

ALIGHT Your Team with Positive Leadership



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This article makes the case for positive leadership as a necessity in educational institutions. It outlines the benefits of this approach, presents a model for applying it, and describes how this plays out at the author's own institution, the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland.

Positive leadership

Positive leadership is not a choice but a necessity in this rapidly changing social and educational environment. It refers to (1) positively deviant performance, (2) affirmative bias, and (3) facilitating the best of the human condition (Cameron, 2008). In a pre-Covid-19 survey, most aspiring educational leaders said they wanted to manage a mediocre team (Burke, 2020). They said it would be significantly more challenging to lead an underperforming organisation, whereas managing a top organisation would come with additional pressure to keep its highly regarded position.

Positive leaders think differently. They aim for deviant performance, they strive for their team to be extraordinary, and they do it by focusing on their own strengths and facilitating their team's strengths.

While the concept of positive leadership derives from the School of Education at the University of Michigan, most research and publications in this area refer to leadership in the corporate sector. Nonetheless, in recent years, a surge of interest has seen researchers applying it eagerly in an educational context and promoting positive universities, for example the University of Buckingham.

The ALIGHT model

Murphy and Louis (2018) created a model that helps school leaders tap into their people's potential. Burke (2020) expanded the concept of positive leadership into a range of positive behaviours that allow educational leaders to use their emotional, intellectual, and psychological resources more effectively. Recently, a new model of ALIGHT Positive Leadership was introduced that helps leaders maximise their resources to achieve extraordinary performance (Lucey & Burke, 2022).

The ALIGHT model has six components (Figure 1):

1. Abundance
2. Limberness
3. Inspiration
4. Grand Design
5. Health
6. Tribe



Figure 1: The ALIGHT model



Figure 2: ALIGHT model subcomponents

Each component has three subcomponents (Figure 2). Components and subcomponents are resources that leaders can tap into to optimise their own and their team's performance.

Components of the ALIGHT model

Abundance

Positive leaders in third-level education can recognise their strengths and the strengths of others. Focusing on weaknesses comes easily as we navigate the world, avoiding danger. Reflecting on strengths is like reaching for higher-hanging fruit, especially when life gets tough. We need to make more effort to do it, but the reward will be sweet.

Using our strengths energises us and allows us to tap into the best versions of ourselves. It is transformational for many people, as we are at our best when using our strengths. Yet sometimes our mindsets stop us from getting there. It happens when leaders do not believe that playing to one's strengths makes a difference to a person or a team. Thus, recognising strengths is not enough. Believing that they can change, then sitting down and planning how they can be applied in everyday life, is what makes a difference.

Limberness

Positive leaders practise limberness, an ability to adapt and be emotionally agile and resilient in changing contexts. Adaptability is a leader's ability to shift their behaviour or mindset purposefully when facing changes. Some leaders take their time and resist change, leading to inertia and subsequent frustrations. Others review their circumstances and promptly adapt, which helps their team follow and embrace change. Even if leaders are cognitively prepared to adapt, their emotions may not allow them to do so. This is where emotional agility comes in handy. Positive leaders use their emotions wisely. They are aware of them and choose a reaction that better fits the situation rather than allowing emotions to overtake them. They also practise resilience by learning and growing from their experiences, be they positive or negative.

Inspiration

Inspiration is a resource that positive leaders use regularly. It is not about being inspirational; rather, it is a resource that helps leaders move their teams to action. Positive leaders understand the power of self-efficacy. When their team members believe they can accomplish a goal, they are more likely to take decisive action and succeed. So leaders work hard to help their teams believe they have all the resources they can have to accomplish their goals.

“ Inspiration is about leaders practising optimism and hope and helping their team experience it.

Inspiration is also about leaders practising optimism and hope and helping their team experience it. Optimism is the belief that everything will work out well. Having optimism makes us try harder to change our circumstances. Hope is about having the will and coming up with a way to accomplish something. Finally, a positive leader creates energising connections on their team. They ensure that team members are not surrounded by those who are sapping the energy out of them. Instead, everyone creates a network that brings about inspiration and positive change.

Grand Design

This resource is a leader's ability to transform day-to-day activities into meaningful contributions. It is also an ability to translate the team's meaning and purpose into daily actions. This dance between a bigger picture and practice is a challenge for many. Sometimes leaders excel at creating meaning but cannot translate it to their team. Other times, they take meaningful daily actions but cannot tie them to the bigger picture. Thus, positive leadership involves a leader's understanding of their significant contribution to their team and the meaning of each of their members' contributions. The leader can also connect each person's daily actions to the team's or the institution's mission and vision. It is about making meaning practical.

Health

Healthy leadership is not only about health promotion, which refers to actions that leaders take to promote healthy lifestyles in an organisation. It is also about engaging in health-oriented behaviours: the small actions that leaders take to ensure a healthy environment for their team. The difference between them is that health promotion requires words, whereas

health orientation requires actions, demonstrating that positive leaders care about their teams. But all this is not enough. Following the theory of salutogenesis, positive leaders practise full integration of health in their daily work. They promote health in their daily interactions with staff. They put their health first and help their staff make sense of daily events to ensure healthy outcomes.

Tribe

Positive leaders can assess, initiate, foster, develop, and redevelop relationships to meet their own needs and the needs of their team and organisation. They ensure daily caring interactions with their team members and connect with others meaningfully. High-quality connections do not mean that team members are best friends. Often they do not know much about each other's personal lives. Instead, it is an approach to working together and getting the best out of each other by nurturing mutual respect, trust, and belonging.

Positive leadership at the RCSI

The Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland recently became a positive organisation where positive leadership is practised daily and positive organisational outcomes are assessed annually. Our Centre for Positive Psychology and Health specialises in not only promoting positive health but also practising it daily. Each staff member is a positive leader in their role. We include all our staff, including PhD scholars, in our weekly meetings to ensure full transparency of practice and to help each team member learn and embrace our positive culture. We start every meeting by reflecting on what went well for us as a team and individually in the last week.

We play to our strengths when contributing to our team. We make important decisions as a team, and every person's views are acknowledged and respected at all times. We are in it together and eager to help each other out for the good of our work and, most importantly, for the benefit of the people we help. This inspires us to keep going, learning, creating, and connecting. It gives us the meaning we need and makes us stronger as we support each other to ride the waves of change together. Positive leadership is not only a model but an invaluable resource that changes people's lives. It is a guide to getting the best out of everyone and our lives.

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