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Strengths-based reflective practices for the management of change: applications from sport and positive psychology

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ABSTRACT
The aim of this article is to demonstrate how reflective practices can enable change to be better managed by business leaders and organizations. The paper is positioned within recent and significant developments in the field of learning through reflection. These developments have given rise to puzzles and challenges, but also some opportunities. We address one of these opportunities for the better management of change, namely the use of applied positive psychology and its relationship with the practices of reflection. A sporting cameo of a ‘team in turmoil’ provides a comparative analysis of three possible change management strategies to revive the fortunes of the team. The three strategies focus on: (a) Deficit-reduction, trouble-shooting and fixing problems; (b) Using ‘traditional’ and often borrowed reflective models and cycles and (c) Managing change through enhancing positivity and using strengths-based reflective practices. Here the power of two core ideas from positive psychology and their application to change management are presented. These are the primacy of the positive and the focus on the use of human strengths. The paper concludes with reference to the work of an elite coach managing within a high performance organization and who has applied some of the principles and processes outlined in this paper, to manage change within the demanding, pressurized and ever changing environment of elite sport. Ultimately this article aims to present applied concepts of reflective practice, grounded in the relatively new field of positive psychology, to enable business leaders and organizations to more effectively manage change.

KEYWORDS
Reflective practice; change management; sport; coaching

Team in turmoil: a cameo
The team is in transition. The transition is causing turmoil. Once successful and consistently making the play-offs, the team is now characterized by a downward spiral over the past two seasons, with worsening performances and results on the field of play. This has been mirrored by uncertainty at boardroom level with regard to future priorities and direction. Poor attendances and decreased income from merchandise have added to the paucity of financial resources available. There is a clear need to manage this transition, from success-to-failure and back again.
Recently the most talented player on the roster departed to a rival club, further draining the collective efficacy of the remaining players. This has been a pattern over the past two seasons with the best players leaving, recruited by teams with greater resources and perhaps more (perceived) ambition. A greater turnover of players has led to a lack of stability and consistency, with daily rumours that other players are ready to ‘jump ship’. Training and practice sessions have become more difficult as players have formed cliques and are not cooperating effectively as a team. The coach senses competing agendas and potential conflict between the players as the pressure to perform increases.

On a personal note, the coach is trying to ‘stay strong and positive’. But he is aware that doubts about his ability to successfully manage this transitional period are creeping into his thoughts and he worries the players and staff are becoming aware of this. He does not want to lose the confidence of those around him.

Anxiety from the supporters and shareholders is also beginning to permeate the team and is creating a culture of uncertainty, fear of failure and even blame, across the entire organization and local community. The coach feels that some issues are beyond his control. But some are not. He begins a period of personal and collective reflection with his assistants and backroom staff. He realizes that to ‘stop the rot’ a new kind of ‘improvement conversation’ may be needed, which might lead to better action and winning performances again.

The practices of reflection and the need to escape

The team in turmoil is a common scenario in sport, which we return to within this paper. It consists of things which appear to be failing right now, memories of what was and hopes of what might be. It is also a story of transition which can be found across sectors, organizations and places. In times of change, systematic, rigorous and public forms of reflection are needed (Carless & Douglas, 2012; Collins & Cruickshank, 2012; Currie & Oats-Wilding, 2012). But there are numerous challenges to reflection in times of turmoil, especially in competitive sports environments where the ‘hurry up’ mentality prevails. The challenges are centred on; (a) what reflection means (b) which practices to use (c) with what purposes in mind and (d) whose interests are being served.

Reflective practices that improve the management of change have their roots in a paradox. In competitive sport and especially in coach education, where reflective practices of one kind or another are being increasingly endorsed and adopted, there is, simultaneously, a persistent questioning of it (Huntley, Cropley, Gilbourne, Sparkes, & Knowles, 2014). Some still decry the lack of an agreed-upon definition of reflection (Cropley, Miles, & Peel, 2012), some still refer to it as a singular practice and some say the evidence for reflection as a component of competent practice is sparse (Knowles, Gilbourne, & Tomlinson, 2007). Others seem imprisoned in original conceptions of reflection, especially from Dewey and Schön, and appear to be unable, or unwilling, to escape from them and explore new possibilities and see reflection as a solution looking for a problem (Ermeling, 2012). We suggest that it is important to appreciate that ‘reflective practice’ is neither singular nor an uncontested term, as this may limit our understanding and application of reflection. Without appreciating the complexity and scope of term, our understanding of the concept and potential utility of reflective practices may be limited.
Many of the practices in the general field of reflection are about individuals examining their own work so that they are more able to change what they do in a particular context. This is very much in line with the early work of Schön (1983), who celebrated the ability and motivation of individuals to understand themselves better and improve themselves and their work. He said that practical knowledge was needed to achieve this. In Schön (1991) we read that what practitioners needed to look at in their working life were those things framed as ‘puzzling’ or ‘strange’. A customary starting point for reflection is what we might refer to as a problem in practice. The work of Dewey (1933) proclaimed that practitioners learned by noticing and framing ‘problems of interest’. He said that if we experience surprise or discomfort in our everyday work, then a reflective process was likely to be triggered. Dewey suggested that this process consisted of several steps. His description of these steps uses words such as perplexity, confusion and doubt. What is interesting here is that there is no suggestion that what might trigger a reflective process is a desire to seek out and to understand why something was positive. The motivational locus resides within the general realm of deficits, not successes. Loughran (2006) looked again at Dewey’s notion of a ‘problem’. He suggested that although reflecting on problems is important, it should not be done at the expense of other aspects of our working lives. Loughran (2006) went on to state that if we use the word ‘problem’ we can easily get caught up with its negative connotations because it is so easily linked in our minds with words such as ‘mistakes’ and ‘errors of judgement’. The ‘default setting’ for reflective practice within change management may be to naturally gravitate towards problems within the organization and errors of individuals. The current paper presents an alternative view of reflection for change management, but first some key developments within the field of reflective practice are discussed.

**A puzzle**

One historic puzzle is related to the purposes of reflection. The old puzzles were essentially to do with: (a) reflection for change; (b) reflection for improvement or (c) reflection for individual, organizational and/or community benefit (Ghaye et al., 2008). These were often re-framed as reflection with purposes that: (a) enabled us to attend to significant (or critical) ‘incidents’ that helped us to understand our practices better; (b) addressed how to do something with these understandings, mainly within one’s own sphere of influence and practice setting; (c) might help us appreciate and positively deal with those things which served to liberate or constrain our work and that of others, in particular workplaces (Ghaye, 2011).

A more contemporary puzzle is related to the purpose of reflection that might enable us to be the best we can be, particularly when managing change. This puzzle is grounded in the question, ‘How can you be the best example of yourself every day?’ The reflective practice literature is replete with a view of reflection as a solution looking for a problem (Ghaye, 2011). This view assumes that reflective practices can find and solve human problems. This brings with it an assumption that problem solving is worthwhile because it leads to something ‘better’, or at least creates space for something different to happen. Simply put, it can create space in people’s heads and working life because some effort has been made to remove problems. However, recent calls to action have advocated moving away from a view of reflection being concerned with eradicating performance
problems, moving towards utilizing reflective practices which provide a more sustained focus on performance successes and strengths (Dixon, Lee, & Ghaye, 2013). Those overseeing the management of change such as our team in turmoil, might emphasize successes for individual members of staff, focus on positive feedback from customers or clients, and highlight good performances with departments and sub-teams, rather than being too preoccupied with solving problems and correcting negatives within the organization. This is not a matter of neglecting issues and faults within the workplace but redressing the balance so that the positives (e.g. success stories, achievements, those things that make us feel proud and fulfilled at work) are celebrated to enhance future performance. This contention will be revisited throughout the paper.

**A challenge**

A challenge with how reflection is practiced within contemporary change management is related to mind-set. One aspect of this is associated with valuing reflection as a must-do process, not seeing it as a luxury, but a necessity. Not done sporadically, privately and in a hurry, but systematically, persistently and with commitment. In other words it needs to become a workplace habit that might eventually be scaled up to create a reflective organization (Ghaye, 2008). Another aspect of this is to do with going public with the learning that arises from deploying the practices of reflection. What seems to be critical is that those who make interventions and facilitate change need to do so with great sensitivity, enabling participants/workers to reflect on their own (and other’s) multifaceted meanings and actions and to share these without pressure, recrimination and distortion. For example, with our team in turmoil, we suggest a mind-set change is required so that focusing on successes and achievements, not just problems and failures, is seen as deserving a notable place in the discourses of change management. These conversations about what we want more of (i.e. success, fulfilment, joy) not just less of (i.e. problems, stress, feelings of burnout), need to be lived and valued.

**An opportunity**

If we survey the reflective practices landscape we can find something promising if we resist accepting what the dominant voices in the field, and especially in sport, are currently saying. The new opportunity that is presenting itself comes from applied positive psychology (Donaldson, Csikszentmihalyi, & Nakamura, 2011; Lomas, Hefferon, & Ivtzan, 2014). This relatively new field helps us to completely reframe the practices of reflection as it explicitly focuses on understanding and acting upon those things which enhance well-being and human flourishing (Seligman, 2011), rather than focusing on deficits and those things that weaken us. More specifically it brings with it a new language, new foci and most importantly, a new sense of what matters most in the process of the management of change. It is an action ‘frame’ which many call the ‘primacy of the positive’ (Lee, Collins & Ghaye, In press). This frame is given shape and significance by two supporting reflective processes namely: (1) Strengths-based improvement conversations (Yeager, Fisher, & Shearon, 2011); (2) The use of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2009). The key to taking advantage of positive emotions in managing change is to regard them as ‘resources’ that can be used to enhance individual and collective: (1) expression
(2) development and (3) agency. For example, appraisals with staff may be re-focused to identify and nurture the strengths of individuals, and team meetings might be based on what workers can do to improve team performance within the constraints of organizational change.

This new frame is supported by two theoretical frameworks; (a) Fredrickson’s (1998, 2001, 2004) Broaden-and-Build theory and (b) Seligman’s theory of Well-being (2011). The former is one of the most important theories to emerge from the new field of positive psychology. It is very relevant to managing change within sport performance and coach education, with applications for the business domain. Fredrickson’s (1998, 2001, 2004) broaden-and-build theory links how we feel with what we can do. In her work she promotes the notion of ‘positivity’. Her theory describes and explains the impact a number of positive emotions (e.g. a sense of achievement, joy, interest, pride and love) have on the things we do and how well we do them.

A key proposition is that these positive emotions broaden an individual’s momentary thought-action repertoire. This means when we feel positive, we are generally more open-minded, more receptive to new ideas, more adaptive and more flexible. For example, the joy of engaging in physical activity sparks the urge to play, interest in a (new) sport sparks the urge to explore, contentment that comes from a hard fought victory sparks the urge to savour. The broadened mind-set arising from these positive emotions is contrasted to the narrowed mind-sets sparked by many negative emotions and their associated action tendencies, such as to attack or flee. In other words when we feel more negative we feel much less prepared and able to: (1) consider alternatives; (2) experiment with new ideas and ways of doing things and (3) consider options. The challenge then, for leaders of change, such as the coach of our team in turmoil, is to emphasize and encourage positive emotions.

A second key proposition of this theory is that positive emotions build an individual’s personal resources and ability to be resilient. These resources can range from physical (better energy management) and intellectual resources (learning new things), to social (building positive relationships) and psychological ones (building a sense of identity and goal orientation). Importantly, these resources function as reserves that can be drawn on later to improve the prospect of performing well under pressure and coping successfully with the complexity of multiple demands placed upon us. With the potential of organizational change to invoke negative emotions and associated actions, it is pertinent for business leaders to understand and embrace a positive approach to reflective practice, grounded in theories such as broaden-and-build.

The notion of reflecting through a positive lens is further underpinned by Seligman (2011), who wanted to identify the building blocks of well-being. He drew up a five-sided model of well-being called the PERMA model (Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Achievement/Accomplishment). The model acts as a guide to help individuals and groups find paths to flourishing. Seligman (2011) believes that strength in each of PERMA’s areas can help people find lives of greater happiness, fulfilment and meaning. The five measurable elements to the model are:

- **Positive emotions:** These have an impact that goes far beyond bringing a smile to our faces. Used wisely they help us to perform better at work. They boost our physical
health, strengthen our relationships; and help to inspire us to be creative, take chances and look to the future with optimism and hope.

- **Engagement**: We do not thrive and flourish when we are doing nothing or doing things that expose our vulnerabilities. When we identify and use our strengths, we can consciously engage in work and physical activities that make us feel most confident, productive and valuable.

- **Relationships**: We enhance our own well-being, and that of others, by building strong networks of relationships around us with family, friends, co-workers and other significant people in our lives.

- **Meaning**: We give ourselves a chance to be the best we can be when we dedicate our time to something greater than ourselves. This could be the good of a team or club, a religious faith, community work, a political cause, a charity and so on. If we feel our work has meaning we are more likely to go the extra mile.

- **Achievement**: Some have been taught that ‘winning isn’t everything’. That we should strive for success, but it is more important to enjoy the game. However, everyone needs to win sometimes. What use are goals and ambitions if we never reach them? To achieve well-being and to flourish, we must look back on our lives with some sense of accomplishment: ‘I did it, and I did it well.’

No one element defines well-being, but each contributes to it. Some aspects of these five elements can be measured subjectively by self-report, but other aspects are measured objectively (Seligman, 2011). The PERMA model has also been used to develop programmes that help individuals develop new cognitive and emotional tools (Peterson, 2006; Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2006). It is this development of resources that can lead to people being potentially more receptive to, and/or resilient to change when it occurs and therefore better placed to manage the process more effectively.

**Revisiting the cameo**

When faced with the challenges and complexities of managing the ‘team in turmoil’ we suggest the coach might usefully think about each of the change management strategies we outline below. Strategy (A) emphasizes deficit-reduction, (B) is based on ‘normal’ reflective practices and (C) represents what we suggest might become a ‘new normal’ in the management of change. These strategies are not necessarily oppositional and mutually exclusive.

**Strategy A: trouble-shooting and fixing problems**

When addressing the management of change, we may need to think carefully about the view that asking deficit-type questions is the best way, in the circumstances, to begin such a process. Deficit-type questions are about what went wrong rather than what went well. They are about problems rather than achievements, failures rather than successes. They are essentially about the kinds of things you feel you want to get rid of, to eliminate and to fix. To answer them can require a considerable investment of human resources, all focused on removing things, or at least, reducing their influence and impact. If we are not careful, an obsession with problems quickly becomes a problem! When we
focus on problems, we begin to construct a world in which problems are central. They become the dominant realities that burden us every day. To ask questions about our failings is to create a world in which failing is focal. Deficit-based questions lead to deficit-based conversations, which in turn lead to deficit-based patterns of action. Conversely we can apply the same logic more positively. By asking ourselves positive questions, we may bring forth future action of far greater promise as demonstrated by the work of Fredrickson (1998, 2001, 2004) and Seligman (2011). Positive questions invite a different kind of conversation, one that brings with it the opportunity for positive action. We are not implying that we should ignore problems. We are simply suggesting a greater balance in the kinds of questions we ask when managing the change process. In any process of the management of change, we suggest that we grow in the direction in which we ask questions (Adams, 2004).

Embedded within this strategy of managing change is an assumption that each person’s greatest room for growth is in his or her areas of greatest weakness (Buckingham, 2007). Taking strengths for granted and focusing on minimizing weaknesses may involve both practical and philosophical issues. One link with the cameo above is that if the coach adopts Strategy (A) then he has to become expert in those areas where athletes struggle, culminating in a focus on ‘skills-gaps’. There is a place for this of course, and sometimes it is very necessary. When managing a change process with a purpose to improve something, it can be tempting to try to fix people (including ourselves), processes and systems (Buckingham, 2007). But there is a challenge for those managing change to make a conscious effort to break out of this weakness spiral and begin to change their assumptions about people and how they can be the best example of themselves.

**Strategy B: using reflective models and cycles and onto frameworks**

Over the years the practices of reflection have been associated with many models of reflection. Although their origins are mainly from healthcare and schooling, they have found their way into sport and are actively promoted by those involved in coach education which has led to a ‘borrowing process’ within the field of sport and coaching (Dixon et al., 2013). While some are explicitly called ‘models of reflection’ others are more generally called ‘models of learning’. Additionally some require the learner to engage in reflection-on-action in a sustained and continuous manner, while others include reflection as part of a process which includes other actions or strategies such as gathering data about practice (e.g. an audit) or as part of an inquiry into practice. Ghaye and Lillyman (2006) summarized the characteristics of reflective models by suggesting they can be seen from one or more of the following perspectives.

1. **A competency-based perspective**: in that they are to do with the development of a particular skill.
2. **A personalistic perspective**: in that they are to do with personal agendas, emotionality, self-study and individual enhancement through a greater sense of self-worth and identity.
3. **An experiential perspective**: in that they emphasize the active exploration of ‘lived experience’, one’s own and the experiences of others. This requires that learners
value their own experiences and have an openness that enables them to learn from the experiences of others (e.g. Kolb, 1984).

4. A transformatory perspective: in that they are to do with asking questions that can challenge the status quo, challenge oppressive and disempowering workplace contexts and focus on reducing or removing barriers to improvement.

A model often cited is that developed by Mezirow (1981). It spawned a number of other models that implied that reflection was, in some way, hierarchical or proceeded in stages. Mezirow’s model is presented in seven levels with ‘reflectivity’ at the base of the hierarchy and ‘theoretical’ at the top. These have specific meanings. But as soon as reflection is modelled in this way certain assumptions become apparent. The first assumption is that different types or kinds of reflection can indeed be identified and described. The second is that one kind of reflection is more complex than the preceding one. Third that this complexity is empirically verifiable. Fourth that the benefits from reflection accrue by climbing the ‘ladder’ or ascending the hierarchy. Fifth that ‘mastery’ at one level is a prerequisite for moving onto the next level. Finally that learning develops by some process of inclusion, in that later levels encapsulate all that which has gone before (Ghaye & Lillyman, 1997; Larrivee, 2008).

Perhaps the most common way of structuring and supporting a change process through reflection, has been by inviting the learner to engage in a reflective cycle. This is a circuitous process that may lead to greater enlightenment and maybe better future action from repeated ‘clockwise’ movements around the cycle. For example, Gibbs (1988) model is prevalent across a range of contexts. It is a general cyclical model having six stopping points, with each point on the cycle being associated with a key question. With these so-called ‘iterative’ models the on-going nature of learning begins to be signalled up. Reflective cycles have an unfinished business feel to them. Out of one particular stopping point called an ‘action plan’ comes (hopefully) new and better future actions. A danger of using ‘borrowed’ models and cycles to manage personal and collective change is that the process can quickly become technical and mechanistic. In essence the models and cycles are reductionist. They can also give rise to an obsession with action planning and the notion of ‘we will be happy once we have achieved these goals’. With this in mind, we invite business leaders and organizations to consider a third strategy.

**Strategy C: managing change through positive reflection and action**

In general, Strategies (A) and (B) depicted a dominant and mainly deficit-based focus for the practices of reflection and for some branches of psychology. Positive psychology offers us a different lens that helps us move from a ‘preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life, to also building positive qualities’ (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5). This poses an interesting challenge for sports coaches and business leaders, who often see themselves as problem-solvers who are expected to ‘fix what’s broken’ within the performance of their staff, teams or organizations. Here we offer another strategy based on the principles of positive psychology and strengths-based reflective practices.

The early beginnings of positive psychology can be traced to the American Psychological Association Presidential Address by Martin Seligman in 1998. Seligman called for psychological researchers to loosen their grip on the almost exclusive focus on human
pathology, and to devote at least some of their attention to the positive features of human existence that make life worth living (Donaldson, Dollwet, & Rao, 2014). Positive psychology is seen as the science of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits and positive organizations (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Put another way, it is the pursuit of understanding and encouraging optimal human functioning. It marks a fundamental shift in ways of perceiving. It encourages us to use particular lenses, in a conscious and planned way, to manage change and to help us understand new and different things about ourselves and others who are involved in sport, coaching and management. These lenses are not centred on negativity such as depression, anxiety, disappointment, failure and so on, but on those positive elements like optimism, knowing and using one’s strengths, being resilient, well-being and human flourishing (Lee, Collins & Ghaye, submitted for publication).

In this 3rd strategy we discuss two of the most significant ideas emerging from positive psychology (Baumgardner & Crothers, 2009) and assess their utility in managing the change process in competitive sport and business. The two ideas are; (1) the primacy of the positive (Sharp, 2011) and (2) the focus on the use of human strengths (Buckingham, 2007). Here we examine why it is so useful to focus on the positive (Barrett & Fry, 2005; Fineman, 2006). Cooperrider and Whitney (2001) described the ‘positive principle’ as the utility of positive feelings for building and sustaining momentum for change. Both Isen and Labroo (2003) and Fredrickson’s (2009) research showed that people experiencing positive feelings are more flexible, creative, integrative, open to information and efficient in their thinking. So one reflective question for the coach of the team in turmoil might be, ‘How positive am I, and those around me, that we can change from a losing to a winning team again?’ Fredrickson (2009) argued that positivity changes how our minds work. For example, ‘Positivity doesn’t just change the contents of your mind, trading bad thoughts for good ones; it also changes the scope or boundaries of your mind. It widens the span of possibilities that you see.’ (p. 9). This expansion of possibilities is worth serious consideration in the context of change management within both sports coaching and within business as it points towards individuals having the capacity to develop their resources and performance attributes even further. For example, Sharp (2011) cites the work of Gostick and Christopher (2008) and Avolio, Howell, and Sosik (1999) highlighting how positive working environments are related to positive engagement, reduced staff turnover, enhanced productivity, performance and profitability. Therefore we invite business leaders and sports coaches alike to ask themselves, ‘How might a change process (re) build a more positive environment?’

Furthermore, leaders should consider how reflective practices can be used to not only build positivity but also to identify and find opportunities to play to one’s strengths as often as possible throughout the change process. More specifically, it is important to identify what character and performance strengths are best used and when, in order to manage change (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001; Linley & Harrington, 2006; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). For the coach in the cameo a reflective question that might be useful to ask is, ‘how much value am I placing on coaching out weaknesses rather than coaching in strengths?’ A more blunt and direct way of saying this is, ‘if the change process is all about getting rid of weaknesses and failures, will the team become stronger and more successful?’ By asking these reflective questions, leaders can better understand their strategies for managing change.
The use of more positive reflective practices to better manage the change process offers a more flexible alternative from the kinds of models and cycles described in strategy (B), which may still be useful to some, particularly those new to systematic reflective processes. Strategy (C) brings with it a shift from the use of these processes to the use of ‘frameworks’ characterized by positive questions. These seem to hold some promise (Ghaye, 2011) if only because they provide opportunities for different kinds of conversation. One such framework is shown in Figure 1.

A brief elaboration of Figure 1 follows.

1. To appreciate: This is inspired by recent work on appreciative enquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005) and appreciative intelligence (Thatchenkery & Metzker, 2006). From the perspective of using more strengths-based reflective practices in the management of change, it embraces an intention to appreciate and understand one’s own and others’ gifts, talents, limitations, self-worth, identity, role, responsibilities and accountability. It is an intention to develop a deeper understanding of one’s own learning agenda, sense of self, self-knowledge, self-efficacy and purpose. The intention is to use the practices of reflection to deepen appreciations and seeing this as a valuable starting point for change. Leaders managing change therefore may want to foster a culture of individual and collective appreciation within their organization.

Figure 1. An appreciative change management process (Ghaye, 2011).
2. To imagine: The intention here is to use the practices of reflection to generate, manage and utilize knowledge, re-frame it and then record this in some way. This is essentially done through reflective accounts and conversations of one kind or another, for example through narratives, diaries, logs, portfolios, essays, problem-based learning assignments and case-based scenarios. The intention is to document learning about what works and why and how to amplify this. It does not ignore the need to address what must be changed and in what way/s, and therefore about how to improve practice. It is associated with seeing with fresh eyes. This intention weaves together new or different ways of thinking, talking and working. Here we invite managers of change to learn to ‘let go’ of some old feelings, thoughts and ways of working and being open to consider new and different ones by embracing a strengths-based approach to reflective practices.

3. To design: This intention can be influenced positively by intentions 1 and 2. It harnesses individual expertise and connects ‘islands of innovation’, bringing both together into a new wholeness of collective wisdom. Criticality and creativity are required along with a preparedness to question conviction-laden practices and policies. Building collective wisdom is triggered by asking the practical question, ‘how do we do this?’ In some circumstances it requires emotional literacy and political acuity from business leaders to cultivate innovative ideas within their teams.

4. To act: The intention here is to do, or achieve something, with this collective wisdom, bearing in mind that moving forward is only one option. Deciding to take no action might also be a positive step. Change is not always about stepping forwards or back, but in making the right step. What is crucial is that all involved document the decisions being made and the reasons for them. In moving forward we leave a ‘footprint’, a mark. If we do not record these ‘footprints’ in some way, we have no way of knowing where we have come from or how far we have travelled. For those managing organizational change, moving forward may be described and judged as incremental or as a step-change (Boyd & Bright, 2007; Bushe, 2011; Bushe & Pitman, 2008; Mohr, McLean, & Silbert, 2003).

A starting point for the coach of the team in turmoil could be to reflect on question 1 in the framework, with the hope that in doing so, positivity might return, and strengths used more frequently and confidently. Two other suggestions are for the coach to; (1) frame good questions and have improvement conversations (2) encourage and motivate all his support staff to do difficult work in an excellent way.

Positive reflection and action of a world champion coach

Here we illustrate some of the more significant issues raised in this paper with reference to the work of a coach managing within a high performance organization and who has applied strengths-based reflective practices to manage change within the demanding, pressurized and ever changing environment of elite sport. This case study is drawn from a reflective conversation with Sir Clive Woodward and provides some thought-provoking implications for managing change within organizational and workplace settings (Lee, Shaw, Chesterfield, & Woodward, 2009).
Sir Clive Woodward is in the very rare position of having not only led a team to achieve the ultimate accolade in their sport (as the England rugby union team won the 2003 IRB (International Rugby Board) World Cup), but also having achieved success in the business domain. He had previously worked for the multi-national company Xerox, before running his own business, an office equipment leasing company. In addition to this rather unique background in high performance business and sport, Sir Clive oversaw a period of major change with the England team, leading them out of the amateur and into the professional era of rugby union. Indeed, at the start of his tenure in 1997, England were ranked 6th in the world and he was challenged with changing the performance, results and mind-sets of a team and organization. Here we reflect on Sir Clive’s philosophy and practices as he led England to international success.

**Fostering enjoyment in times of change**

In line with the central tenets of the Fredrickson’s (1998, 2001, 2004) broaden-and-build theory that when people feel positive, they are generally more open-minded, more receptive to new ideas and more adaptive, Sir Clive emphasized the importance of enjoyment to develop a culture of success:

[when coaching a semi-professional team] I realized how crucial it was for everyone to absolutely enjoy what they were doing, to commit all the time and effort on top of their jobs. Yes, there were leagues and pressures to win but we still had to go to work on Monday morning, so it was even more important that the coach and the players enjoyed the experience. Number one for me is that I must enjoy it and number two is as a coach, I really want you to enjoy it – it’s about getting the game across and removing the fear factor and allowing players to express themselves (pp. 298).

We challenge leaders and managers to reflect on the enjoyment within their teams and organizations, and whether this is prioritized. Indeed, managers of change are invited to consider Lee et al.’s (2009) contention that the philosophy of putting enjoyment first could be a valuable tool in persuading athletes [staff] not to fear change but embrace it. By encouraging staff to welcome organizational changes and seek enjoyment from the challenges faced, leaders may foster a culture of success as part of a strengths-based approach.

**Innovations and creative decisions**

One way of facilitating an enjoyable working environment is through innovative practices. In the most intense and pressurized conditions, it can be challenging to think creatively and oppose conventional wisdom. However, Sir Clive suggested ‘In order for coaching to move forward we need people to think differently and challenge themselves to acquire knowledge from diverse sources to stimulate new learning in their performers’ (pp. 297). Whether it be inventive tactics on the field, using ground-breaking support services such as employing a ‘vision specialist’ and pioneering the use of ProZone match analysis software within rugby (Woodward, 2005), Sir Clive implemented these innovations during a time of change. Even without the resources to introduce new facilities and support services, Sir Clive asserts that enjoyment is fostered primarily through unique ideas:
[the players] enjoyed coming into the ‘England’ environment and experiencing innovation and trying new things which are not easy to coach… That was their enjoyment factor and that was the culture they wanted to be part of. To create this environment, it isn’t about the money, it is about the detail of what you do and making the players believe they have experienced something special (pp. 308).

With this in mind, we invite leaders and managers of change to consider how they can innovate, take calculated risks and introduce something new to develop a culture of enjoyment and positivity.

**Reflect after positive performance**

As highlighted previously, when analysing and reflecting on performances, the natural response may be to focus on fixing problems and eradicating weaknesses. However, Sir Clive strongly advocates asking positive questions after victories and good performances, focusing on how success was achieved.

Even on the coaching side, I was very conscious of keeping the good stuff. I would ask what else could we do or how could we do this better and again, a great time to do that is when you’ve won; to actually be very self-critical when you’ve won a game is great. Players are not used to that because of the tendency to overreact in the face of a loss. (pp. 302)

It is vitally important then, that coaches and players (staff at all levels) develop their understanding of the reasons for successes. This may come from asking ‘how’ and ‘why’ type questions, in order to build on positives and replicate success.

To summarize his strengths-based approach to coaching and change management Sir Clive Woodward perfectly illuminates the process of positive reflection, conversation and action set out in this paper.

… what I learned through business absolutely applies to sport as well. When things are going well, you tend to celebrate but when things aren’t so good, it’s generally an 8 o’clock Monday morning meeting to try to understand the issues. To me it should be the complete reverse: When things are going very well, that’s when you want everyone in the 8 o’clock Monday morning meeting to find out what’s gone well and use this information to reset the benchmarks and understand how to make further improvements. It’s about concentrating on success, not failure.’ (pp. 301)

**Conclusion**

We suggest that certain kinds of reflection are both central to and supportive of the processes involved in the effective management of change. Reflection is a skilled practice that uses experience, knowledge and inquiry processes to increase our capability to intervene, interpret and act positively to understand the root causes of success and to apply this to improve future performance. The use of particular reflective practices which are fuelled by positivity and the use of strengths (both performance and character) can reveal new insights and understandings about who we are, what we do and why. Having presented innovative concepts from reflective practice which are grounded in positive psychology theory, and the practices of a world champion coach, we invite business leaders and managers of change to consider how they can: (a) Challenge their own methods of reflective practice, developing a positive approach to identify,
appreciate and utilize the strengths of themselves, their staff and their organization; (b) Generate a climate of positivity to be more open-minded, more receptive to new ideas, more adaptive, more flexible and more resilient to change; (c) Cultivate and integrate the strengths, qualities and ideas of those around them and (d) Study and celebrate successes both small and major, individual and collective, documenting and then building on these victories. These practices can reveal options, possibilities and avenues for positive and sustainable action.

Whilst this article highlights the potential for strengths-based reflective practices in times of organizational change, there may be some caveats to the approach. To transform mind-sets and cultures which may be grounded in a deficit or problem-based approach could take significant investment of time and effort. For leaders in the high pressure arenas of both business and sport, time is a scarce commodity, and there may be a tendency to ‘revert to type’ in difficult situations rather than embrace a new philosophy. Moreover, there is currently a dearth of empirical research to support the use of strengths-based reflective practices in rapidly changing environments. It is also important to highlight that the authors are not advocating a total shift away from resolving problems and shortcomings by ‘glossing over’ important issues, but rather attain a healthier balance which emphasizes success, enjoyment and openness to change. Achieving this balance however, may be a significant challenge in itself.

We contend that in order to better understand this area, future directions for scholars in the field of positive psychology, organizational change and reflective practice would be to investigate the specific challenges, opportunities and practical implementation of a strengths-based approach to change management. By identifying and examining the specific thought processes, emotions and behaviours of business leaders in times of organizational change, researchers can formulate more appropriate recommendations for developing a culture which fosters positivity. Further investigation into the strengths-based reflective practices used by high performance coaches and leaders from the sporting domain could also have useful applications for the management of organizational change.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

**References**


