



Applying the
Science of the Positive
to
Health and Safety

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The Science of the Positive

The Science of the Positive (Linkenbach, 2007) is the study of the ways in which positive factors impact culture and experience. It is based on the core assumption that the Positive is real and is worth growing, and its aim is to systematize the identification, measurement and growth of the positive in ourselves, our families, our workplaces, and our communities (Linkenbach, 2007).

Those of us who work as health and safety professionals can sometimes forget this core truth, as we become so focused on the dangers and problems we are trying to decrease. The Science of the Positive reverses this problem-centered frame, and focuses on growing the healthy, positive, protective factors that already exist in our communities. When we start to look at the world from a position of hope, it has a profound impact on the questions we ask, the data we collect, and the way we address health and safety issues.

“The Positive” that lies at the center of this framework is made up of the behaviors, attitudes, perceptions, traditions, language, and other factors that have a beneficial impact on human health, culture, and experience. For this reason, the Science of the Positive should not be confused with simple “positive thinking.” It is a scientific process that works across entire cultures. And while the Science of the Positive is based on the core assumption that the positive exists in every community and culture, it recognizes that suffering, pain, and harm are very real. One of its principal aims is to reduce suffering in our families, our communities, and ourselves.

The Science of the Positive is currently in use by organizations seeking to change perceptions, behaviors, and outcomes across communities, as well as by individuals looking to uncover opportunities to fulfill their own potential. It is especially relevant in the field of health promotion, where it can guide the development and use of best practices in our work.

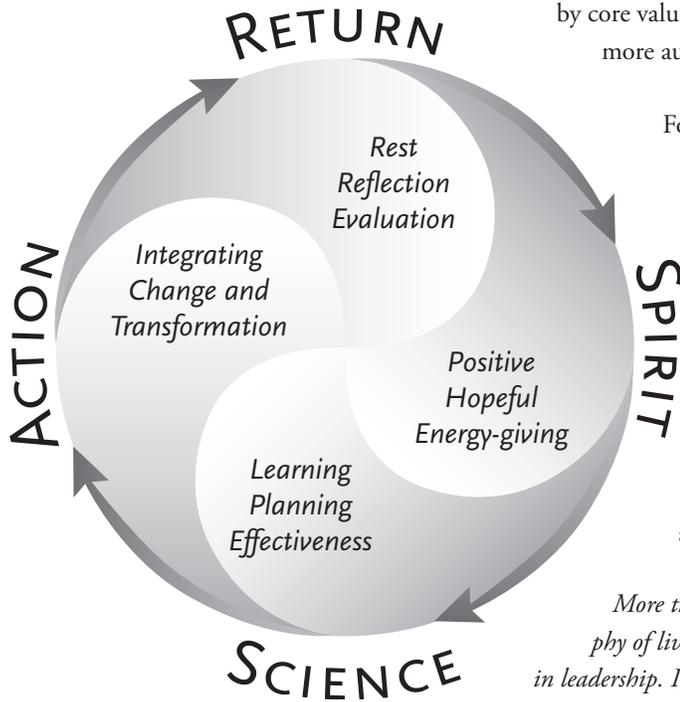
Science of the Positive in Practice:

A major federal agency developed a strategic communications process around the Science of the Positive. Expert researchers and practitioners from across the nation utilized Science of the Positive to help create a positive communications framework and guiding core leadership principles for framing and discussing important national health issues.



The Transformational Cycle of the Science of the Positive: Spirit, Science, Action...and Return

Many of us have gotten locked into a two-dimensional approach to our work, in which science leads to action. The Science of the Positive directs our efforts in a unique way by integrating spirit into this process. By re-engaging with spirit and re-igniting hope, our work proceeds guided by core values that allow us to ask different questions, reach people with more authenticity and truly create room for cultural transformation.



Four core elements – Spirit, Science, and Action, plus the cyclical action of Return – make up the transformational process of the Science of the Positive. Spirit, Science, Action, and Return work together to create a synergistic cycle that facilitates both change and transformation.

This cycle can help us understand our current circumstances, articulate where we aspire to be and envision how we can get there. And by helping us examine our decisions and develop a deeper understanding of why we make them, the cycle allows us become more effective and purposeful in our actions and in our lives.

More than just a scientific inquiry, the Science of the Positive is a philosophy of living and a blueprint for cultivating community and developing soul in leadership. It is also a powerful tool that can guide us through the change and transformation that's necessary when things are not working as they should.

Order Matters:

Spirit First, Then Science, To Lead Action

Spirit First We must always begin by identifying the true essence of what we're trying to achieve. This is why Spirit always comes first. When we speak of Spirit, we refer to the deep "why" behind what we do. If we fail to identify the core purpose or value behind our actions, we can create confusion that allows our work to go off course.

The Importance of Hope

The word "spirit" comes from the Latin word spiritus, which literally means "breath." It is the breath that gives us life. By grounding our efforts in a positive spirit, we breathe life into our work. We call this breath hope. Hope is necessary to renew our daily energy, to bring critical resources and partners to the table, and to sustain our efforts for the challenges to come. We cannot overlook the importance of hope in our work.

In our efforts to promote health and safety, groups sometimes focus their communications campaigns on the harm associated with a problem. But when our communications (especially stories that appear in the media) focus on the negative, we risk creating misperceptions in an attempt to elicit concern in others.

While engaging the community is a critical tool in fostering change, our work has shown that we must be careful not to focus our outreach on the negative; ironically, doing so can create the opposite result from the one we seek. As a society, it is as if we have cultural cataracts: our vision can be distorted by the media's "if it bleeds, it leads" focus on the harm caused by the behavior of a small percentage of people (*Linkenbach, 2001*). Our media obsessively focus on problems, risk, and danger, fueling ever more exaggerated perceptions of their prevalence. This can perpetuate the very behavior we're trying to reduce or eliminate.

A negative focus can also lead to a sense of powerlessness and hopelessness, and negative emotions like these are unlikely to ever create positive change.

Spirit First, Then Science

Once we identify our core values and purpose, we must next seek an accurate understanding of the world around us. Science is about asking the right questions, answering those questions with rigor, and seeking the best possible understanding of the communities in which we work. Our perceptions of what is happening both in our communities and in our own organizations are often inaccurate. These misperceptions will cause us to get stuck in our work.

Am I Busy or Am I Effective?

A key question for all of us – one which can be frightening because it gets to the heart of the matter – is how are we managing our energy? We often talk about how busy we are, but is busy-ness what we want for ourselves? Does busy-ness result in transformative action? The mere fact that you are taking the time to step away from your busy-ness to engage in this learning is a great indication of your desire to become more effective. *Am I busy or effective?* This is the question to continually ask yourself and your colleagues.

The first step towards moving from busy to effective is to begin utilizing the cycle of Spirit, Science, Action, and Return. Start looking for the cycle in your own life and work, and you will start to notice where you are acting without first setting goals and intentions (Spirit) and basing your decisions on the best available information (Science).

As we seek to become more effective, we may realize that we have to change what we are doing. We may have to stop doing certain things altogether. Changing our approaches can be hard, but let us not forget the definition of insanity: doing what we have always done and expecting different results.

When we embrace Science in our prevention efforts, we will become more successful with each and every iteration of our work. Our evaluations will lead us to new insights, which in turn will lead us to better implementation. Without Science, we are prone to misperceptions and hit-or-miss outcomes. By embracing a scientific approach to our work, our efforts at improving health and safety become experiments that help us increase our effectiveness.

It is important for us to acknowledge the complexity of the social sciences. While we have tremendous knowledge about how to send an object to the moon, it is still very difficult for us to predict the decision a teenager will make in various social situations. Yet even given this complexity and the limitations of current research, we must continually strive to improve our understanding and engage in a scientific process.

Spirit First, Then Science, To Lead Action

Health promotion professionals are always eager to jump in and

take Action. We want to start improving the health of our communities immediately and start seeing results yesterday. But Action must come last. Without clear understanding of our purpose and the community we are working in, we cannot engage in meaningful Action that fosters both change and transformation.

Fostering Change and Transformation

Through our actions, we seek to have an impact on ourselves and

on those we serve. This impact includes both change and transformation. Change often happens in incremental improvements in behaviors or attitudes. Sometimes change is temporary, and hard-won improvements may be followed by setbacks. Change often happens only at the surface and does not create deep impacts in community systems.

Transformation, on the other hand, can result in quantum leaps in beliefs or behavior. Though it occurs less frequently than change, transformation also tends to be more lasting, and has much deeper impact. Typically, it is hard to “un-do” transformation – once we have gained a new perspective, we can never go back to our old way of seeing things.

CHANGE

Happens on the surface

Recombines existing elements

More common

Easier to measure

Progresses in linear stages

Happens within current paradigms

Supports current assumptions

Linear

TRANSFORMATION

Happens on a deep core level

New elements, synergistic reactions

More rare

Difficult to measure

Happens in quantum leaps

Shifts paradigms

Dissolves current assumptions

Cyclical

The Science of the Positive creates both change and transformation by fostering conditions in which transformation is more likely to occur. It will be the transformation that results in the sustainable, long-lasting impacts of our work.

Transformation can often be hard to notice – especially when we are right in the middle of it. But if we look at health and safety related behaviors over time, we can see transformation more clearly. Think about issues like smoking on airplanes, using car seats and helmets for children, and the use of hard hats and other protective equipment in the workplace. Today, these practices are so accepted that we wonder that it took so long for them to be implemented. It is from this perspective that we can appreciate the depth of the cultural transformation that has taken place, and take hope that more transformation can occur when we embrace new paradigms for change.

Resetting the Cycle: Return

A crucial and often overlooked part of health promotion work is the element of Return: a time of rest, recovery, and renewal before the cycle begins again. Our dominant culture is fixated on action. But the reflection required by Return is hard work. Stillness takes enormous energy. This last step of the Spirit-Science-Action-Return Cycle is a place of humility and authenticity. We have set our intentions, used our best science, and taken action to make change. We have grown, learned, and been tested, and now have wisdom from the journey. And it is because of this authenticity that we have something of value to return to the community.

If the Action phase has a motto it is, “Don’t just sit there...DO SOMETHING!” In the Return phase the motto would be, “Don’t just do something...SIT THERE!” This is a necessary pause that so many in our field never take for themselves. Once we have had time to reflect on what we have accomplished, to restore our energies, and to recharge our excitement for what we do, it is time to start again with Spirit, to set new intentions and move forward into the Big Next phase in our work.



Science of the Positive in Practice:

At a corporate occupational health and safety organization representing 3.3 million service workers and 83,000 businesses across Ontario, Canada, Science of the Positive principles were used to develop executive team leadership goals and a communication framework. After this work, the company CEO came to Montana for a Science of the Positive “boot camp” – an onsite visit where, over three days, she focused on the spirit of transformation in leadership, the science of planned change, and actions to implement best practices. The CEO later sent key leaders to Montana in order to align her entire executive team with the Science of the Positive principles.

The Seven Core Principles of the Science of the Positive

The Core Principles of the Science of the Positive provide a concrete process to help us frame, execute, and evaluate our work in a way that increases our effectiveness both within our organizations and in our communities. They also guide us to integrate much-needed periods of rest and reflection into our work. These periods allow us to reconnect with our goals and values, and return to our work with a renewed sense of energy and understanding.

By engaging with these principles, we can create a positive, strength-based frame for our work; identify and connect with the true spirit and purpose of what we do; build greater leadership capacity within our organizations; ask the right questions and collect the most salient data; find effective, authentic ways to engage with our communities; and create the conditions most favorable to lasting cultural transformation. These principles become an invaluable tool to help us navigate the complexity of our health and safety work.

Core Principle 1: BE POSITIVE The Positive is our natural state. It is who we truly are underneath the defenses and protections we create in response to painful life experiences. To be Positive is to shed these protections to identify and claim who we really are.

How we respond to the existence of the Positive within us and others directs our lives: either the Positive is experienced by us in the form of hope, acceptance, love, and forgiveness, or it is not and we find ourselves are guided by fear. Our common quest as individuals, communities, and cultures is defined by how effective we are at directing the positive energies of our lives or, conversely, how busy we become constructing diversions from the truth that we are Positive.

If we dare to look deeply, we must confront our greatest fears, which are not about death or loss, but rather about living: What we fear the most is a life transformed by the knowledge that the Positive exists within us.

To be Positive is a daring adventure of facing and then living out the goodness that exists within ourselves, and accepting the tremendous responsibility we have to serve the needs of others. The Positive is the spirit of hope and community that we all share. Deep down, we all know that irrespective of our temporary conditions, we have everything we need to better ourselves, our organizations, our cultures, and the world.

Core Principle 2: BE PRESENT

The Present is the only reality that exists. By focusing our attention on the current moment, we work with what is, not what was or what might be, creating a readiness for transforma-

tion to occur. The positive wholeness that we all long for is not found in a re-interpreted past or a romanticized future – it is only found in the here and now.

The Present is where all of the answers to life's mysteries are immediately accessible. We often create an illusion of certainty and attempt to control the unknown by focusing on the past or the future. This shuts down the potential for transformation. Life's conditions are always moving and changing, but only in the Present can we access truth and the Positive. Creating the space for the Positive to emerge in the Present involves courageous language and authentic dialogue. Honoring people's experience in the Present – not asking them to be someone else for the sake of our own comfort – co-creates conditions of hope, courage, and the willingness to receive the goodness that is here and awaits discovery. Be real right now – it's the best we can do.

Core Principle 3: BE PERCEPTIVE Perception is everything. What we perceive to be real is what we create in our lives and in the world. The way we perceive something solidifies it as that – whether or not it is an accurate reflection of what is really there. This is why perception is so important.

Perception is the misty interface between the human trinity of our thoughts, actions, and our deeper spiritual self. Through attention and effort, we can develop our perceptual ability to see the Positive in every person and situation. We can choose how we perceive things. This unique human ability to choose what and how we perceive is the existential freedom and responsibility that enables us to co-create positive outcomes for ourselves, our organizations, and cultures around the world.

As perception is everything, so too is misperception. Often we filter information in through a distorted lens (formed by past experiences) of fear, distrust and judgment. This creates misperceptions. Being Perceptive is an active process that involves correcting misperceptions, the root source of all problems, pain, and suffering.

Positive transformation requires true humility, which is to acknowledge our tendency to err in what we perceive to be real. We must resist using our distorted lenses to map the territory around us, because these lenses don't accurately reflect what exists in the Present. Instead, we must choose to perceive the deeper truth of the Positive that exists in ourselves, in others, and in what happens around us.

Core Principle 4: BE PURPOSEFUL When we are Purposeful, we bring positive results into our own lives and hope into the lives of others. We create what we truly seek in our lives by aligning our intentions with positive transformation.

To be Purposeful is to be inspired by the potential of the future, not pushed or driven by the past. By consciously choosing positive intentions, we know exactly how to direct our speech and actions to manifest the Positive in the next moment. By being Purposeful we can learn to bring the Positive into being.

We all share a common yearning to experience authentic community; after all, it is only by serving others that our deepest meaning can be realized. Self-transformation is vital, but incomplete. The hero's journey involves service. Being Purposeful means choosing a Positive intention.

Core Principle 5: BE PERFECTED

To be Perfected is to understand we are in a process of transformation, moving toward wholeness and community. The path to being Perfected is through humility – the critical skill of consciously choosing to dissolve our limited views in dedication to seeking a deeper reality. We need the courage to be imperfect in order to be made more whole. Having the courage to claim that we are works in progress always results in a greater sense of connectedness to self, Spirit, nature, and others. True transformation cannot occur unless we acknowledge and embrace our own imperfectness.

Core Principle 6: BE PROACTIVE To be Proactive is to actively choose where we place our attention and what actions we will take. By noticing what is happening – both inside and outside ourselves – we transcend reaction, and can instead choose whether and how to respond to our circumstances. This process produces an experience of hope: we trust ourselves within the natural ebb and flow of life without having the illusion that we need to be in control. When we misperceive or fail to trust, we need to be in control because we're afraid reality is determined by what happens outside ourselves.

Being proactive is critical because it is only with awareness of our reactions and the limits of our current thinking that we create room to see a deeper reality. We can be Proactive by consciously choosing to look beyond our distorted internal lenses, which are always based on past circumstances.

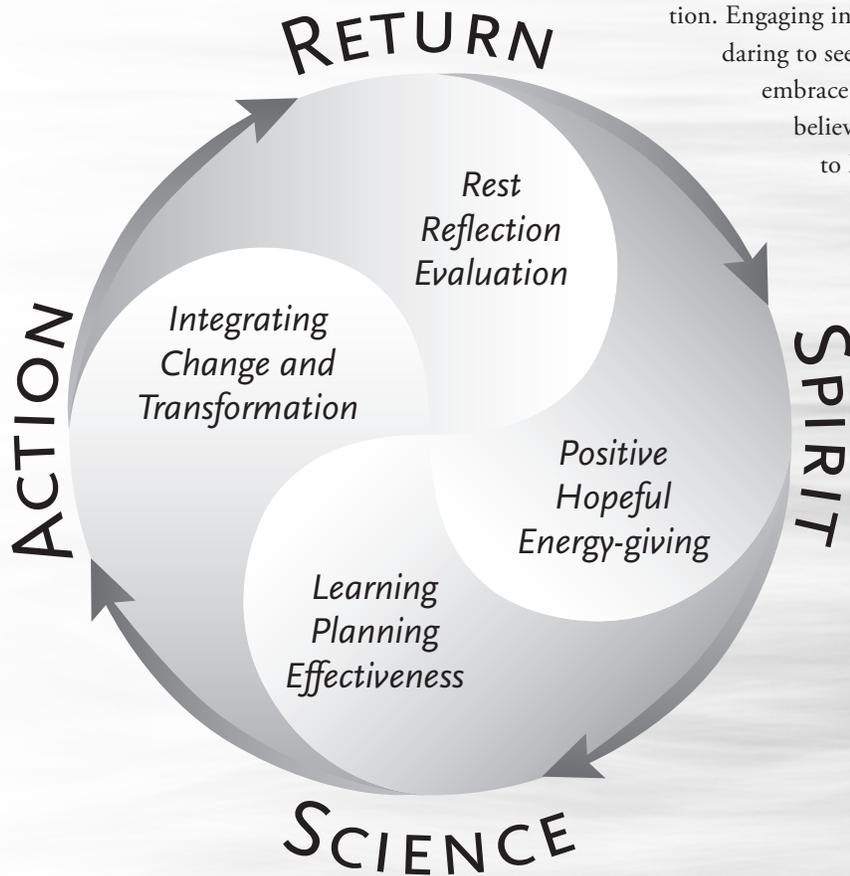
By watching our own thoughts, feelings, and actions – and perceiving them without judgment – we experience a deeper reality, one in which we are able to see how best to act (or not act) in order to positively impact others. Positive transformation is an active, not a passive or reactive process.

Core Principle 7: BE PASSIONATE To be Passionate is to unleash the wild and meaningful life our souls desire and be in the moment-to-moment flow of connectedness to others. It is to live out and share with others the energy of being Positive and the gift of being alive.

Becoming more Passionate in our growth towards the Positive is one side of the human equation, but a self-help focus is not enough to sustain us. We must also direct our passion toward serving others in order to be whole. It is impossible to create positive transformation in our individual lives without also directing our attention toward positively impacting others, and vice versa. True enlightenment, and the enthusiasm of transforming a more positive life, must always express itself in community. Being Passionate is about directing the energy of self-transformation into the act of serving others.

Putting the Science of the Positive into Practice

When we apply the Science of the Positive to health and safety, the spirit of our work is positive, hopeful, and creates energy. Our process embraces learning, replication, and effectiveness. And our actions create change and cultivate deep, lasting transformation. Engaging in the Science of the Positive is about daring to see things as they really are, in order to embrace the future with the willingness to believe that something wonderful is about to happen.



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