

# The creator of positive value

We speak with pioneer in the corporate application of positive psychology and mindfulness, Dr Juan Humberto Young, Academic Director and Professor at the Executive Master of Positive Leadership and Strategy at IE University, Madrid, and author of Mindfulness Based Strategic Awareness Training about his definition of positive leadership and his Mindfulness training protocol.

Interview by Declan Noone



**I WAS RECENTLY READING MARTIN SELIGMAN'S BOOK FLOURISH, AND I CAME ACROSS YOUR NAME AS ONE OF THE STUDENTS ON THE FIRST EVER MASTERS OF APPLIED POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY (MAPP) AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA. WHAT IN YOUR PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL LIFE'S JOURNEY LED A BUSINESSMAN WITH YOUR EXPERIENCE TO STUDY POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY?**

There is one moment, which I remember in my life, where I was first introduced to the potential impact and power of positivity. Growing up, I would visit my father's business nearly every day, he was a certified public accountant and financial advisor, and I would see how he would develop relationships and interact with his clients. On one occasion, I was talking to one of them, and this man had been going through a difficult period. He explained to me, with tears in his eyes, how my father had taken him under his wing, had acted as a mentor, and had helped him change his own mind-set. He told me that he believed that my father's positive approach and his help in changing his mind-set had resulted in some significant improvements in his own life. His joy and energy were a clear demonstration of the power of a changing mind-set and positive emotions.

A number of years later, when I had moved from Panama to Switzerland, I too was experiencing a number of challenges. I had moved from a place where I was known and recognised, to a new country and culture, where I did not have the same name recognition or status, and in addition struggled with the German language. After a while, and unbeknown to me, these pressures and challenges had started to change me. I was no longer the happy person I once had been. So I decided to use mindfulness, something which I was first introduced to in the 1980s, to help me meditate on my life and my purpose. I decided to start my own business and to have greater control over my own life, and as the business developed and evolved I began a PhD at the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University. It was there that I was first introduced to some positive organisational



approaches, and these intrigued me. So much so that I ended up on the first MAPP with Martin Seligman. Here I learned that positive emotions are grounded in robust scientific research, which also confirmed in my view the validity of positive organisational approaches. In essence, my life journey to that point had afforded me the opportunity to both witness and experience the impact of both the positive and the negative, and to appreciate the incredible potential of positive psychology in business and management.

**IT IS COMMONLY SAID TODAY THAT THE ROLE OF A LEADER HAS EVOLVED TO THAT OF A 'CONTEXT CREATOR', WOULD YOU AGREE? WHAT SKILLS ARE REQUIRED IN THIS NEW ROLE?**

Well, let's consider the fact that management theory has its origins in the Industrial Revolution. For the first time in human history, you had the need to control and manage a large workforce and volume of resources to achieve the mass production of goods. This period had a command-and-control approach to management for a multitude of reasons, not least of which is the fact that this was a new phenomenon. Today we are in the 3rd Industrial Revolution where the source of productivity has more to do with intelligence, ideas and innovation. The challenge that lies before us is that you cannot direct people to be more creative, this is not how humans work; you must create an environment (the context) where they can thrive and in turn create those ideas and concepts that will propel your business forward.

However, accepting the changing role of leaders from that of a decision maker, strategist and lonely person at the top, to that of a context creator who helps others excel and grow, is difficult. There are a number of reasons for that besides the fact that the role of the leader as lonely person at the top comes with many privileges and rewards. Legacy practices and beliefs are still the dominant approaches because we develop leaders who believe that they can directly impact the productivity or outcomes of the organisation. That impact or outcome can only be achieved through having a strong and visible presence, so there is a greater likelihood of micro-management and as a result leaders have trouble letting go. There

is also the volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous workplace, marketplace and world in which we live, which encourages the very natural and human behaviour of wanting to control things.

In practice, a context creator is a leader who has accepted and acknowledged that in such a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world they do not have all the answers, while also understanding that solutions are to be found by tapping into the collective knowledge of your workforce. But to do so you will need to let go, to migrate from a 'power over' towards a 'power to' leadership approach. The challenge here is that we are making a counter-intuitive argument – achieve more by letting go. The skills required for this new role involve: self-knowledge and personal maturity, understanding your individual patterns of behaviour and thinking and how that influences you; capacity for greater concentration and focus; the ability to identify multiple perspectives and an openness to diversity; a capacity to envision and a design competence; and last not least an adaptive empathy to interact effectively.

**YOU ARE ESTABLISHED AS ONE OF THE LEADING GLOBAL ADVOCATES OF POSITIVE LEADERSHIP. HOW DO YOU DEFINE POSITIVE LEADERSHIP?**

This is a challenge, as I don't see a monolithic definition of Positive Leadership, because it is a blend of so many different things. It is not just the application of positive psychology, it is an infusion of many other influences including performance, productivity, and how you ascertain value creation and identify stakeholders. In business, leaders and managers prioritise the need to create shareholder value so if there is a difficult decision to be made, the need to create shareholder value wins through.

The manner in which this is achieved has significant internal implications within any organisation. All you have to do is look at the most recent Gallup research to see the levels of dis-engaged employees in the workplace. The Gallup State of the American Workplace report states that '51% of employees are actively looking for a new job or watching for new job openings', while engaged employee levels globally stands at only 33%.

# Mindfulness



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**A context creator is a leader who has accepted that they do not have all the answers.**

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So a Positive Leader needs to move from an ‘either/or’ mind-set and strive to achieve a balance between the competing needs of all of their stakeholders. Consequently, I would define a Positive Leader as someone who is systematically and fully committed to creating value for their shareholders, customers, employees, society and the environment. This involves pursuing and balancing multiple goals simultaneously. I believe that, by doing so, you create a thriving organisation that delivers sustainable growth and productivity. Indeed, in my consultancy work I have witnessed leaders and their organisations achieve continued and sustained growth and productivity, through building a culture and practices that engage their stakeholders and uses the collective knowledge to deliver solutions and create value for all.

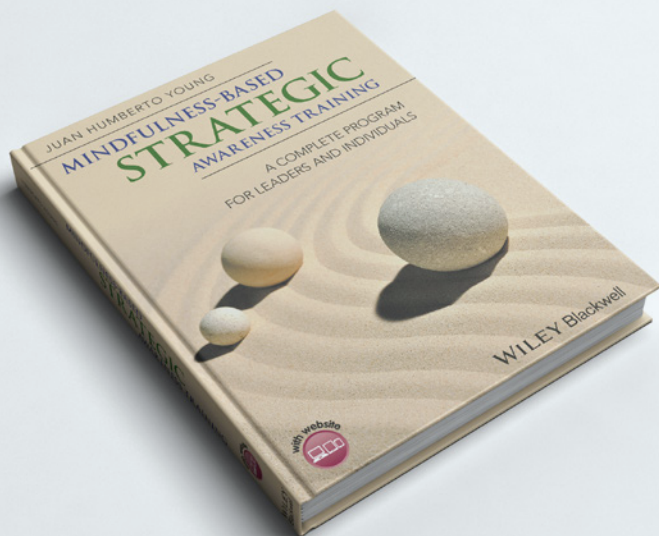
It is important to understand that being a positive leader and having a positive organisation does not mean that everyone is walking around smiling, joking and laughing. It is not just about creating positive emotions. You can have a positive organisation where people can be serious but also happy because they feel respected, challenged, and their needs are being met. Being a positive leader and creating a positive organisation is a process, it is challenging and requires focus, effort and time not merely a smile on your face.

## **WHAT LEADER IN INDUSTRY WOULD YOU LABEL AS A POSITIVE LEADER, AND WHY?**

This may be controversial for some, but I would choose Steve Jobs as a Positive

## **DR JUAN HUMBERTO YOUNG**

is the author of “Mindfulness-Based Strategic Awareness Training”, 2017, has many years professional and business experience in leading positions in banking and various industries. He grounds his work in lifelong academic education ranging from Finance and Risk Management to Positive Psychology and Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy at distinguished universities, becoming an authentic “scholar practitioner”. He has also extensive teaching experience in corporate development programs and at universities, currently as Academic Director of the Executive Master in Positive Leadership and Strategy at IE University, Madrid. He designed the curriculum integrating human development and management based on positive approaches.



## MINDFULNESS-BASED STRATEGIC AWARENESS TRAINING

WILEY-BLACKWELL 2017, OXFORD

Illustrated with real life experiences, Juan Humberto Young makes a compelling argument that we need to train a mindset he calls “strategic awareness” in order to lead fulfilling lives and become capable leaders in whatever context we find ourselves. Today’s volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world requires specific personal resources to tackle the mounting challenges. In his quest for constructive leadership Dr Young identifies two main sources that serve as nutrient for strategic awareness:

Positive Psychology and Mindfulness. Based on these foundations he presents a complete 8-week training program that is conducive to a positive and mindful life, both professionally and in private, through greater strategic awareness.

The book is very practical and offers an abundance of exercises, concrete instructions, handouts and helpful graphics to guide experiential learning (learning by experiencing and trying out as opposed to learning with your head). It attempts to engage readers of all walks of life and in particular busy professionals and business people who sometimes consider an appreciative and mindful stance as a kind of luxury, although it actually fosters sustainability and effectiveness.

Leader and I think it’s important to move away from creating an idealised version of what a Positive Leader is. In reality, we all move along a spectrum when it comes to being a Positive Leader. We do our best, sometimes we do it well, sometimes not, but each time learning and moving forward, as we do in life. I chose Steve Jobs because when you look back at how I defined a Positive Leader as “someone who is systematically and fully committed to creating value for their shareholders, customers, employees, society and the environment”, he achieved many of those things. Not all, but many. Yes, his temperament perhaps could have been better on occasion, but flip it and think perhaps he needed to lose his temper on certain occasions. He created an organisation where his employees were intellectually challenged, well paid, and proud to be working for Apple. His success in delivering to his customers and shareholders is self-evident. Were there things that could and should have been done better? Yes, beyond a shadow of doubt, but building a positive organisation is an evolving process, as is developing into a Positive Leader. Steve Jobs is ‘A’ Positive Leader, he is not ‘THE’ Positive Leader because there is not one type of Positive Leader.

## WHAT DO YOU SEE AS THE PILLARS OF POSITIVE LEADERSHIP, AND HOW DO YOU RECOMMEND WE EDUCATE AND TRAIN LEADERS TO BE POSITIVE LEADERS?

We all have the elements required to be a Positive Leader – they are the same elements needed to be a good person. I do not subscribe to the idea that you are a good leader even if you are not a good person. So it is important that you pay attention to the human in people. We need to move beyond educating the mechanical or technical skills and also seek to develop the person. Therefore, to develop the person we would build, without being too prescriptive, on the pillars of Positive Self-Development, Mindware, and Behavioural Fitness.

You introduce the individual to new concepts and approaches to encourage self-development, awareness of the components of their thinking and behaviours, while ensuring that they develop their understanding of these concepts and approaches through 1st

person experiences. Only by experiencing their impact and rediscovering qualities within themselves can they understand the benefits to themselves and others. Ultimately this will encourage them to act and behave congruently with what they have discovered/rediscovered during the process of self-development.

Finally, it's important that we provide Positive Leaders with frameworks that they can use and apply within their organisations such as Appreciative Inquiry, SOPA (Strengths, Opportunities, and Positive Actions), and Mindfulness-Based Strategic Awareness Training.

**MINDFULNESS IS AN IMPORTANT SKILL AND PRACTICE FOR A POSITIVE LEADER AND YOU HAVE DESIGNED A NEW MINDFULNESS-BASED INTERVENTION PROTOCOL CALLED MINDFULNESS-BASED STRATEGIC AWARENESS TRAINING (MBSAT) AND PUBLISHED THIS IN A NEW BOOK. WHAT IS MBSAT?**

Mindfulness-Based Strategic Awareness Training (MBSAT) is a first person experiential learning programme to assist or help individuals develop a certain type of ability – Strategic Awareness – which is reflected in mental clarity, emotional balance, and awareness of your body sensations. This combination allows an encompassing, strategic awareness so you can take decisions which are beneficial for you and others. When you consider that your current state of happiness or wellbeing, whether good or bad, is a result of decisions you have made in the past, you realise the importance of the decisions that you make. Essentially, MBSAT is developed to help people improve the quality of the decisions they make and as a consequence improve their happiness/wellbeing and that of others.

MBSAT has 3 distinct stages:

1. Focused Mindfulness: trying to help people achieve some level of calm in their lives because no positive transformation can happen if you are in a state of agitation.
2. Analytical Mindfulness: this is where we encourage people to move beyond the present moment and find the elements that have conditioned (experiences/prejudices/biases) their mind. Ultimately, they will confront those conditions and clear their mind of them thereby creating a clean slate on which to build.
3. Relational Mindfulness: developing an appreciation that everything happens in a social context. How can you evolve to see your relational self (how you relate to people & how your conditioning shapes your relationships)?

When people are trained in these 3 aspects of mindfulness in sequence and skilfully, it improves the quality of their life, and in leaders the integration of the 3 aspects can improve the quality of their management and leadership skills.

**WHERE DO YOU SEE THE FUTURE FOR POSITIVE LEADERSHIP?**

Positive Leadership will continue to evolve as more scientific research is published into human and organisational performance. The challenge remains advocating for a new type of organisation and leadership style as long as power and control are still so highly valued within organisations. In any case, the research currently in the public domain clearly supports the need for an innovative approach, and organisations will have to change to meet the multitude of demands they now face. Our challenge will be to ensure that positive organisation and positive leadership is not only to the fore in providing a solution but also delivers on its promise.

**WHAT IS NEXT FOR YOU?**

I am very fortunate that both my purpose and passion are inextricably linked. So I will be involved in building positive leaders and organisations through both my consultancy and university work.

More specifically, I am delivering the MBSAT in a number of institutions while also developing an advanced version of MBSAT which will focus on applying context to it across professions and industries, while also developing more positive frameworks for leaders to use in organisations.