

The Positive Leadership Game

Teaching Note

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Introduction

The aim of the Positive Leadership Game is to help you create a more flourishing workforce that greatly exceeds performance expectations. This game is an exercise in structured brainstorming on behalf of others to help discover possible paths to flourishing and high performance.

Why use a game format? We believe the game format helps people to engage more deeply in the structured brainstorming exercise. The competition inherent in the game creates focus and engagement. The game also engenders a sense of playfulness. Play is a central force for social life (Sandelands, 2003) and is a key mechanism for creating high quality connections between people (Dutton, 2003). Help seeking unlocks latent resources embedded within the group of likely invisible (Baker, 2003). And helping behavior generates positive emotions.

This card game is composed of 88 positive strategy cards. The content of the positive strategy cards is derived from scientific claims that appear in three of the seminal volumes on Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS):

- Cameron, K. Dutton, J. & Quinn, R. (editors.) *Positive organizational scholarship: Foundations of a New Discipline*, San Francisco: Berrett Koehler Publishers (POSFND)
- Cameron, K. and Spreitzer, G. (editors). 2012. *Oxford Handbook of Positive Organizational Scholarship*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. (OHPOS)
- Dutton, J.E., & Spreitzer, G. (editors). 2014. *How to be a Positive Leader: Small Actions, Big Impacts*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler. (HTBPL)

Game Set Up

We recommend that you seat players around tables in groups of 5. You will need one card deck for each table. It is also helpful to have some paper and pens/pencils at the

table to aid in keeping score and for players to take notes on the help being offered to them.

We also recommend priming the players with a positive mindset to set the stage for helping each other. While this is not required, it does help to warm up a group to the task at hand. There are several ways to set a positive mindset:

1. Ask players to think about the most positive organization they have ever experienced and what made it so positive? If time, they could share briefly at their tables.
2. Ask players to share one story with the others at their table. The story should reveal something important about who they are as a person.
3. Show a video clip that captures the spirit of generosity. Here is one clip in an organizational setting: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zIElvi2MuEk>.

Game Rules

1. Each player should choose a relationship, group, or organization they would like to improve.
2. Choose a dealer, shuffle the deck, and deal five cards to each player. Players should take a few minutes to read through each of the cards in their hand.
3. In the first round, the player to the left of the dealer is the focal person who will first introduce his or her improvement aspiration. (1 minute).
4. In turn, each player lays down a card that might help the focal person think of positive change possibilities.
5. When laying down the card, read the suggestion. If you can think of a better suggestion or can offer an idea about how to apply the card share it. Experience shows that your own creative ideas tend to get more points (30 seconds).
6. When each player has laid down a card, the focal person selects the most helpful card and explains why the related contribution was valuable (30 seconds).
7. The person who laid the card selected by the focal player gets one point.
8. Each player is dealt a new card in order to have five cards in his or her hand. The player to the left of the focal person now becomes the new focal person and shares his or her improvement aspiration.
9. The game continues until each player has become the focal person and received ideas on their challenge.

10. The person with the most points at the end of the allotted time is the winner.

Wrapping Up The Game

In our experience, it has taken groups about 30-45 minutes in order to get through one round of the game. This is because players tend to ask questions to clarify their understanding. In addition, players tend to provide context on the cards they lay down.

Giving a small prize (like a Starbucks gift card) to the winner at each table is optional. We have found players engage the game just because they find it interesting, like helping others, or get caught up in the competition inherent in the game structure.

You may also want to debrief players' experience in playing the game, particularly around the theme of positive leadership. Some questions we have used to wrap up include the following:

- What surprised you?
- What most persuaded you that an idea was most helpful?
- What are the lessons for you to become more of a more positive leader?

Ideas for Additional Uses of the Cards

In our debrief with groups, we have also talked about other ways to use the cards for high impact. Here are some of the ideas that have emerged that have the most promise:

- Start a regular meeting you have with your staff with one round of the game (or even one person making a request in each meeting)
- Have an intact team work on a collective problem, issue or opportunity and use the cards to brainstorm ideas
- Pick one card a day to inspire you to be a positive leader

References

Cross, R., Baker, W., & Parker, A. 2003. What creates energy in organizations? *Sloan Management Review*, 44: 51-56.

Dutton, J.E. 2003. *Energize your work: How to create and sustain high quality relationships at work*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Sandelands, L.E., 2003. *Thinking about Social Life*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.