

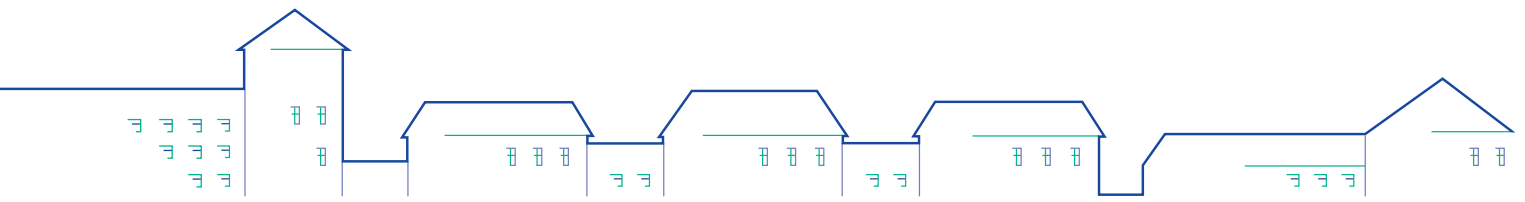
Taking the Lead - Interdisciplinary Approaches from Science and Practice The Leader as a Proactive Culture Developer!?

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Positive Leadership in the Public Service

The term “positive leadership” was largely coined by Kim Cameron, a business professor at the University of Michigan (Cameron, 2008; Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003). He transferred the thinking of so-called “positive psychology”, a psychology that primarily focuses on promoting people’s strengths in companies. Positive leadership thus focuses on the development of the potential of people working in organizations. Transferred to administration, this means that here, too, leaders become aware of the specific strengths of the employees working there and promote them. This means that in addition to leadership focusing on fixing problems, leadership should also focus on nurturing the potential of people working in the public service.



Dr. Markus Ebner

Leadership in change

What actually makes a good leader? This question has been answered quite differently over the last hundred years. One of the first approaches was that the best person to take on leadership responsibilities is the one who has the highest expertise in the subject matter itself (Kirchler, 2011). Quite concretely the best doctor in the team should become ward leader - at least that was the logic of this approach. In later decades, the image of good leadership changed. Now, a good leader was defined as someone who is able to shape good relationships within the team. And in the late 1960s, it was firmly believed that all people strive for self-fulfillment - and a good leader should encourage that.

As different as these approaches are, they have something in common: namely, that there is one leadership style that is right for all people in all organizations in all cultures. What was commonly observed in leadership approaches until the 1980s is this: if an approach seems logical, appears coherent and is endorsed by an expert, then it is probably correct. Eminence based is the half-joking term for the unchecked adoption of expert opinions. This approach has been fundamentally changed by leadership research in recent decades. Leadership means, in very basic terms, steering oneself and other people in a certain direction, thus influencing and creating frameworks in which employees show behavior that is favorable for the respective company or the specific task. The advantage of this definition is that the different quality of leadership thus becomes measurable! If different leadership styles have different effects on the company - e.g. on performance, job satisfaction, fluctuation, absenteeism, burnout risk, health, etc. - then it is possible to make an objective statement about which leadership approach is the better one under specific conditions. And this is precisely the task of so-called evidence-based leadership research: every leadership approach that is propagated is first and foremost considered as a hypothesis - and this is then tested in practice for measurable effects and side effects.

Positive psychology - exploring success

Evidence based was also central to the birth of positive psychology. Just over 20 years ago, one of the world’s most renowned scientists and psychologists, Martin Seligman, became president of the American Psychological Association. In his inaugural address, he noted that since its inception, psychology has predominantly

dealt with only one part of people - those who suffer (Seligman, 1999). And he criticized the fact that psychology has developed many (necessary!) differentiated diagnoses for human problems but cares very little about what makes people happy and what they need to develop their full potential. The professor consequently called on psychologists to also conduct thorough research into those areas that deal with positive aspects such as optimism, courage, future orientation, etc. The basic dogma here was that the absence of depression, anxiety disorders, inner resignation etc. does not automatically mean happiness, development or motivation for achievement - but rather leads to a neutral state. Couples who do not find themselves in front of the divorce judge do not automatically have happy relationships and I even suspect that a not so small percentage of relationships stay together for reasons other than relationship happiness.

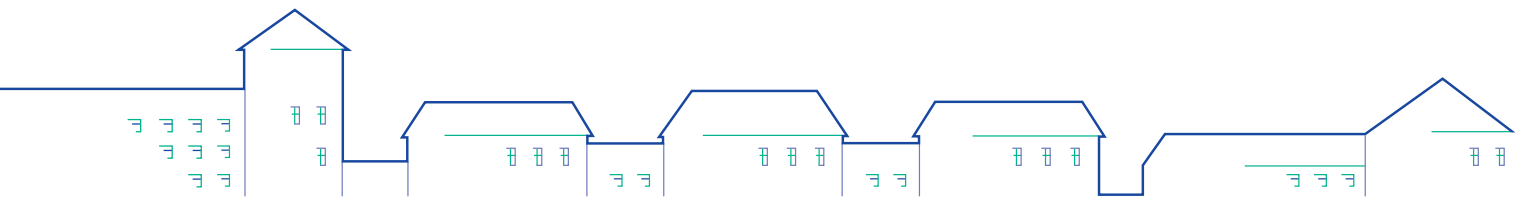
Thus, while we can learn from the research findings of the negative aspects in people, what can we possibly do to avoid them. However, in order to specifically promote positive dynamics, it is necessary to take a close look at these and the necessary conditions for their emergence.

This speech by Seligman is seen as the starting point for that branch of psychology known today as 'positive psychology'. The view of 'positive psychology' has quickly inspired related fields. In leadership research, a resource - and strength-oriented leadership approach has been developed under the term "positive leadership". Practice shows that leadership is all too often deficit oriented. This is already evident in the feedback that leaders communicate: Feedback is often weakness-oriented and is predominantly given when something does not fit. In the worst case, this leads to people in a company no longer being aware of their strengths.

The roots of positive leadership

"An employee should never be entrusted with a leadership task if he or she is struggling with the competence deficits of his or her people instead of using their strengths."

Sounds like the idea of a glorified social romantic, doesn't it? Far from it! In fact, the statement comes from Peter Drucker (1909-2005), one of the most well-known US economists with Austrian roots. He is regarded as the pioneer of modern management theory and founded the now widespread approach of "Leading by Objectives" or Management by Objectives (MbO) (Drucker, 1954). Drucker's statements make it clear that strength orientation is not an invention of recent years but has influenced management theories long ago. However, it was not until the wave of positive psychological research spilled over into the business sector that a systematic and scientific investigation into sustainable and measurable success factors within organizations truly commenced. While it was already known which factors promote burnout, people now began to take a greater interest in those people who remained healthy despite working conditions that posed a risk of burnout. The deficits that need to be compensated for in order to do one's job well have long been the subject of annual staff appraisals. However, what aspects are relevant for someone not only to be good, but even to become excellent and develop their full potential - this is what this new current of psychology was interested in.



Kim Cameron, a renowned economics professor at the University of Michigan, was, as previously mentioned, among the first to apply the principles of “positive psychology” to businesses. This approach has gained particular relevance due to the anticipated economic impacts of the Corona crisis. As early as the 1980s, he recognized in his research that companies that have to make cuts usually have to deal with the same collateral damage: increased conflicts, less communication, and rising mutual distrust. These and many other undesirable effects led to a measurable drop in performance in the businesses studied. But he also recognized exceptions. Namely, companies that really flourished through these measures and unfolded their full potential. His interest as a researcher was aroused: What exactly do these companies do differently that not only continue to exist after a downsizing process, but can demonstrate even greater success than before? The result of his studies was that the type of leadership was one of the very big factors that marked the difference between the survival and the flourishing of an organization after a difficult period. His research shows that the difference is measurable in ‘hard’ metrics such as profitability, employee engagement, innovation, customer loyalty and more. Kim Cameron gave this still intangible leadership style a name: positive leadership.

Leadership in the public service - a special situation?

In general, one could start from the fact that good leadership or the desire for leaders depends little on the type of company. Nevertheless, especially in the public service, due to the special position of the organization, there are some relevant aspects that have a significant influence on leadership.

For example, organization-specific legal requirements must be observed: Leaders in the public service are bound by certain legal requirements that do not apply in other organizations. These specifications include regulations on personnel administration, budget management and decision-making.

Another distinguishing aspect is responsibility to the public: In the public service, managers are directly responsible to the public and must be transparent about their decisions and actions. The public service is also far more visible and therefore the pressure to justify the organization to the public is higher than is the case with other companies.

A relevant distinguishing feature is also the importance of profit orientation: In the public service, the primary concern is the fulfilment of public tasks and the well-being of citizens, whereas in business, profit maximization and competitiveness are usually in the foreground.

This usually has an impact on the style of leadership practiced: In many cases, the leadership style in public organizations is more formal and hierarchical, while in business a transformational or participative leadership style is common.

What framework conditions are needed for the development of potential?

People have different strengths - most agree on this point. But why do some people develop their strengths further, while they atrophy in others? Is it only up to the person him/herself whether he/she uses and develops his/her strengths in

life, or is this also co-determined by other aspects? Quite soon, “positive psychology” realized that a focus only on the individual is not enough. It was noticed that in some schools the students literally blossomed, while in others this was not the case. Country comparisons showed that even with similar economic conditions, the satisfaction of the people living there can vary greatly. And they found companies in the same sector where the employees were highly innovative and committed, while in other organizations they were just doing their job. The trail was thus laid - obviously there must be certain factors that are like nutrients for people to develop their potential. About ten years ago, a model was published based on the research results that is now seen as the standard for potential development: The PERMA model (Seligman, 2011). Each letter of PERMA stands for a prerequisite that people need in order to develop their full potential and each individual aspect can be measured and influenced.

- **Positive Emotions:** The regular experience of positive emotions such as joy, pleasure or fun is an important factor for the well-being of every person. These are emotions that strengthen us and that we experience as pleasant.
- **Engagement** (engagement; being able to contribute): People need the opportunity to develop their potentials, to unfold their strengths and to use them in their lives. When the right level of challenge is found between overchallenge (anxiety) and underchallenge (boredom), a flow experience occurs.
- **Relationships** (beneficial relationships): Being part of a network, feeling part of it and being able to rely on others is an important basis for people to realize their potential. Whether friendships, love relationships, a work team or family - people need a connection to others to become the best version of themselves.
- **Meaning** (experienced meaningfulness): Doing something that is bigger than ourselves and meaningful - this is a need that people have when they talk about meaning. Experiencing something as meaningful is the basis for engaging and experiencing deep fulfilment in doing so.
- **Accomplishment:** This means to have achieved something or to reach a goal through one’s own efforts. People need these experiences to realize that they are not helplessly at the mercy of the world, but that they can influence what happens around them. Only when people experience that goals become attainable through their own efforts do they set out on the path.

Positive Leadership with PERMA-Lead

Based on the findings of the PERMA model, numerous measures were derived. In schools, for example, they began to increase students’ PERMA and studied the effects on their grades - which, by the way, were significantly positive! My team and I transferred the model to the area of leadership: if PERMA demonstrably promotes the development of potential in people, then “positive leadership” means leadership behavior that contributes significantly to increasing the PERMA of employees. And this - according to our hypothesis - leads to measurable positive effects for the organization. We called this approach PERMA-Lead (Ebner, 2019).

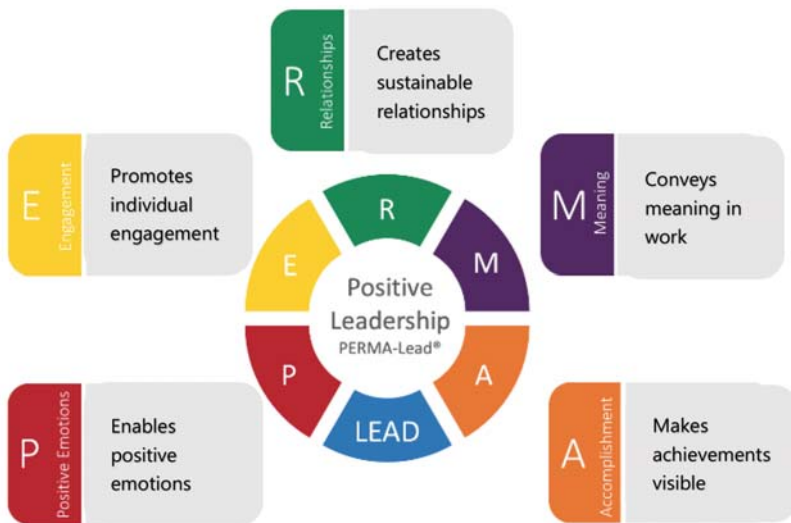
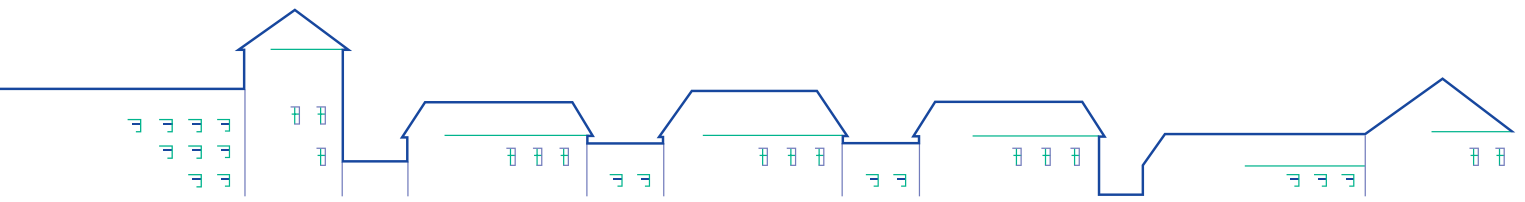


Fig 1: PERMA-Lead as positive leadership style

P-Lead: A positive leader contributes to employees feeling good at work, satisfied and having fun at work.

E-Lead: A positive leader gives his/her employees tasks that correspond to their individual strengths and helps them to build on them. They support their employees in recognizing their abilities.

R-Lead: A positive leader ensures that employees in the team support each other and treat each other with respect. They contribute to everyone feeling part of the team.

M-Lead: A positive leader helps employees to experience meaning in their work and to know why their work is important. They convey to their employees that they are doing valuable work.

A-Lead: A positive leader rejoices with their employees when they have achieved goals and praises them for it. They give positive feedback to their employees when something has been achieved.

Effect of PERMA-Lead

In keeping with evidence-based leadership research, the model is initially a hypothesis that needs to be tested in practice. In the meantime, fortunately, there are numerous studies that have done just that. The results show, for example, that employees who are led by a positive leader show significantly fewer symptoms of stress and have a measurably lower risk of burnout. We also found the same effects in a very recent replication study that looked at positive leadership behavior and burnout risk among hospital staff (Longinus & Ebner, 2020). The influence of

leadership is highly relevant, especially in this corona-related, particularly challenging area of work. Positive leaders therefore have a preventive effect with regard to the risk of burnout. Incidentally, the correlation also applies to the leader him/herself: One's own leadership style is significantly related to one's own risk of burnout, as our data show. But there are other advantages for the leader: In a study, I conducted psychological tests with more than 400 leaders. The result: Positive leaders are more resilient, deal with stressful situations more easily, get back on their feet more quickly after professional setbacks and remain more calm even in difficult situations. In short: they are more resilient.

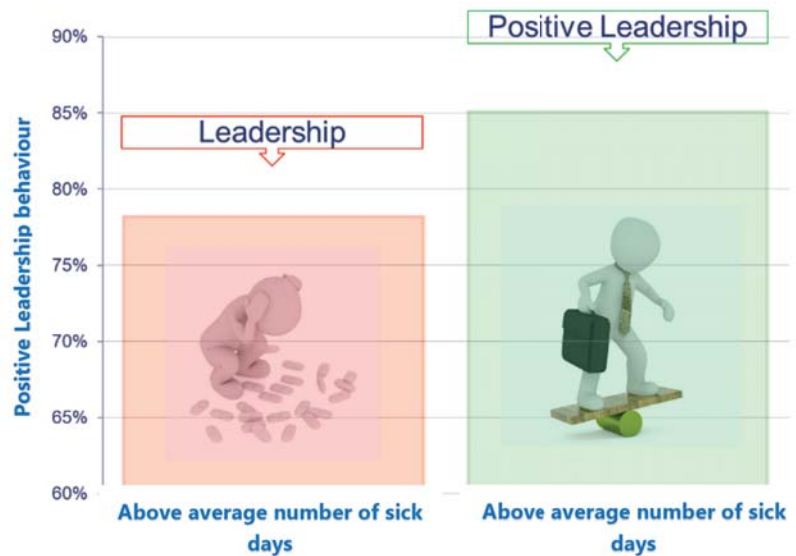


Fig. 2: Relationship between "positive leadership" and sick leave

Another research study investigated whether "positive leadership" has an influence on sick leave days. For this purpose, the respective leadership style was surveyed in numerous teams from the same industries and linked to the company-specific average number of sick leave days. The result, which you can see in Figure 2, shows that "positive leadership" is also a relevant contribution to healthy leading.

Customers are also influenced by "positive leadership". Our research shows that measurably more purchases are made when the management of the business is a positive leader. A study in the grocery trade found that measurably fewer calls to the central complaints hotline are recorded for shops whose store manager is a positive leader than for other shops.

And finally, a selected current study: Due to Corona, many organizations experience uncertain future prospects. Do employees trust that their company will manage the necessary changes? The results show that employees who are led by a positive leader have far greater confidence in their organization - and are also measurably more committed to helping shape these changes.

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- b) Ability/competence: This means everything that can be learned. For example, designing a Power Point presentation, a language, legal basics and so on. Having a skill, however, does not automatically mean that one enjoys practicing this skill.
 - c) Strength: A strength is something that one is driven to express. That pushes out from within - that is intrinsically motivated. People feel that it is an essential part of their identity when they are able to manifest it. An important clue to distinguish a strength from a competence is that something is missing if you cannot express it. And another important hint is that it costs energy if you have to hold it back. For example, if humor is a strength that someone has, then the brain produces funny ideas all the time, so to speak, which one likes to externalize. Something is missing if you can't live out your sense of humor. And it costs energy when you are in a situation where acting out humor is experienced as inappropriate - and you therefore have to hold back the ideas your head produces.

Why is this distinction so important for positive leadership?

Many leaders mistakenly understand the term positive leadership to mean distributing tasks so that each person does what he or she does best. However, this could lead to a situation where a staff member would have to do a job that she does very unwillingly - but at a high level of competence - even more in the future. In that case, it would be punishing the person under the guise of positive leadership. It is therefore important to consider positive leadership as strength-oriented rather than a competence-oriented approach. The result of the decisions can then be quite different.

PERMA-Lead in the public service - expectation and reality

Three test procedures are available for assessing the status of "positive leadership": The PERMA-Lead profiler, in which one's own leadership style becomes visible in comparison to the benchmark of thousands of other leaders. A larger tool is the PERMA-Lead 360° Feedback, in which the assessments of others are integrated as an external image and other management competencies are analyzed in addition to leadership behavior. The third tool is the positive leadership organizational culture analysis, in which both the experienced and the desired leadership culture of an entire organization can be surveyed. More than 800 counsellors in German-speaking countries are now certified to carry out these assessments and then support them in further development steps in a qualified evaluation coaching. Numerous companies and organizations, such as IKEA, dm, Lidl, Bosch, are already working with this approach (Ebner, 2021).

Through the tools and other specific studies, a lot of data has been collected in recent years, which also makes it possible to compare different sectors.

PERMA-Lead comparison general vs. public service

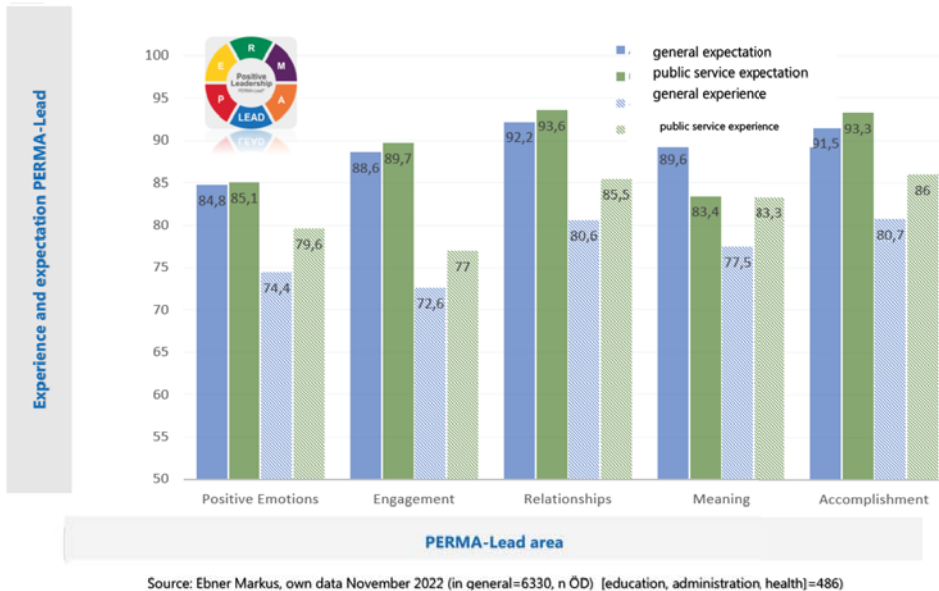


Fig. 4: PERMA-Lead in the public service compared to other sectors.

Figure 4 shows that the expectation of good leadership in the civil service largely corresponds to the general expectations of a good leader. It is interesting, however, that the expectation in the PERMA-Lead factor “meaning” is an exception. Indeed, the results of the comparison show that leaders in the public service are expected to contribute less to the sense of meaning at work than is the case in other sectors. In interviews with public service workers, the following possible reasons for this difference could be identified:

- Traditional work culture:** The work culture in the civil service is often very traditional and formal, and the focus is on fulfilling administrative tasks and regulations. In this context, employees may not have the expectation that their leader will make their working life more meaningful.
- Role clarification:** In the public service, leaders often have very defined roles and responsibilities and are expected to confine themselves to these. Promoting meaningful work life could be seen as a deviation from this role.
- Lack of resources:** A lack of financial and human resources can make it more difficult for public service leaders to launch initiatives to improve the working lives of their employees.
- Low importance of job satisfaction:** In the public service, job satisfaction and employee well-being may be considered less important compared to other factors such as efficiency and cost savings.

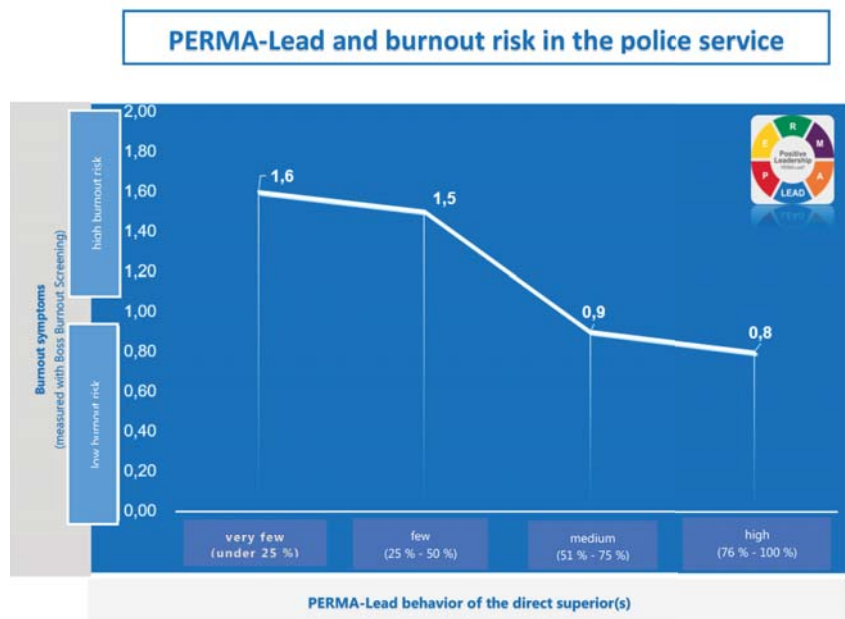
It is important to note that these reasons have only been identified as a possibility for this outcome, are formulated in very general terms and may not apply to every situation in the public service. A meaningful work life - regardless of expectations - is relevant for employees and organizations alike. It is therefore important that leaders actively work to promote it.

What is also exciting about the results is that experienced leadership behavior is consistently rated better in comparison to other sectors. Again, possible reasons were reflected. Some of the possible explanations for this interesting result are that in the public service there is often a higher continuity in terms of leaders and employees, which can lead to a better relationship and communication between both parties. Furthermore, in the public service there are often clear structures and rules that are followed by leaders, which in turn leads to greater predictability and transparency. In the public service, there are also often more extensive opportunities for staff development and training, which can help to ensure that leaders are better qualified and develop better leadership skills.

But again, it is important to note that each sub-sector in the public service and each leader is unique and therefore there may be differences in leadership behavior and staff satisfaction.

PERMA-Lead in policing - a demonstrable effect!

In cooperation with the Police Academy of Lower Saxony, my team and I conducted a study in 2022 to identify possible effects of "positive leadership" in the police service. For this purpose, employees were asked about their subjectively perceived leadership behavior of their direct superiors as well as some other factors. The results show that even in this particular organization there are visible connections between leadership style and its impact on employees.



PERMA-Lead and attractiveness of the police profession

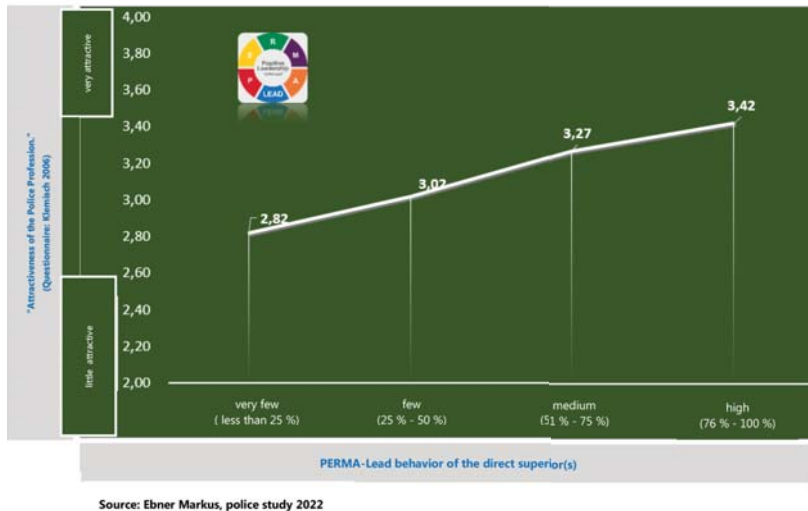


Fig. 5: PERMA-Lead in the police service

Previous studies have already shown that PERMA-Lead has a very positive effect on the burnout risk of employees in the hotel and health care sectors. Our study in the police service comes to the same conclusion: police officers who perceive their superiors as positive leaders have a lower risk of burnout than those who do not. The reasons for this are obvious: A more positive leadership culture strengthens the commitment and motivation of employees and gives them the feeling of being valued and supported. A more positive leadership culture can help employees cope better with stressful situations by listening to their needs and offering them practical solutions. It can help to reduce the workload by supporting a more individualized organization of work and thus also time management that is compatible with the life situation of the respective employees. And ultimately, a more positive leadership culture will also help to create a healthy work environment by not losing sight of the well-being and health of employees.

Another finding of our police study was that employees who are led by a positive leadership experience their profession as far more attractive than those who are not. This is likely to have concrete relevant effects:

- a) Improved performance: If police officers find their job attractive, they are likely to be more motivated and committed, which can lead to improved performance.
- b) Lower turnover: If police officers find their job attractive, they are less likely to change jobs, which can lead to lower turnover in the police service. Especially in today's labor shortage, this is a functionally relevant aspect.

c) Improved public relations: If police officers are proud of their profession, they can convey a more positive message to the public and thus improve the image of the police.

d) Strengthening the sense of teamwork: If police officers find their profession attractive, this can strengthen the sense of teamwork and cooperation within the police. Incidentally, this aspect was confirmed within the framework of this study. In police teams led by a positive leadership, colleagues support each other significantly more often than in those teams where this is not the case.

In summary, it can be shown on the basis of well-founded data that "positive leadership" should also be established as a leadership style in the police service.

Food for thought at the end...

Every journey begins with the first step. No matter whether the destination is the supermarket around the corner or a village on the other side of the world. Thus, the question also applies to one's own further development: Which part of "positive leadership" is feasible for me? Maybe the village on the other side of the world is not the destination, but the supermarket around the corner might be a good start. And then again tomorrow. And then again. "Positive leadership" is not about 'all or nothing'. It is also not about setting a certain intervention once, but about integrating at least parts of this leadership approach and staying with it continuously. It is probably impossible for most people who eat mainly fast food to permanently change their diet completely from tomorrow onwards. Even if they know that their current diet will create quite a few problems in the medium term. But if they manage to include a single carrot in their diet every day, that's 365 carrots in a year. That's a total of around 40 kilograms of carrots that this person would not have eaten otherwise. And that is exactly what "positive leadership" is about!

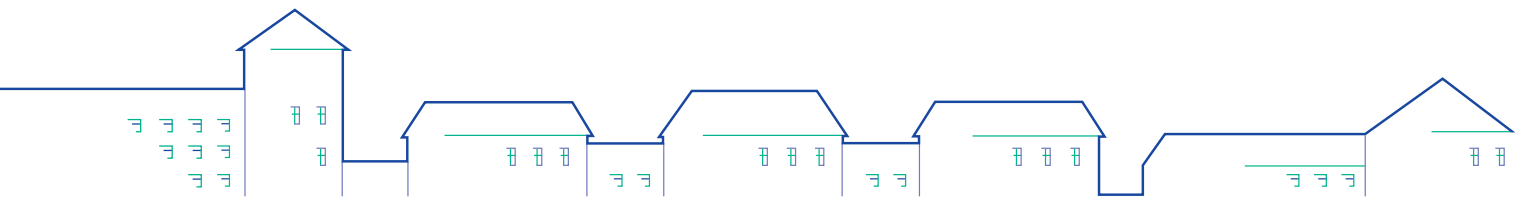
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About the author

Dr. Markus Ebner, MSc is a business and organizational psychologist. He teaches leadership at several universities and universities of applied sciences. In addition to his more than 20 years of work as a trainer, coach and consultant, he is one of the renowned European experts on positive leadership and was awarded the "Exemplary Research To Practice Award" by the World Positive Psychology Association (IPPA) in 2021.