You are reading an excerpt from
Berrett-Koehler Publishers

Our books challenge conventional thinking,
introduce new ideas, and foster positive change.
If you sign up for an account on our website,
you may purchase our books at a discount.

www.bkconnection.com

THE POSITIVE ORGANIZATION

Breaking Free from Conventional Cultures, Constraints, and Beliefs

Robert E. Quinn

Bestselling author of *Deep Change*

Includes the Positive Organization Generator of 100 unconventional practices from real organizations

More Praise for *The Positive Organization*

"Few argue with being positive, but fewer can turn aspirations for being positive into specific organizational actions. Quinn is an exquisite observer and advisor on organizations. This book specifies actions that leaders can take to create abundant or positive organizations. The ideas make sense, the tools are informative, and the examples are clear. This book lays the foundation for redefining organizations."

— **Dave Ulrich, Rensis Likert Professor, Ross School of Business, University of Michigan, and Partner, The RBL Group**

"A profound book offering wise lessons for igniting deep positive change in your organization. Sound too good to be true? Actually, I think it may be an understatement. *The Positive Organization* can help you discover the vision and practices needed for creating cultures of possibility where people exceed expectations and flourish in their work."

— **Charles C. Manz, coauthor of *Share, Don't Take the Lead* and *Self-Leadership***

"Bob Quinn addresses the practical realities of building a positive enterprise and the positive culture necessary to sustain it."

— **Bill Robertson, Chairman, Weston Solutions, Inc.**

"Ten years ago I read *Building the Bridge as You Walk on It* by Robert Quinn. It changed my career. As I read his new book, I realize it is having the same kind of impact but at an organizational level. I have already started applying the ideas to my company, and the results have been powerful. If you want elegant, easy to access, and deeply engaging, start reading now."

— **Nick Craig, President, Authentic Leadership Institute, and coauthor of *Finding Your True North***

"Another insightful, poignant, and practical guide by change master Robert Quinn, *The Positive Organization* is the ultimate user's manual for leaders who want to create positively deviant organizations. It will work for people who want to change any organization, from a multinational company to neighborhood association."

— **Jim Mallozzi, Chairman and CEO, Prudential Real Estate and Relocation Services (Retired)**

"People are drawn to the positive. When we are engaged and creative, we are living for a greater purpose. But because we biologically defend ourselves above all else, the default in organizational life is being defensive and then infecting everyone around us with negativity. Quinn unveils the positive organization without being gushy or Pollyanna. He provides hope for the entangled, a spotlight to guide the lost, and reassurance for those on the journey."

— **Richard Boyatzis, Distinguished University Professor, Departments of Psychology, Cognitive Science, and Organizational Behavior, Case Western Reserve University, and coauthor of *Primal Leadership***

"Another masterpiece from Robert Quinn! I have worked with organizations on creating more positive organizations, and while everybody endorses the concept, people typically find it challenging to make it practically sustainable. Bob's new book provides valuable new examples that illustrate how to do this and tools to achieve success."

—**Anjan Thakor, John E. Simon Professor of Finance, Director of WFA Center for Finance and Accounting Research, and Director of Doctoral Programs, Olin Business School, Washington University in St. Louis**

"This is a wonderfully persuasive, tactile immersion in positive organizations that demystifies them and makes them more attainable while magnifying the reader's desire to get on with that attainment. This is Bob at his best! And it is positive organizing in its best rendering."

—**Karl E. Weick, Rensis Likert Distinguished University Professor of Organizational Behavior and Psychology, Emeritus, Ross School of Business, University of Michigan**

"Bob Quinn identifies the critical path to invigorate the human spirit at work. His daring description of being 'fully engaged and continually renewed' charts a course on how to invite people to the new possibilities of authentic conversations that ignite positive cultures."

—**Jim Haudan, author of *The Art of Engagement***

"Who doesn't want to be part of an organization where people flourish, are unified with clear purpose, and exceed expectations? Robert Quinn's newest work offers clear pathways for leaders to authentically engage others, consider new possibilities, and think beyond problem solving. Building and understanding positive organizations helps create places where others want to contribute, results are celebrated, and people prosper. This book matters."

—**Jim Mahoney, Executive Director, Battelle for Kids**

THE POSITIVE
ORGANIZATION

OTHER BOOKS BY ROBERT QUINN

Deep Change: Discovering the Leader Within

Change the World: How Ordinary People Can Achieve Extraordinary Results

Lift: Becoming a Positive Force in Any Situation

The Best Teacher in You: How to Accelerate Learning and Change Lives

THE POSITIVE ORGANIZATION

BREAKING FREE FROM CONVENTIONAL CULTURES, CONSTRAINTS, AND BELIEFS

Robert E. Quinn

Best-Selling Author of *Deep Change*

*Includes the Positive Organization Generator of
100 unconventional practices from real organizations*

The Positive Organization

I am indebted to a woman who breaks convention while living with discipline. I am grateful to have her as my loving daughter and the demanding manager of this book project. I dedicate this volume to Shauri Quinn Dewey and thank her for her endless, positive impacts on my life.

This page intentionally left blank

◢ CONTENTS

This page intentionally left blank

▲ INTRODUCTION
The Reality of Possibility

One day, Laura Morgan Roberts spoke at the Center for Positive Organizations. Dr. Roberts is a researcher who studies identity and seeks to understand how people can flourish at work. She spoke of modern work-life, the effort to find balance, and a terrible paradox she has identified. She pushed her clicker and a very simple slide went up on the screen. It read as follows:

Overextended and Underutilized

I could feel something happening. I looked around. The audience was full of professionals who work in organizations. The slide seemed to have an actual physical impact. Faces were full of pain. It was a rather remarkable moment.

Many people are overworked. They live on the edge of exhaustion. This fact is publicly recognized, and there is endless discussion about how to better manage our ever-shrinking supply of time.

What is not so widely recognized, however, is that many of those same people are being underutilized. Their strengths go untapped, and their unique gifts go unexpressed. They are giving all their time and energy, yet they get back only a financial return. Their paycheck is important, but it is not enough. As they pursue recognition, wealth, and security, they are infected by the epidemic of disinterest and end up joining the legions of the walking dead. Laura's slide seemed to bring all this to the fore in three simple words.

The next morning I found myself pondering Laura's paradox. Recognizing that every coin has a flip side, I wrote this contrasting paradox:

Fully Engaged and Continually Renewed

While the first paradox suggests a cycle of depletion that is not easily broken, the second suggests a cycle of renewal that is not easily believed. When I show these two contrasting paradoxes to people, they immediately identify with, and emotionally react to, the first. They see its negative message as both real and inevitable. It is a downward cycle that always threatens organizational life.

People react differently to the second paradox. They see it as an unreachable ideal. It is not something they experience or expect to experience. They believe, with good reason, that full engagement and continual renewal is not going to happen. Few people can envision it and even fewer ever aspire to creating such a reality. The lack of vision and aspiration is crucial to this cycle.

The Book

Your current organization is not static. It is continually becoming more negative or more positive. As organizations become more negative, the people within them tend to withdraw and underperform. As organizations become more positive, their people tend to invest and exceed individual and collective expectations.

The purpose of this book is to help create the second kind of organization. It not only illustrates how this is done in real organizations but also explains how to invite people to purpose, how to bring about authentic conversations, how to connect people to new possibilities, how to orient them to the common good, and how to facilitate the emergence of new, more positive cultures.[1]

The appendix contains a useful tool called the Positive Organization Generator. It includes 100 positive practices from real organizations. It is designed so the reader can create new practices that can be implemented in any context without having to ask for permission from someone of higher authority.

At the end of each chapter, you will be asked to think about a key insight you gained and how it can help you to create a more positive organization. It is important to follow through on this, because it will help you envision the organization you want to create as you use the Positive Organization Generator.

There are also other tools for readers. At the end of chapters 3 through 7, there are assessments and activities you can use to introduce your unit or team to the concepts in this volume.

In the end, this book does two things. First, it introduces ideas designed to challenge your conventional assumptions. Second, it offers real tools and simple processes designed to support you in trying new things.

Deep learning can occur when both challenge and support are present. As you begin to conceptualize new practices and to see things from a more complex mental map, you will be able to transform yourself, your unit, and even your organization. If that happens, you and your people will never be the same. Your people will begin to flourish and exceed expectations. They will become fully engaged and continually renewed,[2] and a more positive organization will emerge.

Acknowledgments

This book is full of stories. They come from the lives of wonderful people trying to make the world a better place. I am grateful for the legions of folks who have shared their life experiences and invited me to the wisdom of positive organizations.

In writing this book, there has been an effort to make it as accessible as possible. Much of the academic work that informs this text appears in footnotes. I am indebted to the scholars I cite. I am particularly indebted to the scholars and leaders who surround me at the Center for Positive Organizations. These include Wayne Baker, Kim Cameron, Jane Dutton, Betsy Erwin, Fred Keller, Shirli Kopelman, David Mayer, Roger Newton, Gretchen Spreitzer, Chris White, and Lynn Wooten. I am grateful to Erin YaLe Lim, my research assistant, who found most of the hundred practices in the Positive Organization Generator.

Many people have read some or all of this manuscript and made comments prior to publication. A large subset of them put more into the process than I have seen before. I am deeply indebted to Kirk Blad, Wally Bock, Bruce Degn, Dan Duckworth, Erin Dunn, Wade Eyerly, Kathleen Flanagan, Maria Forbes, Ed Francis, Mirena Hine, Jessica Johnson, Lucie Newcomb, Craig Matteson, Valerie Matteson, Ryan Quinn, Shawn Quinn, and Shuryce Prestwich. Thank you for your every expression.

I owe special thanks to Katie Outcalt and Mark Templeton. They read multiple iterations of the manuscript, sent extensive feedback, and continually challenged me to think more deeply.

In 1986, a young editor nurtured me through the production of my first book. His influence was extraordinary. Decades have passed, and now he is CEO of one of the most positive organizations in the publishing industry. Yet, he once again took on the difficult role of supporting me and pushing me forward in the creation of something that matters. I am forever indebted to Steve Piersanti and the entire staff at Barrett-Koehler Publishers. It is an honor to be associated with such extraordinarily constructive professionals.

Finally, there is Shauri. In launching this book, my daughter and I agreed on a bold experiment. She would become my manager. While living in the Republic of Georgia and raising a new baby, she threw herself into the task. There were daily phone calls in which she demanded that each page be rewritten, multiple times. The manuscript teems with her creativity and discipline. In gratitude, I dedicate this volume to my amazing and energizing daughter. Thank you.

Ann Arbor, Michigan
February 2015

1 ▲ THE POSITIVE ORGANIZATION

One day, I was talking with a young surgeon whose academic specialties included evaluating hospital performance. He thinks very deeply about what factors increase or decrease a hospital's effectiveness, and we were discussing how successful hospitals function. In the middle of our conversation, he paused and then surprised me with a question: "Why do people in finance so often end up as heads of organizations?"

This question caught me off guard, and I improvised some answers. I told him economics is a potent discipline, and people who master it have precise analytic tools. As they move up in their organizations, they learn to rigorously evaluate the allocation of resources in the system. By the time they reach the highest levels of the finance function, they have great skills for controlling an enterprise.

A commonly held belief in business circles is that people in economics and similar analytic disciplines know how to solve important technical problems and how to efficiently utilize resources. Therefore, they can keep things under control.

My friend nodded, but not with enthusiasm. He expressed some reservations about people who base their leadership on control, problem solving, and efficiency. I was not sure what was on his mind. So I asked him to elaborate, and he told me two stories. Each one was about leadership and culture in a hospital setting.

Two Hospitals, Two Cultures

The first story begins when my friend went with a team of colleagues to visit Hospital 1 and were warmly greeted at the front

door by a man in a top hat. Inside, they saw the usual information desk and waiting area but also spaces available to the community for such things as weddings and cooking classes. As they toured the hospital, they got the impression this hospital was like a five-star hotel.

On their tour, they happened to bump into Hospital 1's CEO, who welcomed them and asked if he could help them in any way. He chatted with them for a half hour and shared his vision and philosophy.

During the rest of the tour, they asked the employees about the CEO. People at the lowest levels talked as if they had a personal relationship with the man. They also spoke with pride about the vision and values of the hospital. Clearly, people were unified and felt good about what they were doing. Their every word and action seemed to convey that they were fully committed to the hospital's success. There was a positive culture that seemed to focus, unify, and animate them.

My friend and his associates left deeply impressed. While they were all doctors who have spent their lives in hospitals, it was clear that they had just observed a hospital that exceeded their expectations. They had just encountered a truly "positive organization."

Shortly thereafter, my friend was dropped off at the front door of his own hospital: we'll call it Hospital 2. Given his recent visit to Hospital 1, he began to think about contrasts between that organization and his own. He then experienced one of the differences.

As he walked in, he was met by a gruff woman who wanted to know if he was a student. He explained that he was a surgeon and was scheduled to operate. She would not grant him entry, citing hospital policy. He would have to go back out and walk around to the employee entrance. The surgeon tried to handle the situation artfully, but the woman threatened to call security. He went back out.

A few days later, he related what had happened in a meeting with a senior officer of Hospital 2. This person responded to the story by asking for the name of the woman. The executive wanted to fire her.

My friend told me that this particular senior officer put a lot of emphasis on being in control and fixing problems. His first inclination, for example, was to terminate the troublesome woman. He assumed that she was "the problem."

To the administrator's mind, firing the woman was the right thing to do. He wanted to establish and maintain order and control. He wanted to make the hospital run better. A person who seeks a predictable, smooth-running organization often focuses on disruptions and disruptive influ-

ences: the natural inclination is to fix those disruptive problems. In this case, the knee-jerk solution was to fire the woman.

When we focus on a problem, we are not seeing the whole system. We are paying attention to something within the system. Likewise, when we focus on a single person, we are not focusing on the culture of which that person is a part. The aforementioned senior executive did not stop to wonder what systemic conditions within the culture might have caused the woman to behave as she did. It did not occur to him that if he fired the woman, the problem might not go away. The next person in the same role, responding to the same culture, might eventually behave in the same manner as this woman had.

When people focus on the part rather than the whole, it does not occur to them to ask a most important question: How might the entire culture be reshaped so the people flourish in their work and exceed expectations as they perform?

This book is about creating more positive organizations. The preceding question reflects the simplest definition of a positive organization.

> IN A POSITIVE ORGANIZATION, THE PEOPLE ARE
> FLOURISHING AS THEY WORK. IN TERMS OF
> OUTCOMES, THEY ARE EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS.

To flourish is to grow and thrive. To exceed expectations is to successfully do more than people expect you to do; it is to move toward excellence. Hospital 1 had a culture of excellence. The young surgeon and his colleagues entered Hospital 1 with similar assumptions about what a hospital is like. During their visit, those assumptions were challenged. The surgeons saw people were flourishing and exceeding expectations. They saw a hospital that was performing at a high level because it had a positive culture. The surgeons had seen something that created dissonance in the way they viewed the world. Now they would have to decide whether to disregard it as an anomaly or examine that information more closely.

Mental Maps and Culture

Like the surgeons, all of us have a set of assumptions or beliefs that help us navigate the world we live in. These beliefs are acquired over time from the people we live with and work with. We learn from these people

and from our own experiences what works and what doesn't. These assumptions and beliefs then become like maps in our minds that guide our responses to what we observe and experience around us.

Our mental maps guide us in all areas of life: they create our picture of what family life is like. They tell us what to expect in areas like education, religion, and recreation. Because our assumptions are a product of our experiences, we take our beliefs as truth and seldom doubt them. We hold them tightly, and we tend to deny messages that challenge them.[1]

The mental maps we hold influence our approach to, and our beliefs about culture in our organization. In my experience, there are a few common ways that managers tend to think about culture. Group one, "The Discounters," ignore the fact that culture exists, and they often completely overlook or discount its impact. Group two, "The Skeptics," recognize that culture exists, but they have tried to make change, failed, and then incorrectly concluded that the culture is unalterable. Since experience doesn't lie, "The Skeptics" "know" that aspiring to excellence is both unrealistic and impractical.

Finally there are the few "Believers." These managers have also experienced organizational constraints, but they know culture change is possible because at some point they have tried and succeeded. In succeeding they learned something important. Instead of seeing the culture as a fixed constraint, they see it as the key to success. They recognize that their job is to lead culture change so as to create a more positive organization.[2]

Managers in all three of these groups carry a conventional mental map. We call this map conventional because it is guided by normal or common beliefs. For example, one conventional belief is that stability, hierarchy, and control are the keys to running an efficient and profitable business. There is truth in this conventional belief, so that map can be useful. However, when the conventional map is used alone, it can actually become a constraint. It can prevent people from pursuing the creation of an organization in which people flourish and exceed expectations.

The rare supervisors, managers and executives that fall in to the group of "Believers" have an advantage. They accept the conventional map and all of its very real beliefs and constraints, but they have also acquired a positive mental map. The positive mental map allows them to see possibilities that "Discounters" and "Skeptics" cannot see. They see the con-

straints and possibilities simultaneously, which allows them to do things the others cannot do. In chapter 2 we refer to this advantage as being a bilingual leader.[3]

Defying Conventional Culture

In the young surgeon's story from the beginning of this chapter, Hospital 2 appears to be led by people who only hold the more conventional or common mental map. I had the opportunity to work on a project designed to elevate over 60 nursing units in Hospital 2. We worked with the directors of the nursing units, dividing them into small groups and spending a week with each group to help them see how they could better empower themselves and their people.

The work proved to be a great challenge. It seemed that each time we surfaced some positive practice that might improve a unit, one of the directors would explain why it was impossible to employ it. They spoke of administrators who were punishing, doctors who were insensitive, policies that were inflexible, peers who did not cooperate, and employees who just wanted to do their job and go home. Experience taught these directors of nursing that the organization's culture was constraining. They did not expect the people in their units or people in other parts of the hospital to flourish and exceed expectations.

As we sought to modify their beliefs and elevate their aspirations, we began to examine the nursing units more closely. We looked, in particular, for a positive exception, a unit that defied the conventional culture of the hospital. The exception existed and was easy to find. When we asked administrators if there was such a unit of excellence, they all answered in the affirmative and named the same one, which I will call Unit 5.

Unit 5 served children who were seriously ill. This was demanding work, and yet they were usually first or second on every hard performance measure. Measures of morale were also high. In many of the other units, turnover was high; in this unit, however, the turnover rate was close to zero, and there was a long list of nurses waiting to transfer in. Why?

Other units in the hospital also served populations like Unit 5, but none performed like Unit 5. They seemed to take a unique approach to everything they did. Earlier in the hospital's history, for example,

every unit had been given money to hire a hostess to greet new patients. Nearly all the units hired a nurse. Unit 5, however, hired a drama major and then sent her to clown school. When very sick children and anxious parents arrived on the unit for the first time, a very skilled clown greeted them. Within minutes, they felt they had become part of a special community in which they would be treated as full human beings.

When we interviewed the nurses in Unit 5, they told stories of people going the extra mile to take care of patients and each other. They spoke of collaboration and achievement. It seemed to be a place of high commitment and compassion.

The people we interviewed spoke of the unit director in the same way the people in Hospital 1 had spoken of their CEO. It was common for them to express extreme gratitude for the director of their unit. In our interviews, some nurses actually shed tears as they spoke of their leader. Their descriptions suggested that she was deeply committed to creating a positive unit in a conventional hospital.

The Reality of Constraint

Most organizations tend to be like the more conventional Hospital 2, where many of the nursing units were disempowering places. A few empowering exceptions are found, like Unit 5, but it is not the norm.

Recall that we found Unit 5 because we went searching for a unit of excellence, a positive exception in the organization. We wanted to challenge the tightly held assumptions of the nursing directors by exposing them to a positive reality within their system. We hoped to jolt their beliefs and open their minds to the possibility of thinking in a new and more empowered way.

What we learned is this: the directors, like many people in positions of authority, do not aspire to have flourishing people in their units. They instead seek to meet the minimum assumed requirement in order to survive. Survival, not flourishing, is the aspiration of conventional managers. They do not look for or expect to find excellence. When they do find excellence, they tend to ignore it rather than examine and learn from it. Everyone knew about the excellence of Unit 5, but it never occurred to anyone that it was possible to use that success as a lever for creating

a more positive culture in other such units. The conventional focus on *constraint* precluded a focus on *possibility*.

Across the world, supervisors, managers, and executives learn to speak in politically correct ways about improvement. Yet, it is quite common for them to operate from a perspective of problem solving and task accomplishment. Perhaps it is natural, and even rewarded, for many of them to slough off any sense of responsibility for creating positive organizations.

> This book invites each one of us to become aware of the assumptions that form our individual mental maps (what we believe), how those maps guide our responses to what we observe and experience (our behavior), and how our responses create and reinforce the cultures we live in. It invites each of us to begin to become leaders who imagine and pursue the construction of positive organizations even amid the reality of constraints.

Expanding Our Mental Maps

We can begin to increase our awareness of the assumptions we carry in our own mental maps by understanding that organizations are not static. Human beings tend to use fixed, either/or categories. An organization is either positive or negative. Reality, however, is far more complex and more dynamic than that. Reality often runs across our logical categories. Although I have seen some organizational cultures that are quite negative or quite positive, I cannot imagine an organizational culture that is 100 percent negative or 100 percent positive. Nor can I imagine one that stays fixed in terms of negative and positive. What may be a weakness this month, may turn into a strength next month.

Hospital 1 appears to have a more positive culture than Hospital 2 but that doesn't mean that Hospital 2 is a "bad" organization. Hundreds of people leave that hospital each day healed of their diseases and injuries. Researchers generate scientific breakthroughs that change medicine forever. Leaders at many levels initiate projects to make things better. We even find the very positive Unit 5. Likewise, it is possible that in Hospital 1 we might find one or more negative units.

Negative and positive indicators, or behaviors, tend to appear in an organization at the same time. The ratio of positive to negative behaviors we observe tends to shape our assessment of an organization. For instance, in Hospital 1 and Unit 5, we see many patterns that exceed our conventional expectations, and we conclude that the culture is positive.

In trying to create a more positive organization there are many characteristics we could focus on. Here we have created a list of 20. Look at the first set of 10 and think about what value is placed on them in your organization.

1. Growth Focus: Growth mentality, investing in the future, seeing possibility
2. Self-organization: Empowerment, spontaneity, self-organization
3. Creative Action: Responsive, up-to-date, a learning organization
4. Intrinsic Motivation: Meaningful, rewarding, fulfilling work
5. Positive Contagion: Positive emotions, optimism, enthusiasm
6. Full Engagement: Committed, engaged, fully involved people
7. Individual Accountability: Responsibility, accountability, excellence
8. Decisive Action: Speed, urgency, decisiveness
9. Achievement Focus: Achievement, accomplishment, success
10. Constructive Confrontation: Honesty, challenge, confrontation

An organization with these 10 characteristics is likely to be very visionary, very productive and filled with people who could delight in achievement and success. Yet the careful reader might have some misgivings. The reader might recognize that a focus on a value like achievement could be coupled with human exhaustion, and an emphasis on growth and change could lead to waste, chaos, and confusion. That is because *every* positive characteristic, without a competing positive value or characteristic, can become a negative. With that in mind, let's look at 10 more characteristics.

11. Cost Control: Efficiency, conservation, preservation of assets
12. Organizational Predictability: Stability, order, predictability
13. Procedural Compliance: Sound routines, policies, procedures
14. Managerial Control: Consistent, dependable, reliable performance
15. Objective Analysis: Objectivity, measurement, sound analysis
16. Life Balance: Renewing, reenergizing, life balance

17. Cohesive Teamwork: Collaboration, belonging, positive peer pressure
18. Group Deliberation: Participation, involvement, consensus
19. Authentic Relationships: Caring, selfless service, genuine relationships
20. Appreciative Expression: Appreciation, praise, celebration for others

The second list is not an arbitrary set of items. Each characteristic balances the first list of 10. Please compare the first characteristic on the left with the first on the right, and so on, down the list.[4]

Consider some of the contrasts. Growth focus is very different from cost control. People who believe in organizational predictability may not see how a characteristic like self-organization is possible. Creative action and procedural compliance are also conceptual tensions or oppositions.

We use words like tensions or oppositions and not opposites because the word opposite often implies that two words or phrases are mutually exclusive. In fact, many people will look at the above lists and think that the pairs are mutually exclusive.

Although these characteristics appear to be opposites, they can exist simultaneously (and successfully) in the real world. In fact, they must exist simultaneously. Change and stability are positive tensions. If there was zero stability the organization would cease to exist. If there was zero change the organization would become completely unaligned with the internal or external marketplace. Customers or clients would become dissatisfied, and they would make their displeasure known in one way or another. External resources like money and political support would cease to flow, and the organization would eventually die.

The fact is that organizational success is dependent upon the integration of contrasting or paradoxical tensions such as the ones illustrated in the above lists. F. Scott Fitzgerald once said, "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function."[5]

One reason that we see so few positive organizations and so many conventional organizations is because of the tension between these necessary positive characteristics. Leadership requires the ability to hold opposed ideas at the same time. It requires us to think in more complex and adaptive ways.

First List	Second List
Growth Focus: Growth mentality, investing in the future, seeing possibility	Cost Control: Efficiency, conservation, preservation of assets
Self-organization: Empowerment, spontaneity, self-organization	Organizational Predictability: Stability, order, predictability
Creative Action: Responsive, up-to-date, a learning organization	Procedural Compliance: Sound routines, policies, procedures
Intrinsic Motivation: Meaningful, rewarding, fulfilling work	Managerial Control: Consistent, dependable, reliable performance
Positive Contagion: Positive emotions, optimism, enthusiasm	Objective Analysis: Objectivity, measurement, sound analysis
Full Engagement: Committed, engaged, fully involved people	Life Balance: Renewing, reenergizing, life balance
Individual Accountability: Responsibility, accountability, excellence	Cohesive Teamwork: Collaboration, belonging, positive peer pressure
Decisive Action: Speed, urgency, decisiveness	Group Deliberation: Participation, involvement, consensus
Achievement Focus: Achievement, accomplishment, success	Authentic Relationships: Caring, selfless service, genuine relationships
Constructive Confrontation: Honesty, challenge, confrontation	Appreciative Expression: Appreciation, praise, celebration for others

Figure 1.1 is an unusual tool because it makes us conscious of something that is usually ignored: the tensions that exist in all organizations. Figure 1.1 can help us recognize where our organization is and where it is that we want it to go.

Holding two opposed ideas is challenging, but let's go one step further. Figure 1.1 illustrates the 20 positive characteristics discussed above, along with the 20 negative characteristics that can develop when we give a positive characteristic too much attention. You will see that each pos-
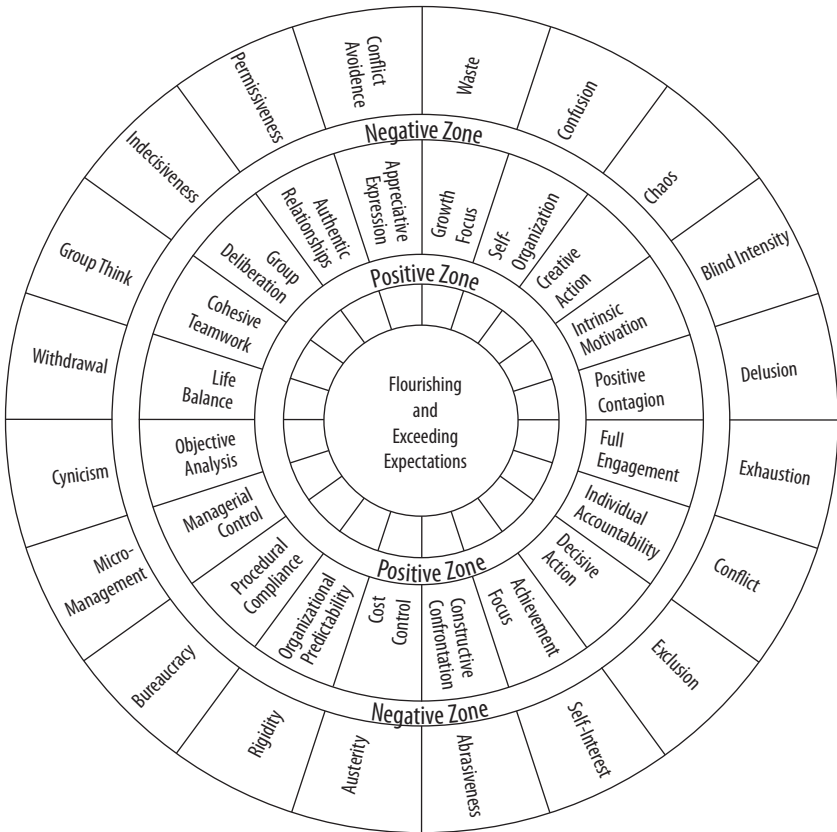
FIGURE 1.1 A Framework of Organizational Tensions

itive is linked to a negative. Not only do we need the ability to accept two opposed ideas at the same time, but we must also give each of these competing values enough attention so that neither one crosses the line and becomes negative.

> In building a positive organization the first challenge is to see the organization not as a static entity, but as a system of tensions. The second challenge is to see all the tensions and not just the ones we are trained to see. This means we have to see the whole system. The third challenge is to realize that positives like full engagement can turn into negatives like exhaustion. The task is to hold the dynamic system in the positive zone of Figure 1.1.

By way of example, we expand the notion of full engagement and exhaustion. Withdrawal, life balance, full engagement and exhaustion run in a line across Figure 1.1. Life balance and full engagement can be found on opposite sides of the inner circle. We call this area the positive zone. Life balance and full engagement are positive but opposing characteristics. Full engagement is positive because we want people to bring their full potential to work. Yet full engagement taken too far can lead to exhaustion and become negative (see the outside circle, next to full engagement). Now let's look at the value of life balance found on the opposite side of the positive zone. If we put too much emphasis on life balance, people may withdraw from their work and give too little. Trying to create an organization where people are fully engaged and also have life balance is a complex aspiration but one without the other will likely lead us to a negative outcome.

Figure 1.1 is valuable because it shows that with the best intentions, we usually aspire to only one value in a set of opposing positive values. If we are even aware of two opposing, positive values, it is difficult to see how they can work together. Yet the ability to hold both positive notions at the same time is more likely to create a positive organization and keep us out of the negative zone. Holding two opposing ideas and creating the right balance of those ideas is a skill you can acquire. Doing so makes you more effective than the average person in your role.

The Bottom Line

I return to my friend, the young surgeon. As we concluded our conversation, he pointed out an irony. In his hospital there was a prime emphasis on both profit and growth. Yet Hospital 1 was outpacing his hospital in both areas. Hospital 1 had a more affirmative and constructive human culture as well as superior financial outcomes.[6]

He acknowledged that his observations about the two hospitals could be attributed to many other factors beyond leadership. Even so, he said, leaders matter. If people in authority have a narrow orientation to profit, technical problem solving, and linear analysis (see the bottom half of Figure 1.1) they may lack the capacity to transform a conventional or negative culture into a positive one.

What my friend was suggesting is exactly what I have seen in organizations across the globe. People, like the first CEO, have a broader mental map that gives rise to a different kind of reality. Some people value analy-

sis, control, efficiency, and profit, but they seem to lack the generative capacity to create cultures of trust, unity, learning, and growth. Others have the opposite problem: they are quite visionary but cannot keep the system organized. A few can do both; it is as if they can live in two different worlds at the same time—the world of stability and productivity and the world of unity and change. In the next chapter we call this the ability to be bilingual.

A Diagnostic Tool

At the end of this book you will find the Positive Organization Generator. The first step in that tool is an assessment of your organization using Figure 1.1 as a guide. Applying this complex and dynamic model of thinking to your own organization, and seeing which values are high and low, should help you take a first step toward becoming bilingual. It may begin to be clear how you can live in two opposing worlds at the same time.

If you would like to make a more systematic assessment we have also developed an online version of the Positive Organization Generator on the Lift Exchange website. In this digital assessment tool you will respond to a set of questions and then receive a profile of your organization. This free online tool gives you the options to do the full version of the Positive Organization Generator, to just choose the assessment option, or to browse 100 positive practices. Feel free to share it with your unit as well. The tool is available at: http://www.liftexchange.com/generator.

Conclusion

When we talk about negative and positive organizations, we often speak in absolutes. We might say, "I work in a negative organization." This kind of language masks important truths. A human culture is complex and dynamic. It is full of human potential. Because an organization's culture is not fixed, it is always possible to move it in a more positive or negative direction. One of the biggest roadblocks to increased positivity is that many people do not understand how to make their culture more positive. For a positive organization to emerge there must be a leader who can understand the complex nature of positive and negative organizing. In the next chapter we learn how some managers do this. They become bilingual.

► **Reader Insights**

At the end of this book, you will have the opportunity to fill out the Positive Organization Generator. The first step will be to assess your unit. The second will be to create a vision for your unit. The third will be to find levers or strategies that allow your newly created vision to become a reality. You will find it helpful if you already have some. Please reflect on this chapter and then answer the following two questions.

What new characteristics would I like my unit to have a year from now?

What new ideas do I have for creating a more positive organization?

Thank You For Reading

Did you like this excerpt? Tell us your thoughts:
bkcommunity@bkpub.com

Berrett-Koehler Publishers
Copyright © 2014, All Rights Reserved.