

When individuals flourish, organisations prosper

Burnout and stress are familiar terms in research on wellbeing at the workplace; flourishing and virtuousness are much less commonplace. Focusing on the positive rather than the negative is an attribute that makes Professor Ian Rothmann and his fellow researchers at the Vaal Triangle Campus's Optentia programme stand out. Their deliberate strategy is to discover what makes people happy at work rather than what makes them miserable.



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"We are interested in what keeps people engaged, happy and satisfied in their jobs, and the impact these people have on organisations," said Professor Rothmann, leader of the research sub-programme 'Flourishing in Institutions' within Optentia. "The focus is on improvement and optimisation as opposed to prevention and treatment."

This emphasis on the positive does not imply that research on stress, burnout, conflict and the myriad other woes of most modern organisations is no longer relevant. "Of course it is important to focus on the negative aspects too," he said. After all, the statistics show that between 15% and 20% of the general population are languishing - meaning they feel and function poorly - and roughly half of these people have real psychological problems, such as symptoms of depression. "Only about 20% of people are flourishing, and the rest are somewhere in-between." The better we understand what makes the flourishers flourish, the more likely it is that the organisations they work for will flourish and prosper too.

Happy managers are good managers

"Is a happy manager a good manager in terms of outcomes? Definitely yes," Prof Rothmann said. "In our study in the agricultural sector in South Africa, involving more than 500 managers, we found that a manager who is engaged and finds meaning in life and work is more committed and has less intention to leave. He is also more likely to find creative solutions to problems, be more interested in organisational citizenship and more willing to do things for others."

Flourishing individuals also tend to be less likely to commit a crime or become involved in ethically dubious dealings, and are more likely to care for the environment. The positive impact of flourishing individuals has been confirmed in other research projects that Prof Rothmann and his team have conducted in various settings, from state-owned enterprises in Namibia to IT environments, hospitals, educational institutions and the police service in South Africa. This research has given the team a solid grasp of the characteristics of flourishing individuals. "Firstly, a person who is flourishing feels well and functions well," said Prof Rothmann.

Feeling well, functioning well

In a work setting, feeling well has two components, namely job satisfaction and positive emotions. Individuals who feel well are more satisfied with their jobs and they experience more positive than negative emotions at work. Positive emotions open them up for learning and creativity and result in better performance.

"Firstly, you are energetic in, and dedicated to, your job and are able to become absorbed in it so that you forget about the

time," he said. "Secondly, your psychological needs are satisfied so that you feel autonomous, competent and have a sense of relatedness - meaning you feel you are contributing to something bigger instead of feeling alone. "Thirdly, you have a purpose and experience meaningfulness in what you do. In a workplace setting, meaningfulness is usually strongest among people who see their work as a calling rather than a career or just a job." The fourth component of an effectively functioning person is hope, resilience, optimism and self-efficacy (which is referred to as psychological capital).

Nature or nurture?

Taken together, all the many components and characteristics of flourishing seem like a tall order to find in a single individual, never mind in a critical mass of employees and managers. The good news is that flourishing individuals are not just born that way: nurture usually has as much to do with it as nature. Put another way, happiness is built on genetic make-up (about 50%), a person's internal efforts to be happy (40%) and his immediate circumstances (10%).

This means an organisation committed to attracting and retaining flourishing employees and managers can do this by creating a conducive environment. This could, for example, include providing interesting and stimulating work, a good work role fit, adequate resources, fair pay, sound co-worker relations and opportunities for learning and career progression. Add to this the opportunity for people to use their strengths and you should be well on your way to building an environment where flourishing individuals can flourish.

Strengths are virtues

This 'strengths-based approach' is known as virtuousness, according to Prof Rothmann. It essentially means allowing employees to do what they do best, resulting in higher productivity and employee engagement.

"All of us have certain skills and strengths. People flourish when they have the opportunity to use their strengths. Employees feel real pleasure when they use their strengths; they learn rapidly and perform successfully, and they complete tasks," he said.

Most compelling of all, perhaps, is that employees who use their strengths at work are more loyal and more productive: their intentions to leave are 14.5% lower and their units about 12.5% more productive. There's virtue in using people's strengths. Many organisations that do so flourish and prosper.