and executive washrooms!
- **Rituals and Routines:** management meetings, board reports and so on may become more habitual than necessary.
- **Stories and Myths:** Stories about people and events, convey a message about what is valued within the organisation.



As it is the attitudes of individuals that actually influence the face or characteristics of the culture, based on the elements mentioned by Johnson with the exception of the paradigm it functions in, the creation of positive organisational behaviour is aligned with the manner in which attitudes are positively influenced and which in turn influences performance.

### What exactly is Positive Organisational Behaviour?

Luthans defines POB as “the study of positively orientated human resources strengths and psychological capacities that can be measured, developed and effectively managed for performance in contemporary work places.”

To best meet the operationally defined criteria for POB, the manner in which the leader or manager can create peoples’ strengths and psychological capacities were used.

**Six constructs for the creation of positive organisational behaviour were earlier identified by Luthans namely:**

- Confidence (Self-efficacy),
- Hope,
- Optimism,
- Subjective wellbeing,
- Emotional intelligence and
- Resilience.

This was further developed by Luthans, Youssef and Avolio into the psychological capital (PsyCap) instrument. Luthans, et

al.(2007: 322) clearly states that “the recently emerging POB does not proclaim to represent some new discovery of the importance of positivity, but rather emphasises the need for more focused theory building, research and effective application of positive traits, states, organisations and behaviours.”

The power of positive organisational behaviour in South Africa and the role of management/leadership in its application should not be underestimated. If we can create a workplace where human talent experience the necessary construct elements of POB, being confidence; hope; optimism; subjective well-being; emotional intelligence and resilience, their attitudes should grow more



**Is this not what we need at this stage of facilitating and enabling ‘the age of hope’ in South Africa and deal with all the challenges that are facing us?**

**It is high time that leaders realize the potential of understanding and embracing organisational behaviour in a positive manner.**

Dr Ivonne du Plessis is an experienced trainer, facilitator and consultant in Human Resource Management and Organisational Behaviour. She is a hands-on person who enjoys sharing her knowledge and managerial experience of more than 20 years in the field of people performance in especially project based environments. She was a Human Resource and Training and Development Manager for a large corporation, before she joined the University of Pretoria. Currently she is an Associate Professor in the Department of Human Resource Management at the University.

She is co-author of two academic books in Management and Project Management, a national and international speaker and academic and has published extensively in accredited journals.