

Positive Leadership: Using the five factors of PERMA-Lead to create extraordinary results

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'How manipulative is leadership?' I have asked this question at the start of many workshops for managers in recent years. Undoubtedly, this wording is provocative—and that is also my intention. But when the thesaurus suggests the terms 'influence' or 'steer' as synonyms for 'manipulate', then it becomes clear: Of course, a main function of leadership is to do exactly that. Yes, as managers we influence people, and that is a relevant part of our job! Only when we become aware of this fact does it become clear what this responsibility entails.

Positive Leadership is about creating a growth-promoting environment

'Every personal assessment must first and foremost refer to what a person is capable of. An employee should never be assigned a leadership role when he struggles with people's skills deficits rather than using their strengths.' One might think that this phrase comes from a radical social romantic who has never been involved with real organisations or leadership. But far from it! In fact, the statement comes from Peter Drucker (1909-2005) an Austrian migrant who became one of the best-known US economists. . He is considered the pioneer of modern management science and his books have sold more than five million copies. In the 1950s, he developed the 'Leadership through Objective', or Management by Objectives (MbO), approach that is still a widely used method of leadership.

For decades, common management theories have described the benefits of leadership approaches that use employees' strengths. Real world experience shows that leadership too often focuses on deficiencies. This becomes clear in managers' feedback that frequently focuses on weakness when something does not fit. Unlocking potentials while only correcting weaknesses is like waiting at the bus stop for the next train. In my opinion, managers aware of their role and their task to be a positive influence make the difference between leadership and 'everyday manipulation', i.e., accidental, unintended mutual influence. I do not believe that supervisors go to the office intending to depress spirits, reduce motivation to a minimum, and destroy every form of initiative and commitment. Yet it happens. Daily!

Good leadership is therefore its own bundle of skills and knowledge—a specific combination of partial competences—which, as in any other profession, can be good or less good. Excellent managers have the skills to recognise and promote employees' potential and to create an environment in which they, the workers, the organisation, and even society can flourish. And, Positive Leadership begins by accepting this challenge. Many people may know this management approach as 'strength-orientated' leadership. Today, however, this is only part of the truth, the concept has been enlarged. Research on this subject has grown rapidly in recent years. Any search for this term in scientific databases will show thousands of publications worldwide; new ones are added every month.

Positive Leadership is thus the leadership competence to create a working environment in which employees want to use and develop their strengths, be involved in what they do, feel valued for

their work, identify with their job, and thus feel motivated not only to orient themselves to the required performance, but also to contribute—to go the extra mile.

Positive Leadership is science based

Because leadership is a task which, by definition, influences other people, I see it as a moral obligation to act on a knowledge base that goes beyond personal experience. Isn't that tedious? Yes, for sure! But would you trust a doctor who has no long-term medical training because it was too tedious to study?

Commonly accepted psychological insights contain many myths that range from handwriting analysis reveals aspects of a person's personality to the full moon causes more violence. And, you may also have heard that some people think predominantly with the left brain and others do so with the right. All these assumptions have one thing in common: either there is no proof or scientific studies have refuted them.

Science has established an approach that supports decisions and develops theories based on social science data obtained with the best-designed studies and analytical methods (keyword 'evidence-based '). This relatively complex process must adhere to scientific standards. When it comes to leadership, it is especially important to critically review management concepts and assess their human impact. Evidence-based management relies on measurability. Positive Leadership, as we understand it today, is a leadership approach that strongly combines science and practice.

Which environment do human beings need to flourish?

Positive Psychology deals with the positive aspects of life as an adjunct to classical psychology and not to what one might presume to be negative psychology. The logic behind it is that the absence of something negative does not necessarily lead to something positive. Thus, the absence of depression, anxiety, or other mental illnesses does not mean that one feels the highest level of life satisfaction, happiness, and purpose. You can think of a scale that ranges from minus 10 to plus 10. Zero would be a neutral situation in which one neither suffers nor experiences special joy.

In his book *Flourish* published in 2011, Seligman presented his new theory of well-being with the PERMA model—an approach that defines the five basic components for the flourishing of human beings as: P (Positive Emotions), E (Engagement), R (Relationships), M (Meaning), and A (Accomplishment). This model assumes that measurable and controllable factors form the basis for flourishing.

In recent years, these five factors of the PERMA model have shaped research and resulted in many books on Positive Psychology. The PERMA model offers the significant advantage of providing a structure easily understood by non-scientists, of allowing activities to be grouped, and of creating a framework for comparable research projects.

From Positive Psychology to PERMA-Lead

The perspective of Positive Psychology has rapidly inspired different areas such as education, health, neuroscience, and many others. For example, under the leadership of American researcher Alejandro Adler, schools have developed exciting projects that focus on pupils' strengths and, as a result, significantly improve their mathematics test scores. This knowledge and the targeted use of personal strengths is thus the key to unfolding one's potential.

Analogous to the approaches of Positive Psychology, organisational research has begun to analyse companies or areas within organisations that perform better than average: the so-called high performers. This analysis is relatively straightforward because the outcome can be defined with 'hard'

metrics: staff turnover, absences, performance, etc. In 2013 my team and I sought to develop the PERMA-Lead Model, a practical Positive Leadership model built directly out of Positive Psychology. In fact, it took three years of intensive work until my team and I established a model that met these criteria. We translated many scientific questionnaires, assigned the individual questions to the PERMA factors, and exchanged information with other researchers. In several focus groups with managers, we reviewed our model for comprehensibility, spoke with trainers and coaches about their practical needs, and tested first drafts of the questionnaire. At conferences, we discussed the provisional model's usefulness with managers. Finally, we committed to the current model.

Thus, a Positive Leader is a manager whose leadership behaviour positively influences the employees' PERMA. The PERMA-Lead Model defines Positive Leadership as a manager's specific contribution to increasing PERMA as outlined in Figure 1.



Fig. 1: The PERMA-Lead Model

The employees' PERMA thus results from Positive Leadership. Of course, the manager is only *one* influential factor. Various aspects such as team dynamics, workplace equipment, economic conditions, and personal sensitivities also influence the PERMA of the organisation's members. However, leadership is a relevant factor influencing the PERMA. Positive Leadership is ultimately the part that the leader contributes to each of the five factors. Our studies could identify the following behaviours that essentially constitute a Positive Leader:

P-Lead: A Positive Leader helps employees feel comfortable, satisfied, and joyful at work.

E-Lead: A Positive Leader helps empowers employees by assigning tasks that correspond to their individual strengths. The leader supports employees in recognising abilities.

R-Lead: A Positive Leader ensures that employees in the team respectfully support each other. The leader encourages everyone to feel like part of the team.

M-lead: A Positive Leader helps employees make sense of their work experience and know the importance of their work while telling employees that they are doing meaningful work.

A-Lead: A Positive Leader rejoices with and praises employees when they accomplish goals. When something has been achieved, positive feedback is given.

Numerous companies, such as IKEA or Bosch, have successfully used PERMA-Lead. Ludger Ramme, President of the CEC-European Managers in Brussels and thus a recognised social partner of the EU Commission, represents around one million managers. Mr Ramme is convinced that managers in Europe can positively influence political development with the five elements of the PERMA-Lead Model. Christian Schug, former CEO of Lidl Austria, makes it clear: *'This Positive Leadership approach opens the way to a culture of trust and promotes the development of our employees. The model's scientific foundation helped us decide to implement this approach as a basis for our leadership culture.'* The employees' feedback confirm this approach. In 2020, Lidl Austria was named one of the best employers in Austria for the seventh consecutive time by the renowned Great Place to Work Institute.

Scientific research about PERMA-Lead

'What is the point for the company?' I have been asked this question most often in recent years. Personnel developers and human resource managers in general have the growing challenge of justifying the offers of workshops, seminars, coaching, and cost-intensive management programmes. Therefore, in recent years, several studies have tested and interviewed people about PERMA-Lead, have collected self and external assessments, and have linked PERMA values among managers and employees with other psychological and business indicators. Figure 2 shows some quantifiable metrics that studies show have improved as a result of PERMA-Lead.

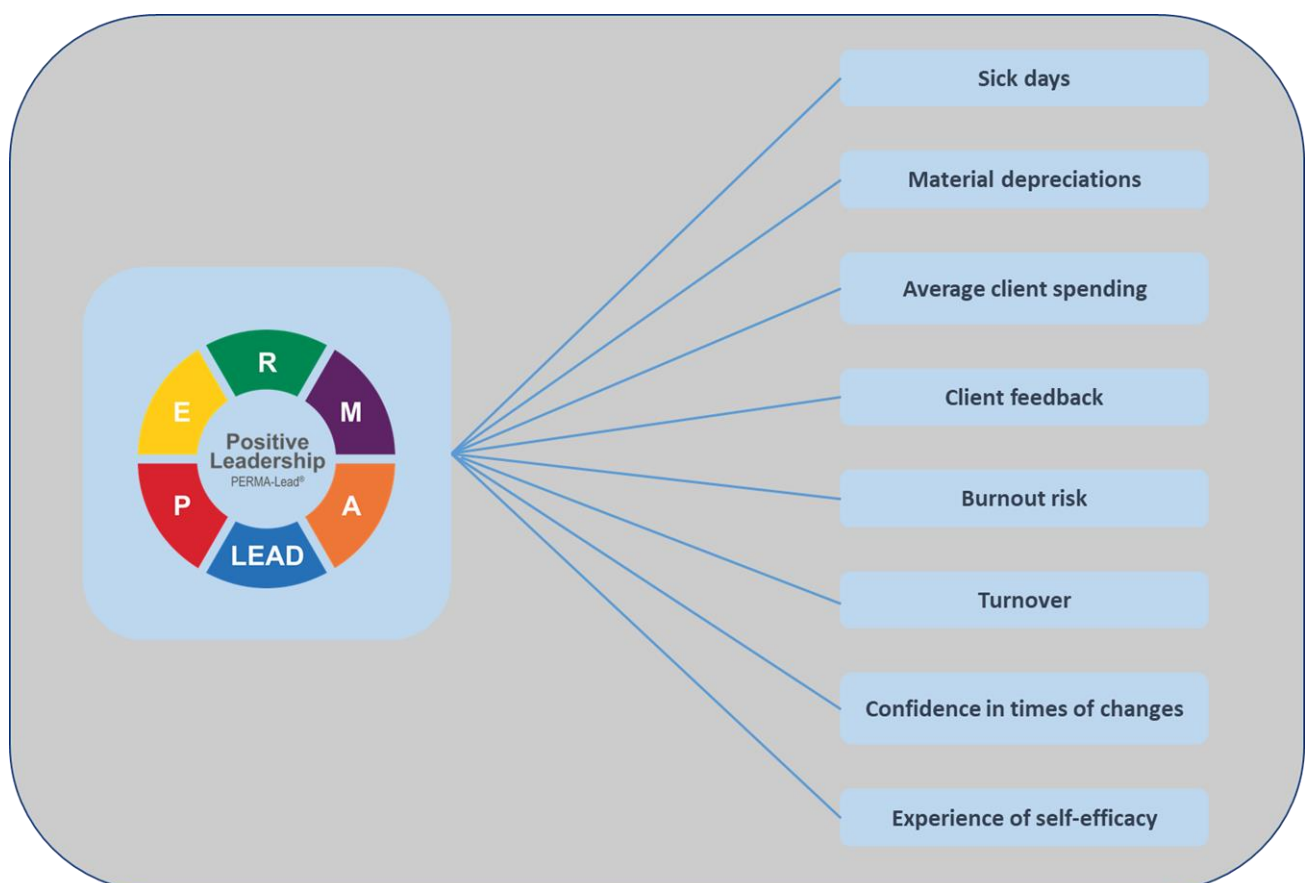


Fig. 2: Metrics scientifically shown to have improved through PERMA-Lead

For example, a positive correlation exists between employees' PERMA and reduced sick leave. On the one hand, higher sickness rates lead to an additional burden on the rest of the team, which has an unfavourable effect on their well-being. On the other hand, research shows that particularly positive emotions and the quality of relationships have a demonstrable effect on people's health and even have a measurable influence on whether someone is infected with a cold or not. One of our research projects shows clearly that a Positive Leadership style also has this effect: Higher Positive Leadership behaviour of the manager correlates with lower average sick-leave days in a team. Our research also noted that the longer people work together, the better this affects the team's average PERMA. Another important topic in organisations is employee turnover. A continually high turnover rate in companies does not only lead to a permanent migration of knowledge relevant to the company, but also has a lasting effect on those employees who remain in the company. We recently finished a study that suggests an interesting interaction: When team members rate their direct manager low in PERMA-Lead, they plan to leave the company twice as often compared to those teams with leaders rated high in PERMA-Lead.

And, a recently completed study on the current situation indicates that the corona pandemic will permanently change many organisations. The associated changes trigger fears in many employees about the future. Our recent research clearly shows that Positive Leadership improves employees' confidence that they can cope well with these changes.

[Practical tools to measure PERMA-Lead](#)

Three PERMA-Lead online instruments are currently available and are already being used in numerous companies:

The **PERMA-Lead Profiler** is a very easy-to-use tool with immediate results. For this purpose, a manager answers various questions. The evaluation takes place directly after the testing. This shows management which PERMA-Lead areas have already been tapped to their full potential and which still have potential for development. In addition, the PERMA-Lead Profiler shows the manager's self-expectations. This instrument very effectively helps in deciding the fields of action to be given higher priority for further development during everyday leadership.

The **PERMA-Lead 360° Feedback** is much more extensive, and therefore more insightful. It compares the manager's self-assessment with three further external assessments: that of the employees, that of the manager's supervisor, and a third group usually made up of colleagues of equal rank. It also shows in detail all expectations of the different groups. This tool reveals much more information than the PERMA-Lead Profiler, since along with the PERMA-Lead factors, it also considers a whole bundle of management competencies and career-promoting behaviour. This process can result in individual coaching, further individual development of managers, and regular assessments of the existing practices. A special added value is using the results to measure the impact of management programmes. It also has the advantage of allowing the participants to define goals based on the status quo and to identify where further training should be focused.

The **PERMA-Lead organisational culture analysis** reveals a company's management culture and expectations and allows further tailor-made training measures based on the status quo. The company analysis reveals existing strengths, the largest potential fields of development, and areas of greatest similarities with and differences between self-assessment and external perception. Particularly when planning the management development programmes or general change processes, it makes sense to first carry out a company-specific assessment of the current situation and then to start precisely from there.

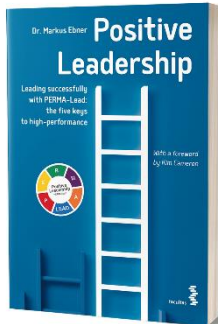
Detailed examples of best practice in using these instruments can be found in my forthcoming book *Practicing Positive Leadership with PERMA-Lead*. More than 400 consultants have already been certified for these procedures and offer them to organisations. Several institutions now offer PERMA-Lead certification workshops.

It's always about taking the first step

Every journey begins with the first step. It does not matter whether the destination is the supermarket around the corner or a village on the other side of the world. The helpful question, after all, is: Which part of Positive Leadership can be implemented? Positive Leadership is not about 'everything or nothing'. Nor is it an issue of specifically intervening once; instead it is about integrating at least parts of this leadership approach and keeping up with it. If companies want to introduce Positive Leadership as an organizational culture, this is not like visiting a garage to exchange worn tyres for new ones. Rather, it is a change in the value system that can also encounter resistance. Moreover, old and new values will coexist for some time, which may create problems. The recipe for success is to stay the course: take one step, establish it and make it a habit, and then take the next step. This is the basis for sustainable and lasting change and therefore also applies to establishing Positive Leadership.

Annotated bibliography of relevant published efficacy studies of the application

ranked by importance



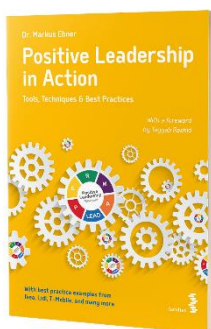
Ebner, M. (2020). Positive Leadership: Leading successfully with PERMA-Lead: The five keys to high performance. Facultas Verlags-und Buchhandels AG.

This book contains a full description of the PERMA-Lead model of Positive Leadership including all relevant worldwide studies for every single factor.

Chapter 4 is a collection and a detailed description of different studies about PERMA-Lead, my team and I have carried out in the last years. (e.g. the effect of the approach on a) sick leave days in teams, b) on average client spendings in supermarkets, c) stress exposure of employees, d) burnout risk of employees, e) the relationship between PERMA-Lead and creativity in finding solution for managers, f) the relationship between personality (BIG 5) and Positive Leadership behavior of the manager, g) the role model effect - the influence of experienced leadership on one's own leadership style).

Chapter 10 shows the testing theoretical parameters of the PERMA-Lead questionnaire for measuring Positive Leadership as well as a comparison with the PERMA-Profiler (by Butler & Kern, 2016) and the PsyCap (by Luthans et al., 2007).

The foreword was written by Kim Cameron



Ebner, M. (2021). Positive Leadership in Action: Tools, Techniques & Best Practices. Facultas Verlags-und Buchhandels AG.

This book contains guest contributions from companies and organizations (e.g. IKEA, Lidl, SOS-Children's Villages, T-Mobile (Magenta), Aareal Bank AG, CEC European Managers, ...) to share details of how they use the PERMA-Lead model in practice.

It also include different Positive Leadership tools, for example the "4 evening questions".

The foreword was written by Tayyab Rashid



Longinus, A., & Ebner, M. (2020). Führung als Burn-out-Prävention. CNE Pflegemanagement, 7(06), 7-10.

This (German) Journal provides research to practice articles in healthcare. In this study we repeated an older study (about the effect of PERMA-Lead on the burnout risk of employees) in the field of healthcare.



Ebner, M. (2017). 4-Evening-Questions: Eine einfache Technik mit tiefgreifender Wirkung. Organisationsberatung, Supervision, Coaching, 24(3), 269-282.

This (German) Journal provides research to practice articles in coaching and organizational consulting.

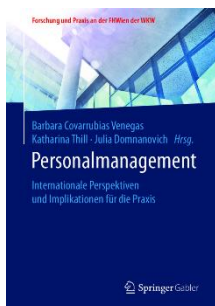
In this study I show the effect of a strength-based technique I developed. It focuses on the factor of Engagement in the PERMA-Lead Model. The technique and the results are described in English in my book "Positive Leadership in Action".



Ebner, M. (2021). Positive Leadership: Entfaltung ermöglichen. ManagerSeminare, 01/2021, 18-25.

That (German) Journal provides research to practice articles in professional training of managers.

This article lists, among other things, the effect of PERMA-Lead on the burnout risk of the manager himself.



Ebner, M. (2018). Positive Leadership und Positive Psychologie im interkulturellen Kontext. In Personalmanagement (pp. 283-303). Springer Gabler, Wiesbaden.

This (German) book chapter describes intercultural aspects of Positive Leadership with a main focus on the PERMA-Lead model.