On the EDGE of an EMPIRE

The Allure of Toxic Leaders
Outsourcing: Bane or Blessing?
It's ironic how Positive Psychology had its roots in a very negative situation.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi was celebrating his thirty-fifth wedding anniversary on the Big Island of Hawaii in 1998. One afternoon, tired of the pool and the shallow water around the resort, he decided to swim out of the bay and into the ocean beyond. “The current took me, and with the big waves, pretty soon I was a half mile from the entrance to the bay,” he recalls. “I got scared, because all there was were large, rough, black lava rocks on the shore. I swam to them, hoping to find a place to climb out, but the waves kept slamming me into the rocks. I was bloody all over. A couple of times I almost passed out.”

What happened next is subject to the variations of individual memory. Martin Seligman’s memory is that he waded in to help rescue Csikszentmihalyi from the water. As Csikszentmihalyi remembers it, he was able to propel himself out of the sea despite “looking like raw hamburger.” While he was staggering back to the resort on a small pathway, he recalls, a man approached him and offered to take him to the first aid station. “Halfway back he says to me, ‘Aren’t you Mike Csikszentmihalyi? I’m Marty Seligman.’ We had met at a conference 20 years before.”

Whichever version is more accurate, what followed is clear: the two renowned psychologists spent the next couple of days in a nearly unbroken stream of conversation. Seligman was soon to begin his term as president of the American Psychological Association and was looking to leave a legacy. “I have recently decided we have devoted too much time to understanding the negative aspects of life,” he confided. They talked about Csikszentmihalyi’s work on flow—the psychology of optimal experience, the phenomenon that sometimes accompanies activities having the right balance of skill and challenge that people find completely engrossing. His study dovetailed nicely with Seligman’s work on optimism and offered direction for research about human strengths, not merely focused on mental illness. Before they left the island, they had formed a partnership that would expand to include other likeminded professionals and bear fruit in a new direction for the discipline of psychology.

A life worth living

Since World War II—when, according to Seligman, many psychologists discovered they could earn their living treating mental illness and researchers found they could get grants by exploring pathology—psychology has mainly been about what is broken in people. By contrast, Positive Psychology calls for scientific exploration into human well-being. Seligman, in Authentic Happiness, highlights three areas of study: positive individual emotion, such as happiness and optimism; positive traits, among them courage, intelligence, and integrity; and positive communities. Says Csikszentmihalyi, “I think psychology could be a lot more helpful to society if it could tell people about what kind of life is worth living, what kind of behavior is going to be more satisfying throughout life instead of just how to prevent and fix things.”

In his president’s inaugural address at the 1998 annual meeting of the American Psychological Association (APA), Seligman called for Positive Psychology to be the “Manhattan Project for the social sciences.” Some in the field wondered aloud if this was the latest incarnation of positive thinking. Others embraced it with such enthusiasm that they wanted to make it a movement with its own journal and professional meetings. “I think that would be a mistake, because then nobody else would read what you’re doing except people who are already identified with the movement,” says Csikszentmihalyi. “The APA has something like 40 different divisions. Who needs a 41st? If we could infiltrate all the divisions, we would really transform psychology.”

Could Positive Psychology be a threat to clinical psychologists operating out of a disease model of mental health? Csikszentmihalyi doesn’t think it needs to be. “Nothing prevents clinical psychologists from training themselves in Positive Psychology,” he notes. Adds Seligman, “Positive Psychology is a supplement to clinical psychology, another arrow in the quiver of clinical psychologists. It is certainly not a replacement.”

“I think the bigger threat is from life coaching,” says Csikszentmihalyi. “They picked up on Positive Psychology more than clinical psychology did.” The speed at which Positive Psychology is catching on gives him pause. “Sometimes I feel that maybe it’s premature to run away with these ideas. Maybe it
would be better to do another 10 years of research before we go public." He looks thoughtful. "On the other hand, if there wasn't this enthusiasm, people might not do the research."

Seligman lauds Csikszentmihalyi as "the brains and historical anchor of the operation" in Positive Psychology, dubbing himself "the cheerleader." Asked what's next in the Positive Psychology future, he responds, "empirically validated interventions that lastingly raise happiness."

Part of that future is taking shape at the Quality of Life Research Center, directed by Csikszentmihalyi and housed in the Drucker School at CGU. Through research and conferences, it adds to the body of knowledge in Positive Psychology. Already it has hosted meetings on the role of the arts in daily life and alternatives to materialism. Among current research is a study on Good Work in Higher Education, and another called The Donors Study.

A major focus of the institute's current efforts is the Good Work Project, a collaboration between Csikszentmihalyi, Harvard professor Howard Gardner, and Stanford's William Damon, exploring work that embodies excellence and meaning. "I see Good Work as fitting within the bigger Positive Psychology," says Csikszentmihalyi. His most recent book, Good Business, examines "leadership, flow, and the making of meaning" and has become a best-seller in Europe.

The next big thing

It took a near-death experience in the Pacific six years ago to launch Csikszentmihalyi into the Positive Psychology endeavor. He no doubt hopes his launch into future professional directions is less traumatic.

"I keep my eyes open for where the next big opportunity is," he says. "I don't make plans. Positive Psychology and Good Work were completely serendipitous. They just happened. A connection was made organically. The more we talked, the more we said, 'We have to do something.' And then we did it. I'm sure that something like this will come up again soon. And if it's really part of what we deeply believe, we'll do it."

A POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY PRIMER

For the past 50 years, psychology has delved ever deeper into what makes people unhealthy and unhappy and what can be done to fix it. The discipline has operated primarily out of a disease model of mental health. (Martin Seligman, former president of the American Psychological Association, says of the National Institute of Mental Health that, despite its charter, it should “now more appropriately be renamed the National Institute of Mental Illness.”)

Positive Psychology turns that thinking on its head. It asks, What makes people happy? What makes communities strong? What can we do to help our children, and ourselves, to pursue lives that have meaning and purpose?

Seligman urges people to find and use what he calls their “signature strengths” — qualities that are deeply authentic to who they are. He has found through rigorous research that time-honored virtues such as optimism and gratitude are powerful engines of happiness today.

Csikszentmihalyi’s decades of study into the theory of flow finds applications in Positive Psychology as well. “Even the most unhappy person has certain things that they enjoy more than others, he says. “If you have the person identify those parts of his or her life that are less negative and try to build on those and make them a more frequent part of life, you can begin to see transformation.

“Pay attention to what you do, see what makes you feel best,” he says. “Then if that’s something you want to live with for the rest of your life, do more of it. I think this is Positive Psychology.”