

Values and Positive Thinking

BY MICHAEL HENDERSON

In the February 2006 issue of *Time* magazine, an article outlined the latest approach to psychotherapy that is creating quite a stir in the psyche community. Dr Steven Hayes, Foundation Professor of Clinical Psychology at the University of Nevada, has challenged the traditional and established approach of cognitive therapy with a new approach to working with clients that involves identifying their personal values. Dr Hayes has developed a successful approach called Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) for people suffering from depression and anxiety attacks.

ACT is a different approach to previous forms of therapy in that it does not attempt to address the problem area head on. The ACT approach suggests we should acknowledge that negative thoughts recur throughout life and instead of challenging them (as suggested in other forms of therapy especially behavioural and cognitive therapy), we should concentrate on identifying and committing to our values. This approach suggests for example that if you have negative thoughts such as "I'm hopeless" or "Nobody loves me " that you firstly accept you are having those thoughts ("Oh, there I go thinking of myself as being hopeless again"), and then ignore the thought and act in a manner that aligns with your highest priority values.

The method suggests that spending time convincing yourself or being challenged by a therapist about how and why you feel you are hopeless and working towards understanding the problem is slow and in fact only reinforces the belief. In other words, thinking more deeply about being hopeless actually and paradoxically reinforces the sense of hopelessness. Dr Hayes says that if instead of saying "I am depressed," we are far better saying "I am having the thought that I am depressed." This immediately provides the option of choices other than being depressed and if those choices are based on our highest priority personal values, we quickly move into a more positive and meaningful mind set. Identifying and living your highest priority values places the context and expression for these values into the foreground and the depression into the background. In this simple shift, the negativity is contained and managed rather than being experienced as all-pervasive and powerful.

The scientific research on ACT is impressive. Hayes and his colleagues summarised the results of thirteen trials where ACT was compared with a range of other treatments after as long as a year. In twelve of the thirteen cases, ACT outperformed the other approaches. ACT patients scored an average of 59% lower on the depression scale. Other results with psychotic patients showed ACT patients were being hospitalised 50% less after four months of treatment. Similarly, success was noted with drug and substance abuse patients and with people giving up smoking.

So what does this have to do with organisational performance?

Well, for those readers familiar with our values work, you will see amazing similarities with our *Finding True North* values process in which people clarify, embody and align with their highest priority values. If accepting that we are not where we want to be in our life and then realigning with our highest priority values can have such a positive impact on people with such clinical conditions, imagine what the process has to offer for healthy people who are merely disengaged or feeling low in morale and motivation. After twelve years of working with personal values in organisations we can assert the advantages are powerful and real.



To find out more about the values process, contact us or order a copy of our book *Finding True North*.

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