

How positive psychology saved a charity from closure - HRM online

By Amanda Woodard written on February 3, 2017

Consider this story about the fortunes of one particular Australian charity.

Back in 2008 Camp Quality, a not-for-profit that supports children with cancer, found themselves in a situation that many organisations dread. With a budget black hole of \$1.5m, they were teetering on the edge of closure. Desperate, CEO Simon Rountree knew radical changes had to happen, and happen quickly.

He embarked on a program to change the organisation's processes and business practices but also, importantly, the mindset of the people who worked there. Little did he imagine back then, how positive psychology would turn out to be key to the charity's sustainability.

A natural optimist, Rountree believed that a large part of the Camp Quality problem was it needed to create good thinking habits among staff.

"A lot of managers will see a conflict averse person and send them off to a conflict resolution course. They are doing that to make the business better. I thought what can we do to make this not about work but about the individual. I started to look into how we could give people the skills to be more resilient, to deal with adversity and challenges every day not only at work but at home and in life."

Rountree delved into research coming out of some of the world's top universities to create a program he called Oranges, based on the science and practices of positive psychology. It aims to improve the health of the whole organisation by enhancing the wellbeing of individuals and it does this through focussing on seven areas of life: optimism, resilience, attitude, now (mindfulness), gratitude, energy and strengths. It's supported by analytics so people can see the differences the program makes.

"It's about how you help people to be more optimistic rather than pessimistic. How people can become more resilient to bounce back further than when the adversity started. How you can give people the right attitude so they're always looking for an opportunity, solution or possibility. How they can be more mindful to stop silly mistakes.

"How you encourage people to be more grateful because the more gratitude in your life the greater well being you have. How they can maintain energy within their day rather than going up and down like a yo-yo. And finally, your strengths – identifying what comes naturally, what you are hard-wired to do, so you use those strengths all the time."

If, like me, you're thinking this sounds well intentioned but a tad too wishy-washy, then the results of what became Camp Quality's survival blueprint will cause a sharp intake of breath.

At its lowest ebb, when the charity was in danger of losing its licence, it had 20 staff and hundreds of volunteers who ran hundreds of programs supporting hundreds of children. Today it has 120 staff, over 2,000 volunteers and 6,500 programs supporting more than 230,000 children. What's more, Camp Quality is currently ranked as Australia's most trusted children's charity.

Okay, but was it a one-off?

Seeing how Oranges was capturing the imagination of the staff and how people were waking up on Monday and saying they were looking forward to work, Rountree realised that they had a successful formula and began piloting the program with commercial clients.

Troubled national Rugby League club, Canterbury Bulldogs were the first to trial Oranges in 2009, after an approach from their CEO Todd Greenberg. It grew into a five-year partnership.

"We did sessions about attitude and optimistic thinking, bouncing back. We had a number of our kids with cancer talking about the resilience they needed to have," says Rountree.

"Todd started talking about the impact Camp Quality had and it sparked interest from other businesses like Canon Australia and Westpac and then APN Media and Estee Lauder. After we'd delivered programs to about a dozen businesses, we decided to commercialise it. We prepared a complete business case that showed there was a market for it," says Rountree.

Camp Quality then chose [PDT](#), an Australian-owned professional development training company operating in 10 countries, to be its commercialisation partner and exclusive Australian provider of the Oranges program.

According to PDT's managing director Paul Findlay, every CEO and HR director should care about their people having skills and tools to be more optimistic, resilient, engaged and energetic.

"If a business has a culture that's drifting and people are thinking of leaving, they should be looking at the wellbeing of their people... When people are happy, positive and resilient, organisations are healthy, stable and profitable," he says.

What's the Oranges secret?

The program targets common challenges such as:

- problem solving
- resiliency in the face of change and setbacks
- poor attitude and infectious negativity
- quality of work and productivity levels
- commitment, application and engagement
- absenteeism
- improving team performance.

Problem solving is one of the outcomes of the O or **Optimism** training. Drawing on the work of positive psychology pioneer Dr Martin Seligman, participants learn that optimism matters because it enables people to think differently, keep things in perspective, stay motivated and see obstacles as something that can be overcome.

In the **Gratitude** module, participants learn how to boost their happiness and that of others by expressing gratitude and appreciation.

Findlay says: "Research is universal that when you give someone gratitude they feel good but you feel even better. This simple action is one of the best tools to increase positive emotions and keep people energised and healthy. It's a powerful antidote to negative emotion and depression."

The **Energy** workshop concentrates on strategies to create fun in the workplace.

"Research shows the benefits of fun and laughter in reducing stress, improving heart rate, muscle activity, digestion and immune systems. In the E module you learn about the importance of [positivity](#) in maintaining energy and how this leads directly to greater levels of optimism, resilience and productivity.

"A positive state of mind is linked to stronger goal setting, innovation, concentration, creativity and mental capacity to make quicker decisions. And it can impact on absenteeism," Findlay says.

Improved team performance is an outcome of the **Strengths** training.

Findlay again: "Strengths are traits that come naturally to us and allow us to perform at our best. They are hardwired within our DNA and when used properly allow individuals and teams to flourish.

"In the 'S' module you will be able to identify your strengths, spot strengths in others and learn how to maximise these so that you and your team can fulfill their potential. Research shows that people who identify and use their strengths on a regular basis also perform better and are more proactive within their teams."