

Improving learning in Higher Education: Case study of the effects of Positive Leadership on students and faculty

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ABSTRACT: Positive Leadership has been introduced in numerous organizations and it has proved itself a very effective approach, able to generate extremely positive results on people and on the key business aspects, including the financials. The present paper describes a case study carried out in an Indian design academy, where Positive Leadership was introduced into two different modules corresponding to the Foundation and final years of the Design Program. Faculty were randomly selected, and they were then supported so that they could conduct their classes according to the principles of Positive Leadership. After the implementation, the results on students (their satisfaction, learning and academic success) and on faculty were analyzed and, like in so many other spheres, Positive Leadership seems to be able to produce a clear improvement of the teaching-learning process that presents an interesting opportunity for further implementation in Higher Education.

KEYWORDS: Higher Education; Positive Leadership; Pedagogical Innovation; Student Engagement; Learning effectiveness; Faculty-Student interaction.

I. Introducing Positive Leadership

Leadership is one of those topics that has been extensively described and researched. Bestsellers provide easy access to translations, interpretations and recommendations based on the leadership of historic figures, Marcus Aurelius (Hicks and Hicks, 2002)[1], who ruled the Roman Empire at its height, or US President Abraham Lincoln (Phillips, 1992) [2] constitute two interesting examples. When it comes to easy reading, leadership is also described through fables, like that by Patrick Lencioni (2005) in *Overcoming the five dysfunctions of a team*[3]. And of course, we have thousands of scientific journals, some of them with very high impact factors, where the most thorough studies and innovative theories are presented. The definitions of leadership are innumerable, so many that there seems to be little room for creating others. For the authors of this paper, leadership is linked to the idea of having a vision, and being able to engage people in order to make it happen. For a university instructor, the vision might just be the importance of learning a subject for the future professional career of his/her students, followed by the necessary motivation and guidance that will make learning effective and students successful.

For the authors of this papers there is also a shared conviction that, in general, it is easier to perform better in a positive environment, so highly dependent on the kind of leadership that generates it. A positive leader would normally create a more inspiring vision, and define healthier conditions for the team to be engaged and succeed in their endeavor. Lino (2017) [4] thinks that the essence of being a positive leader resides in focusing on the best in others while working on becoming the best of ourselves.

It is in this context that the work of Kim Cameron, a professor from the University of Michigan and father of Positive Leadership, has been examined, resulting particularly interesting, given its simplicity for practical implementation and, more than anything, because of the extraordinarily positive impact that it has shown when adopted by numerous organizations of very diverse nature.

Positive Leadership relies on four principles (Cameron, 2012) [5]: Enabling a positive climate where compassion, forgiveness and gratitude are fostered; Establishing positive relationships, assuming that when people receive love, support and encouragement, when they feel secured and valued their performance is elevated; Enhancing positive communication where affirmative and supportive language replaces negative and critical language; Finding the positive meaning that allows people to engage in work that is personally important and that will ultimately create a positive impact.

Cameron (2013) [6] also offers a collection of tools and techniques that allow leaders and organizations to focus on some key initiatives that will facilitate the incorporation of Positive Leadership. The author provides guidance on how to create a culture of abundance, how to develop positive energy networks, how to deliver negative feedback positively and how to establish and achieve what he calls Everest goals.

II. Applying Positive Leadership to Higher Education

Positive leadership is a tool which has changed many organizations and has impacted the way they work and progress, though it is still very new for the Education sector. Bringing in change the way we look into our classroom is utmost required, especially in Indian Higher Education.

As per Kurtz and Shelley (2009) [7], the leadership in any teacher can be inculcated when a teacher connects professional with self goals and consciously facilitates on four dimensions: team development, self development, students' development and institutional development. When the teacher is able to develop students intellectually, spiritually and psychologically, this will lead to the transformation from a mere teacher to a teacher leader.

Lavanya Raj (2009) [8] discusses this in her research paper with the use of a model which can be applicable to teachers and educators. Her paper presents a teacher leadership model and has been coined as CID i.e. Connect, Influence and Develop. The 'connect' part of the model refers to the connection of the educator's personal goals, institutional goals and vision, purpose of education and the students. The 'influence' parameter would impact the four key stakeholders: leadership of the institution, parents, colleagues and students. Regarding the 'develop' criteria, it refers to identifying the students' psychological needs and equipping them with solutions to age related problems, educational problems and social problems, which is the iconic platform for the conversion of a teacher from just an educator to a positive leader. (Sweeny, 2003) [9]

There has been no early research done in India on Positive Leadership in Higher Education, however there are some interesting experiences like the program named 'A life of Happiness and Fulfillment' by Indian School of Business (ISB) which is based on emerging scientific research, specifically from 'Positive Psychology'. (ISB, 2019) [10]

Like Green et al (2011) [11] conclude for the lower levels of Education, the success of any educational institution does not only depend on the academic excellence, but also on the holistic development and wellbeing that it provides to its students, which also means that education should make students more proactive rather than

reactive in their approach. Such statement does not refer to Higher Education, but stands correct for it too. There is an urgent need to help our students become future ready citizens and professionals, and it seems that Positive Education might be successful approach, as shown in the numerous initiatives that Professor Seligman, often referred to as the father of Positive Education, and a team of authors (Bott et al., 2016) [12] compiled in the report on the State of Positive Education.

It is important to note that India's Higher Education system stands at world's third largest in terms of students, which is just next to China and United States. Dr J D Singh (2011) [13] in his article clearly states that there have been challenges in Indian Higher Education, but the change is required by clearly defining the role of colleges and Universities in relation to new millennium, and also to specifically understanding the new scientific research on how people learn.

Indian Higher education is governed by University Grant Commission, which generally governs Indian Universities by enforcing standards and policies and also helps in coordinating between centre and state. According to Department of Higher Education government of India there are more than 17,000 plus colleges functioning under 2,000 plus universities (inclusive of government recognized, deemed and open universities). Apart from these, there are private institutes that offer various professional courses in the Higher Education level, and distance learning, which is also an important feature of the Indian system.

There are institutions in India like the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) which are globally acclaimed for their standard and quality of admission. More than 8000 students are enrolled in IIT every year, and its alumni are considered to be world class and have contributed for the growth in both private and public sectors in India. Yet Indian Higher Education system has failed to produce world class universities like Harvard and Cambridge (Dr J D Singh, 2011) [13]. Maybe Positive Education can make a difference in creating a national change, based the way teachers teach and students learn in the long run.

The incorporation of Positive Education would be possible, and so would the incorporation of the Positive Leadership approach which, like the former, is linked to Positive Psychology. Benito et al (2018) [14] visibly advocate for this approach, and have inspired the initiative described along these lines. They state that, like people see work as a job sometimes, or as a career when they take broader look and aspirations, similarly students can define their educational journey as completing a degree or hopefully as a professional career and personal projection. This statement raises questions such as can more students be encouraged to have ideas, enthusiasm and zeal that can guide their learning? Could students be subjected to an experience that helps them picture how their future professional life will be, and make them visualize that how their future work will have a positive impact on the society?

The members of this research team believe that eventually, by the introduction of Positive Leadership, the process of teaching and learning in the Indian Higher education context could be made less harsh and more humane, the engagement of teachers and students, and student contentment with the overall education experience could increase, dropout rates of students could decrease and there could be an improvement of learning effectiveness and a more holistic accomplishment of better outcomes.

III. A piloting initiative

The present pilot study takes place in a small private Indian institution of Higher Education, as part of a broader international project where another three institutions, belonging to the same global network of universities were also participating. Like in the case of the other international institutions, the hypothesis of the study was that, by incorporating Positive Leadership in the teaching and learning process:

- Student engagement and satisfaction will improve
- Faculty engagement and satisfaction will improve

- Academic outcomes will reflect more effective learning

Before the actual implementation of Positive Leadership started, quite a lot of preparatory work had to be done. Several brainstorming sessions, followed by some interactions with Kim Cameron, resulted in the elaboration of the Faculty Guidelines for the Incorporation of Positive Leadership into the Teaching and Learning process of Higher Education, which contain the interpretation of the principles of Positive Leadership into our educational context.

Faculty were then randomly selected, among those whose modules ran during the last quarter of 2018. One of the instructors taught a module in “Analytical Design Methods” to year three students, and the other taught a module in “Human Body and its Extensions” to foundation year students, both corresponding to the Design Program. After their acceptance, faculty participated in the specific development program and planned their classes, including some Positive Leadership ingredients in each one of them. As an example, below is the journal of one of the instructors, corresponding to the first week of the module he imparted:

- Personal introductions. Asked each student what they hoped to learn in the workshop and gave a brief overview of what the workshop is about and how it will enhance their design skills which they could use in their upcoming final project, as well as in their careers as interior architects.
- Addressed each student by name. Huge challenge for me but I manage to remember all 20 names in just one session.
- Requested them to change the layout of the room from a standard ‘class room’ facing a white board to a ‘studio’ format of groups of students sitting around a table which encourages collaboration and communication.
- Set up ground rules for mobile phones in the class as a mutual ‘agreement’.
- Appreciating their opinions and contributions by thanking them each by name.
- Introducing them to a global role model (‘big’ architects from Denmark) and their various architectural projects.
- Asking them to manually copy the design process in their sketch books to develop manual sketching skills, and to encourage focus, contemplation and reflection.
- Asking each student to present their sketches to the rest of the class and asking others to comment and thanking them for their contributions to the discussion.
- Giving on going feedback on their work taking care to maintain ratio of 5:2 for positive to negative comments.
- Introducing students to the notion of Ethical values in design and how every project by ‘big architects’ embodies some social/ political/ human value.
- Making the connection between ‘Values’ and how they can drive design concepts and innovation, be it for small, medium or large projects.
- Asking students to start 1. A reflective journal 2. A gratitude journal.
- Asking students “What shall we do next week?”. They suggested an outdoor trip next week.
- Personally thanking each student by name and shaking their hand at the end of the day.
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IV. Research methodology

The present research project adopted a mixed-methods approach, where quantitative and qualitative information was concurrently gathered, analyzed and connected. In the case of quantitative data, descriptive statistics utilizing means and percentages was produced, the analysis was then conducted, including the comparisons with previous years when data were available. In the case of qualitative information, focus groups and interviews were conducted and recorded, or summarized in writing by the actual informers. The thematic content was analyzed, and the emerging key concepts identified and presented in the results section of this paper.

The first source of quantitative information was a specific anonymous survey that the participating students completed, after being informed by the project leader. Only two demographic questions, regarding age and gender, were included. The core of the survey consisted of four Likert questions (1-5 scale) and two binary questions (yes/no): How satisfied are you with your experience in this subject?; How engaging were the classes?; How much did you learn in this subject?; Did the instructor contribute positively to your development?; In comparison with an average subject, would you say the experience in this subject was? and Would you recommend this subject to other students?. Two open questions were incorporated at the end, about what students enjoyed the most and general comments?

Additionally, some other quantitative student information was collected and analyzed: student general satisfaction with faculty, attendance and grade distribution.

With regards to the qualitative information, the first source were the two focus groups with some students who volunteered to participate. They were conducted by the project participants that did not have direct connection with the students, and in order to ensure the comparability between both focus groups, they followed some general recommendations and a common thread defined by the following guiding questions:

- Describe your experience in this subject
- Was it positive?
- How was the interaction with the professor?
- How was the interaction with other students?
- How would you describe the class environment?
- Do you see the sense of this subject in your future career?
- How much do you value the human component in your learning experience? Can you give some examples of what you experienced in this subject?
- Would you recommend this kind of pedagogical approach? Why?

Finally the voice of faculty was incorporated as key qualitative information too. Individual interviews were held, after which faculty directly expressed their main impressions in writing, as presented in section 6 of this paper.

V. Results on students

Students definitely expressed a positive difference in classroom experience both through the quantitative survey and the qualitative focus group discussions and interviews.

During one of the focus group discussions, they shared that amazingly for the first time in their life, their faculty would thank each student for coming to class every morning. One of the students expressed that 'we were surprised! But it felt very nice and we enjoyed it.' Adding further to this experience, students mentioned that they felt a marked difference in the faculty's approach in the class. Whereas in previous experience with the same faculty they only had one on one discussions; but this time they were encouraged to interact with peers and faculty together through healthy discussions. This helped them develop confidence and also encouraged sharing. Students started becoming more aware about other projects their classmates were working on and also learnt from the feedback being given to them. They expressed that this interaction gave them the opportunity to learn from 33 different projects and contributed to their learning. At the end of every session, each student was asked to openly share what they learnt during the session. These were then summarized by the faculty to bring together learning and close the session with clarity. They were also asked to maintain a gratitude journal, and this was sometimes shared in the class, which had a positive impact.

The table below contains the key concepts that emerged in the students' discourse during this first focus group:

Topics of discussion	Key concepts
Experience in this subject	Positive, interactive, engaging, comfortable, freedom, confident, encouraging, motivating
Interaction with the professor	Encouraging, Appreciative of smallest things, Friendly but in a professional way
Interaction with other students	Discuss freely, authentic and valuable feedback from peers
The class environment	Friendly, comfortable, more interactive, easy to participate, fun, interesting, motivating, dynamic
Sense of this subject	Decoding real examples, deep understanding of designer's perspective, created a very good foundation for the final design project

Table 1: key emerging concepts of focus group 1

As quantitative results are concerned, 19 students expressed the following opinions in the specific survey:

<i>What is your age range?</i>	100% 20-30
<i>What is your gender?</i>	76% female
<i>How satisfied are you with your experience in this subject?</i>	average 3.3 (1-5 scale)
<i>How engaging were the classes?</i>	82% very or highly engaging
<i>How much did you learn in this subject?</i>	82% much or very much
<i>Did the instructor contribute positively to your development?</i>	100% yes
<i>In comparison with an average subject, would you say the experience in this subject was?</i>	71% better

Table 2: results of the student survey (group 1)

With regards to comparisons with previous years, unfortunately the module where Positive Leadership was incorporated was shared between three faculty members, which made it impossible to extract attendance and grades information from the institution's systems that would refer only to the participating instructor. Student satisfaction with faculty, however, is personalized by instructor and could be compared with the results of the previous year, showing an improvement of **32%**.

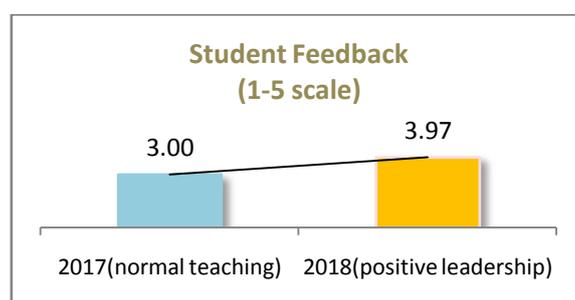


Figure 1: comparison of student satisfaction with faculty in module 1

With reference to the impact on the second group of students, during the focus group discussion, they shared that the most positive thing they experienced was that the class was very interactive and two-way, teacher was approachable, and their view points were not judged but appreciated, boosting their confidence in speaking in class. Students found it to be very different from what they had been doing in their higher secondary schools. They liked how their faculty started a topic and then gave them chance to build on it, which they experienced for the very first time. See the table below regarding the key emerging concepts during the discussion:

Topics of discussion	Key concepts
Experience in this subject	Interactive, Engaging, Learned new concepts, New inventions, Clear, Collaborative, Positive,
Interaction with the professor	Approachable, Comfortable, Interactive, New way of teaching, Not scared to ask question, Friendly yet professional, Clearing doubts, Constructive feedback, Appreciative
Interaction with other students	Collaborative, Team work, Feedback from team members, Helping each other, Knowing classmates better
The class environment	Good attendance (70%), Positive, Energetic, Study with fun, Comfortable, Participative, No scare, Constructive feedback, Freedom to share point of view
Sense of this subject	Mixed reaction due to new subject, Human component, Positive change in thought process, Clear understanding of Body and its extension with interesting examples

Table 3: key emerging concepts of focus group 2

The students' opinions were also reflected in the survey they completed, in particular when they compare with other subjects, as it can be seen in the table below:

<i>What is your age range?</i>	100% 20-30
<i>What is your gender?</i>	89% female
<i>How satisfied are you with your experience in this subject?</i>	average 3.1 (1-5 scale)
<i>How engaging were the classes?</i>	58% very or highly engaging
<i>How much did you learn in this subject?</i>	68% much or very much
<i>Did the instructor contribute positively to your development?</i>	100% yes
<i>In comparison with an average subject, would you say the experience in this subject was?</i>	95% better

Table 4: results of the student survey (group 2)

For this second module, the comparison of attendance, marks and satisfaction with the previous year was possible. Average attendance to class increased by 10% from previous year, and the average marks also increased by 7%. Although the focus group discussion reflected a very positive student experience and support by faculty, it did not show significant difference in the teaching quality feedback grade given by students.

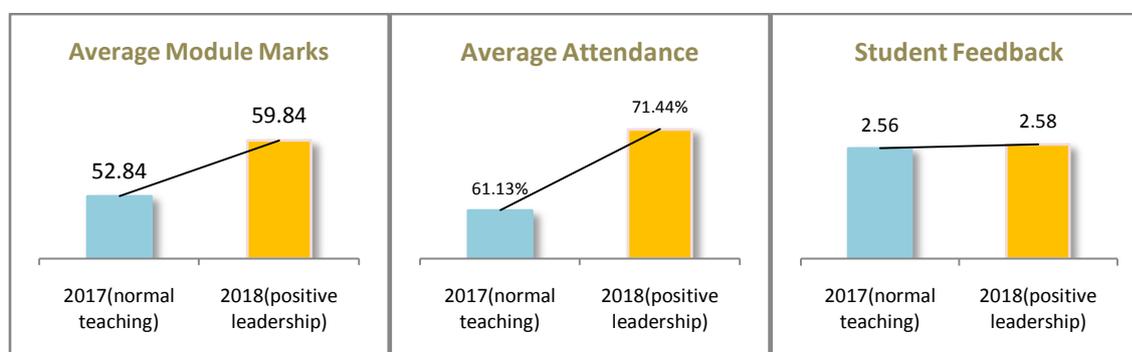


Figure 2: comparison of student marks, attendance and satisfaction with faculty in module 2

VI. The voice of faculty

The direct voice of the faculty that participated in this pilot initiative are presented below. The text contains their personal impressions, reflections and learnings:

Professor Badri:

“When I read the guidelines for incorporating positive leadership in teaching and Learning my first thought was “Hey, these are very obvious good practices, and I have been incorporating many of them already in my long teaching career”. But then there were some points I felt initially very awkward and skeptical about...e.g. A. Remembering and addressing every student by name. I am terrible with names and after nearly 3 decades of teaching, I felt I just couldn’t be bothered. B. Greeting each student as they entered and thanking them as they left. C. Maintaining positive to negative feedback ratio of 5:1.

The last one was especially tough because design pedagogy relies entirely on ‘crit’ or critique. It is considered good for the student to receive harsh, brutal critique in a design school as it strengthens their critical thinking, improves their ‘defense’ and prepares them to face the ‘real’ clients in their careers. Yet, I grit my teeth and faithfully followed the positive practices which in the beginning felt a bit staged and fake but I got habituated to them in no time. As they say “Fake it till you make it”. I am a follower of Mahayana Buddhism and I found a lot of resonances—cherishing others, avoiding harsh words, practicing humility and benevolence. It was a matter of extending those habits to the class room.

The climate in the sessions was palpably positive and relaxed as students were in their natural, spontaneous selves. They were laughing, joking, discussing, and playing music as they worked. Yet, their presentations were engaging and serious. The atmosphere was nurturing and inspiring and on the whole I think the positive strategies brought out the best in them. The average attendance was not so good but then I wonder not following Positive Leadership would have made any difference to that anyway? In fact, I think it might have only made it worse”

Professor Rupali:

“I was first introduced to the concept of Positive Leadership when Pearl Academy conducted workshops on it. I was immediately excited about the ideas and as they resonated deeply with me. When I started working on the Positive Leadership pilot, I was excited and my mind was buzzing with all the things I wanted to implement. Recognizing that I had only five weeks I decided to focus on three strategies - foster a positive emotional climate, build positive relationships and engage in positive communication. Almost all the activities we did were centered on these strategies.

It was interesting to observe the students’ response to the PL strategies being implemented. They felt empowered and started voicing their opinions openly. They felt appreciated which made them more motivated. Attendance was quite high for the module! They began to work as a team, helping each other and even standing in for each other in times of need. Students actually started mirroring some of the strategies I was implementing, without even knowing about the pilot and just through observation... e.g., maintaining a healthy ratio for positive vs negative feedback during peer reviews, communicating respectfully and recognizing each other’s contribution toward team tasks.

I found the experience of the positive leadership pilot to be highly engaging. I learnt a lot about how my own behavior affects and influences the behavior of those around me, especially that of students as they look up to teachers and educators. This is not to say that I didn’t face some challenges though. Remembering each student’s name and addressing them by their names was the biggest one. I tried to add an element of humor every time I made a mistake by making jokes about my memory, but I have to admit, this is one challenge I haven’t completely overcome!!!”

VII. Conclusions and recommendations

This study confirms that Positive Leadership has the potential to greatly improve the teaching and learning environment in higher education. The results from the pilot clearly show the beneficial effects of positive leadership on both the class room experience and the outcomes, ratifying the hypothesis of the study. In this particular initiative, the impact on the students was visible in different ways in each of the subjects. In one of the cases, an increase in average module marks, and attendance was observed, while in another it increased the teaching quality feedback grade for the instructor. Focus group discussions further validated that students were more satisfied and felt that the sessions were more engaging and the way they learnt was in the positive direction. They felt appreciated for even the smallest thing they did, which resulted in further motivating them.

Additionally, it is interesting to note the impact that it has had on the faculty themselves. They were more energized, looked for more interesting things to do and felt empowered by the success of a positive climate in the class. They themselves experimented in the classroom, reflected on the new experience, got new ideas and developed hypothesis for further active experimentation. The stages defined by Kolbs (2014) [14] regarding the experiential learning cycle were energized by the positivity they generated, and faculty became eager learners themselves.

This study confirms that Positive Leadership creates an active and enhanced learning environment in the classroom. It would be beneficial to the teaching and learning in the Indian higher education sector to take this pilot study ahead and do a longer term impact study of the same. It would be interesting to see if Positive Leadership can help students develop more respectful, positive attitudes that prepare them better as professionals and citizens. Further, those responsible for pedagogical training and development in India could explore Positive Leadership as an important route to enhanced outcomes for both faculty and students.

In the particular field of Design, this pilot becomes even more relevant. In a design college, where most of learning occurs through feedback and juries, the environment in the class and the relationship between the mentor and the students are key to empowering the learners to do their best. Remaining in the creative arena, the concept of creative leadership is also gaining strength these days, and could perhaps be made more effective by incorporating Positive Leadership into it. In our interpretation of it, creative leadership aims to make the world a better place, and consists of the strategies that will enable the realization of an innovative vision, where the leaders will create favorable conditions to get the best out of everyone, and for them to engage, work collaboratively and make positive change a reality.

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