



Reflecting pathways to
learning and change



F. Campone, Inc. Newsletter

As coaches who work with executives of various dispositions, I'd guess that many of us have wondered at least once what effect a leader's optimism (or pessimism) may have on the performance of those they lead. Two researchers, Dana Arakawa and Margaret Greenberg, have explored just this question in a study published in *The International Journal of Coaching Psychology*, vol. 2,

Currents in Coaching Research: Leadership and Optimism

Arakawa and Greenberg took a two-pronged approach in their investigation, *Optimistic managers and their influence on productivity and employee engagement in a technology organization: Implications for coaching psychologists*.

The authors developed a model of positive leadership which incorporated three elements that are strongly supported in the literature of positive psychology. The first is a strengths-based approach to managing; the second the manager's perspective (explanatory style) during challenging times; and the third is how the manager provides recognition and encouragement. The authors cite two objectives of the study. The primary objective was to determine if teams produce better results and employees are more engaged under the leadership of an optimistic manager. The second objective was to investigate the means by which optimistic managers influence their teams.

The methods section of the paper is highly detailed and may be of particular interest to those considering exploring similar questions. The study utilizes two author-created surveys, one each for managers and employees. The authors cite the sources of items for their surveys, including one public domain assessment (The Life Orientation Test Revised by Scheier, Carver & Bridges, 1994). They also drew on one proprietary assessment (The Gallup Organization Q12) and a set of questions they developed to assess the three components of their positive leadership model. Project performance was measured by examining nine attributes of the projects carried out by participants.

The authors began the study with two primary questions: (1) whether teams led by optimistic managers produce better results; (2) whether employees led by an optimistic manager are more engaged at work. They hypothesized that both would be affirmative and that manager optimism would correlate positively with project performance and employee engagement. Arakawa and Greenberg also sought to test their three-element model of positive leadership by exploring the correlations between and among manager optimism and engagement, employee optimism and engagement, and project performance. Data from retrospective project performance in 2005 and data from prospective project performance in 2006 were run separately.

Results from the 2005 data showed significant correlation between manager optimism and manager engagement and a larger correlation between manager engagement and project performance. All three elements of the positive leadership model also showed positive

correlation with employee engagement, project performance and recognition. Nonetheless, the 2005 data did not support the hypothesis of a correlation between manager optimism and employee engagement or project performance. Data from 2006 showed similar results with the exception that in 2006 manager optimism did show a moderate to large significant correlation with project performance. The authors duly note some of possible reasons for the differences in the two sets of results, resting on differences between reporting structures in the two years and significant overlap of reporting lines.

In their discussion, Arakawa and Greenberg suggest that coaches consider the three aspects of their positive leadership model- a strengths-based approach, a positive perspective and recognition- and assist clients in becoming more self-aware with respect to these. They also note that optimism and the behaviors in the model can be learned and practiced with the guidance of a coach. This article is one of several in the cited issue of The International Journal of Coaching Psychology which explore the potential applications of the principles of Positive Psychology in coaching.
