

Utilizing Positive Psychology to Enhance Job Performance and Satisfaction for School Administrators

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Abstract

The positive psychology components of mindfulness/mindset, grit, optimism, happiness, and positive emotions and satisfaction from others are excellent criteria for school administrators to use for reflecting on their job performance and satisfaction. Mindfulness is being acutely aware of what is happening “in the moment,” regarding the thoughts and actions of self and others. The Arbinger Institute defines mindset as how a school administrator views self, staff, and other stakeholders. An inward mindset represents being self-centered and paying little attention to the wants and needs of others. The outward mindset represents a school administrator viewing the work done by others as important to everyone and believes that all school personnel are “in this together” for establishing and achieving goals to benefit students. Grit is having the passion to establish and achieve a major goal beneficial to ultimately improving student learning. Perseverance, through unwavering commitment and drive, is needed to accomplish the goal. Effort is required by the school administrator to maintain perseverance and develop the knowledge and skills needed to achieve the goal. Optimism represents viewing an adverse event as only a temporary setback that prompts a school administrator to be motivated to try harder to overcome the obstacles causing the situation, while remaining positive about self and work in general. Happiness on the job for school administrators is focusing on positive emotions, engaging in challenging activities, building positive relationships with others, strongly believing in the meaning and importance of their work, and having a sense of pride and accomplishment in what they do. Lastly, positive emotions and satisfaction flowing from interactions with others in the work environment enhances the job satisfaction of school administrators.

Keywords: Positive psychology, mindfulness/mindset, grit, optimism, happiness, positive emotions and satisfaction from others in the work environment, and job performance and satisfaction of school administrators.

Introduction

Effective school administrators are always looking for ways to improve performance. It is equally important that school administrators feel good about their jobs, enjoy the specific work they do, and have positive feelings flowing from interactions with fellow workers and those they supervise. While effective school administrators likely already incorporate many of the concepts of the positive psychology movement, an up-to-date review of these concepts should be beneficial to use as points of reference for reflection.

Positive Psychology

Positive psychology is the study of the strengths enabling people to thrive and reach their full potential at work and in their personal lives. It emphasizes positive emotions, meaningful purpose, positive relationships, authentic engagement with others, satisfaction, and general mental health well-being (Seligman, 2008). This compares to much of what is represented by the study of psychology through negative attributes of human weaknesses and general mental illness factors. Major aspects of positive psychology in the context of school administrators are: (a) embrace the challenges of the job with a passion and be energized to successfully meet them; (b) learn from setbacks and adversity at work, and not let them be discouraging; (c) engage staff and other stakeholders in developing the school’s goals and taking actions to complete them; (d) view staff members as the major asset for improving education for students and help them to do their best.

(e) focus on building positive and meaningful relationships with all of the school's stakeholders; (f) find fulfillment and excitement in using creativity to solve problems and being more productive on the job; and (g) look beyond oneself to help staff members and others find satisfaction and enjoyment in their work, which will ultimately benefit students (Bartz, 2017). This article examines mindfulness/mindset, grit, optimism, happiness, and positive emotions from others as important components of positive psychology applicable to school administrators.

Mindfulness/Mindset

Mindfulness

Conceptually, mindfulness is broader than mindset. Mindfulness means increasing awareness by focusing more specifically on what is happening in the world around us. It represents being acutely aware of what is happening in the moment—with self and others. This compares to *mindlessness* in which people's thinking is on automatic pilot—not consciously processing what is going on around them (Seligman, 2002). The repetitiveness of some activities of a school administrator's job can result in *sleepwalking* through the activities without intentionally paying attention to one's thoughts or focusing on what others are communicating and, possibly, thinking (Watt, 2012). Mindfulness includes self-reflections on thoughts, actions, and motives as well as an awareness and interest in what is going on regarding individuals with whom a school administrator is interacting. It also stresses being very observant and fully *into the moment* regarding what others are saying and the administrator is thinking (Grenville-Cleve, 2012). This is similar to the reflection-in-action concept in which an administrator adjusts his or her thinking and what is being said moment-by-moment based on the topic at hand and feedback from others in the conversation. A major way mindfulness differs from mindset is its emphasis on meditation.

Meditation

Meditation has gone from a fringe ritual to a mainstream health movement. It is also a technique for administrators to reduce stress and anxiety and help them have a clear focus on what is important. The key question regarding the effective use of meditation for many people is, "Can modern-day multitaskers really learn to quiet their minds?" (Dunn, 2017, p. 44). In a practical sense, meditation is the intentional practice of uncritically focusing one's attention on one thing at a time (Davis, Eshelman, & McKay, 2008). Some experts view meditation as "brain-based therapy" (Laurinavicius, 2016, p. 7). Meditation is a part of mindfulness that means setting aside a specific amount of time, from as little as two minutes to an hour or more, for focusing one's thoughts and awareness inward to help one clear the mind, reduce stress, and become acutely conscious of concentrating on reviewing a problem or situation. Meditation means clearing our minds of clutterful noise and tension to help the brain be able to focus clearly on a specific problem or situation. It stresses controlling emotions by creating a sense of detachment so that coping mechanisms and thinking processes are enhanced in solving a problem (Mindfulness Goes Mainstream, 2017). Three major aspects of meditation are: (1) breath awareness; (2) open-focus mindfulness techniques; and (3) guided mindfulness meditation practices (Kristeller, 2007). During meditation, training the mind to hold attention on breathing helps make the process more effective. Open focus, or awareness, is often considered the core of meditation because it stresses clearing the mind and focusing on one event at a time. Guided awareness means engaging in a particular event in a non-judgmental manner.

Mindset

Dweck's (2006) perspectives on mindset are often referenced by educators. According to Dweck, an individual can choose to believe one's intelligence, personality, and other personal attributes are basically unchangeable (fixed mindset) or believe that these factors can be nurtured and developed (growth mindset) to enhance on-the-job performance and satisfaction. School administrators should not stereotype themselves because this can contribute to the fixed mindset. Rather, school administrators should view their personal attributes as being pliable and amenable to growth and development. This means that training and professional development are key elements of the outward mindset (Bartz, 2016). Critical components of Dweck's outward mindset are: (a) have purpose drive work; (b) deal head-on with deficiencies as opposed to hiding or attempting to compensate for them; (c) view setbacks or adverse situations as opportunities to learn and do better in the future; (d) view those with whom you work as collaborators for problem solving; (e) strive to continue to be a lifelong learner to improve knowledge and skills.

(f) be motivated, inspired, and proud of the accomplishments of the individuals with whom you work;(g) believe that all individuals can grow and improve through passion, perseverance, efforts, and application of their experiences. (h) be a calculated risk-taker and welcome new challenges as opportunities to improve and get better, as opposed to being fearful of risk; and (i) focus on relationship building with the people in your work environment (Bartz, 2016). Mindset means how individuals view self, staff, and other individuals with whom they interact at work. The Arbinger Institute (2016) distinguishes mindset as being inward or outward. Being self-centered and paying little attention and giving minimal importance to the wants and needs of others is indicative of the inward mindset. The outward mindset is representative of individuals viewing the efforts and work done by others as important to everyone. In essence, the outward mindset means that school administrators believe that they and those they supervise are in this together regarding establishing and working to achieve goals. The outward mindset welcomes creative and innovative ideas when establishing goals from those who will be involved in doing the work to achieve the goals. The philosophy of helping others to be their best is emulated by the outward mindset. Figure 1 presents a comparison between the inward and outward mindsets.

Figure 1 Comparing Inward and Outward Mindsets for School Administrators toward Staff and Others

Inward	Outward
1. Strives to control people	1. Strives to cause staff and others to be fully responsible and engaged in work
2. Often blames others when things go wrong	2. Takes responsibility for actions of oneself and staff in the school's work environment
3. Is narcissistic	3. Displays modesty toward staff and others
4. Consistently defends one's position	4. Works collaboratively with staff to solicit their opinions and collectively develop the best solutions for the school's problems
5. Interactions with staff and others focus on protecting oneself	5. Interactions with staff and others focus on building positive relationships with and among people
6. Uses behaviors that sometimes try to manipulate staff and others in an attempt to improve one's own image results among staff another can help oneself achieve goals	6. Strives to facilitate committed behaviors collectively with staff and others to improve work produced and achieve the school's goals
7. Shows minimal regard for creating collective	7. Motivated about how to work with staff and others collaboratively and for others to collaborate with each other and oneself
8. Views staff and others in a context as to how they	8. Focuses on the needs and challenges of staff and others to create a work environment that prompts individual and group cooperation
9. Assumes that to simply change one's behavior is the best way to enhance the work productivity of staff and others	9. Understands changing how oneself views staff and others is more beneficial to everyone in comparison to merely focusing on changing behaviors toward staff and others
10. Focuses on how to make oneself look good for work produced, even at the expense of staff and others	10. Sees, thinks, and works on how to improve job performance through collaboration with staff and others that incorporate their needs and wants, and gains them recognition
11. Often creates competition between staff and causes them to work independently of each other	11. Focuses on the school's staff as an entity having a collective belief of working with each other for the common good of student learning
12. Focuses mainly on the job responsibilities of oneself	12. Assists staff and others in identifying their interests and being motivated to successfully achieve what they need for the betterment of the students
13. Focuses on getting the work "out the door" with little identity for its benefits	13. Focuses on the meaning and purposefulness of the work and the positive impact it can have for students, staff, and the school
14. Inclined to step in, take over, and direct the work of staff and others when not pleased	14. Helps staff and others understand what they need to do, provides developmental training when needed, and furnishes the necessary resources
15. Creates conflict that keeps staff embattled with each other (divide and conquer for control)	15. Focuses on preventing and resolving conflict among staff and others
16. Focuses on personal and professional goals and attempts to protect and advance oneself	16. Focuses on the goals of the school, and objectives and behaviors that take staff and others into consideration
17. Advances one's own agenda, even at the expense of what is best for students and others	17. Focuses on working together with staff and others for collective results to benefit students
18. Identifies what can be taken from others to achieve objectives for oneself	18. Identifies what can be given to help staff and others to successfully achieve their work objectives
19. Oftentimes tries to control the behavior of staff and others for self-benefit through power, authority, and fear	19. Relinquishes power and authority to empower staff's and others' abilities to be responsible and accountable for their work (Bartz, 2017)

Grit

The three major components of grit are passion, perseverance, and effort. Passion represents a strong emotional desire and commitment to achieve something important to a school administrator. Passion includes identifying a goal or particular achievement the school administrator wants to accomplish and is the starting point of grit. For this goal to be achieved, the school administrator needs to be motivated through passion that includes drive, interest, and enthusiasm. Perseverance, the second main ingredient of grit, means demonstrating the self-discipline, hope, and stick-to-it-ness to stay focused on the goal through to its completion. Effort, the third major ingredient of grit, serves a dual role: (1) when combined with the talent of an individual, it leads to improved knowledge and skills to achieve the goal; and (2) once the enhanced knowledge and skills are in place, effort is needed as an element of perseverance to achieve the goal (Duckworth, 2016). Grit emphasizes that talent, while important, is sometimes overrated. Talent is defined as the attributes a school administrator has such as intelligence, judgment, and the ability to learn. Possessing a deep feeling for what an individual wants to achieve through passion, coupled with a vision as to how to realize this achievement, is important to grit.

The key elements of grit—passion, perseverance, and effort—are better predictors of on-the-job success than a school administrator's abilities that are represented through talent (Duckworth, 2016).

It may be easier for school administrators to have passion for a specific goal than the perseverance and effort needed to realize the goal. Because of the nature of a school administrator's day-to-day work, it is easy for her/him to become distracted from what it takes to consistently have the perseverance and effort to achieve a goal. Grit advocates that it is important to have a limited number of goals so that a school administrator stays focused on them for an adequate time period, which could be a year or more. Because a school administrator's time and energy are limited, it may be necessary to prioritize goals, even if there are only a few of them. Passion means that interest and optimism are present to continually strive to accomplish goals. Furthermore, goals created by passion are not easily given up by a school administrator, even when doubts may occur or when situations become difficult. A school administrator who views the job as a calling to serve students, employees, and the community is inclined to have not only more passion for his/her goals but also more perseverance to achieve them. Finally, it is essential to have congruency between an administrator's personal desires and the needs of the school/district for a goal representing a passion.

Optimism

There are two fundamental ways of looking at adverse events that happen to a school administrator. The school administrator can: (1) imagine the worst and wallow in self-pity; or (2) view such events as temporary, surmountable, and challenges to overcome. Pessimists believe that an adverse event will last a long time, make the person helpless, and is her/his fault. Optimists view an adverse event as only a temporary setback that does not permeate all aspects of their lives and in most situations, is not their fault. They are not fazed by the defeat, but are motivated to try harder to overcome obstacles causing the situation. Being a pessimist or optimist can be habit-forming and become engrained in a school administrator's character (Seligman, 2006). Pessimists are likely to give up more easily and get depressed when facing an adverse event.

Pessimism can be a difficult syndrome to break. However, optimism—with proper training—can be learned through a new set of cognitive skills. When adversity is encountered, an individual has rapidly-occurring thoughts about the event. These thoughts are almost instinctive and driven by a person's beliefs that are often habitual. People may not even realize these beliefs unless they pause to analyze the situation. Beliefs flow from what people feel and drive their behaviors which lead to consequences for their actions (Seligman, 2006). When an individual acts on these beliefs, prompted by adversity, the actions have consequences.

These consequences could cause constructive or positive actions to the adverse situation, or cause dejection and prompt a person to "give up." The point is, beliefs play a critical role in how people deal with adversity through their behaviors and the consequences flowing from these behaviors. An optimist view an adverse event in the following manner: (a) the event has merely caused a temporary setback;(b) whatever caused the adversity is confined specifically to this particular event and no other happenings in the person's life;(c) the results flowing from the adversity are not the fault of the person, the particular circumstances of the event, or caused by others;(d) the adverse event likely happened for multiple reasons, many of which the individual could not control;(e) is unfazed by what others might perceive as defeat from the adverse event;(f) perceives an adverse event as a challenge to try harder and do better in the future (Seligman, 2006).

It is essential for a school administrator to be optimistic when: (a) trying to achieve something, such as passing a bond referendum;(b) the teachers in your district feel that mandated changes by the State for teacher evaluation may not work; and (c) trying to inspire board members to support a proposed curriculum change brought forth by teachers and principals. School administrators need to be guarded optimists when: (a) budget issues such as State funding have consistently been a disappointment for the past several years and no changes appear for the foreseeable future;(b) an employee or board member has recently experienced a personal tragedy; and(c) trying to identify how others feel because of their troubling situations. Optimism should not be used until the affected individual's confidence has been established through displaying empathy.

Happiness

Virtues are the set of characteristics that form the foundation of one's character. Happiness flows from engaging one's strengths and virtues with others in an authentic manner. School administrators need to stress the use of their virtues in good and bad times (Seligman, 2002). As the old saying goes, "actions flow from character." Virtues like confidence, hope, trust, honesty, and relationship building with others serve school administrators well—especially when times are difficult.

Seligman's model for happiness is represented by PERMA—Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment (Positive Psychology Melbourne, 2017). Positive emotions include the school administrator being optimistic about the here and now, as well as seeing positives in the past and future. Enjoyment through intellectual stimulation and creativity will aid the school administrator in experiencing positive emotions. Engagement means that school administrators participate in work activities and tasks that fully challenge them to learn, grow intellectually, and feel good about their experiences.

Relationships refer to school administrators socially connecting with others through authentic and meaningful interactions. It is especially important to have positive feelings about relationships with others at work during difficult and challenging times. Meaning refers to school administrators truly understanding the important and positive impact their work has to the school/district, students, school staff, and other stakeholders. Further, it includes feeling good about pursuing school administration as a career and enjoying experiences related to the job in the context of accomplishments and relationships with others.

Accomplishments represent the school administrator having achievement goals and being ambitious and motivated to accomplish these goals. Such goals should include activities which prompt school administrators to excel in performance and reward their efforts by seeing the benefits flowing from accomplishments. School administrators should feel proud of their work accomplishments and the important contributions they make to students and other stakeholders (Positive Psychology Melbourne, 2017).The rewards of positive psychology through these happiness factors are motivational to school administrators and prompt positive adrenaline to create behaviors in which they can be their best.

Positive Emotions from Others (Satisfaction through Others)

Positive interactions from those with whom the school administrator works lead to increased job satisfaction and work productivity (Cloud, 2016). These positive interactions prompt feelings that create energy, motivation, and enthusiasm that such interactions aid the school administrator and other individuals in the work environment to be more open and meaningful in communicating which should result in the development of many creative and innovative ideas. These interactions require the school administrator to exercise self-control and patience because open communications often take considerable time. Those supervised by the administrator will feel more empowered if he/she creates a work environment of support, respect, development, and clear expectations through accountability.

The field of emotional intelligence is useful to school administrators by its advocacy of consistently managing their emotions and displaying empathy, attentiveness, and understanding when interacting with people at work. (Walton, 2012). While it is important that school administrators' self-interests are met in the work environment so that they experience positive feelings, it is equally important that they display an interest in those with whom they work. As Walton noted, "If you don't listen to others, or simply don't care (particularly if you show it), can you really expect support, commitment or ideas from others to help you in the future?" (Walton, 2012, p. 71). In reality, a school administrator's performance can either be improved or diminished by the other people in the work environment (Cloud, 2016).

Further, it is important that a school administrator not allow one person in a group to impede its effectiveness through negativism. If pessimists are allowed to dominate a group, its cohesiveness and productivity will suffer.

Summary

School administrators have difficult and challenging jobs. The positive psychology concepts of mindfulness/mindset, grit, optimism, happiness, and positive emotions from others furnish excellent criteria for school administrators to use in reflecting on their performance and job satisfaction. These reflections will likely support much of the way in which the school administrator presently operates and, thus, provide positive energy. Such reflections may also provide the school administrator with ideas for making behavioral changes that will increase productivity and job satisfaction; enhance the performance of others; and, ultimately, better serve students.

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