

Seligman's Positive Psychology (including VIA Character Strengths)

Historically, psychology focused predominantly on diagnosing and treating mental illness. In 1998, Martin Seligman, during his presidency of the American Psychological Association, catalysed a paradigm shift by introducing Positive Psychology, a discipline concerned not with what's wrong with people, but with what makes life worth living.

Positive Psychology is defined as the scientific study of optimal human functioning, aiming to discover and promote the factors that allow individuals, organisations, and communities to thrive. It is grounded in empirical research and seeks to understand positive emotions, strengths, virtues, and institutions that contribute to human flourishing.

Theoretical Foundations of Positive Psychology

Seligman's work evolved through several key theoretical stages:

1. Authentic Happiness Theory (2002)

This early model proposed that happiness consists of three elements:

- Pleasure: Experiencing positive emotions
- Engagement: Being deeply involved in activities (linked to Csikszentmihalyi's *Flow*)
- Meaning: Belonging to and serving something larger than oneself

2. Well-Being Theory (PERMA Model, 2011)

Seligman later expanded his framework to include five measurable elements of well-being, known as PERMA:

- Positive Emotion
- Engagement
- Relationships
- Meaning

- Accomplishment

Each element contributes to well-being and is pursued for its own sake. This model is widely used in leadership development, employee engagement, and organisational culture initiatives.

VIA Character Strengths: The Backbone of Positive Psychology

To operationalise Positive Psychology, Seligman and Christopher Peterson developed the VIA Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues (2004). This framework identifies 24 universal character strengths grouped under six core virtues:

Virtue	Character Strengths
Wisdom	Creativity, Curiosity, Judgement, Love of Learning, Perspective
Courage	Bravery, Perseverance, Honesty, Zest
Humanity	Love, Kindness, Social Intelligence
Justice	Teamwork, Fairness, Leadership
Temperance	Forgiveness, Humility, Prudence, Self-Regulation
Transcendence	Appreciation of Beauty, Gratitude, Hope, Humour, Spirituality

These strengths are considered morally valued, universally recognised, and measurable. The VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS) is a psychometric tool used globally to assess an individual's signature strengths.

Theoretical Integration

Positive Psychology and the VIA framework intersect with several other theories:

Theory	Connection
Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan)	Emphasises autonomy, competence, and relatedness, core to well-being and strengths-based development
Flow Theory (Csikszentmihalyi)	Engagement in PERMA aligns with flow states, deep immersion in meaningful tasks
Strengths-Based Leadership (Rath & Conchie)	Builds on the idea that leveraging strengths leads to higher performance and engagement
Transformational Leadership	Leaders who model character strengths (e.g. integrity, hope, empathy) inspire and elevate followers

Organisational Citizenship Behaviour (OCB)	Strengths like kindness, fairness, and teamwork underpin discretionary behaviours that benefit organisations
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Business Application: Case Example – Discovery Limited

Discovery Limited, a South African financial services group, exemplifies the application of Positive Psychology principles:

- PERMA in Practice: The *Vitality* programme promotes positive emotions (rewards), engagement (gamification), and meaning (health as purpose).
- Strengths-Based Culture: Leadership development initiatives incorporate VIA strengths to enhance authenticity and resilience.
- Employee Well-Being: Discovery’s wellness strategy integrates psychological capital (hope, optimism, resilience) to reduce burnout and improve performance.
- Customer Engagement: By aligning product design with values like fairness, transparency, and empowerment, Discovery fosters trust and loyalty.

This strengths-based, purpose-driven approach has contributed to Discovery’s reputation as an innovator in behavioural insurance and health promotion.

Conclusion

Seligman’s Positive Psychology offers a scientifically grounded, human-centred framework for enhancing individual and organisational flourishing. It provides:

- A strategic lens for leadership development
- A diagnostic tool for culture and engagement
- A framework for ethical, sustainable performance

In a South African context, marked by diversity, resilience, and transformation, Positive Psychology is not merely aspirational; it is a practical imperative for building inclusive, high-performing organisations.