

EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE REPORT

supporting EA professionals

Positive Psychology Coaching A Framework for Navigating COVID & Beyond

By Dr. Mickey Parsons, MCC, CEAP



In a year of extraordinary challenges, employee assistance professionals and coaches are providing critical and timely support for organizational leaders. At The Workplace Coach, an Atlanta-based executive coaching and leadership development firm that I

lead, the COVID-19 pandemic has lent new urgency to our work with executives and managers, just as it has for my EA colleagues.

As an experienced CEAP, former director of employee assistance programs, and an executive leadership coach, I feel certain that the hot button issues my clients are bringing to our sessions are much the same as those my EA colleagues are addressing in their trainings, consulting sessions, mentoring, and workplace coaching.

Pivoting, Developing, Flexing

Our clients have to flex their leadership muscles to develop new ways of engaging remote work teams and entire workforces that are doing their jobs from home for the first time. My colleagues and I spent much of 2020 coaching leaders and managers in essential soft skills, like creating a culture of safety and trust, showing empathy for employees, and developing psychological flexibility.

At the same time, we're partnering with clients to help them pivot their business plans and develop flexible strategies and action plans for a post-pandemic world whose contours and timing are impossible to predict.

We are all in uncharted territory. And we are all searching for tools, tactics, and strategies that will help both ourselves and our organizations survive and prosper.

Thriving amid Stress

In my experience, no theoretical orientation provides a better framework for helping leaders, teams and organizations thrive amid stressful circumstances than *positive psychology*. Positive psychology is the scientific study of the strengths, positive emotions,

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traits, virtues, and values that support optimal functioning and well-being and allow individuals, organizations and communities to flourish (Seligman, 2011).

We practice positive psychology coaching at The Workplace Coach. This differs from other forms of coaching due to its:

- Focus on identifying core strengths and values;
- Building on past success;
- Enhancing resilience; and
- Supporting clients in cultivating happiness and self-compassion.

As positive psychology coaches, we are trained in applying psychological theories, concepts, and principles to the practice of coaching.

I see positive psychology as a common ground where EA and coaching professionals can come together to enhance the work performance and personal well-being of our clients. And I strongly believe that basing EA interventions, consultations, and coaching in positive psychology is an optimal strategy for organizations that want to not merely survive the pandemic but emerge stronger and ready to thrive.

What Leaders Need

During the pandemic, we have noted a shift in the tenor of our coaching sessions, as the unfolding crisis challenges the certitude of even the most experienced leaders. Our executive coaching clients need more empathy, understanding, and support than usual. For them, coaching that blends active listening with incisive and powerful questions can renew confidence and hope, emboldening them to think creatively and plan their next steps forward.

For others, effective coaching in the current climate may center on a deep exploration of values, purpose and strengths, coaching strategies that are rooted in positive psychology. These clients typically benefit from the use of tools like Gallup's Clifton Strengths assessment, the VIA Character Strengths Survey, and other values clarification exercises and strengths profiles.

Clients who are acutely stressed by the COVID crisis may require positive psychology activities that enhance a sense of calmness and well-being and calm and reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression. Examples include keeping a daily gratitude journal and practicing mindfulness meditation.

Keeping Managers on-Course

Of course, as coaches and EA professionals, we also have a duty to challenge leaders and managers

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when we see their thinking veer off-course. At The Workplace Coach, we have observed leaders resorting to a command-and-control style of management during the pandemic out of the fear that their remote workers will slack off and productivity will drop.

(Research and experience show the reverse to be true: Remote workers tend to be more focused and productive, especially when trusted by their manager.)

For leaders having a tough time releasing their iron-fisted grip, positive psychology provides a framework for exploring the beliefs and stories that may be impeding their thinking. Through narrative coaching, for example, we invite the client to become mindful of their inner stories so they can deconstruct them, broaden their perspectives, and explore alternatives to those currently governing their thinking.

Enhancing Resilience and Flexibility

As pandemic fatigue creates emotional exhaustion for all of us, a combination of self-care and positive

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interventions also can help EA practitioners, coaches, and clients to navigate these times with greater ease.

One example is positive psychology's PERMA model of happiness, which I have found to be an excellent basis for increasing resilience and psychological flexibility while promoting health, optimism, and a sense of safety. Conceived by positive psychology founder Martin Seligman, the PERMA model describes the five core elements of psychological well-being, happiness and fulfillment. They are:

- P** – positive emotion. We boost resiliency by lowering stress and mindfully navigating emotions.
- E** – engagement. We improve creativity and confidence by developing strengths.
- R** – relationships. We create psychological safety by investing in connections to other people.
- M** – meaning. We work to find or create meaning in our work and other purposeful activities.
- A** – accomplishment. We set and achieve realistic goals, creating a sense of fulfillment.

New models add a final H for health, reminding us to maximize our energy throughout the day by eating, moving and recovering wisely, especially when we are busy and stressed or distracted.

EA & Positive Psych Coaching: A Natural Fit

I have long credited much of my coaching success to my background in employee assistance. To me, the affinity between employee assistance programs and coaching is obvious. After all, accomplished EA professionals and masterful coaches both draw on their specialized knowledge of behavior, motivation, psychology and business to train, consult, mentor and coach within the workplace.

It seems a logical evolution for innovative EA providers to embrace and leverage positive psychology and positive psychology coaching. After all, the idea that healthier and happier employees are more productive and innovative is a driving force behind the employee assistance field. Indeed, EA practitioners have been at the forefront of helping individuals and organizations function at optimum levels for decades.

In fact, our surveys have found that EA practitioners who coach are more likely to utilize positive psychology tools and frameworks and tend to focus more on helping employees cultivate positive emotions through the development of their natural strengths, traits and virtues.

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Editor's Notebook



Remote work. The ongoing COVID saga. Today's workplaces are more stressful and complex than ever.

Everyone is searching for tools, tactics, and strategies to help. Enter *positive psychology coaching*, a method dis-

cussed by Mickey Parsons in this month's cover story designed to enhance a sense of calmness and well-being and reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression.

"One example is positive psychology's PERMA model of happiness, which I have found to be an excellent basis for increasing resilience and psychological flexibility while promoting health, optimism, and a sense of safety," writes Parsons.

Positive psychology is a strategy for readers worth exploring.

If you're a Baby Boomer like me, you may have noticed that your brain doesn't seem to work as nimbly and swiftly as it used to. Productivity slips as it takes longer to complete tasks than it used to. Concentration becomes more difficult. And yet, the symptoms of cognitive decline, listed in this issue's *Brown Bagger* insert, are often subtle and not always apparent.

The good news is that as front-line health care professionals, EAP practitioners can offer much-needed support, resources, and targeted referrals. *In a day and age in which many Americans are working later into their lives, it's yet another potential niche for the EAP.*

In a polarizing world, trust is more important than ever – a topic discussed in *Lifestyle Tips*. Could a management consultation from the EAP help? Speaking of today's polarized society, actively addressing ways of being more civil are absolutely crucial. See the posts on my blog at www.writeitrightllc.com/blog

Finally, what's on YOUR MIND as a busy EA professional? What can *EAR* do that maybe we're not right now? Like you, we are here to help. Call or email anytime!

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Benefits Employees Want Most in 2021

By Alyssa Place

The coronavirus pandemic changed the workforce in 2020, and employees have high expectations for the benefits and perks their employers will provide in 2021.

A recent survey by the software company Citrix polled 2,500 employees and HR professionals to find out how employee expectations have shifted during the pandemic and what they are looking for in the workplace. These are the leading workplace benefits employees most want to see:

Workplace flexibility. Remote work has become the norm during the pandemic, and employees want to keep it that way: 88% of employees surveyed said they want to work for an organization that offers “complete flexibility” when it comes to their location and hours worked. Additionally, 83% of employees would consider moving out of cities and other popular urban areas if they were allowed to work remotely the majority of the time, the survey found.

Upgraded technology. Platforms like Zoom, Slack and other workplace solutions have kept the workplace running during the pandemic. An overwhelming 89% of employees said remote work technologies have made them more productive. In fact, 88% of respondents told Citrix that technological tools are now a major factor in whether they plan to keep or leave their current position.

Educational opportunities. Employees want an opportunity to learn new skills or build on their existing strengths, even during quarantine. Most (82%) of employees want training at least once a year to stay competitive in their fields, Citrix found. But employers have a large gap to fill: a report by West Monroe Partners found that 56% of employees feel their organization’s skills gap is *moderate* if not *severe*.

Diversity initiatives. Citrix found that 86% of employees believe that a diverse workforce will become even more important as roles, skills, and company requirements change. That said, 65% of employees are not confident their organization will actually prioritize diversity initiatives.



Less focus on output. While employers feared productivity would drop once employees began working from home, the majority of employers have reported the same or higher levels of productivity, according to Mercer. But 86% of employees would prefer to be evaluated by the quality over quantity of their work, Citrix found. They say a more hands-off approach makes them more likely to work harder and feel more valued. ■

Alyssa Place is senior editor with Employee Benefit News (EBN).

EAR Goes Bimonthly!

The year 2020 was a difficult one for many of us, both financially and in other ways. With the last issue of Employee Assistance Report (EAR), this newsletter has changed to a bimonthly (every other month) schedule. This issue will be available approximately February 1 as the February/March 2021 EAR, the April/May EAR will be posted on or about April 5, and so on.

This change should actually be a good thing for readers, as some of you were saying the monthly frequency was getting to be too much to keep up with. An alternating month schedule means you will be able to remain current on important EA trends, topics, and news, while taking a breather in between!

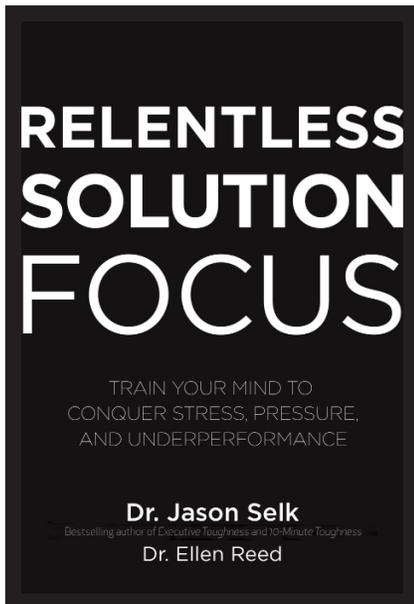
So, mark February 1 and April 5 on your calendar, and be on the lookout for timely EAP blog posts between now and then at <https://www.writeitrightllc.com/blog> We are currently posting a series on the growing importance of civility.

I hope your new year is off to a good start.

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Relentless Solution Focus



Employee Assistance Report (EAR) had the opportunity recently to interview Dr. Jason Selk and Dr. Ellen Reed, authors of the new book, “Relentless Solution Focus: Train Your Mind to Conquer Stress, Pressure, and Underperformance.” RSF has great potential as a strategy for employee assistance professionals.

EAR: We all know that negative thinking and pessimism is bad for our health – doing something about it isn’t easy! What practical suggestions would you have for replacing negative thoughts with positive ones?

Reed: You’re absolutely right. It isn’t easy, but anyone can do it with training! The key is to retrain your brain from the normal problem-centric way of thought. The idea is to take advantage of the brain’s ability to mold itself through training —

to make solution-focused thinking the norm. My colleague Dr. Jason Selk spent years studying some of the happiest and most successful teams and individuals on the planet, and he found that successful people have an uncanny ability to keep their focus on *solutions*. The even better news is training takes no more than three minutes per day.

EAR: In a nutshell, what is the Relentless Solution Focus (RSF) method, and why is it a landmark approach?

Reed: Relentless Solution Focus is defined simply as the mind’s ability to stay focused on solutions, especially in the face of adversity. It is essentially a way of training mental toughness and optimism. The enormous benefit of optimism is not a new concept. What makes Relentless Solution Focus a landmark approach is that it teaches people *how* to be optimistic. Our book teaches people how.

EAR: Why is it a mistake to focus on problems if a person really wants to get past them? What should someone do instead?

Reed: It is a common misconception that you must fully immerse yourself in a problem to get past it. My colleague Jason and I center on Expectancy Theory, which states that *what you focus on expands*. When you are focused on a problem, that problem gets bigger in your mind. It’s common to get so sucked into this thinking that you never even get to a solution, which

may be defined as *any improvement whatsoever to your current situation*. Don’t worry about trying to solve the problem all at once. Look for one inch of improvement at a time. What may seem slow at first is actually the fastest and most effective way to get to where you want to be.

EAR: In conclusion, is there anything else you’d like to pass along to readers interested in new and innovative ways of resolving problems for their clients?

Reed: In the book, we outline a simple and concrete training plan that takes no more than three minutes per day to complete. Here is something that can get the reader started—write down the following question, and put it somewhere you will see it frequently throughout the day: (“*What is one thing I can do that could make this better?*”)

When you catch yourself feeling stressed, worried, angry, or any other negative emotion, that means you are focusing on a problem. Use your negative emotion as an alarm to alert you that you are in need of a Relentless Solution Focus question (“*What is one thing I can do that could make this better?*”)

Asking and answering this question forces your mind onto solutions. Shifting your focus into solutions will allow more solutions to present themselves. Remember, look for just one inch of improvement. We see the amazing effects of RSF in our clients every day. Confidence and performance grow, as does happiness. ■

The Latest on Remote Work

Most like it, but challenges remain

Most of us were muscled into work-from-home (WFH) arrangements without having much time to prepare. Which of us didn't have to deal with partners talking way too loud, children insisting on watching PAW Patrol during a Zoom call, or attention-hogging pets that want to nestle on our laptop keyboard? While it might have been hectic at first, most of us have adjusted to the new normal.

Researchers with LiveCareer surveyed 1,000+ Americans to find out how remote employees feel about telecommuting, whether they want to return to the office or continue to stay in a remote capacity for good. The following are some of the key findings:

- ❖ Nearly one-third (29%) of working professionals will quit their job if not allowed to continue working remotely with their current employer. Another 62% of employees will prefer employers that offer WFH in the future.

- ❖ An overwhelming 81% of working professionals enjoy working remotely, with 65% stating that remote work has positively affected their work-life balance.

- ❖ The biggest WFH challenges include home distractions (59%), staying motivated (45%), and communication (37%).

- ❖ As many as 50% of remote staff agree (35%) or strongly agree (15%) with the following statement: **“I don't get as much feedback now compared to when I worked onsite.”**

- ❖ A *pay raise* is the only perk that might help win telecommuters back. ■

For more findings on the future of remote work, check out <https://www.livecareer.com/resources/careers/planning/is-remote-work-here-to-stay>

In the News

Workplace Giving Shatters Records

In an anxiety-ridden year, one bright spot was people's generosity. Despite fewer tax breaks for charitable giving, 2020 was a record-breaking year, according to recently released data from Benevity, which has been tracking workplace giving for 12 years. The following are some highlights:

- ❖ 2020 is officially the most charitable year on record, as tracked by Benevity. Through workplace giving programs, Americans donated \$1.5 billion by September 2020, which is \$100 million more in the first nine months of the year than in ALL of 2019.

- ❖ COVID-19 and racial justice protests sparked dramatic surges of giving in April, May, and June.

In an eight-week window in response to the pandemic, 450,000 people pledged \$640 million in donations to causes supporting vulnerable populations.

- ❖ In June, a new record was set with \$300 million in donations in a single month, with the majority going to causes advancing racial equity and justice.

- ❖ Giving Tuesday donations marked a 70% increase from 2019. ■

Source: Benevity, which operates workplace-giving companies for more than 600 global companies like Nike, Apple, Coca-Cola and others. For more information visit, <https://benevity.com/>.

Engagement has Never Been More Important

By Jan Makela

In light of the coronavirus pandemic, remote work has become an immensely powerful recruiting and retention tool for many organizations. In addition to the obvious benefits in flexible work schedules for employees, the organization also enjoys lower costs by saving on office-related expenses, and a boost in productivity as employees are no longer in transit on long commutes. Remote work can prove a perfect arrangement for employer and employee alike.

But all is not rosy in the work-from-home age. The following are some strategies for how corporate clients (and possibly your EAP!) can best manage remote employees. *Notice that all of them involve clear communication and engagement.*

Relationships Matter!

In a shared environment, relationship-building occurs naturally around the water cooler, in hallways, and before and after meetings. Without physical proximity, new avenues for relationship-building need to be used with remote workers.

- ❖ Managers should use instant messaging for the types of interactions that occur in the hallways with office-based staff. Ask how their day is going, send a link to a helpful article or share a joke.

- ❖ Managers are not going to just run into remote employees, so connections require deliberate effort. Set reminders in calendars to make sure informal check-ins don't get overlooked.

- ❖ Managers should encourage a couple of minutes of personal chit-chat at the beginning of calls. Ask about their weekend, family, or hobbies.

Be Available!

Remote employees can't stop by their boss's desk when they need a quick answer, so it's imperative that managers set aside time to be available to them. Respond to messages promptly so productivity isn't hindered. If the manager can't fully address a question right away, let them know you're working on it.



Share calendars! Doing so allows remote staff to see when they have the best chance of catching the manager between meetings. Remote staff can save non-urgent questions for regular meetings rather than sending multiple emails or instant messages.

Another avenue is video calls, which can build rapport by allowing colleagues to visually connect. It's more personal than a voice on the phone or text in an email. Video calls offer another advantage... callers are more engaged and less likely to be distracted by emails or social media.

Connect and Engage!

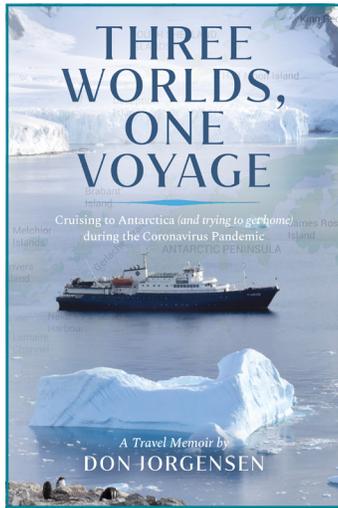
Managers may find that remote employees lack the buy-in and engagement of people who have worked in the home office. If the employee completely works from home, consider including them in home office training events and allow them to meet people that they may interact with but never see.

Managers may find that relationships improve and turnover decreases. *Finding ways for staff to connect and engage is the secret sauce to having successful employees that do not come in to the office.* ■

Jan Makela is an executive coach, highly sought-after speaker, and best-selling author of "Cracking the Code to Success and Be the Manager People Won't Leave" for which he received the 2017 Quilly Award. For more information, visit www.strengthbasedleadership.net.

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BIG Trip in a Most Unusual Year



Editor's note: Most of us had to cancel travel plans related to business or pleasure in 2020. Don Jorgensen, PhD, CEAP, a noted consultant and author of the December/January EAR cover story, "Is Your EAP Relevant?" had the unique experience of traveling to Antarctica just as the pandemic was starting and was likely left wondering

how and when he'd get back to his Tucson, Ariz., home in the U.S. His new book takes the reader through a fascinating story.

Three Worlds, One Voyage is the vivid, first-hand account of a small expedition cruise to Antarctica in March 2020 just as COVID-19 exploded across the globe. The author recounts the real-life challenge of finding a way home as the virus spread, reports of sick cruise ships grew, and international flight cancellations multiplied, and port after port turned the ship away.

The engrossing day-by-day account tracks the extended voyage as the author shares how the ongoing

crisis forced him to address personal challenges while all passengers and crew faced new questions daily:

- Will the ship be stranded at sea?
- Will passengers be quarantined in Argentina?
- Will the U.S. let its own citizens back into the country?
- Will everyone be forced to spend another three to four weeks on board?
- Will all passengers be required to sail on to Europe?

This book is a great read not just for the unexpected impact of facing a global pandemic abroad, but for anyone wanting to know more about an active expedition cruise, as captivating stories and photos take the reader on a journey across the Drake Passage and into the vast Antarctic peninsula.

The author delivers fascinating facts about the icy continent, a freezing water encounter, walking among penguins and kayaking among incredible icebergs, hungry seals, and humpback whales.

Three Worlds, One Voyage: Cruising to Antarctica (and Trying to Get Home) during the Coronavirus Pandemic is available in paperback or e-book format at Amazon.com: <https://amzn.to/3otDLCL>

Profits from the book will benefit ShelterBox USA, a global disaster relief organization. ■

Positive Psychology Coaching *cont'd from Page 3*

Summary

I encourage EA practitioners who want to strengthen their roles and relationships with their clients to undergo training in coaching and positive psychology. Doing so is a smart strategic move, allowing you to add services that will help companies develop talent, accelerate innovation, promote ethical leadership, and become more socially responsible. It allows the EAP to contribute to the transformation of client companies while reinforcing the value of your role. ■

Mickey Parsons, PsyD., is founder of *The Workplace Coach* (www.theworkplacecoach.com) in Atlanta, GA and assistant professor of

psychology at Life University, where he co-created the Coaching Psychology track in the Master of Science in Positive Psychology program. He may be reached at mickey@theworkplacecoach.com

Resources

Positive Psychology Coaching: Putting the Science of Happiness to Work for Your Clients by Robert Biswas-Diener

Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being by Martin Seligman

www.viacharacter.org

<https://www.gallup.com/cliftonstrengths/en/strengthsfinder.aspx>