There is a perfect storm brewing in healthcare. The recent economic downturn has created considerable stress for healthcare systems and their employees. That stress will be exacerbated by the pending changes that healthcare reform measures are likely to bring. In addition, healthcare executives must contend with the looming shortage of nurses who will be needed to take care of the aging baby boomers. To fill those vacancies, leaders need to recruit and retain young people, who tend to have different expectations of how they will be treated in the workplace than the previous generation of nurses.

To successfully survive the storm, hospitals need to create a positive culture that promotes camaraderie, teamwork, and professionalism. That requires a change from the traditional command-and-control style of leadership that has been prevalent for decades in healthcare organizations. In order to attract and retain a new generation of nurses who are willing and able to provide high quality patient care at a reasonable cost, healthcare executives need to understand how to create the type of positive culture shown to be characteristic of hospitals that have high levels of satisfaction and success.

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY AT WORK
Our research in using positive psychology principles in healthcare systems is proving remarkably effective in providing strategies for transforming the culture of a hospital so that leaders and staff are able to work together to meet the chal-
The importance of creating a positive workplace is important, both for the well-being of the people and for the hospital’s bottom line. In the following example we begin with an illustration of a management initiative that was on the brink of failure and then provide six positive psychology principles to achieve a successful turnaround.

At the end of a long meeting, a senior executive had one last topic to be covered in the few minutes left before everyone departed for the day. The leader proceeded to announce that the hospital was instituting a new program for managing the distribution of patient-controlled analgesia (PCA) pumps. No longer would units be permitted to hoard pumps for their patients, making unused pumps invisible to other units that needed them. The leaders were told that a central distribution center was being set up, and there would be a short amnesty period for units to turn in all of their pumps, after which a tough penalty would be imposed on those who failed to comply with the new policy.

This is certainly a legitimate problem that needs to be addressed. Pain pump availability was a longstanding issue that the organization had struggled with for many years. A task force had been established to study the problem, and they came up with what they thought was the best solution. Then they focused their attention on how to force the staff to follow their plan or face the most negative consequence they had the power to administer.

This process is all too typical for dealing with difficult issues in organizations. It reflects an old style of leadership that rarely works very well in this day and age, which is undoubtedly why this hospital has had a perpetual problem with its pumps. A command-and-control style of leadership works well in a crisis, but positive outcomes are very hard to sustain in the long run with a top-down approach. Without the leaders standing over staff, forcing them to comply with their commands, employees are almost always able to find a way to circumvent the rules if they oppose the effort to control their behavior.

That is precisely what happened to the leaders who were attempting to get control over the pumps. The executives strongly advocated for their new policy and were backing up the new procedures with negative sanctions for noncompliance. But this created an adversarial situation between leadership and staff, with leaders relying on their ability to wield power as the means to achieve their objective.

This approach generally has a high probability of failure because it fails to take into account the staff perspective, which means the people who must make the program successful have no incentive to engage in making the initiative work. In fact, in this case they had strong feelings of opposition to the plan and actively attempted to sabotage it.

The staff was afraid that this new plan would result in the same problems they had seen in the past, in which they found themselves waiting long periods to get a pump. The RNs hated being in a position of having to contend with a patient in pain when they were unable to get a pump in a reasonable amount of time.

The leaders found themselves in an unanticipated power struggle that created a lot of bad feelings on both sides and caused a downward spiral in overall staff performance. Patient satisfaction scores began to plummet, the use of sick leave rose dramatically, and turnover spiked as a number of the most professional RNs left to get away from the toxic environment that had been created.

Both parties in this conflict felt perfectly justified in their position and, therefore, in the aggressive actions they were taking to win the war. But in reality everyone—leaders, staff, and patients—lost as a result of participating in the ongoing battles.

**Teams that get the timing and delivery of these 3 elements right are able to exert a positive influence over 92% of the factors that determine success and satisfaction in their organization.**

**LINEAR VERSUS NONLINEAR APPROACHES**

How typical is this story? Studies by one of the foremost positive psychology researchers, Marcial Losada, found that 30% of business teams are seriously floundering, resulting in poor performance and significant dissatisfaction. By contrast, 25% of organizations have leadership teams that are flourishing, reflected by their robust profitability, high customer satisfaction, and superior performance evaluations for leaders and employees alike. The remaining 45% of business teams have a mixed profile, and their track records reveal mixed results.1

The bad news for teams in this middle group is that they are extremely vulnerable to being pulled down into the poor performance range when problems arise in their organizations, which is what happened to the hospital described above. When facing a challenge, they deteriorate into the dynamics characteristic of poorly performing teams: their emotions become increasingly negative, they become inflexible and absorbed in advocating for what they want, and they vigorously defend their own position while becoming critical and contemptuous of all others.
On the other hand, high performing teams demonstrate a much different set of dynamics. They base their behavior on three pillars that form the foundation for all well-functioning organizations. Teams that get the timing and delivery of these 3 elements right are able to exert a positive influence over 92% of the factors that determine success and satisfaction in their organization.

The essential ingredients that, when properly combined, create a solid bedrock on which high performing organizations are built involve positivity, inquiry, and a focus on others. Losada’s research has revealed that these 3 dynamics, when used at the right time and in the right way, can produce a nonlinear leap in level of functioning.²

Nonlinearity is a complex statistical concept. We’re going to offer a simplified explanation that provides a basic understanding of what is necessary for nursing leaders to do to take their teams to the top levels of performance. Nonlinearity is basically a way of saying that the sum is greater than the total of the parts, which can be illustrated as follows. Would you eat raw eggs, dry flour, and baking soda, and then wash it all down with a big swig of buttermilk? Probably not, but you would very likely enjoy eating a piece of cake, which contains all of those components, combined and baked according to a specific recipe. The result is a transformation that barely resembles the characteristics of the initial ingredients.

Contrast the concept of nonlinearity with linearity, which is the opposite idea. Linearity is like the accelerator in your car: the harder you push the gas pedal, the faster your car will go. That’s a good thing because it gives you proportional control over your vehicle, meaning that if you push the gas pedal down a little, your car responds by going just a little faster. However, if you push down hard, the car accelerates quickly.

Dealing with people requires a nonlinear approach. You can’t push people harder and harder and expect that they’ll react by moving faster and faster in the direction that you want them to go. Take the leadership team described above. They think that if they drive their point home forcefully, they’ll cause the staff to move quickly toward where they want them to be—a place where they comply with their new rules and regulations.

But looking at the situation through the lens of nonlinearity makes it possible to see that it is unlikely the leaders will get a positive response. Because the staff is likely to have a negative reaction to the authoritarian approach being used, they will almost certainly become distressed and demonstrate a fight, flight, or freeze reaction. That is how human beings are hardwired to respond to stressful situations, and the result is often open conflict, passive-aggressive behavior, or progressive disengagement.

NEGATIVITY VERSUS OPTIMAL FUNCTIONING
Poor performance prevails when a workplace becomes caught in a doomed loop of negative emotions that have arisen as a result of people becoming caught up in the stress reactions generated by linear leaders. For decades organizational development research attempted to resolve this dilemma by trying to change the behavior of individuals and organizations that were dysfunctional. But learning how to overcome weaknesses and to neutralize negatives didn’t make people feel incredibly positive about their personal or professional lives; it only provided a brief respite from their suffering. Then another set of problems arose, and they once again were pulled down by their negative reactions.

For the past decade, positive psychologists have directed many of their scientific studies toward developing an understanding how people achieve high levels of success and satisfaction. By studying optimal human functioning, positive psychology researchers have discovered numerous strategies for bringing out the best in individuals and organizations.

To understand the basic premise of optimal functioning, think of people as having an emotional bank account that must maintain a large positive balance to withstand the constant withdrawals caused by negative reactions to problem situations. The challenges people face in their lives cause their brains to create stress chemicals, which automatically drive them into having negative reactions, such as anger, anxiety, and depression. These negative reactions are withdrawals from their emotional bank account. Even when they solve a problem, they only feel relief, not genuine joy.

In order to make deposits into an emotional bank account, people need to have experiences that generate positive emotions. To determine how this process works in a hospital that is widely recognized for its optimal functioning, one of us conducted an extensive appreciative inquiry. The hospital is listed in the Solucient 100, Reuter’s 100, and Healthgrades.com Top 5%. Muha found 6 positive psychology principles that, in combination, were creating an optimally functioning healthcare organization.³

THE SIX PRINCIPLES
To help people remember these 6 positive psychology principles, they have been termed PROPEL©, an acronym for passion, relationships, optimism, proactivity, energy, and legacy. Using these 6 principles enabled the highly regarded hospital to fill their employees’ emotional bank accounts with positives and achieve an optimal level of organizational functioning.

Passion was found to be of first and foremost importance for an organization that seeks to achieve an optimal level of functioning. Maintaining passion in hospital staff requires mapping out an enticing vision of being able to work together in ways that meet the needs of all of the people involved.

Passion arises within people when they create a compelling vision of how they can be living a valuable life. Having a vision based on the values that are most important to a person sparks a substantial amount of motivation, which gives him or her a great deal of energy for achieving their goals. His or her vision must have enough specific details to be like a video of the future. That provides him or her with a picture that is so powerful it can play promi-
Learning to use the 6 principles enabled the leaders and staff to create an abundantly positive balance in their emotional bank account.

mently in his or her mind when he or she needs to refocus attention away from negative situations.

**Relationships** work well only when there are more than 5 positive interactions for every negative encounter. To attain that ratio, leaders must demonstrate an interest in what’s happening in the lives of their staff and be enthusiastic in support of employees’ efforts to create a positive life, at home as well as at work. Leaders who participate in these types of relationships create a loyal, hard-working staff who do their very best to take care of both the patients and the hospital.

**Optimists** are able to deal with problems by finding mutually satisfying solutions. Successful organizations describe problems as being short-term, limited to one aspect of a bigger picture, and occurring as a result of honest mistakes. Highly effective leaders encourage their staff to help them solve problems when they do arise. However, most of their time is devoted to appreciating the positives contributions of their staff, which sends satisfaction scores soaring.

**Proactive** people achieve optimal functioning by consistently using their strengths. Leaders know the strengths that have helped them and their team to achieve positive results in the past. And they are adept at seeing how those strengths apply to achieving the vision they created with their staff of being a hospital that takes as good of care of patients and the hospital.

**Energy** is required to routinely recharge people so that they can sustain their optimal level of functioning. Leaders and staff alike must continually replenish their physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual energy. Organizations that are able to sustain success and satisfaction help their people to regenerate the energy they need to sustain their passion and persistence in working toward their shared vision.

**Legacy** leads to the highest level of optimal functioning. Passion within an individual is stirred when the person pursues his or her own purpose. Passion within an entire organization is ignited when people leave a legacy by making a meaningful difference in the lives of others. Helping others to be at their best creates an upward spiral of positivity in which almost all of the people in the organization demonstrate a commitment to achieving extraordinary results.

In a case study at a major academic medical center, learning to use these PROPEL® principles enabled a poorly performing department to become highly functioning in just 1 year. The 170 FTEs on the 4 units involved in the initiative went from having a job engagement score of 3% (as independently measured by HealthStream Research) to 87% as compared to other hospitals in the national database. The staff satisfaction score rose from 1% to 85%, and the staff retention rate improved 49%.

Other indices also revealed significant improvement as a result of transforming the culture on the units by integrating the 6 positive psychology principles. Sick leave dropped by 75%. The Press Ganey patient satisfaction scores rose by 43%. The Gallup Q12 staff satisfaction scores indicate that this department is now in the top quadrant of the national database and scores higher than the institutional mean on all 12 questions. The 4 units’ patient safety scores improved significantly, as did their performance on the National Database of Nursing Quality Indicators® measures.

Learning to use the 6 PROPEL® principles enabled the leaders and staff to create an abundantly positive balance in their emotional bank account. When the hospital teams involved in the study put these principles into practice, their level of success and satisfaction took a nonlinear leap.

The leaders who are contending with the PCA pump problem would also benefit from using the 6 principles to find a solution. The PROPEL approach provides specific strategies for implementing the 3 ingredients of high performing teams to generate a nonlinear leap.

**Passion.** The first step is getting the staff passionate about the prospects of the new pump program working well for everyone involved. To enlist the aid and energy of the staff, the leadership team needed to shift from advocacy to inquiry by asking the staff for their vision of what they believe would work: “Have there been times in the past when things worked well to get your patients pumps in a reasonable time when you did not have any readily available on your unit? What system do you believe will work best for all of our units to get the pain pumps they need in the future?”

The leaders discovered that staff wanted to have a set number of pain pumps on their unit that corresponded with how many pumps they almost always have in use. Then, they said, they would be very supportive of the idea of having their spare pumps put into the central pool.

**Relationships.** To generate much more *positivity* rather than negativity with staff, the leadership transformed their connection from conflictual to collaborative. That enabled them to engage in relationships that had more than 5 positive exchanges for every 1 negative interaction. “We think that you can help us solve a problem that at times is a barrier to being able to being able to provide the best possible care to every one of our patients. Sometimes we have a patient
who needs a pain pump, but we can’t locate any that are available because other units have them tucked away in case they need them for their own patients.

“Now we all wish the budget would allow us to just keep buying more pumps, but everyone knows that is not possible. You all are good nurses and none of you wants to see any of our patients have to wait a long time for a pain pump. There has to be a solution to this problem, and we really need you to help us find it.”

In a prime example of how well positive collaboration works, the staff ended up choosing someone from their own ranks to be responsible for keeping track of the number of pumps on their unit to ensure they were adhering to the new policy. This got leadership out of the “bad guy” role and put them in a position of being able to give lots of positive reinforcement when they found the units in compliance.

Optimism. Of course, not every unit will perfectly adhere to the pump policy every time. When problems did arise, the leaders stopped pushing their own agenda and begin to resolve the issues by making them temporary, specific, and situational. To do so they enlisted the aid of their staff in the problem-solving process: “We have not worked out all of the kinks in our pain pump program yet. We would like to understand your reluctance to sharing PCA pumps. What would it take to change that situation? What are your concerns about putting the pumps that you currently have on your unit into a central distribution facility? What could we do to address that concern?”

Some leaders, when first presented with this approach, are pessimistic and express concern about the amount of time it takes to work out solutions this way. Others balk at having to cater to the employees who report to them, insisting that employees should simply do what they’re told. But these leaders are not taking into account the amount of time and energy that it takes to deal with push back, resistance, and outright defiance. Nor are they considering the toll that contending with an ongoing conflict with the staff will take on the personal psyches of all of the people involved.

Leaders who learn to use an optimistic problem solving approach love the fact that they transform their job from the role and put them in a position of being able to give lots of positive reinforcement when they found the units in compliance.

Proactivity. Leaders who function at an optimal level focus on others when they are seeking solutions, and they continue their teamwork approach when the time comes to take action. After the staff decided that they would take the responsibility for getting their extra pain pumps to the central distribution facility, each team needed to pick someone who had the necessary skills to make it happen. So they looked at what strengths would be needed for the job. They decided that the person should be a good relation, an excellent arranger, and highly responsible.

How did they determine who possessed those strengths? The organization actually had their employees take a strengths test so that everyone would know their own best traits and those of their coworkers and managers. That enabled them to identify who would be best suited to the role. As the best predictor of success is the consistent use of one’s strengths, it is clear why the program worked so well—the vast majority of the people designated to monitor the pump situation had a natural talent for this type of activity.

Energy. Any change effort can run out of steam after awhile. To keep the pain pump program alive and well, the leaders threw random and spontaneous appreciation parties. They showed up with Kudos snack bars and literally applauded the staff for their efforts in making the program work well.

Legacy. To put the final positive psychology principle into action, patients specifically were asked to make notes about how well their pain had been managed during their stay. This focused the staff’s attention on ensuring a high level of patient satisfaction and also provided some wonderful letters of gratitude from patients that were shared throughout the hospital.

Over time, the hospital became known as having the most caring staff among all of the facilities in the area, which lead to patients widely recommending the hospital to their friends and family. By developing a positive culture within their organization, the hospital became a better place for the staff to work and for patients to receive care.

References


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