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DESIGN WITH A POSITIVE LENS

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The positive lens refers to an emerging perspective in the social sciences that emphasizes our capacity to construct better organizations and technologies through a discourse that encourages human strengths and participative action. In the disciplines of management and organization studies, the positive lens stimulates us to focus on the potential of designing hopeful organizations and more humanly centered technologies, which are not dominated by the detection of error and control of deviant behaviors. Similar to the propositions of positive psychology, which turns attention away from the treatment of dysfunctions and toward the encouragement of human potential, management and related disciplines find themselves in the midst of an attention shift that emphasizes our capacity to design better organizations and technologies by drawing on the best of human capabilities. This shift affects the way managers and policymakers frame their discourse as they design and shape their respective organizations.

Adopting a positive lens affords an affirmative design attitude at the crossroads of technology, organizations, and society. Joining a positive lens onto organizing with the transformative power of design thinking opens new horizons and uncovers previously overlooked possibilities for creating organizational and social well-being. The positive lens applied to information and organization design opens broader considerations of social context, uses cross-disciplinary tools, takes a holistic approach, and emphasizes a responsible, ethical attention to human possibilities.

A positive lens is particularly conducive to adopting a design attitude. Moreover, it is argued that managers have focused for too long on the detection of error, treatment of dysfunctions, and control of chronic problems at the expense of encouraging human strengths, nurturing human values, and pursuing the potential of designing hopeful organizations and more humanly centered technologies. Therefore, adopting a positive lens in our discourse and consequent action can help in designing better organizations and technologies. It is time to change the conventional thought pattern that searches relentlessly for problems to be solved. That does not require one to abandon problem solving altogether. Instead, it asks one to be open for something else and see where it takes his or her work and everyday life.

The positive lens connotes a distinctive perspective on management and design that is less focused on the detection of mistakes or gaining superior control, and more concerned with positive change that involves the encouragement of what is best in humans and emphasizes a search for the conditions that increase our capacity to construct more satisfying and morally strong organizations and technologies. Applying a positive lens to design and management forms part of a larger paradigmatic movement that defines itself as a positive way of knowing (e.g., Appreciative Inquiry, Positive Psychology, and Positive Organizational Scholarship). The positive lens promotes management that aims to examine and enhance positive modalities in human dynamics, forms of organizing, practices, relationships, and programs of discovery and learning.

An explanation for the prevalent preoccupation of managers with malfunctions and quick problem fixes may be the presumption that success and failure are binary opposites and, consequently, that any undertaking will be successful if all possible pitfalls are circumvented. However, because success is not the logical opposite of failure, the study of what went wrong may serve those who aim to avoid failure, but it still constitutes a poor foundation for those who strive to be at their best. In other words, though success and failure are related, examining one does not teach us what we need to know about the other. Thus, research with the positive lens strives to explore what leads to exemplary designs rather than to prescribe preventive tactics.

One way to explain what positive design is would be to say what it is not. Design with a positive lens implies that the design questions we use to guide us should focus on stimulating the generative core of sociotechnical systems by asking what gives life to organizations – and seeking what could be, instead of searching for description and explanation by asking what is and why. Positive design focuses on desirable scenarios and visions of the future by asking what could and might be, as opposed to an attempt to predict the future by asking what will be. Most notably, the guiding questions are explicit about a conscious ethical stance and personal choice in asking what should be, and thus reject the academic ethos that extols being unattached, impersonal, and avoiding ethical controversies. Design with a positive lens implies that the approach is synthetic and value-seeking in contrast to being analytic, error-focused, and deficiency-seeking. The process of design with a positive lens is organic, iterative, and open-ended in contrast to being subsumed by decision trees of design choices with a clear beginning and end. Finally, the underlying objective of positive design is about creating and maintaining virtuous cycles for the benefit of all stakeholders in contrast to preventing or escaping vicious cycles.

The positive lens inspires an alternative perception to the meaning of managing and designing. Developing and managing organizations and systems through the positive lens is likely to result in better tools, better systems, better organizations, better communities, and better lives. The positive lens allows one to escape the gravity of the deficit rationality and clears the way for the development of a humanistic and relationship-driven design framework, which is based on shared responsibility, blurred boundaries, and collaborative effort. Adopting a positive lens can affect the ways managers, designers, and users frame their discourse and consequently shape organizations and information systems.

Endnote:

This commentary was adapted from Avital, M. and Boland, R.J (2008) "Managing as Designing with a Positive Lens," in M. Avital, R.J. Boland, and D.L. Cooperrider (Eds), *Designing Information and Organizations with a Positive Lens*, Advances in Appreciative Inquiry Series, Volume 2, Elsevier Science, Oxford. Further elaboration on the topic is available in Avital, M., Lyytinen, K., Boland, R.J., Butler, B., Dougherty, D., Fineout, M., Jansen, W., Levina, N., Rifkin W. and Venable, J. (2006) "Design with a Positive Lens: An Affirmative Approach to Designing Information and Organizations," *Communications of the Association for Information Systems,* 18 (25), pp. 519-545.