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# Positive Psychology At Work: Psychological Capital and Thriving as Pathways to Employee Engagement

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## **Abstract**

As chief executive officers and corporate leaders around the globe seek to truly differentiate their organizations, employee engagement, when grounded in the principals of positive psychology and more deeply explored in positive organizational scholarship, offers a genuine solution. This paper defines employee engagement, its history and its grounding in positive psychology. Further it explains how two constructs, Psychological Capital and Thriving, provide a point of entry for organizations to increase the emergence of employee engagement. Finally, it discusses how the organization that leverages these two constructs as a means to enhance the engagement of their individual employees has the potential to influence not only the individual employee, but also the wider organization, to the benefit of economic performance.

## **Keywords**

Employee Engagement, Positive Psychology, Positive Organizational Scholarship, Organizational Culture, Conscious Capitalism, Psychological Capital, Thriving, Organizational Thriving, Employee Economic Performance, Stakeholder, Stakeholder Theory

## **Disciplines**

Business Administration, Management, and Operations | Entrepreneurial and Small Business Operations | Leadership Studies | Organizational Behavior and Theory | Other Psychology | Performance Management | Training and Development | Work, Economy and Organizations

Positive Psychology At Work:  
Psychological Capital and Thriving As  
Pathways to Employee Engagement

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University of Pennsylvania

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Degree of Masters in Applied Positive Psychology

Advisor: Karen Warner

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### Abstract

As chief executive officers and corporate leaders around the globe seek to truly differentiate their organizations, employee engagement, when grounded in the principals of positive psychology and more deeply explored in positive organizational scholarship, offers a genuine solution. This paper defines employee engagement, its history and its grounding in positive psychology. Further it explains how two constructs, Psychological Capital and Thriving, provide a point of entry for organizations to increase the emergence of employee engagement. Finally, it discusses how the organization that leverages these two constructs as a means to enhance the engagement of their individual employees has the potential to influence not only the individual employee, but also the wider organization, to the benefit of economic performance.

## Acknowledgements

Who ever would have thought an old pragmatic capitalist pig like me would be getting his Masters in Applied Positive Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. I do not view this as a culmination, but more as a stepping-stone to the next phase of my life. The journey was certainly more valuable than I ever expected; yes, *other people matter*.....

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Ron Levene  
July 29, 2015  
Brackney, PA

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Positive Psychology At Work: Psychological Capital and Thriving As Pathways to Employee  
Engagement

*“There are only three measurements that tell you nearly everything you need to know about your organization’s overall performance: employee engagement, customer satisfaction, and cash flow. It goes without saying that no company, small or large, can win over the long run without energized employees who believe in the mission and understand how to achieve it.” – Jack Welch, former Chief Executive Officer of General Electric*

### **Introduction**

Most business organizations are really all about three things: products, process and people. The first two are often considered the hard part, finding that unique magic widget or service and figuring out the procedures one can use to produce product and get it into the hands of paying customers. Then, with product and procedures in place, we just hire people and we tell them what to do. Wrong. As Jack Welch, the famed former chief executive officer (CEO) of General Electric said, it is truly all about “energized employees who believe in the mission and understand how to achieve it.” Robert Waterman, co-author of the seminal business book *In Search of Excellence* (1982), wrote in his 1994 follow-on, *What America Does Right*, “Organizing to meet your own people’s needs seems a simple enough idea. It isn’t. It means understanding what motivates people and aligning cultures, systems, structures, people and leadership attention toward things that are inherently motivating. It’s a radical departure from management convention. The old (and still very pervasive) dictum says that the job of the manager is to tell people what to do” (Waterman, 1994, p. 17). Entrepreneurs, managers, and investors can easily underestimate the importance of the people and cultural issues to the execution of the business plans.

My intention in this paper is to examine the phenomenon of employee engagement. I explore the varied definitions and importance of employee engagement and the sources for developing and enhancing employee engagement in the organization. Further, I examine more deeply two particular mechanisms for creating employee engagement in the organization, and why engagement is important for the longer-term success of the organization.

I assert that it is possible that the two higher constructs, *psychological capital* (PsyCap) -- consisting of the simultaneous presence of hope, self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism, (HERO) (Luthans, Youssef, & Avolio, 2007)-- and *thriving*, consisting of the presence of both knowledge enhancement and vitality (Spreitzer, Sutcliffe, Dutton, Sonenshein, & Grant, 2005), can boost individual employee engagement to the benefit of the greater organization. The so-called “Holy Grail” of long-term organizational success may be employee engagement. An organization that creates the right cultural atmosphere, properly nurtures its leadership, and cultivates the individual characteristics for employee engagement, especially those specifically in support of the two higher constructs of PsyCap and thriving, can create superior economic performance. There are both strong commercial and societal reasons for making this investment (Corporate Executive Board, 2004).

There are various definitions of employee engagement put forward by the consulting companies, academics, and the popular press. With that in mind, and for the purposes of this paper, employee engagement, by my definition, is the presence of these things: an individual employee who...

- 1) Connects with the company cognitively and emotionally...
- 2) Applies discretionary effort as exhibited by the instance and energy spent helping the organization succeed, possibly while in a state of preoccupation and that is...

- 3) Not bound to time (a state of *flow*), and...
- 4) Not related to direct superior reward.

(Note: More details on the sources of these varied definitions will be explored later in this paper.)

Beyond the definition, employee engagement represents an attitude toward the work, the job and the organization, and this attitude is exhibited in behaviors linked to the organizational outcomes (Little & Little, 2006; Macey & Schneider, 2008). Researchers have shown that engaged people want to be at work, clearly understand the organization's expectations, have the resources to achieve these expectations readily available, really understand how their role links to the organizational success, and work to achieve both their individual, and the organization's identified goals (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002).

In order to gain a more intricate understanding of employee engagement, we need to construct a pathway. We need to explore the foundational structure and then add further blocks to that foundation in which we extend the concept of engagement of the individual employee to the greater organization. The concepts involved in engagement have their foundation in positive psychology, which will be explored in depth, and these concepts connect to the organizational level through the field of positive organizational scholarship (POS). A deeper understanding of the two major constructs, psychological capital and thriving, and how they may provide a pathway for increasing employee engagement, is at the core of my premise. To truly understand engagement, one needs to investigate the organization's reason for caring about employee engagement and the broader implications of employee engagement to the corporation. Finally, one needs to recognize how those decisions can impact organizational choices and possibly have broader societal significance.

To begin, we start with the foundation on which the concepts and constructs are built: positive psychology.

### **The History of Positive Psychology**

The history of positive psychology traces its modern origins to Dr. Martin Seligman's historic speech to the 1998 American Psychologist Association (APA) in which he relates the story of how his daughter, Nikki, challenged his grumpy ways (Seligman, 1999). Seligman's resulting epiphany -- that if she could stop whining at age five by exhibiting her self-control, then he could control his grumpiness -- led to the realization that raising a child may be more about supporting her strengths and nurturing the good we find in people than about fixing what is wrong with her. Seligman translated this to his broader practice and research. He realized that the modern history of psychology focused on the deficit-and-disorder side of the mental-health equation, and maybe it was time to turn to the positive concepts surrounding what can go right in life, and how do we get more of it into our lives (Seligman, 1999). Further back in his book *Learned Optimism* (1990), Seligman hinted at the concept of positive psychology, or at least the issue of psychology's historic "devotion to suffering, victims, mental illness and trauma" (Seligman, 1990, p. iii) and the need to turn from the pathologies to what makes up the positive. The absence of the negative does not equate to the presence of the positive. Psychology needed to move beyond the pervasive disease model, and its historical emphasis on pathology, and to be inclusive of the positive attributes like well-being, satisfaction, and happiness, among others (Maddux, 2000).

The foundation of positive psychology is not about achieving the absence of deficits like anxiety, depression, or anger; this simply brings us to neutral. The core premise is that the

presence of the positive attributes that make life worth living can lead us to goodness and excellence. “Positive psychology is the study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions” (Gable & Haidt, 2005, p. 104).

The modern concepts of positive psychology can trace a longer arc of historical reference back over points in time that lead to this current theme. In 1968, Abraham Maslow’s considerations of the positive side are clear in his seminal work, *Toward a Psychology of Being*, when he wrote: “To oversimplify the matter somewhat, it is as if Freud supplied to us the sick half of psychology and we must now fill it out with the healthy half. Perhaps this healthy psychology will give us more possibility for controlling and improving our lives and for making ourselves better people. Perhaps this will be more fruitful than asking ‘how to get unsick’” (Maslow, 1968, p. 3). Well before Maslow, the philosopher William James, in his address to the American Philosophical Society, called for a new field of psychology, a broadening of the field to study the “underlying success of mind cure” (James, 1892/1984). In doing so, James was one of the earlier investigators of the concept of healthy-minded themes.

Further back in history one can consider the grounding of positive psychology in the views of Aristotole, who advanced the thought that habits are based in virtue and that the choices we make are based in our emotions. A virtuous circle of practicing allows us to create a habit of virtue. Melchert cites Artistole as he states, “So we learn these excellences by practicing behavior that eventually becomes habitual in us” (Melchert, 2002, p. 192). The more repeatable and learned those reactions are, the more of a habit they become. Through active pursuit and experience, this repeatable decision-making can be made a habit. Artistotle, in his treatise on ethics, *Nicomachean Ethics*, uses the term *eudaemonia*, which has been translated as

“happiness,” but may be alternatively translated as “well-being” or “flourishing” and may distinguish beyond *feeling* happy to truly *being* happy (Melchert, 2002).

Flourishing is a clear component of the early contemporary declarations on positive psychology, although there are varied means of measuring our achievement of it. Seligman uses the mnemonic device PERMA to identify five contributory factors to his definition of well-being: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment, each one representing a component of finding success in well-being and dissolving much of the previous monism which was prevalent in the history of psychology and the concepts of happiness (Seligman, 2012).

It is important to consider each of the distinct elements of PERMA. **Positive emotion** is based on what we feel, while **engagement** is about the concept of flow -- finding ourselves merged with the object of our involvement and of our focused concentration; losing ourselves in the moment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). A **relationship** is the absence of solitary existence and the insistence that, as Chris Peterson, a founder of the modern positive psychology movement, was fond of saying, “Other people matter” (Seligman, personal communication, September 5, 2015). The nature of our relationships with others is at the crux of most everything we do and that we feel good about. **Meaning** is the idea that we benefit by belonging to and serving something bigger than ourselves. And **accomplishment** is the sense that people pursue success, mastery, and achievement for their own sake; this is a sense of achievement (Seligman, 2012).

Others have put forth alternative ideas on the concept of optimal functioning, or flourishing. One such model offered by Ryff and Singer in 2002 in their *Definitions of Theory-Guided Dimensions of Well-Being*, puts forth six components: self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth

(Ryff & Singer, 2002). They ascribe a high score-low score notation to each of these critical measures of well-being as a means for identifying the degree of well-being that is achieved. They go on to discuss variations based on age, gender, and socio-economic status, each with a replicable pattern usable for measurement. An extension of this model is the one put forward by Keyes (2002) in which he goes beyond the psychological well-being to include “social well-being epitomizing the more public social criteria whereby people evaluate their functioning in life” (Keyes, 2002, p. 209). Keyes’ model includes social coherence, social actualization, social integration, social acceptance, and social contribution as components of measuring individual well-being beyond the self. Much of this relates back to Peterson’s “other people matter” paradigm (Seligman, personal communication, fall 2015).

Positive psychology is not just “happy-ology.” In each of the above-mentioned constructs and in considering the history of positive psychology, these constructs have an empirical basis, a clear notion that positive psychology is based in scientific study. While it has its foundation in the philosophical realms of Aristotle, positive psychology is well grounded in the modern scientific process and study of outcomes in controlled experimental situations. The term “positive psychology” has come to be at the epicenter of this movement, but the overlay of scientific study on the impact of interventions is critical to the current and future success of the field. It is through the umbrella term “positive psychology,” and the drawing together of the many who have embraced the concepts of “what makes life worth living” over the centuries, that the modern identification of positive psychology emerges (Peterson & Park, 2003). The concepts, constructs, and empirical nature of positive psychology provide the foundation on which employee engagement is based. These allow for the deeper scientific study of engagement and its impact on the individual as a member of the organization, while positive organizational

scholarship extends the concept beyond the individual and into the organization.

### **Positive Organizational Scholarship**

Positive Organizational Scholarship is an emerging area of disciplined study that views standard organizational behavioral issues through a positive psychology lens. Historically, the analysis of organizational function has focused on the mitigation of dysfunction within these groups in much the same way psychology has historically focused on the deficit aspects of mental health. Positive organizational scholarship seeks to look at the experience of organizational issues through the new lens of positive deviance (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003). Positive deviance is an approach in which an organization's actions moves with intention from the normative middle-ground in the affirmative more morally obligated direction (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2004); essentially following the direction of moral obligation even when it may be in contrast to the purity of satisfying shareholders.

Essentially POS is primarily concerned with analyzing the outcomes, the processes, and the attributes of an organization and its members. POS examines the questions surrounding the enabling of the organization via its processes, methods, structures, culture, and motivations to allow it to free up the members to achieve positive outcomes. POS then extends to the considerations adjoining how the organization can foster these positive processes to drive positive outcomes (Bernstein, 2003). It does not ignore the negative world that it characterizes as driven by greed, manipulation, and distrust, it simply chooses to focus on the other side of the equation or in the other directions of appreciation, collaboration and meaningfulness (Caza & Cameron, 2008).

Positive organizational scholarship takes a clear and deliberate perspective of positive

deviances and believes that the answers may be found within the communities' or organizations that it examines (Cameron ., 2003). With a clear affirmative bias, it seeks to understand what is the best of human conditions in an organization and how to achieve these conditions to the benefit of all participants touched by the organization. There is a clear desire to improve outcomes from this affirmative bias. Practitioners seek to identify which methods will drive affirmative outcomes. However, POS believes, like positive psychology, that it is critical that these examinations be grounded in serious empirical credibility. It is essential to examine these processes for how and why the prescriptive programs, called positive interventions, work to allow the target organizations to produce the desired positive results. Equally important is knowing when these prescriptive programs, delivered via interventions, will not work (Cameron et al., 2003). Positive organizational scholarship has, in its short history, concerned itself with the concepts of individual virtue and social concerns, leadership issues, organizational virtues, as well as issues of positive relationships. The POS area of study wants to understand the impact on performance issues, including issues of communication, and the absence of, or ability to reduce, negativity (Caza & Cameron, 2008).

### **Organizational Capital and Finding Psychological Capital**

Traditionally, the business community has focused on capital in various forms to support and sustain the business system. Economic capital has referred to financial capital, tangible assets, etc., and, historically, these have been the primary focus of most managerial decisions. The concept of sustainable competitive advantage was linked to these assets along with other elements like barriers to entry, patents, or technology (Luthans, Luthans, & Luthans, 2004). More recently attention has turned toward consideration of *human* capital -- the people resources

-- of the business system as a sustainable differentiator for competitive advantage. When human and economic capital are aligned with corporate strategy and more fully engaged in the business system, greater value is created (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002). An additional form of capital has more recently emerged as well, *social* capital. Social Capital is defined as the networks and trusting relationships formed inside and outside of organizations (Luthans et al., 2004). Social capital can trace its roots back to the late 1830's in notations by Alexis de Tocqueville, and in his writing in *Democracy in America* (1835) in which he discusses social connectedness and what he called "habits of the heart" in which people watched out for others simply because "what was good for you was good for me." L.J. Hanafin first coined the idea of social capital as "those tangible substances that count for most in the daily lives of people: namely good will, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse among the individuals and families who make up a social unit" (Hanifan, 1916, p. 132). The concept of building social capital by way of reciprocity has recently been more deeply explored by Adam Grant in his book *Give and Take* (2013) and is deserving of deeper measured study.

Beyond the concepts of human, economic and social capital is the emerging idea of psychological capital. Seligman in his book *Authentic Happiness* (2002) questioned psychological capital's existence. And if it does exist, what form does it take, how can we get it, and can it be accumulated (Seligman, 2002)? Seligman even goes so far as to suggest an answer that "...when we are engaged (absorbed in flow), perhaps we are investing, building psychological capital for our future" (Seligman, 2002, p. 116).

Psychological capital is an emerging higher-order psychological construct brought to the forefront by Fred Luthans. PsyCap is rooted in positive organizational behavior with connection to the origins of positive psychology (Luthans, 2002) and is a step in the evolution of our concept

of capital in the broader economic context. (See Figure 1.)

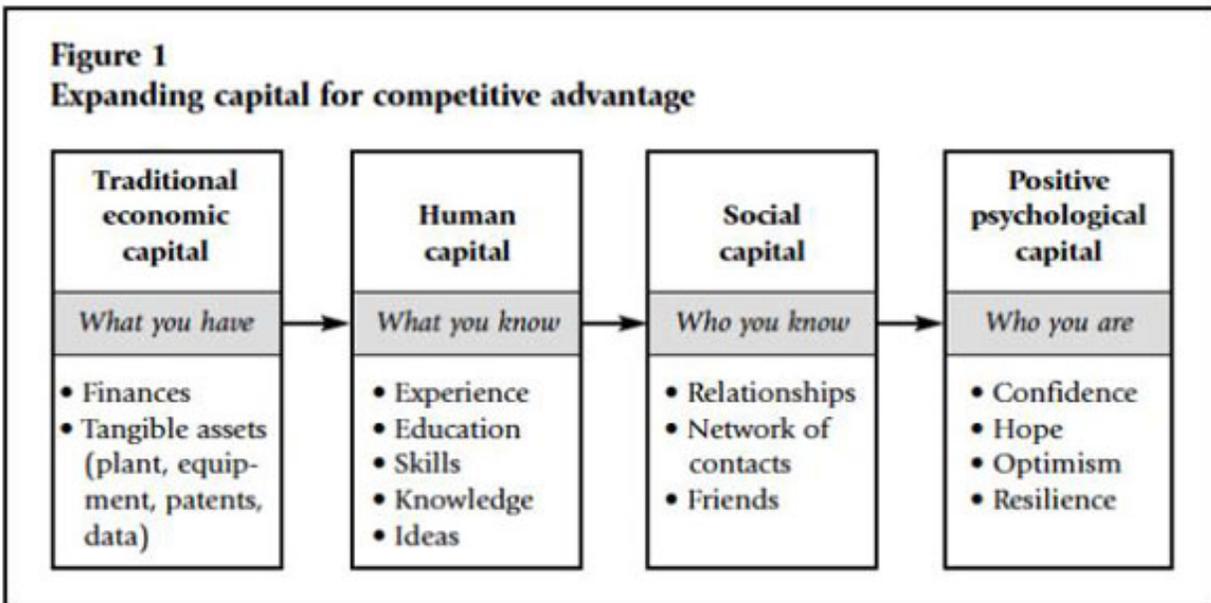


Figure 1 – Source: (Luthans, Luthans, & Luthans, 2004, p. 46).

PsyCap is the assemblage and simultaneous presence of four component positive psychological resources. While each can stand on its own merits, it is when they are all present and linked together that they can provide insight into individual satisfaction and potential for improved performance. It is this simultaneous composite presence of the individual elements that makes it a higher-order construct (Luthans, Avolio, Avey, & Norman, 2007).

The individual psychological elements of PsyCap are **hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism** (Luthans, Youssef, & Avolio, 2007). Each needs to be considered independently in order to understand the composite higher-order construct. Hope is the sense of individual agency, or control, to work toward one’s goals, and it is the first element (Snyder, 2000). The second element is self-efficacy, a sense of self-confidence in one’s own ability and the sense that one has the capacity to put forward the effort to achieve a goal (Bandura & Locke, 2003). The

third element is resilience, characterized as one's positive ability to cope with adversity or stress often found in conflicts or failures, the idea being that I can bounce back to attain success when faced with deep adversity or challenge (Masten & Reed, 2002). The final attribute is optimism. Optimism, is the sense that one can succeed both now and in the future and is based in the concept that positive events are internal, fixed, and have a global sense is the third component of the construct (Seligman, 1990).

### **The Concept of "H.E.R.O." Elements**

To consider how PsyCap is constructed, one must first understand each singular element more deeply in order to understand the common thread that leads to the higher construct. Lately the construct of PsyCap has been summarized using the acronym HERO: hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism (Luthans et al., 2004) as an easy and memorable reference. Each element stands singularly, is grounded in theory, is validated with empirical research data, has a positive impact on attitudes, behaviors, and performance, and each is considered a psychological state (not a trait) and therefore able to be developed (Luthans, Youssef, & Avolio, 2007).

When all four distinct elements are present in a situation with the proper organizational antecedents, the individual's motivational inclination to accomplish task and goals is increased beyond that of motivation from the distinct elements alone (Luthans, 2002). It is this specific greater benefit of the simultaneous presence that makes PsyCap a higher-order construct. The same is true of the concept of thriving. As I will discuss a bit later, it is the simultaneity of thriving's two elements, vitality and learning, that is critical to thriving being a higher construct and a possible pathway to employee engagement. A deeper look at the individual HERO elements of PsyCap is worthwhile to gain understanding of the composite higher constructs.

## Hope

In the late 1980's C.R. Snyder introduced the concept of hope theory based on his earlier work focused on how people distance themselves from mistakes and failures. Snyder investigated the reverse concept, or how people move closer to what they do want, such as a direction toward established goals (Rand & Cheavens, 2009). Broadly considered, hope is the idea that an individual can have an optimistic view of future outcomes (Snyder, 2000). Snyder's hope theory reflects the individual's capability to be clear about objectives, to develop the specific schemes for achieving those goals, and to be able to both originate, and have the enthusiasm to sustain the effort toward, those goals (Snyder, 2002). Hope reflects the individual's perception of his or her capacity to clearly conceptualize goals, develop strategies to reach these goals, and initiate and sustain the motivation to achieve these goals (Linley & Joseph, 2004). This is broken down into a cyclical process stating that first one must set a clear goal as an anchor, these are the "end points of the mental action sequence" (Lopez et al., 2004, p. 392). The establishment of strategies or pathways as routes to achieve these goals follows. And finally one creates agency, or aspiration and willpower, to sustain the motivation and drive toward the goals. There is a similar cyclical nature of the goal setting and achieving process, and it has been found that those with high levels of hope do better in school, have better health, have better problem-solving skills, and are more adjusted psychologically (Lopez et al., 2004). It is dependent on the individual making decisions surrounding the conceptualization and establishment of these goals that drives hope.

### **Self-Efficacy**

Albert Bandura is credited with defining self-efficacy, the idea that the individual has both the confidence to identify the pathway and confidence in his or her own abilities to achieve the desired end result by their own activities (Bandura, 1977, 1997, Maddux, 2000). Self-efficacy means that people's beliefs in their own capabilities can, by their own actions, produce a desired result. It is not about what I *will* do, but it is about what I *believe I can* do (Maddux, 2000). Maddux refers to this as, the *Little Engine That Could* theory after the children's book of that title written in the 1930's (Maddux, 2000, p. 335). Self-efficacy is important in both adopting the positive behaviors of interventions and in the stopping of unhealthy behaviors. Increasing self-efficacy is fundamental to engraining the positive habits of positive interventions (Maddux, 2000). According to Bandura, people will evade events they believe exceed their coping capabilities, but will embrace those that they believe they are capable of completing, while at the same time the individuals will determine how much effort and how long they will persist in their efforts based on their sense of their own self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982).

### **Resilience**

Resilience is characterized as the ability to generate a positive outcome in spite of serious threat (Masten, 2001). Resilience requires the ability to effectively negotiate or manage the sources of the significant stressor trauma (Windle, 2010). In considering resilience, the context is critical. There must be a judgment of the severity of the threat in order for there to be consideration of resilience and there must be a level of quality of the adaptation to this situational threat (Masten, 2001).

The scientific research and history tell us that resilience is a key to success at work, at school, and with overall satisfaction with life (Reivich & Shatte, 2002). One's resilience may vary between life areas, but an individual's ability to understand and cultivate resilience cannot only help us to deal with stress, crisis, and adversity, but it can also enable us to achieve higher levels of life satisfaction at work, home, school and in relationships (Masten & Reed, 2002).

Karen Reivich and Andrew Shatte's *The Resilience Factor* (2002), research tells us that resilience has four fundamental uses in our lives:

1. Overcoming obstacles, which are often grounded in our youth and early experiences.
2. Steering through everyday adversities, the large and small trials and tribulations of life.
3. Bouncing back from monumental crisis, finding a way forward when things are deeply challenging, and even possibly growing from these experiences.
4. Reaching out as an active tool (versus those above that are reactive) to find meaning and purpose, opening us up to new experiences and helping us to move toward flourishing.

They go on to tell us that there are six areas of capabilities that individuals can develop that will prepare themselves for these unfavorable events: emotional regulation, impulse control, optimism, causal analysis, empathy, self-efficacy, and making connections (Reivich & Shatte, 2002).

One of the contributing factors to resilience is the confidence to believe one can change the outcome; that we are not born a certain way with pre-programmed thoughts, but are *tabula-rasa*, more of a clean-slate that can be modified through certain behaviors and choices as put forward early by Aristotle and later accredited to John Locke, in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Locke, 1689). If we can get the individual to focus on the following four pillars of boosting resilience, we can get the individual to take charge of his or her own life.

Those pillars are: 1) life change is possible and, with learning, we can overcome and unlearn; 2) using our cognitive process to reshape our thoughts around resilience; 3) honest and accurate thinking is critical to the process; and finally 4) refocusing human strengths into a proactive and not a reactive tool. This can change the way the individual approaches life (Reivich & Shatte, 2002). Specific to the work environment and PsyCap, Luthans defines resilience as the ability “to ‘bounce back’ from adversity, uncertainty, conflict, failure or even positive change, progress and increased responsibility” (Luthans, 2002, p. 702).

### **Optimism**

Generally speaking, we all think we know what optimism is: a temperament or tendency to look on the more promising side of events with an expectation of a favorable outcome. In positive psychology, optimism has a more specific definition, which, like hope, resilience or other attributes, does not always match the common everyday definition or utilization of the word. Optimism more specifically refers to explanatory style and the way in which people regularly explain happenings in their lives (Seligman, 1990). In this way, Martin Seligman linked the concept of optimism to attribution theory, the idea that individuals are optimistic when they attribute the issue they are facing in their lives to being temporary, specific, and due to external causes as opposed to those who view the issues pessimistically and attribute them to being permanent, pervasive, and internal. An optimistic attribution style has been shown linked to higher levels of motivation, accomplishment, and somatic well-being and lower levels of depressive symptoms (Gillham, Shatte, Reivich, & Seligman, 2001).

Often when we experience negative occurrences in our lives we seek explanations. In Seligman’s observations on learned helplessness, it is the manner in which we consider and

attribute these elements to sources that is influenced by our life outlook and how we routinely explain these events. How we do this can impact our well-being (Seligman, 1990). In a negative explanatory style, one believes that adverse events are internal, permanent and pervasive. The optimistic explanatory style is rooted in the opposite attributes; events are seen as external, temporary, and specific to the event. Learned helplessness theory states that each explanatory style is linked to, and has been shown to lead to, differing expectations of the future outcomes (Gillham et al., 2001). Individuals with an optimistic outlook and explanatory style have been linked to higher academic achievement and increased job productivity (Schulman, 1995). In one of the more famous assertions of the success of those with positive explanatory style, Seligman (1986) studied life insurance sales people, a group that historically suffers a high rejection rate and has a 58% first-year drop-out rate. He found that those with an optimistic explanatory style sold 37% more insurance than those with a negative explanatory style and that those ranked in the top 10% of optimistic explanatory style sold 88% more than those in the lowest 10% (Seligman & Schulman, 1986).

In reviewing the four elements that make up the individual elements of PsyCap, it is notable that they have shared mechanisms among them. They are all empirically valid on their own discriminant basis, but they have many facets in common, making PsyCap multi-dimensional. This can be evidenced by the way in which each of the components is described and how they relate to each other (Avey, Reichard, Luthans, & Mhatre, 2011). In describing self-efficacy, for example, Bandura goes so far as to note “evidence shows that human accomplishment and positive well-being require an optimistic sense of personal efficacy to override the numerous impediments to success” (Bandura, 1998, p56). Bandura goes on to say that “success usually comes through renewed effort after failed attempts. It is resiliency of

personal efficacy that counts” (Bandura, 1998, p. 62). C.R. Snyder states that, similar to hope, “optimism is a goal-based cognitive process that operates whenever an outcome is perceived as having substantial value” (Snyder, 2002, p. 257). There is a multi-dimensional relationship among each of the individual elements, but it is the composite presence of the singular elements that creates the higher-order-construct of PsyCap and that predicts performance and satisfaction (Avey et al., 2011).

### **Measures and Validation of Psychological Capital**

In an effort to empirically validate the higher-order construct of psychological capital, a multidimensional study of the four characteristic components was designed and completed in 2006 by Fred Luthans. His goal in the study was to show the linkage of the four elements and to show the combined presence as the source of psychological capital and to then link this to individual motivation toward the completion of tasks (Luthans, Avolio, et al., 2007). His team defined two hypotheses. The first was: *“Employee’s level of PsyCap will be positively related to their performance and job satisfaction”* (Luthans, Avolio et al., 2007, p. 551). And the second was: *“Employee’s level of PsyCap will have a relatively stronger relationship to their performance and job satisfaction than each of the individual facets of hope, resilience, optimism, and self-efficacy”* (Luthans, Avolio, et al., 2007, p. 551).

Luthans and his team used two differing populations and held concurrent studies. The first population was made up of 174 students, men and women, from multiple large mid-western universities, who took specific self-reported scales and tests over the course of four weeks in order to check the stability of the components over time. The second population of 144 men and women was drawn from two sources. The first were engineers and mid-level managers from a

large Fortune 100 firm, and the second was a cross-functional pool drawn from a mid-sized insurance services firm. In study group one, an on-line survey method administered over multiple periods was used to capture the data with the concern of having data over relatively mid-range time periods in an effort to check the proposed relative stability of the state of PsyCap over time. In study group two, an on-site survey was administered over similar time periods. Both self-report and managerial ratings were observed. In both cases, surveys using psychometrically validated scales drawn with equal weighting from each HERO element and combined into a single PsyCap survey were administered (Luthans et al., 2007 p 554) and a separate but validated job satisfaction scale was used (Luthans et al., 2007).

The results showed that for hypothesis one, the correlation between PsyCap and both job satisfaction and affective organizational commitment was higher than the individual trait measures administered separately, and they found at least preliminary evidence that PsyCap is state-like while the individual characteristics are trait-like over time (Luthans et al., 2007, p. 561). In study group two, there was clear evidence found to support both hypothesis one and hypothesis two. The findings support that, overall, PsyCap has a significant positive relationship to both performance and job satisfaction, and that PsyCap's measure is greater than that of the individual components appearing singularly (Luthans et al., 563-564). The overall conclusion of these two studies, on a preliminary basis, was that PsyCap can be represented as a higher-order-construct, that the measures were psychometrically valid, and that there is a positive relationship between PsyCap to both job satisfaction and performance. Psychological capital was a "better overall predictor of these outcomes than the individual components" of hope, self-efficacy, optimism and resilience (Luthans, et al., p.566) .

Notable for organizations, in 2011 a meta-analysis by J.B. Avey looked at a number of

studies to validate the principals of PsyCap and its relationship to employee attitudes. In Avey's findings, he states that PsyCap as a higher secondary-order construct is "significantly and strongly related to employee attitudes generally considered desirable by human resource management" (Avey, Reichard, Luthans, & Mhatre, 2011, p. 146). Conversely, he also found that PsyCap is negatively related to the undesirable attitudes for human resources. PsyCap is "related to their attitudes in strength and direction generally considered desirable for meeting the goals for effective human resource functioning in today's challenged organizations" (Avey et al., 2011, p. 146). Avey notes that, beyond attitudes, PsyCap is linked to desirable behaviors as well (Avey et al., 2011).

Both the original study and the more recent meta-analysis validate the basis of PsyCap's connection to the desirable human resource traits for an organization to derive benefit and the higher construct nature of PsyCap. The combination of these singular constructs (HERO) being found simultaneously in individuals situated in an organization is necessary for the presence and development of psychological capital; together they are more impactful than might be found in the individual elements (Luthans et al., 2007).

### **Thriving at Work: An Extension of Psychological Capital**

The validation of psychological capital has been extended in further work by Spreitzer and Paterson (Spreitzer, et al., 2005; Paterson, Luthan, & Jeung, 2013) to be a foundation of the construct of thriving, although it is only a suggested relationship and this was the first study to show any empirically tested relationship. In this study, they link the concept of psychological capital and its four components outlined earlier to the "agentic" work behaviors (Paterson et al., 2013) of being task focused and thoughtfully relating their job's role to the overall organization's

system. Spreitzer's exploration more directly relates engagement to the idea of thriving at work, and she was one of the first to define the construct of thriving. She initially conceived of the concept from the medical terminology "failure to thrive," and then further defined it as the absence of languishing (Spreitzer, personal communication, July 28, 2015). This was defined by Keyes (2002) as the subjective experience of "being stuck in a rut, or failing to make progress" (Spreitzer et al., 2005, p. 537).

Thriving is defined as the higher psychological state in which the individual feels involvement and energy, marked by both a sense of learning (gaining comprehension and informational understanding) and a sense of vitality (robustness in the work environment) (Spreitzer et al., 2005; Patterson et al., 2013). Important to this concept is that thriving is a subjective psychological state that is present in the individual and may be temporary in states like PsyCap (Chaplin, John, & Goldberg, 1988), and it must be distinguished from the other associated similar constructs of resilience, flourishing, well-being and self-actualization (Spreitzer et al., 2005). The components of thriving are vitality and learning (Spreitzer et al., 2005; Paterson et al., 2013) and when both are present it can result in the self-development of the individual at work. Self-development means that the individual seeks feedback, sets developmental goals, engages in the developmental activities toward those goals, and tracks their own progress (Paterson et al., 2013). It is vital for clarity that for thriving to be present it is the combination of the two elements, vitality and learning at work, to be present together (Spreitzer & Porath, 2012). When the two elements are linked together they create a pattern that increases the prediction of employee involvement at work, may enhance innovation and creativity, and may have an overall beneficial effect on the individuals well-being (Spreitzer & Porath, 2012).

It is also a consideration that thriving requires a supportive supervisory environment in

which specific antecedents are present (Carmeli & Spreitzer, 2009). For thriving to be present, supervisors need to exhibit specific behaviors to create a safe environment for the employee so the individual has a sense that there is an organizational concern for their well-being, encouragement for their career development, and that their individual work is esteemed (Paterson et al., 2013). The employee's perception of safety and meaning being present at work can be associated with increased levels of attention and task orientation at work (Kahn, 1990; May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004).

The work context for thriving is enhanced by the presence of certain agentic (proactive, self-reflective, and self-regulating) elements. Some of these elements are the creation of an atmosphere where the individual is both confident that there is decision-making discretion (Spreitzer et al., 2005) and in which the supervisor supports their individual sense of control and autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000). It is further enhanced when the individual has assurance that there is broad information sharing and confidence in the quality and accessibility of the information for the decision making process. (Spreitzer et al., 2005). The final important element for thriving to be present is a broad sense of trust and respect permeating the environment, thus giving the individual a sense of autonomy, efficaciousness, instilling a sense of mastery, and a feeling of being valued (Spreitzer et al., 2005). In summary, decision making discretion, broad information sharing, and a wide reaching sense of trust and respect in the organization can enhance the opportunity for the individuals to thrive and have positive impact on organizational outcomes.

Patterson, in a 2014 study on thriving, used 198 full time employee-supervisor dyads and focused on two agentic work behaviors in which the individual employees could expressly exercise control over their own behaviors (Bandura, 2001). Patterson studied task focus as

characterized by “moments when an individual is attentive and alert during the performance of work related tasks”, enjoying a sense of being fully engaged in the task, and they are “voluntarily and intentionally driving their personal energy in the work task” (Paterson et al., 2013, p. 436, Kahn 1990). This task focus stimulates the occurrence of vitality (Spreitzer et al., 2005), in which the individual becomes more absorbed in their work and has a sense of being energized (Spreitzer et al., 2005; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). The second agentic work behavior construct Patterson studied was heedful relating, which is illustrated by contribution, representation and subordination of the individual while occupied with the group toward the execution of goals. (Weick, 2003). The individual acting in a mindful way will understand how their job fits with others in achieving the outcomes desired by the system. They will also provide pro-social support for peers, will gain energy from these activities, and will often learn from the process of supporting their peer group (Spreitzer, et al., 2005). This “heedful relating” can enhance the learning experience. Patterson found that both psychological capital and a positive supervisory climate’s influence on thriving were supported when moderated via the task focus component of thriving, but found that neither was supported when moderated by heedful relating.

### **Traits Versus States: The Critical Difference for Developing Employee Engagement**

One important aspect in understanding the nature of PsyCap and thriving is that they are considered states, which are temporal. It is important for the organization to understand the implications of that temporal nature if they expect to derive benefit from PsyCap and thriving. Psychological traits are elements that are considered more fixed or stable over longer periods of time, while states are characteristics that are more dynamic and can vary during different experiences (Chaplin, John, & Goldberg, 1988). Since the psychological capacities that make

up PsyCap are states and not traits, this means that the presence of these in an individual can be influenced over time. In a business or organization one can think of traits as something you hire for, while states are something to be trained and cultivated.

The development over time of these singular positive psychology motivational propensities -- hope, self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism -- in simultaneous combination results in the accrual of psychological capital. Luthans et al., stated that “employees who are more hopeful, optimistic, efficacious, and resilient may be more likely to ‘weather the storm’ of the type of dynamic, global environmental contexts confronting most organizations today better than their counterparts with lower PsyCap” (Luthans et al., 2007, p. 568). Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi stated that psychological capital “is developed through a pattern of investment of psychic resources that results in obtaining experiential rewards from the present moment while also increasing the likelihood of future benefit... It’s about the state of components of your inner life. When you add up the components, experiences, and capital it makes up the value” (Kersting, 2003, p. 26). As these characteristics are dynamic by nature and therefore more malleable, there is a legitimate concern of them ebbing and flowing over time. But there may be ways we can influence the presence of these elements to the benefit of the organizational system and enhance productivity, increase retention, and add overall long-term sustainable economic value to the organization.

### **Employee Engagement**

The concept of employee engagement was coined and brought into contemporary management language by Gallup, based on their historical work in surveying employee opinions as they relate to organizational results using their Q12 survey. Gallup predicated their work on

the idea that employee engagement was shown to lead to improvements in employee productivity. These enhancements lead to increased profitability attributable to increased revenue, which is derived from higher levels of customer service and retention. They are augmented by lower cost that is achieved from higher employee retention that mitigate cost of employee turnover. This same improved engagement drives lower cost via improved work safety (Little & Little, 2006; Buckingham & Coffman, 1999). In Gallup's surveys, they categorize those employees who are actively engaged, those who are non-engaged, and those who are actively disengaged. This base concept is easily accepted but often casually modified by practitioners to fit their own application uses. In researching the many options it appears that the Gallup definition seems to have lacked the academic rigor and clarity to find its way as a definition into the emerging empirical research.

As noted earlier there appear to be as many academic opinions on the definition as popular application ones, but most seem to revolve around employee engagement as an individual commitment at the organizational level that exhibits a state of attachment (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986; Macey & Schneider, 2008) and a binding force that links the individual to the organization (Meyer, Becker, & Vandenberghe, 2004). It is inclusive of both individual job satisfaction and involvement at the organizational level (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002). Critical to this definition is the concept that employee engagement is not bounded by time (Meyer et al., 2004) in that it fluctuates, representing the daily ebb and flow of the individual employee's experience. Engagement is also both promotive of the function of the organization while remaining discretionary as not being explicitly recognized via any formal rewards (Macey & Schneider, 2008) but it can be acknowledged via recognition (Kahn, 1990, Saks, 2006).

Further definitions found in the Human Resource Development (HRD) scholarly arena

suggest that employee engagement is grounded in three facets: cognitive engagement, emotional engagement, and behavioral engagement (Shuck & Reio, 2011). In this definition cognitive engagement relates to the sense employees have that their work is both meaningful and safe physically, emotionally and psychologically. Additionally they need to sense that they have adequate tangible and intangible resources to complete their job (Kahn, 1990). Emotional engagement represents how one feels toward their place of work and a willingness to include individual resources such as pride, belief and knowledge in their self-identification with work (Rhoades, Eisenberger, & Armelis, 2001). Behavioral engagement is the physical manifestation of both cognitive and emotional engagement in which the employee exhibits increased levels of discretionary effort, or a willingness to go beyond the norms of job responsibilities (Macey & Schneider, 2008).

More recently Schaufeli and Bakker (2010) have defined work engagement as a positively affected motivational state of fulfillment as manifested in three dimensions:

**Vigor** – high levels of energy and mental resilience while attending to work tasks, with an inclination to devote ones effort while not becoming easily fatigued; persisting in the face of challenge.

**Dedication** – strong involvement in one’s work, supported by a sense of enthusiasm and meaning, satisfaction and inspiration.

**Absorption** – being fully captivated in one’s work while having a tough time disconnecting from the work.

These are just some of the more empirically grounded definitions of engagement. With that in mind and for the purposes in this paper I reiterate that I am defining the concept of employee engagement to be the following: 1) an individual employee connecting with the

company cognitively and emotionally, and 2) applying discretionary effort as exhibited by the instance and energy spent helping the organization succeed, possibly while in a state of preoccupation and that is both 3) not bound to time (a state of flow) and 4) not related to direct superior reward. Employee engagement represents both an attitude toward work, the job and the organization, and is exhibited in behaviors linked to the organizational outcomes (Little & Little, 2006; Macey & Schneider, 2008). Engaged employees want to be at work, they clearly understand the organization's expectations, they have the resources to achieve these expectations readily available to them, while truly understanding how their role links to the organizational success, and the individual works to achieve both their individual and the organization's identified goals. With these definitions of employee engagement in mind we now need to study how it can be present in the work environment.

### **Insuring The Presence of the Antecedents of Employee Engagement**

A consideration of driving employee engagement in and through the organization is to insure that an opportunity for the engagement of the individual is being cultivated. Much the way the farmer prepares his soil, the corporation or organization seeking increases in employee engagement needs to prepare the organization's soil. The organizational leadership must identify the potential antecedents (soil nutrients) that may forecast employee engagement and assure their presence in the organization. In 2005, Alan Saks completed one of the early studies of these antecedents or "soil nutrients" that if present may lead to the cultivation of higher employee engagement. Using the concept of Social Exchange Theory (SET) first developed by sociologist George Homans in the 1950s (Saks, 2006) and later refined by Richard Emerson, Saks identified six antecedent characteristics which, if present, can encourage the presence of job engagement

and/or organizational engagement of employees. The first four antecedent job characteristics Saks identified are: perceived organizational support, perceived supervisor support, rewards and recognition. Saks then stated that both procedural justice and distributive justice were identified individually as being necessary antecedents for the development of an employee's job engagement and organization engagement (Saks, 2006). Saks concluded that the development of both job and organizational engagement can lead to four positive consequences, beyond those generally cited, as: improved business results; higher job satisfaction and organizational commitment; low intention to quit; and improved organizational citizenship behavior. Saks concludes that, based on SET concepts and his study, when the two parties involved -- the individual and the organization -- live by fair-exchange rules, both parties will build trust and mutual commitment in a favorable give-and-take exchange. This atmosphere results in an opportunity for an increase in employee engagement in both the job and organizational levels (Saks, 2006). Additionally, when employees become engaged they are more likely to have high-quality relationships with the company, leading to positive thoughts, intentions, and behaviors (Saks, 2006).

In the case of thriving, it is important to understand that as Spreitzer states, the leadership models are highly reflective of the desired outcomes (Spreitzer, Lam, & Fritz, 2010) and that the leaders need to be trying new things and risking failure in order to create a psychologically safe atmosphere in which the employees can do the same. To complete the construct, the leadership needs to be promoting a performance-oriented culture built around the idea of goal-oriented learning. And finally the leaders can make the employee's role clear, including well-defined boundaries and accountability, while buffering the employee from disabling job demands (Spreitzer et al., 2010). In creating this atmosphere leaders help employees adopt optimal levels

of thriving and increase engagement for their own benefit and to the benefit of the organization. It is clear that to cultivate employee engagement, organizational leadership must create a fertile soil in which the antecedent elements are present.

### **The Case for Engagement, Psychological Capital & Thriving**

In the organizational atmosphere one must consider the reasons for cultivating employee engagement. Pragmatic considerations for being concerned with employee engagement fall into two categories, either increasing revenue or lowering costs, all driving improved earnings for the corporation. The implications of improved employee engagement on revenue range from improved service to customers (Gates, 2003) to direct revenue increases (Robinson, 2006) to higher earnings per share (Gallup). For cost reductions opportunities there are areas like improved safety (Harter, Schmidt, Killham, & Asplund, 2008) and lower incidents, improved employee retention, (Harter et al., 2008), and lower absenteeism (Wellins, Bernthal, & Phelps, 2004).

Gretchen Spreitzer and Christine Porath, along with partners at the Roth School of Business' Center for Positive Organizational Scholarship undertook an examination of individual and organizational performance by surveying over 1200 blue-collar and white-collar employees across varied industries (Porath, Spreitzer, Gibson, & Garnett, 2011). They found that organizations with a highly engaged workforce that exhibited the elements of thriving, both vitality and learning, outperformed their peer groups. "Across industries and job types, we found that people who fit our description of thriving demonstrated 16% better overall performance (as reported by their managers) and 125% less burnout (self-reported) than their peers. They were 32% more committed to the organization and 46% more satisfied with their jobs" (Spreitzer &

Porath, 2012). These same individuals missed less work and reported less out of work time attending to medical issues and that translated to lower health-care costs for the corporation (Spreitzer & Porath, 2012). In a broader-reaching analysis of public equities and returns to shareholders, it was found that companies with higher ratings of employee satisfaction did in fact generate higher returns, running approximately 2.1% above their peer industry benchmarks, with a four-factor alpha of monthly momentum being 3.5% (Edmans, 2011). Much of this research is making the tangible and measureable case for PsyCap, thriving and figuring out how to translate these activities and investments into increased employee engagement to the benefit of the individuals and the broader organization. The implications of individual enhancement of engagement to the greater organization are important to the concept of leveraging engagement beyond the individual and are a critical building block to the creation of a flourishing organization.

### **Employee Engagement - Leveraging the Individual**

Employee engagement should be considered as a system-wide goal for the corporation, as the benefits yield to the overall entity. While employee engagement can be examined in the overall organization it must remain clear that employee engagement is an individual-level construct (Shuck & Wollard, 2010). To illustrate this, Shuck uses the metaphor of averaging the times for everyone running a race and then reporting that everyone ran at the same pace. It lacks the accounting of the individual differences and variables that effect the outcome. He points out that to be effective an organization needs to know who is running the fastest and who is running the slowest (Shuck & Wollard, 2010). It seems to make sense that the organization can measure at the overall organizational level, but then needs to identify the interventional opportunities and

create impact at the individual level in order to raise each employee's engagement in an effort to raise the overall average.

The higher construct of PsyCap and the concept of thriving both truly target the individual and are linked to the organization via the individual. An organization is a collection of individuals with a common purpose, shared language and agreement on a desired outcome (Jane Dutton, personal communication, May 2, 2015). Creating value for the individual as a component of the whole is critical to the organization's success. The organization is the means to creating the fertile soil in which this linked collection of individuals can increase their own engagement.

There are a series of measures that can be considered when checking for individual employee engagement. The Maslach-Burnout Inventory-General Survey attempts to measure the level of employee engagement by assessing the opposite pole of engagement, burnout. In the view of Maslach and Leiter (Admasachew & Dawson, 2010) engagement is the opposite of exhaustion and burnout, so a low score would indicate engagement.

Another measure of engagement's psychological presence is the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) that measures the cognitive state of having positive, fulfilling work that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010). In this measure vigor is characterized by high levels of mental energy and resilience, which both relate to PsyCap and thriving. Schaufeli and Bakker further define absorption as characterized by being fully concentrated and connected to one's work such that time passes quickly and it is tough to detach oneself from the work. This idea seems to clearly relate to the idea put forward by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in early positive psychology research as the concept of flow.

Flow is defined by Csikszentmihalyi, in his book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal*

*Experience* (1990) as a state in which a person is completely absorbed in an activity, especially one using creative abilities. The person feels a sense of effortless control over the situation and is often operating at peak of personal performance (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Think Michael Jordan throwing down in hoops in that “can’t miss” state of mind, or Eric Clapton completely lost in the amazing guitar solo during “Layla.” One’s actions seem frozen in time, the world may move in slow motion, and you are completely lost to the zone in a state of peak experience. Seligman considered this concept of flow in positive psychology and linked it to psychological capital in his book *Authentic Happiness* (2002) when while talking about gratifications, he said “...when we are engaged (absorbed in flow), perhaps we are investing, building psychological capital for our future. Perhaps flow is the state that marks psychological growth. Absorption, the loss of consciousness and stopping of time may be evolution’s way of telling us we are stocking up psychological resources for the future.” (Seligman, 2002, p. 116)

A third alternative for measuring engagement is the Job Demand Resource (JDR) model in which the developers combined the negatively phrased questions of exhaustion and burnout with the positively phrased questions of performance feedback (Demmenouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001). In each of these measurement cases, it is the gathering of the feedback and observations of the individuals that, when compiled, give us a view of the overall organization.

The individual is a connected component of the larger organization. There needs to be consideration of the greater eco-system in which the individual is connecting to the broader organization and possibly to the greater world (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). In the 1970’s Urie Bronfenbrenner argued that to appreciate human development there has to be consideration of the entire eco-system in which the individual exists; he calls this “The Ecosystem of Human

Development”.

Although Bronfenbrenner uses this sociological model -- which utilizes five socially organized subsystems -- to explain human development, it can certainly provide a basis that can be applied to other organized ecological development systems, like an organization or corporation.

Bronfenbrenner’s model utilizes a nested system stating that the individual develops at the center of these four nested environmental systems – microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). (See Figure 2.)

- Microsystem – refers to very close interpersonal relationships experienced by the individual. In our system this may be considered at the team or department level of a corporation in which there is a very direct immediacy among the individuals.
- Mesosystems – refers to a series of interconnected microsystems, such as multiple teams or departments being part of a larger entity, like being part of the corporation or a whole organization.
- Exosystem– is the linkage of the processes occurring between more than one setting, which do not contain the individual, but are indirectly influencing the developmental process. In the corporation’s case this might refer to the broader business environment, the industry, competitors, family, society or the customer realm in which the system exists.
- Macrosystems – is the more overarching condition in which all the systems exist, and might be thought of as the entirety of the world in which the organization exists, including other outside influences, like social attitudes and ideologies.

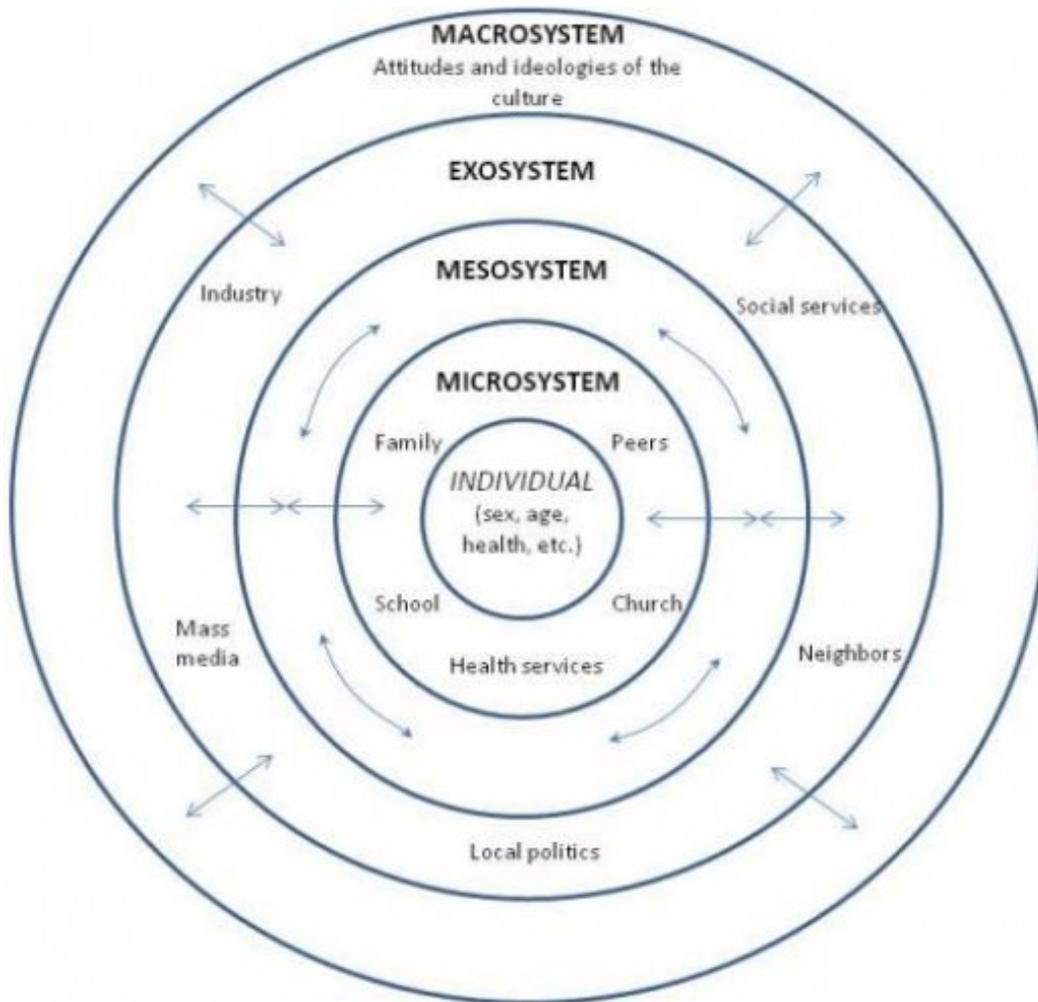


Figure 2 Bronfenbrenner Ecosystem of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner, 1994)

Utilizing this model, we see how the individual exists at the center of a more far reaching environment in which improving employee engagement at the individual level can be extended. If we can extend this individual impact outwardly, there may be an ability to impact the broader

team, the organization, or corporation. The individual's impact may extend out even further into their family, their community and even the broader world at large. If one can find a way to influence the singular psychological elements within PsyCap and thriving to impact the individual's sense of engagement, then quite possibly by developing this sense of engagement at the individual level we can have a much broader-reaching leveraged effect on the whole corporation or even into the greater society. In this way the intervention applied to the individual might even influence greater flourishing within society. But, we need to start with the individual and try to create an upward spiral from that central point. Connecting multiple individuals in this manner to the broader organization might work like the ripples that emanate from the single stone tossed meaningfully into the organizational pond.

### **Positive Antecedents and Interventions for PsyCap, Thriving, and Employee Engagement**

So how do we toss that first stone into the organizational pond, creating the singular impact and the outward ripple effects of engagement? The means to this end are to insure that the antecedents for PsyCap and thriving are present in the organization. As employee engagement is an individual construct, specific interventions may be created or existing interventions employed, to boost the presence of the elements of PsyCap, (hope, efficacy, resilience, optimism) and thriving, (vigor and learning).

Interventions in positive psychology are a core method for affecting change in the target individual and may be a key element of employee engagement's foundation in positive psychology. Interventions are a fundamental method of provoking wanted change in the target individual. The basis of positive interventions is to assist the individual in identifying what they desire and then providing tactics and tools to assist them in achieving the outcome they desire.

Positive psychology is dedicated to the idea of the individual getting more of what they want out of life versus the mainstream of psychology, which, as pointed out earlier, has focused on the deficit side of the equation in an effort to mitigate and reduce what we do not want in life.

Positive interventions are undertakings in which a person engages to improve their own sense of well-being, and in our case increasing the singular elements that make up the higher constructs of PsyCap and thriving that can lead to an increased level of employee engagement. The individual may act either on his or her own or in a coached manner. Positive interventions find their grounding in the Aristotelian concept of virtue in achieving the Greek ideal of eudaimonia (Melchert, 2002). Aristotle discusses virtue and that being a virtuous person is what will make a person a happy person. In virtue Aristotle says we discover ethics and knowing what to do and how to live. He states that virtue is or can be a learned experience (Melchert, 2002). The happiness of virtue can only be achieved through an active engagement in pursuit of this excellence, as happiness is not possible without this excellence (Melchert, 2002).

To develop excellence one must choose to develop a supportive habit in much the way William James and Aristotle prescribe. Aristotle says the difference between natural tendency and habit is that in nature one has a pre-determined fixed repetition, and in habits we actively acquire the repetition (J. Pawelski, personal communication, Sept. 2014). Making the choice to act in appropriate ways, and to intentionally practice these behaviors, leads to these decision-making habits being repeatable (Melchert, 2002). In this sense a positive intervention needs to focus on the creation of positive habits, not the amelioration of the negative habits. For an intervention to be considered positive it must focus on the growth of the good elements in life. For an intervention to be positive it must intend to increase elements of well-being by cultivating things such as pleasant affect, strengths, relationships, meaning and our sense of purpose (J.

Pawelski, personal communication, Sept. 2014).

A positive intervention is defined as an evidenced-based, empirically tested, intentional act designed to provide the target with increased well-being, operating in a non-clinical manner to enhance or augment positive feelings that supports flourishing (J. Pawelski, personal communication, Sept. 2014). Further the definition of a successful positive intervention is based on the components from which they are synthesized. If these elements are combined in the proper manner, then the creation of a positive intervention for the driving of change of habits is possible.

If the antecedents are present, the soil is prepped for cultivation. The organization can identify and then implement these positive interventions designed around the individual elements. If done properly it is quite possible the organization can drive positive habituation in line with the elements of PsyCap and thriving to create increased employee engagement.

### **The Influence of Corporate Social Responsibility**

Of great importance is the consideration of the question of why to undertake this effort. The essential organizational deliberation is usually regarding the benefit and return to shareholders. I have shown that employee engagement, if present, can provide a positive economic impact in increased revenue or decreased cost, but there are considerations beyond those two pragmatic reasons.

Historically in capitalism it has been contemplated that the corporation was simple in its goals and clear in its role to return money to shareholders, and that the shareholders as individuals should decide how to utilize those profits (Friedman, 1962). More recently this thought has begun to see a shift toward the paradigm of involving a broader range of participants

known as stakeholders, all of whom have a vital interest in, and can be affected, at varying levels by decision made by the business organization. Stakeholders can be both internal and primary - owners, managers, employees - or external and secondary - shareholders, customers, creditors, suppliers, government and society (Freeman, 1984). The concept of stakeholders has overtones of moral obligation that cause it to consider actions beyond that of return of capital to shareholders. This sense of moral obligation aligns with positive organizational psychology's consideration of positive deviance as the new lens by which to view organizations. The development of employee engagement in the organization can serve to provide both a return to shareholders and to the broader more morally grounded stakeholders. Creating lasting value for the stakeholders and the extension of attention to stakeholders may be becoming more essential to organizational strategy and for the definition of business success (Laszlo, 2003).

This sense of response to stakeholders is often referred to as corporate social performance (CSP) and in some cases as corporate social responsibility, (CSR). Although these definitions can be disputed, for my purposes I am considering these concepts in parallel to each other; meaning that the organization is acting in a positive deviant way that benefits the broader stakeholders (Margolis, Elfenbein, & Walsh, 2009). In more and more situations, a case is being made that facilitating individuals to flourish beyond monetary terms is becoming critical for organizations to succeed for the benefit of the broader stakeholders involved (Laszlo et al., 2012).

Individual success can be linked to connectedness and engagement in the organization and a sense of purpose being driven through the organization for the benefit of the broader realm of stakeholders (Laszlo et al., 2012). In some cases individual success can be linked to improved return to shareholders as well, without detriment to stakeholders. One meta-analysis (Margolis,

et al 2002), reported that fifty-three percent of studies pointed toward a positive relationship between CSP and financial performance, and sixty-eight percent of studies that examined financial performance as the constant found a positive relationship to CSP (Margolis et al., 2009). And in an examination of CSRs link to financial performance a positive correlation was also found (Lech, 2013).

The concepts of shareholder and stakeholder do not need to be mutually exclusive. The idea of “doing good” can be connected to doing well in the shareholder financial sense. In many cases there is a value creation mechanism as the link between the CSR/CSP activities. Organizational activities like corporate policies, transparency, environmental performance, employee engagement practices (doing good) connects to an impact on corporate financial performance in decreased cost, increased revenue and generation of improved financial returns. In his meta-analysis, Margolis found either a majority of non-significant relationships (58%) or a positive relationship (27%) between CSP and financial performance. At a minimum, the organization’s effort and investment in CSP appear to either be at worst neutral or at best to have a positive effect (Margolis et al., 2009). Given this direct linkage to positive economic outcomes it just seems to make sense for the organization to consider making this investment in cultivating employee engagement for the benefit of both the immediate shareholders and the broader stakeholders.

### **Conclusion: Where From Here?**

Ask 100 CEOs what their competitive advantage is, or their strongest strategic differentiator, and you will likely get answers citing superior products, better in design or quality, disruptive distribution methods or a unique business model. Some might even say “it’s

our people.” Will they truly know why, and more importantly, how, to make this last statement true? Employee engagement benefits the organization through improved outcomes for shareholders and stakeholders. Two meaningful pathways to improve the presence of employee engagement are the higher-order constructs of PsyCap and thriving, by enhancing the individual elements of each. The organization that can figure out a means for increasing the presence of PsyCap and thriving at the individual level will generate benefit for the individual employees and improve their organizational outcomes. The organization must first insure that the antecedents outlined earlier are present in the organization, that their leadership is creating a fertile soil into which one can plant the seeds of engagement. It is especially important that leaders and supervisors are educated on the concepts and benefits of engagement. Positive interventions targeting the organization’s individuals to boost the singular elements that comprise PsyCap and thriving can increase the presence of these elements at the individual level in the organization. With this first stone tossed into the organizational pond, it is quite possible that each individual will further impact the overall organizational ecosystem and, quite possibly, extend that benefit beyond the eco-system of the immediate organization to the greater society in which it conducts business. Employee engagement, approached in the proper way, might be able to be that broader-reaching “Holy Grail” of competitive advantage that organizations seek.

“Throw yourself into some work you believe in with all your heart, live for it, die for it, and you will find happiness that you had thought could never be yours.”  
–Dale Carnegie

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