

A Better Place To Work

Daily Practices That Transform Culture

Deborah Connors

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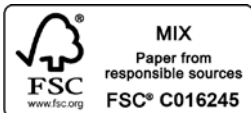
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DISCLAIMER: This book discusses various evidence based practices that have been shown to impact workplace culture in a positive way. As the author states, every culture is different and therefore it is important to tailor each practice to meet the particular needs of your workplace and culture. And even then, the practices you use may need course-correcting as you move forward. The advice and practices herein may or may not be suitable for your situation and the author and publisher will not be liable for any loss of profit or any other personal or commercial damages, including, but not limited to special, incidental, consequential, or other damages. Some of the names and personal characteristics of the individuals involved have been changed in order to disguise their identities. Any resulting resemblance to individuals living or dead is entirely coincidental and unintentional.



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This book is dedicated to the 28 Canadian Workplace Wellness Pioneers. These individuals were nominated and chosen by their peers for their groundbreaking work that has contributed to our understanding about what makes workplaces positive and healthy. We will never fill your shoes, but we can follow in your footsteps.

- 1997 Kendrith Bentley
 Dr. Martin Collis
 Dr. Ron Labonte
 Russ Kisby
- 1998 Dr. Roy Shephard
 Dr. Martin Shain
 Murray Martin
- 1999 Sandy Keir
 Veronica Marsden
 Dr. Art Salmon
- 2000 Doug Cowan
 Jack Santa-Barbara
- 2001 Sue Pridham
 Sue Hills
- 2002 Dr. Linda Duxbury
- 2003 Joan Burton
- 2004 Dr. Graham Lowe
- 2005 Dr. Jean-Pierre Brun
- 2006 Dr. Derrick Thompson
- 2007 Nora Spinks
- 2008 Coreen Flemming
- 2009 Ed Buffet
- 2010 Zorianna Hyworon
- 2011 Mike Ashar
- 2012 Dr. Ian Arnold
- 2013 Mary Ann Baynton
 Marion Reeves
- 2014 Kelly Blackshaw

Gratitude

Some people go away for months to write. Others, like me, fit in minutes between volleyball games and family dinners (thank you Jordan and Jess for the balance in my life), or while travelling back and forth to Alberta in a Ford F150 (thank you Mike for doing all the driving, and for reading all those chapter drafts that I left on your pillow), or in coffee shops in Greece (thank you Mom and Dad for that opportunity to disconnect, vacation and reflect), or dog-sitting in a beautiful house in Ucluelet (thank you Dan and Denise for allowing me that space, and to Charlie the dog for taking me out on walks three times a day) and in hotel rooms while on speaking trips to share this content (thank you to my remarkable clients that make that possible). It takes longer to write this way, but the work is better for the reflection that comes between the spurts of writing.

When I led The Better Workplace Conference for the last time in 2013 (what a great celebration that was!) and I thought back over the 17 years of how this event evolved from the original Health Work & Wellness Conference in 1997, I knew there was a book to be written. It was going to be about the ideas that were shared at the conference over the years that needed to reach a larger audience. I am extremely grateful to the over 600 speakers who shared their stories at Health Work & Wellness/The Better Workplace Conference between 1997-2013. Your messages made a difference to creating awareness about the need for healthier and more positive workplaces in this country. Thank you. All your names are listed in the Resources section.

As I started to write, I took a course with Carla Rieger that helped me to peel back the layers and get to the core of what I had to offer to the world. Thank you Carla! Later, I took an online course with Patti Digh called Organizing Your Writing Life, which was not at

all about getting my files in order, but all about what blocks us from writing (which is never about having a messy office!). Thank you, Patti, for the inspiration to develop writing rituals.

Knowing nothing about the publishing industry, I took another online course with Julie Salisbury of Influence Publishing and learned how complex and ever-changing this industry is. Thank you to Julie, who became my partner in publishing this book, and to Greg Salisbury for typesetting and to Danielle Anderson for her great editing.

Over the course of creating chapter after chapter, many others faithfully read each version and provided feedback—thank you to Pat McCue and Shonagh McRae, and also to Rixta Moritz and Hugh Culver for the extra feedback on a few chapters.

Most importantly I am grateful for the organizational health experts from around the world that agreed to in-depth interviews and willingly shared their wisdom and their brave and inspiring stories, some very personal and painful, so that others can learn and benefit: Dr Martin Shain, Dr. Graham Lowe, Dr. Linda Duxbury, Dr. Robert Quinn, Mary-Lou MacDonald, Mary Ann Baynton, Dr. Michael West, Melissa Barton, Dr. Gregor Breucker and Marie Mac Donald.

Thank you to Thoughtexchange for providing the platform for me to hold an online conversation with the organizational health community in Canada and beyond to gather feedback on positive organizations and what leaders need to move in that direction.

In the early years of the conference we realized we needed a good photographer onsite to capture the excitement, the connections and the fun being had. Some of those pictures are included in the center of the book. Thank you to my friend Gottfried Mitteregger for showing up for all those first years, and my nephew, Landon Sveinson, for taking over this role for the final few years. You are both so good at capturing the essence of what is happening at an event, and bringing out the spirit in each person you photograph.

Since the beginning of the conference, we worked with only one

designer on our brochures, logos and onsite materials. Thank you Brenda Hewer for your excellent work over the years, and for designing the book cover and many of the diagrams throughout.

And of course, this book never would have been written if the conference never happened, so I am grateful to that first core team who said “Yes!” to this event! Thank you to Sheron Stone, Jeanie Cloutier and Muneerah Kassam—it was a privilege to work with you! Over the 17-year span of this event, there were hundreds of people involved and I cannot thank you all here, but please know that I remember all of your faces, your names and the spirit you brought to this event. I do want to particularly thank: Jonathan Buchwald, Dal Palmer and the great team at PRIME, Andrea Mau, Alison Infante, Marischal de Armond and the team at De Armond Management, Marta Devellano and Jamie Millar-Dixon.

And finally, thank you to Mary Ann Baynton, Great-West Life Assurance Company and the Great-West Life Centre for Mental Health in the Workplace for how you have demonstrated to the country the need for healthy organizations through your support of the conference over the years and your support of this book.

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Definitions

Appreciative Inquiry (AI): a worldview that assumes that every human system has something that works right. AI begins by identifying the positive core and connecting to it in ways that heighten energy, sharpen vision, and inspire action for change. (from The Center for Appreciative Inquiry)

Bilingual Leadership: possessing both transformational leadership and conventional management skills and knowing when to use each. (Dr. Robert Quinn, 2015)

Careful Workplace: one that conserves individual, social and economic capital by causing no foreseeable physical or psychological harm to individuals. (Dr. Martin Shain, 2017)

Compassionate Leadership: paying close attention to all staff and really understanding the situations they face, and then responding empathetically and taking thoughtful and appropriate action to help. Compassionate leadership includes four main qualities: attending, understanding, empathizing and supporting. (from Dr. Michael West, The King's Fund, UK)

Culture: patterns of social behaviour and normative expectations that become characteristic of an organization's functioning, without its members consciously choosing them. (Robert F. Allen, 1987)

Culture Shift: consciously shifting the culture of your organization, typically aiming for a more positive psychological and social environment.

Emergent Process: Robert Quinn defines emergence as when “something appears, occurs, or materializes without direction and control from the top.” Learning to trust the emergent process is one of the principles of positive organizing.

Emotional Intelligence (EI): the ability to recognize and handle our own emotions and those of others. It is generally said to include three skills: emotional awareness, the ability to harness emotions and apply them to tasks like thinking and problem solving, and the ability to manage emotions, which includes regulating your own emotions and cheering up or calming down other people. (from Psychology Today)

Flourishing: living within an optimal range of human functioning, one that connotes goodness, generativity, growth and resilience. (Frederickson and Losada, 2005)

Focused Writing: writing off the top of your head with no judgement; just setting a timer and writing whatever comes to mind, with no rules. If you can't think of anything to say, just write “I can't think of anything to say” until something comes. The idea is to keep your pen moving for a specified period, and to let your thoughts flow through your pen. (Adapted from Patti Digh, Life is a Verb, 2008)

Leader: someone who has a vision and changes the culture of a system to make it better. (Robert Quinn)

Inter-Team Working: Dr. Michael West defines “Inter-team cooperation” as the effectiveness of the team in working with other teams in the organization with which it has to work in order to deliver products or services. (Michael West, 2012)

Mindfulness: paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally. (Jon Kabat-Zinn, 1994)

Mindlessness: being unaware of what is going on around us and/or how we are responding to it. (Ellen Langer, 1989)

Organizational Health: a “way of doing business” which includes effective communication, dynamic leadership, healthy workplace culture, decision latitude, work and family policies and practices and effective change leadership. It is a mindset that permeates the organization—that encourages creativity, innovation, productivity and diversity of ideas. It is a culture that celebrates personal responsibility for well-being and supports employees to be their best physically, mentally, socially, spiritually and emotionally. Most companies have many of the components listed above, but it is the integration of these aspects with each other and into the way business is conducted that creates a healthy organization. (derived from Deborah Connors message in the Health Work & Wellness Conference brochure, 1998)

Positive Deviance: intentional behaviors that depart from the norms of a referent group in honorable ways. (Spreitzer and Sonenshein, 2012)

Positive People Culture: a culture where people experience positive emotions, optimism, cohesion, gratitude and humour, and where they have as a consequence, a real sense of engagement. (Dr. Michael West)

Positive Organization: a system in which the people flourish and exceed expectations. (Robert Quinn, 2015)

Practice: engaging in an activity again and again, in an attempt to improve it.

Possibility Thinking: broadening our minds to see the possibilities versus simply focusing on constraints. (adapted from the work of both Barbara Fredrickson and Robert Quinn)

Resilience: positive adaptation, or the ability to maintain or regain mental health, despite experiencing adversity. (Sage Journals)

Senior Executive: someone with positional authority; someone at the top of the hierarchy.

Slow Death: a situation that arises in organizations when we disengage from what is good for the organization to pursue our own interests, and when we ignore signs that our strategies are ineffective, leading to feelings of hopelessness throughout the organization. (Quinn, 2012)

Transformational Leadership: Transformational leaders are those who can effectively improve culture, typically through a focus on vision versus problem solving. (Quinn, 2012)

Wellness: a high state of physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual and social well-being.

360-Degree Assessment: [this] refers to the practice of involving multiple raters, often including self-ratings, in the assessment of individuals. Typically, feedback about a target individual is solicited from significant “others,” using a standardized assessment instrument. These “others” typically include the individual’s co-workers, subordinates, and managers, as well as customers. The requirement is that they are knowledgeable about the individual and are people whose opinions are valued by the individual and the organization. (onlinelibrary.wiley.com)

Introduction

“There are two primary choices in life; to accept conditions as they exist, or accept the responsibility for changing them.”

—Denis Waitley

Something magical happened in the fall of 1997. If you were one of the 550 people who walked into the Hotel Vancouver for the very first Health Work & Wellness™ Conference in Canada, you will know exactly what I’m talking about.

The energy and excitement was palpable. There had never been a forum of this kind in the country, and people with different backgrounds from workplaces across the nation and beyond came to be a part of the inaugural event. The fact that the delegates were not from just one profession or one industry is what made the atmosphere so electric.

We started this conference because we thought there was a better way to do business, and apparently those 550 people thought so too. Right from the get-go we were focusing on organizational culture as the key to building a better workplace, but not everyone was ready to hear that message yet.

The opening keynote speaker at that first conference was workplace health expert and professor Dr. Ron Labonte. He opened with a talk about the social determinants of health in the workplace, covering concepts like control, respect, trust, flexibility and communication.

In the elevator after his opening address, I asked a woman (who did not know I was the founder of the event), “What did you think of Dr. Labonte’s talk?” This question brought forth a rant about how “this is not what wellness is all about!” Her vision of a healthy workplace did not encompass shifting the culture. It was about programs, checklists and “best practices,” and Labonte’s presentation clearly did not fit into her world view.

My thought was, *Good! He’s created some controversy here, so now we*

can open up some real conversation! Because at that time, most people were pre-occupied with personal health practices and programs that dealt with smoking cessation, stress management and fitness. All very worthy projects, but unlikely to create the kind of positive and healthy psychological environment necessary for people to flourish at work and contribute their best.

This book is the story of the conversations and innovations that were shared at the Health Work and Wellness™ Conference (which later became branded as The Better Workplace Conference) over the 17 years that I led the event. In that period, we brought together innovators and influencers from around the world who were studying and leading positive change, both inside their organizations and with their clients. Through running this event, I had the unique opportunity to meet and get to know hundreds of incredible thought-leaders and keynote speakers. Ten of these influencers who I was particularly inspired by agreed to be interviewed for this book, and their stories and advice can be found within these pages.

This powerful conference also attracted a community of like-minded individuals and created a whole generation of workplace health and wellness professionals. As part of my research for this book I reached out to this community to start a conversation on positive workplace culture, and have included their thoughts and stories as well.

As organizational health has evolved in Canada, the awareness and understanding about this concept has changed. Just as Labonte suggested all those years ago, it is very clear that creating a better place to work starts with shifting the culture. There are some good news stories of positive and lasting change, but there are also accounts of those who have tried new ways, failed, and learned great lessons in the process. These stories have been gathered here as inspiration for those of you who are striving for a more positive culture at work.

Collectively, the stories show that shifting the culture in your workplace, whether you are an organization of one or

ten-thousand-and-one, is not as much about policies, strategies and programs (although these are all helpful) as it is about practices—daily applications that you can start putting in place immediately.

Some of these practices are individual ones that we, as leaders, can begin today, such as learning how to replace the vicious cycles we get into with resilient ones. Others, such as team debriefs, can be used to improve the effectiveness of our teams. And some, such as the practice of positive organizing, can be used with large groups and organizations. You can implement these changes from anywhere within your organization; it doesn't have to start at the top.

A profound way to begin to shift your culture is to find the transformational question that will help you to think differently, help your team to take on a new challenge, or help your organization to get engaged in a new vision. I have used transformational questions in each chapter, and the one that forms the through-line for this book is simply:

What will we do differently to create a better place to work?

I urge you to keep this question in mind as you work through this book. Just as there is no step-by-step process to creating positive culture change, there is no prescribed order to reading this book. Start anywhere. Read the stories and recommendations. Ask yourself the questions as you go, and then ask them of your teams. Take notes in your journal, or write in the margins of this book. Work through the activities and practices in each chapter. Highlight things that jump out at you. And, most importantly, tailor them to fit your own situation. The book was designed to be a practical guide that you can apply immediately in your place of work.

At the core of a great workplace is leadership from all levels. In order to pursue the best possible future for our organizations, we need

to take the lead and move out of our comfort zone, learn new ways of doing things, empower people to step into possibility and positivity, and let the future transpire through us.

Inspiring examples and stories are everywhere; you can find them sprinkled throughout the pages of this book. There are courageous leaders who are asking their people what they want their culture to be. There are transformational leaders inspiring their employees to see possibility.

Immerse yourself in these powerful, positive stories; engage your teams in the change process; declare your vision and commitment as a leader to transform your culture; ask the right questions and trust what will emerge.

Grab a cup of coffee, a pen and a highlighter, and enjoy the process as you read, write and work your way into some new positive practices!

CHAPTER 1



“The bad times won’t last forever, but the story of how you stood up to them will. It’s time to write that story.”

—Stan Slap, Keynote Speaker, Conference 2010

I’m sitting in the chair at a new hair studio and, making conversation, the stylist asks me what I do. When I tell him that I teach leaders how to radically shift culture so that people can flourish, he says, “Oh, do we ever need that here!” It’s a familiar theme, whether I’m at the dentist, the accountant or talking to someone at a networking event. Invariably, when the topic of creating a better place to work comes up, people have a lot to say. It usually goes something like, “Business is great, but...” and then they go on to say something negative about the social environment at work. It’s often related to feeling overwhelmed or undervalued.

Why does this topic come up repeatedly? I think it is because as these businesses or departments grow and change, nine times out of ten, there is a focus on the core business, the products, the sales and marketing strategies and even on the customer experience, but no thought is given to the people doing the work.

A person’s performance at work is largely tied to whether they feel supported and appreciated by their organization. Hal Rosenbluth

said it best in his book “The Customer Comes Second”: “Only when people know what it feels like to be first in someone else’s eyes can they sincerely share that feeling with others.”¹

Yet I have seen many small businesses make the mistake of doing whatever it takes to please the client, at the expense of their own staff. Many departments within big organizations implement technical changes without having a strategy to help their people manage the effects of those changes on their mental and emotional health. People are then left feeling overwhelmed, stressed, burned out, and less able to be creative and to contribute their best work.

In preparation for this book I gathered information on healthy workplace culture, reviewing research from the thought-leaders I brought together over the 17-year period of leading The Better Workplace Conference, formerly called the Health Work & Wellness™ Conference. Because of the change in names, I will be referring to this event simply as “the Conference” for the remainder of the book.

I conducted in-depth interviews with ten particularly inspiring experts: Dr. Robert Quinn, Dr. Martin Shain, Dr. Michael West, Dr. Linda Duxbury, Marie Mac Donald, Dr. Graham Lowe, Melissa Barton, Mary-Lou MacDonald, Dr. Gregor Breucker, and Mary Ann Baynton.

This compilation of expert advice leads us to one conclusion: if we change our culture, we change our outcomes. Although programs, strategies and policies support conditions where people can flourish and succeed, it is the culture (or “how we do things around here”) that creates those conditions. Flourishing people contribute their best, see more possibilities, and are more proactive and innovative. If your change effort does not address the culture, success in achieving organizational health will be minimal.

The late Robert F. Allen describes culture (which he calls the “organizational unconscious”), as being “those patterns of social behaviour and normative expectations that become characteristic of an

organization's functioning, without its members consciously choosing them." He describes how unconscious activity can block our conscious goals, so the first step in shifting those unconscious behaviours is recognizing them.²

Once we know that these behaviours and norms exist, they can be consciously improved. This positive improvement to the culture happens through the practices or behaviors we partake in daily. To "practice" means to engage in an activity repeatedly in order to improve it. For example, as we practice active listening, over time we become better listeners and can pick up on more verbal and non-verbal cues.

A practice is something that is never "mastered." For example, as I practice examining my hypocrisies as a leader, I may get better at leading by example. However, will I get to a point where there is no hypocrisy between what I do and what I say? Probably not; there are always opportunities for further improvement.

As you will see throughout this book, there is overwhelming evidence that we can increase positivity and resilience in people, teams and organizations through daily practices. These practices positively impact creativity, innovation, productivity, employee satisfaction, customer service, customer satisfaction and the financial outcomes of the organization.

All too often though, efforts to improve organizational health focus only on implementing a program. This might be a stress management program or a series of lunch and learn seminars. While the information in these programs may be useful, the focus is on individual health, not the health of the organization and—more specifically—not on changing the culture. In fact, the culture is often not even considered as the reason for the lack of organizational health or performance. The culture does not change with this approach, and research shows that most workplace health programs yield poor results in terms of their impact on organizational performance.

Here's a mini practice for you: each time you see one of these

questions in a box throughout the book, put the book down and think about how it would feel to ask this question in your workplace. There is a question posed in each chapter, like the one below, that I hope will be a transformational one for you—one that makes you think differently, take on a new challenge or create a new vision. It will be in a green, abstract box somewhere in the chapter. When you come across each one, stop and reflect on it and perhaps make a few notes for yourself.

How will your workplace be different tomorrow if there is a positive shift today?

If you look ahead six months, what differences would you like to see in your workplace? What about one year from now? Three years from now?

The goal of this book is to help you achieve this vision. It will encourage you to shift your culture in an upward direction by developing practices that increase your positivity and resilience and help you to become a more transformational leader. Doing this work will greatly increase your chance of creating a culture where people can contribute their best.

Slow Death

If we are doing nothing to move our organization in a positive direction, it will be spiraling towards what Dr. Robert Quinn calls “slow death.”

Quinn was the opening keynote speaker at the Conference in 2012. He is author of several outstanding books on leadership and positive workplaces.^{3,4} He is also one of the thought-leaders I interviewed for this book.

In his decades of studying organizations, he has observed that they are always in the state of becoming more positive or becoming more

negative; they are never stagnant. The “normal” state is to grow, and then to plateau. At this point, things become routine and people tend to get comfortable and, often, complacent. The problem is that the world outside the organization is not stagnant, and so what may feel like maintenance is the start of a downward spiral leading to slow death.

You may have experienced this circumstance at some point; I personally encountered it when working in a large organization where the culture seemed to get more and more negative. People were burning out, but no one seemed to know how to stop the decline. This is a common phenomenon, and is sometimes the result of not wanting to—or not knowing how to—make the deep changes needed to turn things around.

Quinn says that most people choose slow death over making deep change. Why? Because shifting the culture requires significant personal change, and this often seems daunting.

There is no step-by-step, cookie-cutter approach to this challenge. Quinn describes North American organizations as having a “checklist mentality,” meaning we want an easy path (or checklist) to follow. It often looks like this: an expert comes up with a strategy that works in one organization, which then becomes a “best practice” which others copy. It is a fast and easy process, but one that doesn’t often work because every workplace culture will respond differently to a set approach.

To illustrate this checklist mentality, Quinn talks about the great success that Toyota had years ago with their Lean Program.⁵ Lean is a method of maximizing customer value while minimizing costs. Thousands of companies have tried to replicate what Toyota achieved, but only a few have been successful. Quinn believes this is because the best implementation of the model is about changing the way people think and act at work rather than simply copying an existing strategy verbatim.

When it comes to organizational health and wellness, most companies take the same approach. A high percentage of large organizations will report having a wellness program which may include fitness, mental health, disease management or any number of health initiatives. In most cases, this program does not address the workplace culture.

In my interview with Dr. Quinn, he said, “Many administrators don’t even see the culture, or understand it, much less imagine changing it. Most don’t see culture as their business.”

Many senior executives see managing the culture as someone else’s job.

Maybe you’re the “someone else.”

The Cost of Doing Nothing

Culture is not always seen as being important to business goals. However, there is a “cost to doing nothing.” This is a phrase often used by Dr. Martin Shain, an organizational health and legal expert who has studied the implications of negative psycho-social environments at work. He was a keynote speaker at some of our earlier conferences, and when I interviewed him I asked him about this. He replied:

The cost of doing nothing refers to the fact that nothing is ever neutral – things are either going forward or going backwards, so if you’re doing nothing, things are basically going backwards.

Those costs are measurable and quantifiable, so you can use them as the baseline for moving forward. But if you don’t do anything, things are much more likely to get worse than to get better.

The choices we make every day shape the story of our workplace. What is the story you’re writing in yours? Perhaps you see a need for a radical shift in your culture. Perhaps you’ve been through bad times,

and you're the one pushing to make work a better life experience for everyone.

Whatever your motivation, what's important for you to know is that you have the power to create a better place to work.

That's right. You.

The magnitude of that change will depend more on your sense of power and purpose than it will on your position in the organization. Anyone at any level can be a leader; positional authority does not equate to leadership. Most of the experts I interviewed for this book were very passionate about that point. For example, Dr. Robert Quinn said, "Most executives, including CEOs, are not leaders. Being at the top of the hierarchy doesn't make you a leader. A leader changes the culture of the system and makes the system better."

Dr. Linda Duxbury, who was the keynote speaker at the Conference in 2011, also states, "We confuse positional authority with leadership. A CEO is only a manager if he or she is not leading. Leadership is having a vision and having followers."

Leadership is about seeing where your organization needs to go and taking your people in that direction. Leadership is changing the culture of the system and making it better. In this book, when I use the word "leader" I am referring to people who have a vision and shift the culture for the better. I will call the people with positional authority "senior executives."

This book is for influential leaders who want to improve their workplace culture. It is about how to be "positively deviant" at work—moving away from the normal way of doing business for beneficial reasons.

Flourishing versus Languishing

In positive psychology, flourishing is defined as living "within an optimal range of human functioning, one that connotes goodness, generativity, growth, and resilience."⁶

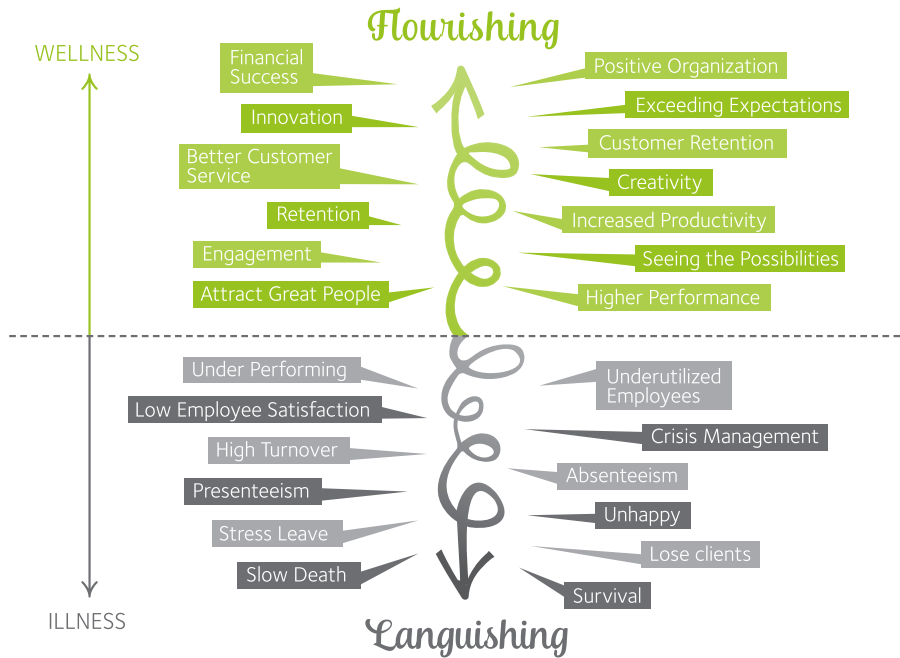
Positive culture shift happens through daily practices that promote flourishing. These are evidence-based practices that any leader can develop in order to start an upward spiral in their own life, their team, their department or throughout their entire organization.

The practices relate to how we treat each other, how we communicate, how mindful we are throughout our day, our awareness of how we impact others, the integrity with which we work, how and when we disconnect from work, how we find gratitude in our day, and how emotionally intelligent we are. They disrupt downward spirals in order to create environments where individuals, teams and organizations can thrive.

Diagram #1 shows a simple picture of the organizational benefits of flourishing as well as the negative effects of languishing. Evidence shows that the more positive emotions we experience, the more we tend to flourish. Conversely, the more negative emotions we experience, the more we tend to languish.⁷

For example, the downward spiral of being overextended and exhausted often leads to burnout. Quinn points out that when an employee is in this state, they are also underutilized: their busyness and overwhelm is keeping them from contributing their best. In this situation, there is an organizational and personal “cost to doing nothing.”

DIAGRAM #1

Organizational Impact of Flourishing vs Languishing

On the other hand, the upward spiral represents what happens when we experience more positive emotions at work. Research shows that this leads to increased creativity, innovation, engagement and flourishing. For example, a work culture that promotes continuous renewal, positivity and resilience leads to better performance outcomes by creating a culture of contribution where people exceed expectations.

Throughout this book, I share over 50 evidence-based, positive practices that can be tailored to fit the culture in your workplace. These are practices that increase positivity, shift focus from downstream to upstream, build resilience, strengthen teams, create learning organizations, set the foundation for psychological health and transform cultures. They will help you shift your culture into an upward spiral, which is important for innovation, performance, attraction, retention, productivity, engagement, and great customer service—all outcomes

that any business strives for. In each chapter I will introduce you to new practices and how they can benefit your workplace, but you can also find a summary of these practices in the Resources section at the end of the book.

The key to success in implementing new practices is to tailor and mold each practice to fit your team or workplace.

Stories

I asked every expert I interviewed for a story of positive change in order to provide real-life examples of personal, team, and organizational change and influence. This first one is a story of my own; perhaps you have lived a story like this one.

When I was in my twenties I was hired on a contract to launch a new provincial initiative, and I was excited for this opportunity. I had a good education and a lot to contribute to the organization, and when I started the job it seemed like a great place to work.

As time passed, however, I began noticing some negative patterns. I witnessed inappropriate behavior by those in senior positions, and I saw a lot of people come and go. When an employee had any kind of issue, there was no human resources department to call on. I started to count, and soon realized that employee turnover was about 50% annually. No one in a senior position viewed this as a problem.

But still, I thought I could excel here. I was offered a promotion that held more earning potential, and I was eager to take this on. My director took me aside and advised me to negotiate the best salary I could going in, as raises were not given readily. On his recommendation, I sat down with the Executive Director to discuss my salary expectations. Then I waited. And waited. A few days later, my director gave me a newspaper ad to review before they placed it in the paper. It was for the job I had been offered! Without any explanation, the position was advertised and given to someone outside the organization who no doubt had a lower

salary expectation. I asked the Executive Director what happened, but I was never given an answer.

Wait a minute though! Did you notice the circle of communication here? My director coached me to ask for a higher salary, and then the job was taken away *because* I asked for a higher salary? There was a definite lack of clarity and authentic communication.

Shortly after this, I joined the 50% of my colleagues who left the organization every year, and I wrote a letter to the Board of Directors as my own form of an exit interview. Of the twelve board members, I received a phone call from only one. He indicated that he had been concerned about the turnover for some time; as far as I know, that is the extent of the investigation into this issue.

Being a young employee with expectations of fairness and integrity in the workplace, I found the whole experience appalling. It made me think, *There has to be a better way to do business.*

This thought is what made me start and lead the Conference for 17 years. It's my "WHY." It's why I spent the past 30+ years devoting my work to creating better workplaces. It is why I wrote this book.

A Community Thoughtexchange

While I was running the Conference, a community formed. It started as a forum for sharing ideas between organizations across Canada and a way to bring together thought-leaders from around the world. Over time, it became a community of like-minded individuals who were looking for ways to create more positive and healthy workplaces.

As I was pulling together resources for this book, I reached out to this community—one made up of senior executives, organizational health experts, researchers, consultants, managers, directors, human resources professionals and other change agents from a wide array of

industries—to hold an online discussion about positive workplace culture. The information I received from this exchange is what guided my questions in the subsequent interviews with the experts.

This discussion was held in partnership with a company called Thoughtexchange. The Thoughtexchange Group Insight Platform™ describes their process in this way: “Rather than simply surveying people, Thoughtexchange lets you ask open-ended questions in a way that lets everyone say all they need to say; everyone learns about tradeoffs that have to be made, and realistic solutions emerge.” It is a way of taking the pulse of what those working with these issues are currently thinking.

A Thoughtexchange has three steps: The Share step, where participants are asked up to four very simple, open-ended questions; the Star step, where participants are shown the thoughts of others and can assign stars to the ones they value most; and the Discover step, where participants are invited to view the report and see what themes emerged. In the Share step, we asked four open-ended questions:

1. How do you characterize a positive workplace culture?
2. What practices have you experienced (or heard of) that have improved workplace culture?
3. What are some things that prevent your workplace from achieving a positive workplace culture?
4. What would you like to learn about as a leader interested in improving workplace culture?

151 participants shared 598 thoughts as a part of this conversation. Here are some of the thoughts that really stood out for me. This first thought reinforces the importance of culture and highlights the big picture:

“I enjoy a great workplace culture. People are emotionally intelligent and make a sincere effort to recognize and support others. **When we take on too many projects, however, the demands on our time and energy reduce our ability to be thoughtful in all of our interactions.**”

There was a great deal of discussion around how essential it is to have a positive culture, and about how scheduling and workload can undermine this intent. As our workplaces become more connected through technology, this is increasingly important. These two quotes from the discussion highlight the importance of scheduling and workload:

“Technology increases the rapidness of work and escalates work expectations and demands—often creating an ‘always on’ mentality. People need to be able to separate work from other aspects of their lives to ensure a positive, healthy balance.”

“Staff keep trying to succeed while suffering burnout, which means less ability to get things done.”

In response to the question about what people want to learn, there were many thoughts shared about learning how to influence change from whatever level they are at. A couple of these are shared below:

“How to be influential. It’s important because if it’s possible to have even a slight opportunity to contribute to a positive workplace culture, I want to do that.”

“How can we influence change even if overall the organization is not ready?”

What I found most interesting was the request to learn more about stories and storytelling. Participants asked to hear stories of change—real examples of success and culture shift in firms of all sizes. But not only are they eager to hear stories, they also expressed an interest in learning to tell stories, as expressed by one participant:

“We are drowning in data and information overload. **To cut through that clutter we need to become good storytellers.** Stories can convey a theme, an idea, a vision, a desire in ways that data and bureaucratic/corporate speak cannot. Learn to listen and tell stories that matter.”

I took this thought to heart and am using my own stories, as well as the stories of the influencers I interviewed, to showcase practices that are contributing to better work.

After looking at the results of this Thoughtexchange, I compiled the main ideas that jumped out at me and will be further expanded on throughout this book:

1. **People generally want to contribute.** This is what we hire them for—their education, expertise, knowledge, experience and what they can contribute to our organizations. They want to exceed our expectations and feel valued. We all want to be in a work situation where we can be creative and innovative, and where we’re not overloaded. We want balance and flexibility. We want to have control over where and how we work, to be evaluated by what we contribute and not by how many hours we work. We want to use the skills and talents we were hired for. We want to be happy and have fun at work. In short, we want “great work.”⁸
2. **A focus on becoming more positive means shifting focus from downstream to upstream thinking.** Our current focus on organizational health mainly follows the medical model, which

is a problem-solving, treatment-focused approach. Instead, we should be using an upstream or preventive approach.

3. **Leaders model the positive behaviors that begin to shift the culture**, and they engage their teams in creating the vision of “what we want our culture to be” and “who we are when we are at our best.”
4. **There is no step-by-step checklist approach to this work.** Although cookie-cutter or program approaches are the easiest to implement, they are rarely successful. What works is tailoring positive, healthy practices to fit your organization or team.
5. **There are evidence-based practices that increase our positive emotions as individuals and teams, and create conditions for organizing positively.** This allows us to see more possibilities and be more productive.
6. **Moving from a conventional management approach to a transformational leadership approach** will lead to more success. This is difficult because conventional management principles are ingrained in us. Transformational leadership focuses on vision versus problem-solving, pays attention to asking questions versus having all the answers, and engages people in purpose, possibilities and the common good.
7. **There are practices that increase our resilience** as individuals, teams and organizations, which results in sustaining great work.
8. **The path will not be clear cut; it will be murky.** Course correction along the way will be necessary. This is how we become learning organizations.
9. **There are many great tools** recommended by the thought-leaders in this book that will help you in your quest for a more positive, healthy culture in your organization.

On the note of great work, I heard Michael Bungay-Stanier speak at the Conference in 2014. He talked about three different types of

work—great work, good work and bad work—and then asked us to draw a pie chart and divide it based on how much of each we were doing at the time. Great work is the stuff that feeds your soul, where you’re doing what you love; it’s meaningful and you feel like you’re making an impact. Good work is productive time that uses your talent and education and is interesting. Bad work is that soul-sucking, time-wasting, “busy work,” which he says most organizations generate a lot of.

In my interview with Dr. Graham Lowe, professor emeritus at the University of Alberta, he said that great work is what people desire. They want to feel that they are contributing to something larger rather than just getting paid at the end of the week. In his latest co-authored book, “Redesigning Work: A Blueprint for Canada’s Future Well-Being and Prosperity,” survey data is shared from the early 2000’s as well as post-recession. Lowe says,

It is clear that there is a real premium that people place on quality work where they can contribute. There are several things that fit together—making a difference, being recognized for it, feeling like you are part of a team or supportive group, and liking the people you work with. Pay is important to people, but pay does not trump any of those other things.^[9]

The “Be Positive” Framework for Shifting Culture

Diagram #2 provides a framework I developed to outline over 50 daily practices that support creativity, innovation and pro-activity at work for individuals, teams and organizations. Each letter in the framework corresponds with a different set of practices, and also with each chapter of this book.

DIAGRAM #2

Framework for a Positive People Culture



The Through-Line Approach to Implementing Practices

I had been skiing for 20 years when I took a lesson that made all the difference to my performance, and not just on the slopes. The instructor talked to us about the “fall line” of the mountain. This is the direction water will flow when it is free to run. When you stand at the top of a mogul run, you can visualize what would happen if you tipped over a bucket of water and watched where it went. There can be any number of paths, but they all follow this fall line. *“When you miss the fall line as a skier you feel as though you are fighting against the mountain, but when you get it right, gravity helps the skis turn and its magic!”*

From the top of the mountain you won’t be able to see that line all the way to the bottom—you only see the beginning of it, and you can pick your first three turns. It’s mid-course, in real time as you’re flying down the mountain, that you pick the next three, and then the next. Often I’ll miss a turn and then I’m course correcting on the fly, but I’m always looking for that fall line to follow.

There is a similar concept in acting and writing. It is called the “through-line,” and it is the thread or theme that connects the thoughts and concepts. This is what keeps the audience engaged. While the speaker or author may tell many stories or explain different concepts, they always come back to the through-line. In turn, this brings the listener or reader back to the theme or general message they are trying to convey.

We can use this through-line approach when trying to create positive change. It helps immensely to have a vision to work towards (e.g. what do we want our culture to be?), but once we have that the next question is “what are three turns I can take to move toward that vision?”

As a skier, I know what my vision is—to get to the bottom of the run! To do that, my focus needs to be on finding the fall line through the moguls. What are my first three turns? If my focus is on the bottom

of the hill, I'm quite likely to tumble rather than ski down because I'm not focused on what is directly in front of me. I need to have a laser focus on what my skis are doing, and when I miss a turn because it is icier or stickier than I thought I need to immediately adjust to the new reality and pick the turn that will get me back on that fall line.

It may seem unnerving not to know what will come after those first three turns, but that's how life is. We want to know all the steps when we're moving through a change and be able to check off the boxes. We are more comfortable with cookie-cutter approaches and following best practices than we are with finding the possibilities and trusting the emergent process. But when we are working toward a more positive or healthy culture at work, it is leadership practices that create change. Think of these practices as turns on a mountain.

The question that is the through-line for this book is: **What will we do differently to create a better place to work?**

To get started, pick one, two or three practices that you want to try, and be open to the possibilities of what will emerge from developing these new habits. When you get there, what are the next three? If you miss one, you'll need to course-correct along the way. We must trust the emergent process because we're not going to know the next turns until we embark on the first ones.

Shifting culture is about what we practice. I can begin a practice today and start applying it in my workplace tomorrow. I can introduce it to my team—one practice, one person at a time. I can impact change, and that's powerful.

A Better Way

There is a new vision of work emerging. It is about flourishing versus surviving. It is possible to achieve what everyone wants—an opportunity to contribute. It is possible to create great, high-quality work in your organization and to reap the benefits. And it often means

going against the grain of the direction that work is taking in this society. It means being positively deviant and developing workplace practices that transform the psychological and emotional environment!

To me, there is hope in knowing that positive culture shifts happen through the practices of individual people and teams. It makes it personal. We can choose to practice exhaustion, mindlessness and lack of integrity, or we can choose to practice resilience, mindfulness and transformational leadership.

What story are you choosing?

ACTIVITIES

Personal Practices:

1. Think about the best workplace or work team you have ever experienced. Write down as many words as you can to describe this workplace or team.

Now think about your worst workplace experience. Write down as many words as you can to describe this workplace or team.

Compare the lists. What do these words describe? Chances are that the words you used describe the culture. Usually when

I ask people this question they use words like respect, trust, positive, communication, caring, openness and collaborative to describe their best workplace. When they describe their worst workplace, they use words like blame, bullying, top-down, unfair, disrespected, negative or undervalued. What words did you use?

I do this exercise to show people that what makes a workplace great or not-so-great is the culture. And yet, when organizations set out to create a better, healthier workplace they typically do not focus on culture. Try this exercise at your next team meeting to stimulate discussion.

2. There is a practice called “focused writing” that is used to help you explore a topic and come up with new, creative solutions. There is something about the act of writing that unlocks a different part of our brain than we use when simply thinking or talking about the issue.

Get a blank note pad or journal and set a timer for 5 minutes. Consider the question “*what will be different tomorrow if there is a positive shift in my workplace today?*” and begin writing. The idea with focused writing is that you do not take your pen off the paper and instead keep writing whatever comes to mind. If you can’t think of anything to say, write “I can’t think of anything to say.” Eventually the words will start to flow. Don’t worry about clarity or spelling, no one will see this but you. Just write until the timer goes. Try this creative process and see if it helps you to come up with new solutions or sort through different ideas in your mind.

Take another five minutes and do focused writing using the question “*what is my through-line?*” Let the ideas flow and just write until the timer goes off. Then go back and circle anything that stands out for you.

3. Begin a one-page personal leadership plan which includes your through-line goals (What do I want our culture to be?). You can include the practices you will start with, or you can add these in as you read the book. I developed this way of planning by following some of the ideas in Hugh Culver's book "Give Me a Break."¹⁰ Divide your page as follows:

Through-line Culture Goals (these are your overarching goals)

e.g.

- Improve positivity in my team this year so that we are working cohesively, creatively and productively.

My goals are: _____

Plan for This Week (these are your first three turns)

e.g.

- Focused writing on "What do I want our culture to be?"
- Observe what our current challenges are and where we need practices to shift these
- Examine my hypocrisies as a leader

My goals are: _____

Plan for this Month (these are practices or tasks you want to develop this month but are not your first three turns)

e.g

- Read through this entire book and look at other leadership, team and organizational practices that can be implemented
- Do the best/worst workplace exercise with my team
- Start a gratitude journal and just observe what it does for me

My plan this month is: _____

Someday Plans (ideas you don't want to lose sight of, but are not in your short-term plan)

e.g

- Consider a culture survey for our team/organization
- Consider offering some instruction on mindfulness/meditation and developing a meditation/quiet room for employees to use throughout the day

My someday plans include: _____

Each week, check in with your vision. What is on your through-line for this week? Evaluate. If what you're doing is not feeding your through-line, then what course-correction is needed? What are your next three turns? What is on the plan for this month and on your someday list? What can you add to this plan as you move through the rest of the book?

Team Practice:

Discuss this chapter with your team. Together, discuss your vision for a better place to work and pick your first three turns. What are the first three practices that will best move you toward your goal? Work through, develop and tailor these practices, one by one, as you learn about them throughout this book. Change course when needed.

The first three turns that will best move my team toward our vision are:

1. _____

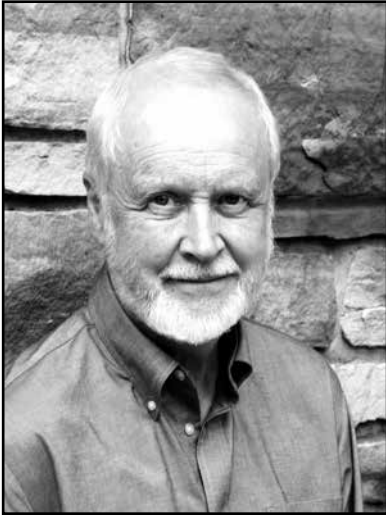
2. _____

3. _____

Organizational Practice:

Examine the “costs of doing nothing” in your organization. What are the negative outcomes you are seeing that are related to not addressing your culture? Examples include turnover, absenteeism, presenteeism, lack of innovation, productivity, customer service, overwhelmed and underutilized employees, benefit costs, costs of short- and long-term disability, EAP costs, and more. What other costs might there be?

Featured Influencer: Dr. Martin Shain



Martin Shain S.J.D.

Dr. Martin Shain is principal and founder of the Neighbour at Work Centre, a consulting agency in workplace mental health established in 2004, and a lecturer in the School of Public Health at the University of Toronto.

Drawing on his background in law and social science, Martin consults with workplace stakeholders to help them understand and address their current and emerging responsibilities in order to provide and maintain psychologically safe and healthy workplaces.

Martin wrote three policy discussion papers for the Mental Health Commission of Canada that provide key foundations for, and a prototype of, the National Standard on Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace issued in 2013.

He is an ongoing core member of the multipartite Technical Committee that developed the National Standard into its present form.

Martin helped develop the criteria for Canada's Safest Employers Psychological Safety Award and subsequently served as a judge to review applications for the first two years of its existence.

His most recent book is "The Careful Workplace: seeking psychological safety at work in the era of Canada's national standard," published by Thomson Reuters in 2016.

Dr. Shain was the recipient of the Canadian Workplace Wellness Pioneer Award.

More about Dr. Shain's work and publications can be found at www.neighbouratwork.com.

