

Dr. Markus Ebner

Positive Leadership in Action

Tools, Techniques & Best Practices

*With a foreword
by Tayyab Rashid*



**With best practice examples from IKEA,
Lidl Austria, T-Systems, and many more**

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With a foreword by Tayyab Rashid, PhD



Dr. Markus Ebner is a trained coach and a psychologist. He teaches at the Universities of Vienna and Klagenfurt and is specialized in the field of Positive Psychology. He is one of the leading experts for positive leadership in Europe; his work connects science and day-to-day practice. Dr. Ebner and his team have accompanied high-level organizations and companies for more than 20 years and help people to recognize their strengths and develop their potential.

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Foreword

by Tayyab Rashid, PhD

I have spent a good part of my past fifteen years, in various settings, unpacking elements that could plausibly weave the whole called wellbeing. A cautiously optimistic clinician-practitioner, I was content with Martin Seligman's Authentic Happiness notion, parsed it into the Pleasant, the Engaged and the Meaningful Life. My post-doctoral fellowship was to explore its effectiveness in mitigating symptoms of severe depression, in addition to other therapeutic resources. My endeavor was reasonably successful. Nonetheless, soon after, Seligman operationalized wellbeing as PERMA, composed of five scientifically measurable and manageable elements: 1) Positive emotion, 2) Engagement, 3) Relationships, 4) Meaning and 5) Accomplishment, with the first letters of each component forming the mnemonic PERMA (Seligman, 2011). While I have attempted to build these elements amidst clinical conditions with mixed results, Markus Ebner in *Positive Leadership* has brought years of experience of working with and teaching about organizations into a pragmatic, accessible, evidence-based volume, which, in my view, is one of the best resources of PERMA.

There are several reasons which make this one of the best evidence-based, accessible, pragmatic, and well-organized positive psychology and wellbeing guides.

To begin with, Markus Ebner resists that temptation of offering simple solutions. In a socio-economically uneven world gripped by a pandemic, climate catastrophes, political polarization, digitally connected but emotionally isolated citizens, the universally purported simplistic solutions do not result in contextualized, nuanced, and evidence-informed ways to enhance wellbeing. To this effect, Markus Ebner reassures us that the following content is not his idiosyncratic musings, but assertions, actions, and initiatives based on peer-reviewed, published data. This data, he argues, clearly points out that the absence of something negative does not necessarily lead to something positive.

I have explored and also am familiar with explorations of others regarding PERMA. However, the description of PERMA in *Positive Leadership* is the most comprehensive, built from a solid practitioner-scientist base. To begin with, Markus Ebner makes a seamless transition from PERMA to a broad-spectrum of PERMA-Lead. PERMA-Lead focuses on leadership and organizational settings, but the practical strategies of each of the five components of PERMA have a wide range of implications.

The basis for this book with exceptionally helpful practical techniques and examples from organizations was already laid out in Markus Ebner's previous book where each of the nine chapters, including five on PERMA elements, have relevant and updated research, the big picture as well as subtle points supported by solid research foundations. Research is not merely described parenthetically but is explained to enhance the understanding of the concept from an applied perspective. Throughout the book, the author stays close to the readers, sharing personal anecdotes such as his visit to Thailand and being fascinated by an array of exotic fruits and vegetables. This keeps the reader engaged. Furthermore, Markus Ebner seems to be

well versed in the contemporary global shrinking attention span. Wisely harnessing it, the book divides the content into manageable parts, including a description of each component, supportive research, practice suggestions, and importantly, the potentially negative aspect of each component.

Ebner describes each of the five components of PERMA-Lead in detail. For the positive-emotions component, ten variations of positive emotions, including joy, gratitude, serenity or contentment, interest, hope, pride, amusement, and inspiration, are described in the Broaden-and-Build perspective. With the help of intuitive illustrations, the relationship between positive emotions, job satisfaction, and productivity offers managers useful insights as to where and how to intervene.

One of the areas which has received less empirical attention in positive psychology is the relationship of personality traits and positive psychology constructs. Establishing this connection, with the help of empirical-evidence, the author enhances the validity of positive psychology constructs.

Positive Psychology has been criticized for offering overly simplistic and decontextualised interventions. Markus Ebner mindfully discusses the specific use of each of the PERMA-Lead components and their potential harm or unintended consequences. Critical and nuanced appraisal of notions such as you should feel good and not bad, be cheerful to someone in an angry or sad mood, withhold feedback on negative behavior, and be in a jovial mood for tasks where serious and proportionately negative mood might be adaptive, demonstrates that without being a clinician, the author has clinical sensitivities to use each PERMA-Lead component with sensitivity and specificity. He is familiar on how to calibrate them according to situational

dynamics. He also brings much-needed compassion by stating, “there is always a pain in the room.” I am not familiar with many organizational psychologists who teach the skills to acknowledge and empathize with the pain of employees.

Markus Ebner explores relevant factors in supportive work relationships and highlights trust, regular interaction, setting common and clear goals and standards, and willingness to share knowledge. His book shares research findings which show that good teamwork, in fact, contributes to the good health of employees. He underscores the significance of the meaningful contribution to a purpose greater than oneself and helps the reader understand how meaning at work has evolved from Baby Boomers to successive Generations X, Y, & Z.

Putting all elements together, Markus Ebner offers useful insights as to how positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment can create a whole greater than the sum of its parts in enhancing the wellbeing profile of its employees, which in turn, will most likely positively impact the bottom line.

With this new additional book, there is now a valuable collection of tools and techniques for Positive Leadership. The numerous examples of the guest authors from different organizations show how effectively the PERMA-Lead approach is already being implemented in numerous contexts. It also shows the author’s passion for combining well-founded research with practice. This book is a treasure trove of evidence-based, implementable ideas which can help a wide range of professionals (e.g., managers, supervisors, administrators) to translate the abstract notions of positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment into observable, measurable, and replicable purposeful actions.

No matter where one is on the organizational hierarchy, this book is remarkable resource to foster paths of wellbeing.

Thank you, Markus, for stitching a quilt, which will broaden, widen, and deepen the wellbeing of many. I don't work in organizational settings. However, I am sure to consult with *Positive Leadership* in many situations that will help me co-create and co-enhance the wellbeing of those with whom I work, as well as my own.

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Introduction

A growing number of companies have recognized the importance of using Positive Leadership, an exciting approach to management that discovers and develops the full potential of the people in an organization. But how do you actually implement this concept? This book is about practical ways to apply this new method!

My previous book on Positive Leadership focused on explaining its fundamental concepts, exploring global research relevant to this leadership approach, and examining its roots to reveal how leadership can succeed (even) better.

The book you are holding in your hands consists of two practice-oriented parts: In the first part, you will find proven tools and techniques that belong in a Positive Leader's toolbox. With these descriptions, I would also like to inspire trainers, coaches, consultants, and others to use these approaches in their work. I have deliberately chosen a diverse mix of simple strategies, such as strength-oriented feedback, and more elaborate methods, such as the GROW model. Some of these techniques were developed by other colleagues and were applied - and sometimes modified - by my team and me. Other tools have been developed over the last few years and refined in numerous coaching sessions, seminars, and through feedback from the field. All these techniques have been proven successful in everyday management.

The second part of the book presents guest contributions from companies and organizations that share details of how they use Positive Leadership. It describes different projects, tells stories, and provides varied insights into the routine practice of Positive Leadership. When selecting the companies, I also consciously created a diverse mix. This resulted in a wide range of examples from international corporations, smaller organizations, social institutions, profit-oriented companies as well as from the public sector or non-profit associations. However, despite their differences, all organizations are connected by their exciting experiences with “Positive Leadership”. Of course, these organizations are not perfect. You can only find perfection in stories, films, or in the imagination – certainly not where creative humans interact. The second part is much more about how these organizations overcame challenges to successfully implement new management concepts. Positive Leadership is also about this best-practice logic: looking closely at what worked, then analyzing the exact ingredients, and recooking with these ingredients – and seasoning a little to your own taste.

Therefore, with this “Positive Leadership cookbook”, I hope you will find many applicable ideas, practical insights, and, of course, the positive inspiration to experiment after or while reading it!

Markus Ebner

Tools and Techniques for Positive Leadership



1 Circular Questions: Small Lego bricks for every leadership situation

Field of application: Circular questions are suitable for a wide range of leadership situations. In short conversations, job interviews or longer meetings, these jewels have a great effect when placed properly.

“He who asks leads!” This proverb is already overly familiar to many people. Nevertheless, many managers are not even aware how much they can positively influence a situation with the right questioning technique. Circular questions are a particularly powerful kind of questioning. This approach originates from systemic psychotherapy and differs from classical linear-logical questions in that circular questions help bring about “thinking outside the box.” They inspire the conversation partner to view a situation differently.

Most modern coaching courses emphasize learning these questioning techniques. Many consultants use a variety of circular questions. No wonder that every good leadership course now uses some of these questions. However, not all of these questions seem suitable for the role of a leader.

Numerous scientific papers show that circular questions have been highly successfully in organizations outside of therapy and coaching.^[1-5]

This chapter introduces you to many tools that will also use circular questions. They resemble small Lego bricks, which you can use separately or—according to your needs—build something bigger. And, as with Lego bricks, it doesn't matter whether you want to build a house, a ship, or anything else, you use the same bricks. Just put them together differently. They are not an explicit Positive Leadership technique, but they perfectly fit with the logic of Positive Leadership. Here are some selected circular questions, which my team and I teach to managers in our seminars as a “basic Lego box.”



Environmental questions

“What do your colleagues say?”
“How will your actions affection your environment?”
“Who will be affected if you change?”

Logic: Making visible the effects of achieving goals



Change of perspective questions

“What would your boss consider helpful?”
“How would X know it was better?”
“What rating would the customer give you?”
“How would an invisible observer describe your behavior?”
“How will others know that something has changed?”
“What do other concerned parties actually see as the problem?”
“Who might not see such a big problem?”
“What would X do in your situation?”

Logic: See the situation (or goal or possibilities) from a different perspective.



Difference questions

“What’s the difference between your previous situation and your current situation?”
“What was different when the problem didn’t exist?”
“What’s different when things go (a little) better?”
“What do you do differently when things get better?”
“What were the situations in which it worked?”
“What were the moments in which it was a little better?”

Logic: Identify differences in order to develop possible solutions

Scaling questions

“On a scale of one to ten, where would you rate yourself?”
“On a scale of one to ten, how close are you to your destination?”
“Rate your options on a scale of one to ten.”
“You say you’re at seven. What’s six?”—After the answer : “What’s eight?”

Logic: Prevent black-and-white thinking; make small differences visible



Action-oriented questions

“What’s your next move?”
“What are the first three steps?”
“What will you do afterwards?”
“Who can you ask for support?”

Logic: From reflection or planning into action



Resource questions

“Who or what could help you?”
“Who already supports you in that?”
“Which of your skills are most useful to you in this situation?”
“What strengths can you consciously use now?”
“What similar situation have you dealt with in the past? How did you do that?”



“What are you doing now to deal with this situation?”
“How come things aren’t worse than this? How do you do it?”

Logic: Identify support options

Expansion questions

“If there were no outside constraints, what would your goal be?”—After the answer:
“What part of it might even be possible?”
“What would be something you could do that is so out of your nature?”
“What could you do that would be out of the ordinary for you?”
“What would totally surprise the others, if you did that?”

Logic: Expand your imagination



Escalation questions

“What would you have to do to make your problem worse?”

Logic: By considering what one could do to worsen the situation, one might recognize whether this is already being done and then develop a strategy to do the opposite.



Highlight the problem’s features

“What are the upsides of this situation?”
“How can we learn from the current situation?”
“How could what you’re experiencing right now be helpful for your future?”
“Who benefits from the situation as it is?”
“Who would object to changing the situation?”

Logic: Finding the positive sides of the problem or recognizing the “good in the bad”; making visible the possible resistance to change.





Chunk up

Why do you want to achieve this goal?"

"What's better when you reach that goal?"

"What's in it for you?"

Logic: This technique aims to find a possible hidden goal behind the communicated goal. It helps to avoid commitment to the wrong goals.



2 PP5 Technique: Recognizing the positive and areas for development

Field of application: This feedback and reflection technique can be used where specific steps forward need to be developed and a person or group differ in at least two properties, attributes, etc.

Positive Leadership's basic principle is to recognize useful strengths and through PERMA create conditions for unfolding potential. The problem is that people focus more on what works less well. In other words, we focus too often on negative rather than positive feedback.

During employee evaluation, if one area is rated less highly than the others, probably most attention will be paid to the weaker area, while other more positive areas will only be noted in passing. In my numerous coaching sessions for managers on using 360° feedback or other diagnostic methods, my counterparts almost always had the same response: no matter whether the evaluation tended to be good or less good, the focus was on the worst area in relation to the others. Even if all areas were evaluated excellent and only one deviated a little, they looked at the

weaker area. I really became aware of the peculiarity of this approach when, a few years ago, we started to work with the first managers in evaluating our newly developed PERMA-Leadership System. In the evaluation coaching, the participants automatically shift focus to those areas with the greatest potential for development: the areas with the lowest ratings.

I realized that we were dealing with a completely illogical paradox: on the one hand, we motivated managers to recognize and utilize the strengths of their employees; on the other hand, in coaching, we almost exclusively worked on improving their weaknesses in Positive Leadership behavior. Therefore, the goal became finding a strategy that didn't mean either-or, but both analyzed what works and looked for the areas that most needed development. With this in mind, I developed the PP5 technique, which includes coaching techniques as well as using the findings of positive psychological research. The two Ps stand for the first steps of this technique, which have a positive focus. The number 5 stands for 5 percent, which becomes relevant in the third step. I would now like to show you how the technique works using a real example.

A manager was evaluated in a PERMA-Lead 360° feedback from their team as shown in [Figure 2.1](#).