

Applying Positive Psychology *on the Run* in a Large Corporation

Kathryn H. Britton
MAPP 2006, University of Pennsylvania
kathryn@theano-coaching.com



Abstract

This case study explored the feasibility of raising job satisfaction by using a set of interventions drawn from positive psychology and positive organizational scholarship. The interventions were used with groups within a large multi-national corporation who were working under intense schedule pressure. People were open to the ideas, quick to understand them, and able to find creative grassroots implementations. The average time investment was 2.5 hours.

Participants

Three software development groups:

Group 1: 90 members, three sites. Morale somewhat low. Perception of overwhelming schedule pressure

Group 2: 13 members, 1 site. Self-identified very high morale

Group 3: 22 members, two sites. Mid-level morale

People with different job responsibilities, different job levels, and wide range in age and national origin.

Procedure

Collaboration with groups → process for raising job satisfaction:

Step 1: Search for the positive core - as per Appreciative Inquiry

Step 2: Apply positive interventions: Present principles and positive interventions to increase the following attributes. Conduct workshops to brainstorm ways to implement interventions.

Creativity
Resilience
Collaboration
Open-mindedness
Effective social coordination
Probability of 'flow' on the job

Evaluation

Interest & understanding →

Participation: more than 50% took time from tight schedules
Interest from other groups in hearing about process & results

Feasibility in context →

Practicality of plans produced by implementation workshops
High satisfaction (anecdotal only)

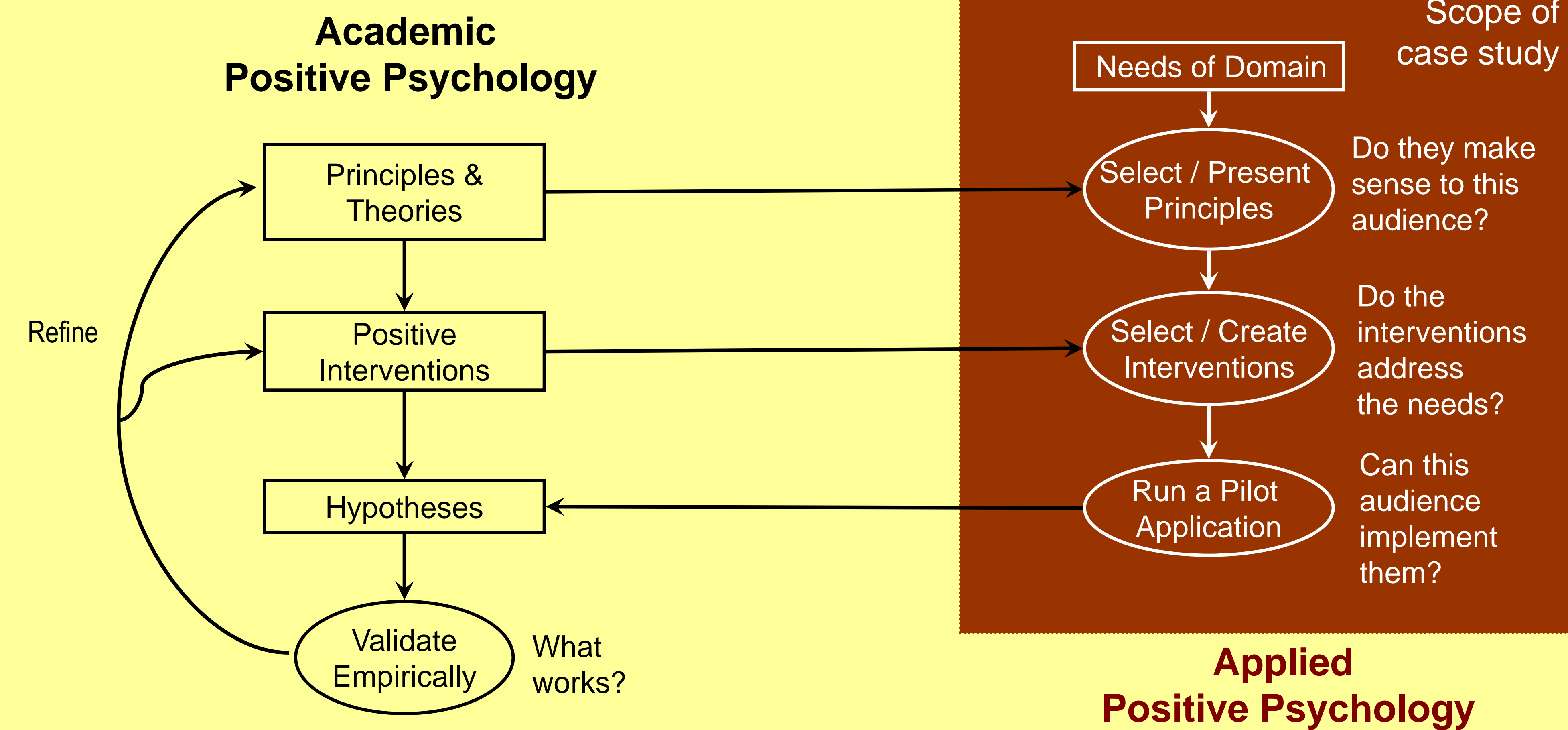
Time investment → Time spent in meetings devoted to this topic on average 2.5 hours, maximum 5 hours

Impact → Empirical validation delayed until next official survey

Management Interest → Commissioned a morale self-assessment tool for establishing baseline, setting goals, and checking progress. Four questions addressed:

- Do we have a shared and valued purpose?
- Do we make effective use of people's time?
- Do we manage people's energy effectively?
- Do we invest effectively in ongoing professional development?

Life Cycle of Research Transfer



Step 1: Search for the Positive Core

Process: Conducted interviews and round tables with Appreciative Inquiry style questions (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000)

Note: Time required for a full-blown AI summit was considered completely out of scope.

Sample Questions:

- What do you most value about your organization and about yourself at work?.
- Describe a time when people in your organization were most engaged and vibrant at work.
- What gives life to your organization when it is at its best?
- What dreams do you have for greater health and vitality in your organization?

Step 1 Outcomes

Immediate boost in feeling about work:
"I didn't realize we had so much going for us."

Examples of Identified Strengths:

- We have exceptional teamwork with 4 sites around the globe.
- We are very good at focusing on important issues and letting inconsequential items go.
- Our environment is exceptionally open to exploration and taking risks.
- We encourage contributions from every member: "Imagination bounded by pragmatism and business sense."
- We make great use of diversity; we enjoy differences and share chances to lead.
- We have lots of arguing but no fighting.

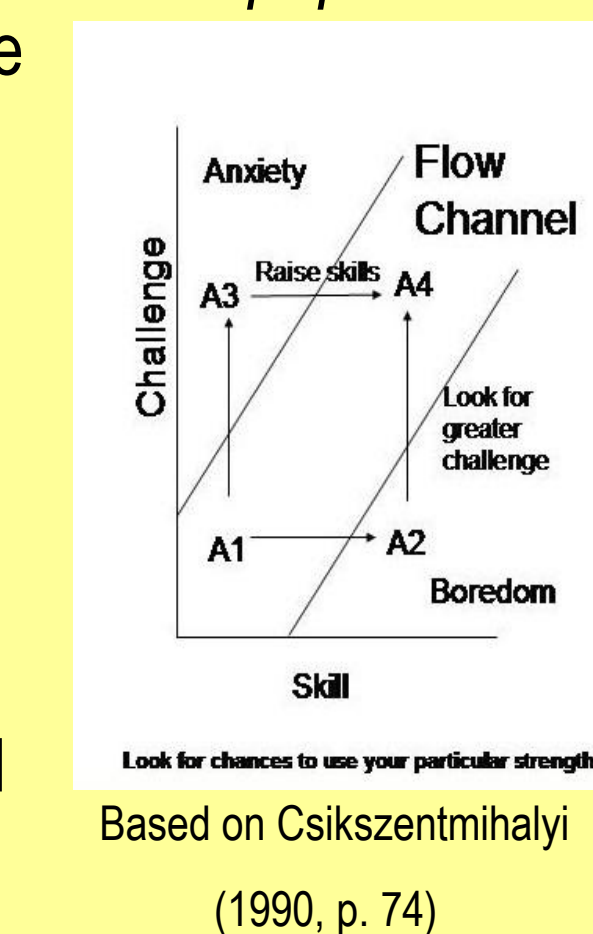
Examples of Themes About The Future:

- More realistic work schedules
- More chances to learn from each other and enhance skills
- More chances to work directly with customers

Step 2: Apply Positive Interventions

- **Intentionally increase positive emotion**
→ Based on Broaden & Build, Peak-End Rule
- **Establish conditions for flow**
→ Based on 9 flow factors
- **Encourage high-quality connections**
→ Based on Jane Dutton's work
- **Deal well with negative events – Reframing**
→ Based on realistic optimism and resilience
- **Deal well with positive events**
→ Based on capitalizing, process praise, and active constructive responding

Most popular idea



Implementation:

1. Presentations with examples relevant to the context
2. Brainstorming workshops
 - 5 groups, around 10 people per group
 - Brainstorming prompts
 - Each group generated at least 20 ideas
 - Report out top 3 ideas
 - Planning → who does what to make things happen

Example prompts:

- What actions can we take to increase the level of positive emotion in our day-to-day work lives?
- How do we build habits of reframing so that we feel like the actors in our stories, not victims?

Step 2 Outcomes – Example actions

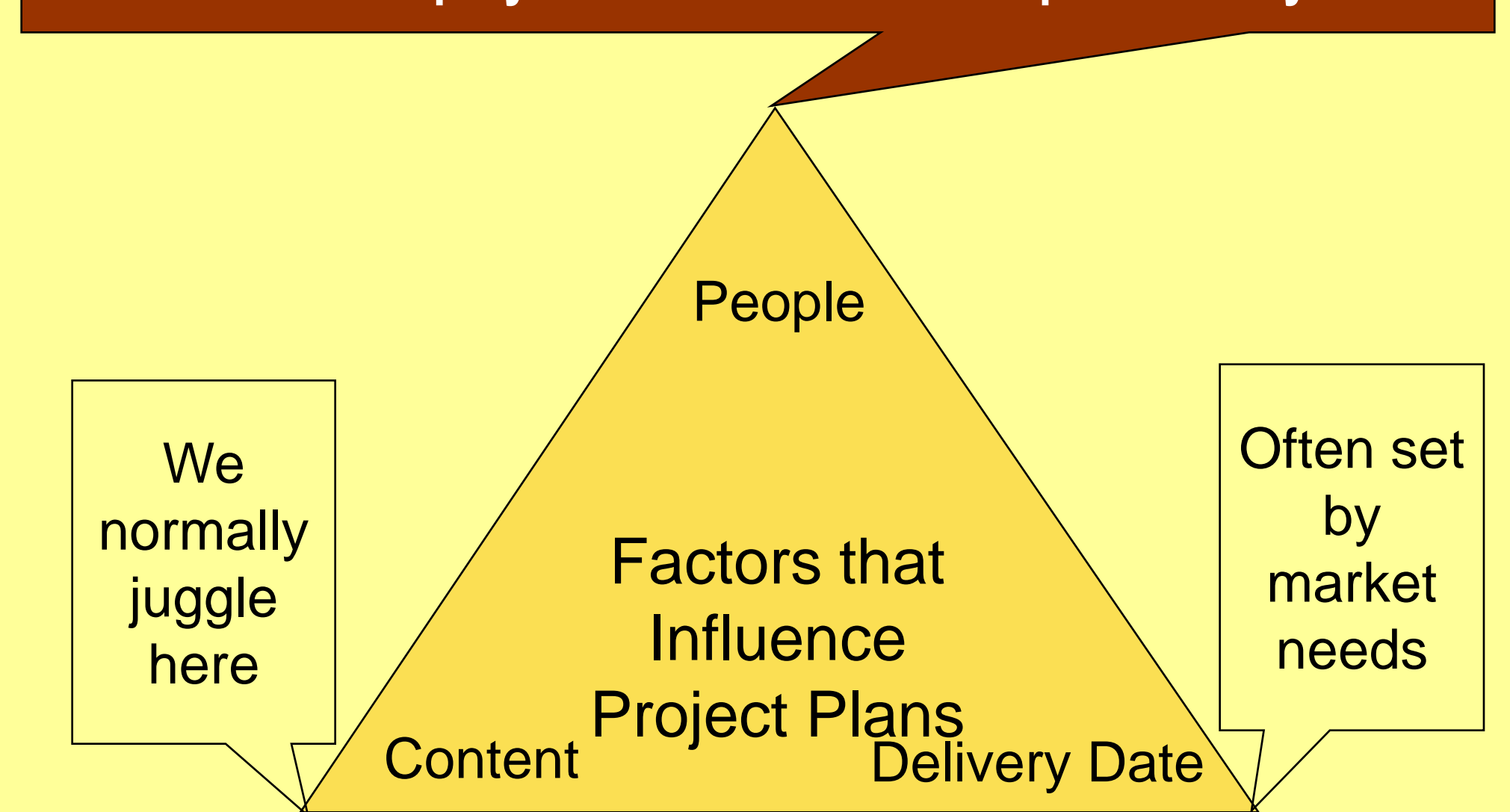
- Training in effective meeting practices to free blocks of time for flow
- Arrange more social activities at work
- Work on ways to end each day with a sense of accomplishment
- Start and end meetings on a positive note
- Give people more control over use of time (story about overtime)
- Agreement to watch for complaining and shift to reframing

Results

- Participants understood principles and implemented interventions with very small time investments.
- Grassroots actions – no need for executive commitment
- Reframing worked especially well as a group effort.
- Periodic 'boosters' are needed to maintain forward motion.
- Management found the exercise sufficiently useful to commission a 4-question inventory for evaluating group satisfaction, setting goals, and evaluating progress toward goals.
- The concept of focusing on strengths instead of weaknesses was relatively hard for people to accept and implement.

Convincing Organizations to Try this Approach

We need to focus on improving work environment because **employee satisfaction affects productivity ...**



Employees are a remarkably elastic resource.

- respond to cold by shrinking
- respond to satisfaction and personal control by stretching

The same person can be a top performer in some circumstances and a mediocre performer in others.

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to the unnamed people in this corporation who were willing to try this approach, who listened to me on my positive psychology soapbox, and who told wonderful stories of these ideas in practice now and earlier in their careers.

References

See handout for proper citations for:

Cooperrider and Whitney on Appreciative Inquiry
Csikszentmihalyi on conditions that enable Flow
Dutton on enabling High-quality Connections
Dweck on Process Praise
Fredrickson on Broaden and Build theory
Gable on what to do when things go right
Kahneman on Peak-End Rule
Reivich and Shatte on what to do when things go wrong
Seligman on Learned Optimism
... And others