

# Exploring what works: Is SF the best way of harnessing the impact of positive psychology in the workplace?

Carey Glass MSc C. Psychol

## Abstract:

*Contemporary research is demonstrating the power of positive psychology in the workplace. Work linking positive psychology and SF is, however, at its genesis and untested. This article asks two questions: First, does SF operate as a methodology for bringing the fruits of positive psychology into the workplace? Second, if it does, what does this mean for the practice of SF? What aspects should we focus on to maximise what works? This will be examined through the ground breaking work of Barbara Frederickson. Frederickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions will be considered and the evidence supporting it outlined. Hypotheses about the links between it, other cognate research and techniques used within SF will be examined to answer these questions.*

## **Exploring what works: Is SF the best way of harnessing the impact of positive psychology in the workplace?**

Work linking positive psychology and SF is at its genesis and untested. Some might even say it is an irrelevancy because, in SF, the action is in the interaction; we focus our attention on what happens between individuals rather than looking within individuals for answers. Nevertheless lovers of SF could not be described as Behaviourists, who regarded the head as a black box irrelevant to behavioural change. We generally accept that our interactions affect our inner emotions; it is simply that that is not where we locate our work in order to effect change. So linking work in positive psychology which tends to look inside our heads, with work

in SF which looks between our heads, is contentious and unchartered.

This paper will link them by examining the idea that SF provides interactions that alter what goes on inside our heads to, in turn, catalyse more useful interactions between us. We will examine the idea that SF operates as a methodology for bringing positive emotions and broadened thinking into the workplace and consider how SF acts on our mental processes to achieve this. This will be examined by focusing on the ground breaking work of one theorist and researcher into positive psychology, Barbara Frederickson.

More specifically, Frederickson's (1998, 2001) broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions focuses on the particular thought-action repertoires that form part of our cognitive processing and considers what happens to them when experiencing positive as opposed to negative emotions. Linking SF to Frederickson's theory, this article puts forward the hypothesis that SF techniques work directly on positive emotions and thought-action repertoires to facilitate the broadened thinking that leads to effective solutions in the workplace.

### **Theories of Emotion in Psychology**

For a long time, less attention has been paid to theories of positive emotions in psychology than to theories based on negative emotions. This may simply reflect the spirit of the age in which most disciplines have focused on problems. To some degree, it may also reflect the nature of emotions themselves.

Positive emotions are fewer in number than negative emotions. Taxonomies of emotions generally identify a ratio of 3 or 4 negative emotions to 1 positive (Ekman, 1992). This imbalance is also reflected in the number of words in the English language that describe emotions (Averill, 1980).

As well, positive emotions are less differentiated than negative emotions. For example, looking at facial expressions, Ekman et al. (1987) have shown that negative emotions are associated with particular facial configurations that are

unique and recognised cross-culturally. However, positive emotions do not have uniquely defining characteristics and simply share the Duchenne smile with raised lip corners and muscle contraction around the eyes (Ekman, 1992). Also when people recall past experiences, they can differentiate negative emotions more effectively than positive ones. This differentiation makes negative emotions more immediately amenable to the rigours of scientific research.

Most interestingly, where positive and negative emotions are very different is in their links to action. Negative emotions are intrinsically associated with urges to act in specific ways. They lead to autonomic (automatic) responses in the nervous system that can be related to our basic “fight and flight” urges. For example fear leads to the urge to escape and our body reacts automatically mobilizing us to run away by increasing blood flow to our large muscle groups (Levenson, 1994). We have all had these experiences with negative emotions where anger leads to the urge to fight, disgust to get rid of something, guilt to make amends etc., even if we do not then act on them.

Various emotion theorists have noted this linkage between specific emotions and specific actions. This has led to an evolutionary understanding that emotions are linked to specific actions because these actions are evolutionarily adaptive for our survival. Clearly for our ancestors, a lack of action in response to an emotional experience of threat may have had life and death consequences in ways that we may now only experience during conflicts that lead to violence. It was therefore clearly important that negative emotions were attached to autonomic responses for action and this has remained with us. However the case with positive emotions is less clear and less directly linked to action. For example contentment or pride does not obviously link with a particular action. This directly observable linkage between negative emotion and action may be another reason why psychology has chosen to focus more on negative rather than positive emotions. However, Frederickson has used the knowledge accumulated thus far to extend the thinking to a theory of positive emotions.

## **Frederickson's Broaden-And-Build Theory of Positive Emotions**

One of the features of this autonomic connection between negative emotions and actions is that it instantly narrows our attention to a more limited or even a highly specific response. To “survive”, we immediately focus our attention on a specific behavioural response such as running or fighting and therefore do not expand our thinking to other behavioural alternatives. Frederickson (2001) believes that it is this narrowing effect on our thought-action repertoires that distinguishes negative and positive emotions.

In terms of SF thinking, this may provide an explanation for some forms of “stuckness”. When we are experiencing the negative emotions that accompany problems, our attention narrows and we limit and often enact and re-enact a behavioural repertoire that does not offer useful solutions. Moreover, the usual approach of trying to find solutions by delving further into problems perpetuates the situation by creating more negative emotions that continue to narrow our attention and further our sense of stuckness.

If the negative emotions we experience with problems are linked to survival repertoires what might this mean for organisations? Certainly if our thoughts are limited, this decreases our ability to act creatively to find solutions. Even if we can overcome these instinctive urges, we often still see more seemingly sophisticated responses that are still directly linked to these instincts. For example Dunphy (1987) in his book *Organisational Change By Choice* notes the connection between responses to problems in organisations and fight and flight instincts. He shows that fight reactions to problems are overtly acted out in conflict, grievances and wild cat strikes, and covertly acted out in “working to rule”, rumour mongering, competitiveness, sabotage, waste and errors. Turning to flight reactions, overt responses include a high turnover, high absenteeism and tardiness, while covert flight reactions include sickness, reduced initiative, “busy work”, day dreaming, drug and alcohol abuse and may even extend to accidents. The

resulting impacts on productivity are manifold. Thus, it could be argued that our more culturally acceptable responses still represent a narrowed attentional repertoire.

So what of positive emotions and their interaction with thought-action repertoires? Frederickson (2001) proposes that in contrast to negative emotions that narrow our thought-action repertoires, positive emotions broaden our thought-action repertoires and build enduring personal resources. While negative emotions autonomically create specific action tendencies to ensure survival, positive emotions do not usually carry the same immediate survival consequences. Therefore, the thoughts sparked by positive emotions may not of necessity prepare us for action. What positive emotions seem to do is to generally broaden the array of thoughts and actions that come to mind. For example the positive emotion of joy/happiness broadens our focus by creating the urge to play, to be creative and to push the limits. Love creates recurring desires to play with, explore, and enjoy experiences with loved ones. Pride leads us to share the news of our achievements and think about greater ones in the future and when we feel contentment, we savour our life circumstances and think about the world in new ways.

Frederickson (2001) argues that these broadening repertoires also have the evolutionary goal of building enduring personal resources physically, intellectually, psychologically and socially. For example, ethnologists have long attested the evolutionary significance of play. Research with animals has shown that when juveniles play by running into branches or catapulting in unexpected directions, they then use these skills as an adult to avoid predators. There is plenty of evidence in educational psychology that childhood play builds enduring intellectual resources by increasing creativity and brain development. We are also well aware from the work of colleagues like Paul Jackson (2001) how the positive effects of improvised play lead to creative thinking.

Various psychologists have investigated more directly the links between positive emotions and cognition. Isen and his colleagues have shown that people who are feeling positive

show patterns of thought that are more flexible, unusual, creative and inclusive. Their thinking tends to be more efficient and more open to information and options. (See Isen, 2000 for a review.) Isen has also linked these effects to increased dopamine levels in the brain (Ashby, Isen and Turken 1999).

### **The Relationship Between SF and the Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions**

So the question becomes how does SF fit in here? SF seems to be uniquely placed as a methodology to enable the building of both positive emotions and expanded thought-action repertoires. One of the factors that needs to be considered here is the direction of this interaction between emotion and thought-action repertoires. Frederickson presents the view that positive emotions lead to the expansion of thought-action repertoires. She also has some evidence that this may operate reciprocally with broadened thought-action repertoires generating positive emotions. She did an experiment to assess what she termed “broad-minded coping”. She asked participants to think about different ways of dealing with problems or to step back from situations and be more objective and discovered that this cognitive broadening did enhance emotional well-being (Frederickson and Joiner, 2000). She found an upward spiral in which positive emotions led to increases in broad-minded coping and, in turn, these enhanced coping skills predicted increased positive emotions. This created greater resilience in participants tested over a five week period. What this suggests is that SF offers a distinct advantage here by directly facilitating both positive emotions and broadened thought-action repertoires. This maximises their benefits for individuals whatever the direction of the interaction.

To further consider the relationship between SF and the broaden-and-build theory, it is worth looking at various SF techniques to examine how they catalyse this building of positive emotions and broadened thought-action repertoires that can lead to more effective actions in our workplaces.

### **SF Questions Target Thought- Action Repertoires**

The first point to be made is about the power of questions in SF. As an approach, SF recognises the power and importance of asking questions, particularly open questions. It is a fair hypothesis to suggest that typical SF questions such as: “How will you know that this meeting has been useful? How will you know that the problem has been solved? How will you know that things in the organisation are improving? What has been working well?” all serve to broaden and build thinking. They widen the array of thoughts and actions that come to mind and they may well be directly acting on thought-action repertoires.

Currently research has not advanced enough in this area to know exactly what cognitive processes are involved in this expansion of thought-action repertoires. It is possible that emotions broaden or narrow our attention. It is also possible that emotions affect our retrieval from memory serving to broaden or narrow the options we can think of. Emotions may also affect our imaginative abilities. Or possibly all these factors are involved. Interestingly, SF questions cover all these bases. SF questions use the classical psychological mechanisms of shifting attention to enable us to expand our thinking. To develop solutions we also ask questions that require individuals to retrieve from their memory times when the problem has been absent or less pervasive. Miracle questions are clearly used to access our imagination in order to move us forward.

### **SF Questions Target the Range of Positive Emotions**

The above examples suggest that questioning techniques in SF may expand our thought-action repertoires. As well, SF questions may be directly working to access a range of positive emotions in the listener. Our questions tend to have a positive bias built in to them that may access this range of positive emotions. Even questions that are not overtly positive such as “How have you been getting through these difficult issues?”

focus on how people are coping rather than how they are failing to cope. If we have listened effectively to the client, we know that at a minimum our questions usually engage and promote interest on the part of the listener.

Interest is a distinct positive emotion that has received some research attention. It has been shown that interest broadens our thoughts and actions by creating the urge to explore and to take in new information and experiences, phenomena we experience with our clients. Izard (1977) has also shown that our interest arises when we feel safe and in contexts that offer novelty and a sense of possibility and change, all of which are provided in an SF approach. He suggests that interest is accompanied by feeling animated and enlivened, feelings that we commonly observe in our work with clients. What can be concluded from the research into interest is that simply by engaging the client through SF questioning techniques, we are promoting the positive emotion of interest and its related thought-action repertoires that promote a willingness to listen to and explore the ideas and experiences of others. This alone has to be of benefit for team work in organisations.

Many of our questions invite our clients more directly to elicit positive emotions. To find solutions we tend to search the past and search the future. The questions we ask about the past directly seek examples of “when things were better”. When we are searching in the future, we ask “what life will be like when things are better”. Indeed, when we have ongoing client meetings with individuals or teams, we often start our sessions by asking “what’s better” or “what has improved since we last met”. We cannot know exactly which positive emotions from the range of interest, joy, contentment, pride, relief, affection and love that these questions are eliciting unless the client happens to say so. In reality, as adherents of SF, we are more interested in behavioural descriptions than emotions. Nevertheless clients most often start by stating the feeling that accompanied our “better” question, and we then ask them to elucidate it in behavioural terms. This indicates that our “better” questions are bringing



forth positive emotions. Also, the smiles and sense of relief and bodily relaxation that we observe in our clients further attests to this.

### **The Power of the Miracle Question in Conjuring Positive Emotions**

One of the most fascinating ways that we actually conjure positive emotions is by the use of the miracle question. Interestingly one of Frederickson's own experiments demonstrates the power of this technique that we use as one of our bread and butter approaches in engaging positive emotions. Frederickson and Branigan (2005) did an experiment in which they showed film clips to induce specific positive and negative emotions in participants. Participants were then immediately asked to imagine being in a situation in which similar feelings would arise and were asked to list what they would like to do at that point, given the way they were feeling. Participants who were experiencing joy and contentment identified more things that they would like to do than those experiencing fear and anger. They also identified more things to do than the control group. Participants feeling negative produced fewer things to do than even the control group. This experiment suggests that using the imagination to conjure positive feelings has a powerful impact on our capacity to expand our ideas for activities. In organisations, having a variety of useful actions to draw on can be essential in gaining competitive advantage. This indicates how important the use of imagination in our work in organisations can be for engendering such outcomes.

Other links can be proposed about the power of the miracle question. There is plenty of evidence to indicate that positive affect facilitates creative thinking. The miracle question serves to elicit both positive and creative responses which maximise people's ability to expand the options available to them. It would also be interesting to assess whether engaging the imagination expands attentional focus in a similar manner to individuals who experience elation or mania such as

creative artists. There is broad evidence to show that such individuals have an expanded attentional focus.

There is also neuropsychological evidence that the right hemisphere of the brain is involved in processing images and is specialized for emotional reactions. The right hemisphere also tends to be involved in processing more holistic or global information (Corballis, 2007). While this is highly speculative, it is possible that the miracle question by engaging our imagery which is consistent with right hemisphere processing also engages the global processing capacities of that hemisphere enabling us to expand our thinking.

### **SF Compliments Target the Range of Positive Emotions**

As well as placing a strong emphasis on questions, SF also places an emphasis on working hard to notice the skills and resources of individuals and teams and to compliment or play those resources back to them. SF techniques have specific questions built into them to elicit the resources of the client that may be as simple as “How did you do that?”. At first, people in organisations find it strange that we ask them to look at what has worked and how they have achieved their goals, as they are so used to focusing on what doesn’t work. They may even be surprised by the amount of time that we spend on this. However, questions that focus on people’s skills and resources will not only allow them to repeat successful behaviour but are also likely to induce positive emotions within them immediately, when they and we choose to notice how they are successful. Even if this only affects one positive emotion, pride, the research indicates that it in turn will urge these individuals to envision greater achievements in the future, a critical feature in successful organisations. This will also have the immediate impact of expanding their openness to fresh ideas and new possibilities to take the organisation forward.

## **The Undoing Hypothesis and SF**

Through their work Frederickson and her colleagues have proposed the “undoing hypothesis”. If negative emotions narrow the momentary thought-action repertoire and positive emotions broaden that same repertoire, they wondered whether positive emotions might undo the specific action tendency that is related to a negative emotion. They thought that broadening a person’s thought-action repertoire might dismantle the hold that a negative emotion had on the individual’s body which was preparing it for a specific “life saving” action. Negative emotions are known to increase cardiovascular activity so that blood can flow to the large muscles to take action. Frederickson and her colleagues used this fact to test the “undoing hypothesis” (Frederickson & Levenson, 1998, Frederickson, Mancuso, Branigan & Tugade, 2000). They predicted that those who experience positive emotions on the heels of a high-activation negative emotion would show the fastest cardio-vascular recovery; a prediction that was supported by their results. This type of evidence certainly supports the power of SF in therapeutic situations for curbing violence and self-harm. However it also opens up the possibility of using SF in organisations to specifically target the harmful effects of stress, sickness and absenteeism.

## **Baby Steps and the Positivity Offset**

One of the other advantages of an SF approach in relation to positive psychology in general is the way it capitalises on the positivity offset. The positivity offset is the tendency of individuals to experience mild positive affect fairly frequently even in neutral contexts. This positive affect prompts us to engage with our environment and partake in activities and therefore gives us an adaptive bias to approach new people, objects and situations. The use of baby steps in SF gives individuals small easy ways of taking advantage of the positivity offset in a manner that is most useful and self-reinforcing in achieving their goals.

## **Conclusions and Implications for SF in Organisations**

In this paper, it has been argued in line with the broaden-and-build theory that SF techniques work directly on positive emotions and thought-action repertoires to facilitate the broadened thinking that leads to effective solutions for individuals in the workplace. It is therefore important to ask what this link between the broaden-and-build theory and SF might mean for our work.

Frederickson's theory reinforces the power of SF questions partly because they have a positive focus built in to them, but also because they expand attention. Her theory also explains one of the distinctions between SF and positive thinking. When we start using SF with clients, they often say "ah yes its positive thinking...". However in SF we do not try to make a negative situation look good. We take the client's experience seriously and shift attention from the problem space to the solution space. For example, SF might lead managers to take hard decisions to restructure organisations and retrench staff which clients wouldn't automatically associate with positive thinking. The missing link here is Frederickson's explanation of the broadening of attention. SF uses positive questioning and this broadens our thinking and thereby leads to useful (rather than just positive) solutions. In SF, useful solutions are our goal, not positive thinking. When people use positive thinking, they are often using it to encourage them to act on something that they have already decided. In SF, decisions are at the end point rather than at the starting point of positive thinking. For our purposes, it is simply that positive emotions mediate useful solutions by expanding attention.

What might this mean for our questioning techniques? One possibility to consider is whether open questions by definition broaden our thoughts, or whether we can extend SF by developing sets of questions that particularly enable broadening. Do some styles of questions do that better than others, and can it be generalized?

Another possibility to consider is whether we should more

purposefully be asking questions about emotions in an SF way. We already ask questions like “If you were feeling proud how would you notice?”, directly tapping into positive emotions that expand thinking. When asking about third party perspectives, we often focus on actions: “How would your colleagues notice that you were behaving differently or that things had changed?” If eliciting positive emotions expands our thought-action repertoires, then maybe we should ask more third party questions in ways that elicit emotions such as “How would your colleagues notice that you were feeling happier about X?”

Frederickson’s theory certainly reinforces the variety of question that we use. While we do not know which cognitive mechanisms are acted upon by positive emotions – attention, memory, imagination or all of them and more, SF has the advantage of hitting all targets. Nevertheless, there are times that we do not choose to use SF in a way that hits all targets. In the reality of work with corporate clients we tend to find that we are more comfortable using some techniques more than others. As a group of people dedicated to transferring the power of SF which developed in the therapeutic realm to organisations, we are well aware that the language needs to be adapted for the corporate world. As a result we might shy away from asking the miracle question in its original form. The research cited above would suggest that this is an error as we would be severely curtailing the thoughts and options that clients bring to mind by engaging their imaginations. Our challenge then is to find the right language to engage our clients in the miracle question or to find alternatives that are equally powerful in engaging the imagination but more corporate in style.

A final thought relates to the “undoing hypothesis”. As mentioned above, possibly one new direction to take SF in organisations is to the HR professionals consumed with the harmful effects of stress, sickness and absenteeism. If facilitating positive emotions can immediately reduce the harmful physiological effects of negative emotional repertoires in individuals, SF is well-placed to offer a specific service to

reduce stress and illness in organisations. Its techniques could be taught in organisations for that specific purpose.

To review, this paper has considered the ground breaking broaden-and-build theory of Barbara Frederickson and posited it as an explanation of how the mechanisms of SF operate inside our heads to produce useful outcomes in navigating the world. It has been hypothesized that the implicitly open and positive questioning of SF as well as its use of resources, memory and imagination, facilitates positive emotions and broadened thought-action repertoires for individuals. These repertoires not only enable individuals to come up with a broader range of solutions for themselves, but of equal importance, also enable them to be more curious, open and accepting of the thoughts of others to foster better team interactions and more productive outcomes for organisations. In turn her theory not only supports the power of SF in bringing the fruits of positive psychology to the workplace, but adds food for thought regarding the use and direction of SF in organisations and the aspects of SF we should focus on as practitioners in order to maximise what works.

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*About the Author:*

Carey Glass, Business Psychologist and Director of The Human Centre, works with leaders in the UK's private sector and public service organisations, to foster success in their teams. [carey.glass@thehumancentre.co.uk](mailto:carey.glass@thehumancentre.co.uk).