

Chapter 53

How Positive Psychology can Support Sustainable Project Management

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the relationship between positive psychology and sustainable project management is discussed. A general description of the field of positive psychology is given. The relationship between positive psychology and the three P's of sustainability (People, Planet, and Profit) is described. Specific attention is paid to hope and optimism as ways to intervene in project teams. Hope and optimism are central concepts in positive psychology. These concepts can help to improve the sustainability of project teams and to stimulate sustainable change.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In this chapter, sustainable project management is studied from a psychological perspective. The field of project management evolved from the use of mathematical calculation models to a field concerned with change management and the roll of behavior involved in these change processes (Silvius & Schipper 2012). We can see an increasing awareness that human behavior is crucial for project success (Kahkonen et al., 2009), therefore human behavior is the central perspective for this chapter.

The knowledge from the new scientific field of positive psychology will be used to study sustainable project management. More specifically, attention will be paid to the role of positive emotions, optimism and hope. This knowledge will provide us with insights in the way positive psychological approaches to project management will increase the sustainability of projects.

This perspective is taken because a large number of studies both on sustainability and project management are 'problem focused'. They are concentrating on ways to prevent problems, like risk management (Raz & Michael, 2001), stress

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in projects (Aitken & Crawford, 2007) or the difficulties faced when sustainable behavior is being promoted (Dovers, 1995).

In this chapter, it will be argued that this problem focus, with its perspective on problems and negative emotions, is not fruitful. To deal with the challenges of sustainable project management, a positive approach is needed. Grounded in the science of positive psychology and using the concepts of positive emotions, optimism, and hope. The chapter will answer the question: *How can positive psychology support positive project management?*

In the following section attention will be paid to the relationship between positive psychology, projects and positive emotions, one of the central concepts of positive psychology. The next section will describe the link between positive emotions and sustainability, using the division between people, planet and profit. In the third section the focus will be on ways to influence sustainable behavior by influencing positive emotions, special attention will be paid to the powerful concepts of optimism and hope. This chapter ends with concluding remarks and suggestions for further research.

PROJECTS, POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY AND POSITIVE EMOTIONS

Projects

In the organizational theory many different definitions of projects are being used. In this chapter we use the widely used definition by Turner (1993): 'Projects are an endeavor in which human, material and financial resources are organized in a novel way, to undertake a unique scope of work, of given specification, within constraints of cost and time, so as to achieve beneficial change defined by quantitative and qualitative objectives'.

Two things are important in this definition when it comes to the topic of this paper: first of all projects are endeavors in which human resources are being organized. And secondly, the purpose of projects is to achieve change. These are two components that will be addressed in this chapter.

Projects are endeavors in which human resources are being organized, this means that human behavior is an important component of projects. Paying attention to this part of project management is crucial for successful projects (El Saaba, 2001; Pant & Baroudi, 2008; Pasian, 2011; Suhonen & Paasivaara, 2011).

Realizing that projects are change instruments is important when it comes to sustainable organizations. At this moment sustainable organizations are not mainstream. Implementing sustainability into organizations urges for an explicit change perspective. Projects seem to be the perfect vehicle to drive this change, due to the explicit change perspective of project management.

Positive Psychology

Positive psychology is a movement in the field of psychology that was coined by Martin Seligman, the former chairman of the American Psychological Association (APA) who is widely seen as one of the founding fathers of this movement. Positive psychology was a reaction to the dominant orientation of psychology on problems, sickness, and negative deviant behavior.

The movement of positive psychology is focusing on 'positive' research questions like 'why do people get into a flow while working' (Csikszentmihaiyi, 1990), 'why are people happy' (Lyubomirsky, 2001, 2007) or 'what are the roots of positive deviant behavior in organizations' (Cameron 2008). The reason to study this positive behavior is not to disqualify the 'negative' research in traditional psychology but to complement the traditional research with a different perspective (Seligman 1998).

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