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## Recovering from a crisis: designing and implementing a positive change intervention

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**Abstract:** This qualitative study examines the nuances of a positive organisational change initiative at a Middle Eastern financial services firm after the global financial crisis of 2008. This study employs a single-case study design. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, stories, audiovisuals, and secondary sources and analysed using the thematic analysis approach. We identify specific positive practices and enablers of successful positive organisational change. The findings suggest that four positive practices – opportunity to connect, display of hidden talents, building personal skills, moments of playfulness, and four enablers of change – formation of high-quality connections, individual capacity building, enhanced job engagement, experience and display of positive emotions lead to high performance. Our study contributes by developing a theoretical and actionable framework for designing and implementing positive change interventions, especially as organisations recover from major crises.

**Keywords:** positive organisational change; positive practices; job engagement; high-quality connections; positive emotions; Middle East.

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## 1 Introduction

The current pandemic crisis is predicted to have a long-term negative impact on the global economy (World Economic Forum, 2019). It is likely to lead to an economic downturn, low business activity, employee layoffs and low employee morale. Recovery efforts from the crisis will require firms to think about ways to improve performance and work towards enhancing employee morale and engagement (Vaziri et al., 2020). In such situations, positive framing can lead to positive organisational changes (James et al., 2011). Positive change interventions can therefore be beneficial in such contexts.

Positive organisational change is a relatively new approach for understanding and implementing change. It is based on the cognitive reframing of change from being problematic to an opportunity for organisational improvement (Cooperrider and Sekerka, 2006). Using a positive frame, organisations can reduce the negative impact of change implementation on employees and develop more positive attitudes and behaviours towards change (Kee and Rubel, 2021). However, illustrations of the actual implementation of positive organisational change are still emerging. There is a need to identify features of positive organisational change initiatives, which can then be incorporated and implemented across organisations (Nekooee et al., 2021).

This paper addresses this need by presenting a positive organisational change initiative implemented at a Middle Eastern financial services firm. After the global financial crisis of 2008, there was an urgent need for change. The management team designed a positive business initiative called MOVE, which involved sports, arts, cultural, and everyday business activities, leading to an increase in organisational performance. We present an in-depth analysis of this initiative to uncover positive practices and enablers of change, contributing to its success. Change agents while designing and implementing positive change interventions can incorporate learning from this case, particularly as organisations endeavour to recover from the current pandemic crisis.

## 2 Review of literature

### 2.1 Positive organisational change

Positive organisational change is rooted in the emerging field of positive organisational scholarship (POS), which investigates positive practices, attributes, changes and outcomes (Cameron and Spreitzer, 2011). Positive change adopts a positive lens, assumes an affirmative bias, emphasises the impact of virtuousness, and focuses on positively deviant performance (Cameron and McNaughtan, 2014).

By adopting a positive lens, organisational problems are reinterpreted as opportunities and strength-building experiences (Cameron, 2008; Gittell et al., 2006; Prasad, 2021). The assumption of an affirmative bias is rooted in the broaden and build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2003). Positivity unlocks and elevates resources in individuals and teams, such that capabilities are broadened, and capacities or resources are built and strengthened (Fredrickson, 2009). Virtuousness is based on the eudaemonic assumption that an inclination exists in all human systems towards achieving their highest aspiration (Cameron, 2008). Across various sectors, studies find a positive relationship between virtuousness (e.g., forgiveness, compassion, optimism, trustworthiness, etc.) and performance outcomes (Cameron et al., 2011; Sweis et al., 2020). The financial return is closely related to virtuousness in downsizing (Gittell et al., 2006).

Positive change emphasises positively deviant performance, i.e., outcomes that exceed expected performance (Bright et al., 2006; Shah and Kant, 2020) by using positive practices. Practices refer to recurrent, materially bounded, and situated activities of a unit or organisation (Orlikowski, 2002). Implementation of positive practices leads to higher profitability, productivity, customer satisfaction, and employee retention (Cameron and McNaughtan, 2014). Some of these positive practices include: providing compassionate support to employees, forgiving mistakes, avoiding blame, fostering meaningfulness, expressing frequent gratitude, and showing kindness and concern (Cameron et al., 2011; Gittell et al., 2006). Additionally, enabling meaningful work through job crafting was found to positively contribute to positive change and enhance job satisfaction, motivation and performance (Monica and Krishnaveni, 2019; Berg et al., 2010).

The role of leadership is critical in implementing positive practices. Leaders' adoption of positive practices motivates positive change in organisations (Cameron and McNaughtan, 2014; Woo et al., 2018). A study on organisational healing highlights the role of leaders in fostering compassion, nurturing high-quality connections, and enhancing the healing process for organisational recovery from a negative experience (Powley and Piderit, 2008).

### 2.2 Positive business initiative: MOVE

The 2008 subprime mortgage crisis in the USA led to a decline in almost all business and market performance measures. In response, the company focused on improving customer satisfaction and revenue maximisation in 2009, followed by cost optimisation in 2010. In 2011, a positive business initiative called 'MOVE' was introduced.

MOVE was designed to motivate employees and create a more positive environment in the organisation. It comprises four sets of activities: business initiatives, cultural events, sports and games. It served as a platform to build positive relationships amongst

employees, provide them an opportunity to build individual strengths, experience and express various positive emotions and set goals. The firm's top management was confident that MOVE would lead to greater job engagement and enhance sales, income and profits.

MOVE had four major events: 'Event 1', 'Event 2', 'Event 3' and 'Event 4'. Event 1 involved activities around daily business parameters such as income, remittance, foreign currency margin, cost-to-income ratio, branch productivity and staff deployment. Based on performance in these activities, absolute and comparative points were allocated to teams monthly or bi-monthly. Event 2 focused on various business initiatives that were experiencing lower-than-desired growth. It encouraged teams to take a jump over barriers and beat competitors in the market. Points were allocated on a bi-monthly basis. It included events such as currency carnival and account credit. Event 3 included short, sport-based activities to develop employees' sports-related capabilities. The events were conducted monthly, on a league basis, with the top two teams from each group playing in the finals at the end of the year. Activities included cricket, football, basketball, badminton, chess and carom. Event 4 was designed to showcase individuals' artistic flair. Conducted monthly, the activities included group songs, debate, quiz and photography. A mega-event was held at the end of the year to determine the winners of each event.

To form teams, geographic areas in UAE covering 10–12 branches were identified. These were grouped into seven area teams based on business potential, performance and geographic proximity. Each area formed teams of 10–20 employees for each activity under each event. A website on the firm's intranet served as a central portal for information on all events. Volunteers from the head office formed the coordination committee. Participation, in any event, was discretionary.

### **3 Method**

To examine the nuances of change, we used a single-case embedded design (Yin, 1994). The study was embedded within the 'MOVE' initiative.

#### *3.1 Sources of data*

Employing purposeful sampling (Bogdan and Biklen, 2003), data were collected by one of the authors through stories shared by employees, interviews, and audiovisuals provided by the company. First, he met the organising team of MOVE to understand and get data on the context of the initiative, the remittance industry, the financial meltdown, the need for an organisational change, and the various company initiatives before MOVE. Detailed information about MOVE was collected from its dedicated webpage. This gave in-depth data on its structure, events, teams, scorecards, and testimonials from participants, including images and videos.

Next, a story-sharing contest was designed for employees who participated in MOVE. Employees were encouraged to share stories of their MOVE experiences and how they impacted their personal and professional lives. The best stories were rewarded with cash prizes. Two hundred stories were received, out of which 62 provided detailed accounts of the initiative and its impact. These were selected for further analysis. Two employees also provided interviews where they talked about the impact of the initiative on them. Further, nine key informants, including leaders (the MD, CEO, CFO, country head and

HR head), organising team members, and managers who executed the initiative, were interviewed to understand the challenges faced and MOVE's impact. All interviews were semi-structured.

### 3.2 Analysis

From the data gathered, a detailed case synopsis was prepared. We developed narrative accounts of the participants' experiences during MOVE events (e.g., Powley and Piderit, 2008). Narrative accounts are interrelated episodes describing human action sequences (Baumeister and Newman, 1994) summarised in one or two pages or 'realist' tales (Van Maanen, 1988). This dataset was analysed following the thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Clarke et al., 2019; Ghaedi et al., 2021). First, we read the data multiple times to familiarise ourselves with its nuances. Next, we coded the data to identify emerging patterns combined into more significant themes by iteratively moving between data and theory. Themes were developed inductively with the theoretical context of positive organisational change and positive practices guiding our analysis. We identified three broad themes: positive practices built into the change initiative, enablers of change and outcomes of change. We examined the relationships between these themes to develop a framework for positive organisational change.

## 4 Findings

Four positive practices were built into MOVE: opportunity to connect, display talent, build personal skills and capacities, and experience moments of playfulness. These practices, when enacted, resulted in four experiences and behaviours, which we identified as enablers of change: formation of positive relationships, individual capacity building, higher job engagement, and experience and display of positive emotions. The impact of these enablers was reflected in higher performance in the organisation.

### 4.1 Positive practices implemented in MOVE

In November 2009, leaders planned and executed a two-day event to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the organisation. This event brought all organisation members together, engaging them in various sports, arts and cultural events. The event was a huge success. Employees displayed high enthusiasm as they got an opportunity to express themselves as individuals through moments of playfulness. Immediately after the event, notably high performance was observed, indicating a link between the event and the positive deviance in performance. Reflecting on this outcome, a manager stated:

"...during these two-days, employees could live their best selves, display their talents, meet so many members of the organization and surprisingly the organization had peak performance in the weeks that followed."

As the event resulted in positive experiences for employees and the organisation, it became a pilot for the leaders to design a large initiative to implement positive practices. Thus, they designed MOVE as a year-long initiative to implement various positive practices. Two managers explained:

“...during this event that the top management team got this vision to capture the hearts of their employees by giving them happy moments at work through play, display hidden talents, opportunity to connect and experience positive emotions along with business growth, where employees are highly engaged working towards a greater performance outcome... that is why MOVE initiative was planned and executed.”

“The top management team after seeing the employees at this event started dreaming of capturing their hearts by giving them better moments, more opportunity to connect, play, display their hidden talents and feel positive emotions... at the same time the business growing, employees giving their hundred percent.”

“During this event, employees were very enthusiastic about participating in these events and experienced happiness. So in MOVE, the management decided to give them an opportunity to display these talents every month, with a larger scope of participation. Every employee had a chance to choose activities of their choice and express their creativity... to give every employee an opportunity to bring out their best selves.”

By design, all the four MOVE events implemented positive practices of providing participants with an opportunity to connect, display talents, build capacities, and experience moments of playfulness at work. The objective was to enable employees to move out of their professional spaces, interact personally, and explore their capabilities while engaging in play-based activities. As expressed by managers, organisers of MOVE, and leaders:

“Some of them work in shifts, and life is busy over the counters. As every MOVE event was team-based, participants got an opportunity to meet others. Some of them met in meetings to plan for Event 1 and Event 2 activities. Others met for rehearsals of Event 3 and Event 4 activities. In general, a branch has say from 5 to 10 members employees... now they met members of different branches...”

“Our employees come from different nationalities, different cultures... in routine branch hours, they hardly have a chance to think outside their daily jobs. MOVE opened up a window for them to showcase their talents. Every member got the opportunity to share something, some talents, some art, some ability...”

“We planned MOVE to groom future managers... MOVE gives an opportunity to build capacities... and it was also one way of informing grooming future managers for the business...”

This indicated that the leaders had carefully thought and planned about including positive practices in the structure of the initiative itself. Further, they had a clear understanding of the expected impact of the practices. This took us further into the analysis to understand the process of positive organisational change. We identified four enablers of change that helped the organisation to achieve a positively deviant performance outcome.

#### *4.2 Key enablers of change*

Four key enablers of positive change became evident in MOVE that led to a positively deviant performance. Participating in various MOVE activities helped employees to build their capacities. Participants expressed and experienced a variety of positive emotions

and formed positive relationships among themselves. The events also enhanced their job engagement.

#### *4.2.1 Individual capacity building*

Events of MOVE provided employees with opportunities to discover, develop, and leverage their strengths, which might not have found expression in their routine work. Employees inquired into their unique strengths, capabilities, and skills while participating in different MOVE activities. The efforts employees put in the different MOVE events led to developing new skills and knowledge that were often transferable to their work, resulting in individual capacity building and better performance.

For instance, some events required employees to lead teams. This helped develop leadership skills at various levels in the organisation, as described by a top management team member and subsequently acknowledged by a manager:

“In [MOVE] there is a leadership pipeline in place. [It encourages] empowerment at the grass-root level where you identified who was the best for a particular role and made them captains irrespective of position or power led to this yearlong commitment from the employees as well as the management.”

“Many employees became captains of Event 1 and Event 2 activities to lead their team. They got the opportunity to display their leadership talents in the process.”

As several employees took up roles of captains in events, they developed their leadership skills in the process. For instance, a junior employee got an opportunity to become a captain and lead his team. He participated in an Event 1 activity and successfully led his team to win the same. Employees also explored and developed their technical knowledge and personal skills by participating in the events. They developed their work-related knowledge and skills, which helped them perform better at organisational tasks. In one narrative, an employee described how he developed oratory skills through MOVE. He participated in the debate contest but was not able to perform well and was nervous. He started practicing for it regularly. He kept persisting, searching online for ideas and refining his debating skills. Finally, when he went on the stage, he was able to speak confidently. He developed speaking confidently in front of others, which also positively translated to his job role. He was able to handle customers with much more confidence and effectiveness.

In another instance, an employee got a promotion post participating in MOVE. He wanted to pass a particular exam. The contents required to be learned for the exam overlapped with an event in MOVE. By participating in the event, he was able to better prepare for the exam. He got points for his team and was also able to achieve the first position in the exam:

“I always wanted to pass this exam to get promoted in my company. Event 1 gave me an opportunity to sharpen my skills and helped me prepare for the exam. I tried different methods to improve my performance and get points for my team. It was a proud moment for me when I came first in the exam and got promoted. I feel it was a win-win for us to participate in MOVE.”

Another employee gained expertise in company products and processes by participating in an event and became the expert point of contact for customers and employees alike for any queries related to products and processes. Along with gaining work-related skills,



sports, and cultural events of MOVE enabled employees to display their talents. This resulted in a sense of happiness and joy as employees got appreciated for their talent. An employee expressed:

“I had forgotten dancing long back. However, during the Event 4 activity, my colleagues asked me to participate in a group dance activity. I became very nervous and had inhibitions to perform in front of other company officials. I went for practice sessions, and finally, I participated. We won second prize, and everyone said I danced well. Before this day, I thought I became too old for performing in dance activities. MOVE gave me an opportunity to renew my talent.”

#### *4.2.2 Formation of positive relationships*

Participating in different MOVE events enabled employees to connect with others across hierarchies. They got introduced to several peers as well as superiors and leaders in an informal setting. Many of these interactions turned into friendships. Moreover, there were instances when employees’ perceptions of their co-workers changed to the positive side due to these interactions. An organiser described the development of positive relationships amongst employees:

“The employees could meet members from various levels during these informal activities of Event 3 and Event 4. First, they were a bit shy to see all the top officials and perform in front of them, but eventually, they started observing them. They began sharing ideas with other members on various issues related to work or personal... This way, a network of friendship was available for them to connect with.”

An employee stated how these available networks turned into friendship during MOVE:

“I was not aware that we [another employee] were in the same branch until we met at dance practice. Our interaction now makes us good friends.”

The organisation was a microcosm of multiple cultures and employed Arab nationals and expatriates from multiple countries such as India, the Philippines, the USA and Bangladesh. The MOVE initiative facilitated employees to traverse these cultural boundaries and connect during the various events. Thus, positive relationships also enabled employees from diverse cultural backgrounds to connect and learn from each other.

Further, the presence and accessibility of leaders during MOVE events gave employees an opportunity to meet them personally and connect across hierarchies. For instance, an employee described how an office boy played a manager in an Event 3 activity, displaying how MOVE promoted cross-hierarchical interactions. Employees found this to be a unique and enriching experience that was not present in their previous organisations. The leaders’ genuine interest in forming positive relationships with the employees was also displayed when an employee received a call directly from the chief operating officer (COO) to appreciate his efforts in an Event 1 activity.

As employees participated in different MOVE events, they engaged in helping behaviour, providing work and non-work related and emotional support to each other. They proactively helped each other and openly shared ideas and knowledge. An employee described one such instance:

“One day my colleague informed me that there is a new Hurdle activity announced and that she wants to take part in it. With great enthusiasm, I shared all the information, and we discussed different possibilities to win ... I was happy she could win the event in two weeks and got a name for our branch.”

These behaviours, recognised as task enabling behaviours (Stephens et al., 2011), enabled employees to strengthen their relationships and perform better at their jobs. For instance, during one activity, an employee was not having a particular type of currency in sufficient amount as requested by a customer. He used the network developed during MOVE to reach out for help to a cashier from another branch. With his help, the employee successfully provided the currency and won points for his team for an Event 1 activity.

Employees also received considerable emotional support during MOVE events. They described how their supervisors and co-workers encouraged them to keep making efforts and how this made much difference to them and their performance. An employee stated:

“His [supervisor’s] reply impressed me. He said, ‘...you never tried to know who you are, but I did. You might participate as you are the only one fit for this activity...’ So I decided to find out the real hero in me as my supervisor advised.”

Another employee expressed his gratitude towards his supervisor who encouraged him to participate in MOVE events and adjusted his work times to accommodate rehearsals. This made a lasting impression on the employee.

One story of emotional support that stood out was when an employee went out of her way to relocate a newly wedded employee to a branch closer to his home. This indicated that MOVE enabled work-related connections and developed a network of emotional and social support amongst employees. These behaviours extended to daily activities of employees beyond MOVE events as described by an employee:

“During this time we have met lots of people, our colleagues. We discuss many things which are happening in their area and branches... and we tr[ie]d to adopt that kind of initiatives which helped us to increase the performance as well as business.”

These relationships displayed features such as mutual support, task enabling behaviours, trust, positive regard, openness to ideas, which indicated positive relationships (Stephens et al., 2011) whose development was facilitated through MOVE.

#### *4.2.3 Experience and display of positive emotions*

Events of MOVE generated a variety of positive emotions in employees, organisers and leaders alike. Employees exhibited the same during the entire initiative. Be it planning for different events or practice sessions or stage performances; employees displayed great enthusiasm and joy in MOVE initiative. Many positive emotions such as gratitude for the help received, pride in accomplishing an activity, joy in celebrating the team success, amusement when employees from different nationalities performed a group dance or leaders performing in Events 3 or 4 activity were expressed.

One employee received a call from the COO to appreciate his efforts at an event, which led to better customer service. He described feeling “very emotional and consider[ing] this as the best recognition” of his career. Another employee expressed his

thankfulness to his supervisor for encouraging him in the events and supporting him by adjusting his work time to participate in the events. He stated:

*“I am thankful to him [his supervisor] for encouraging me, also to adjust the duty timing for my rehearsal. Thinking about the support I received, brought me tears even today. The bond that we have formed during the MOVE is priceless.”*

In another expression of gratefulness, a Pilipino expatriate described how he had found a family away from home through MOVE. He felt that he was cared for and was able to engage in activities he liked along with work, which gave him the energy to keep performing at work.

In one specific instance, an employee discovered that he had cancer and received full support from his organisation. He was supported both monetarily and emotionally. He received several calls from co-workers inquiring about his health and was also visited by senior organisation members during his time at the hospital. He felt he was part of a family in his organisation and that he was vital for them. He expressed that he was “so grateful [that he] cannot explain [in words].”

The experience of positive emotions was also evident to the organisers who expressed that:

*“Participating in various MOVE events, employees experienced and expressed the joy of participation, gratitude for the help received, and pride in winning awards. As all the activities were team-based, this positivity spread over the team members from different branches across the country UAE. It was experienced not only by the participants, but the audience, judges, and leaders also felt this positivity.”*

#### 4.2.4 Enhanced job engagement

As employees engaged in competitive activities with rewards as end goals, there was an increased sense of job engagement. By participating in different Events 1 and 2 activities, employees exhibited greater focus and absorption in their jobs, reflecting their day-to-day job roles. As one organiser described this intent:

*“Various events of MOVE motivated employees to bring their best selves to work, investing their energies. Everyday business activities ‘Event 1’ and bi-monthly initiatives ‘Event 2’ were carefully crafted to engage employees. Sports and arts activities were introduced under ‘Event 3’ and ‘Event 4’ to encourage holistic engagement. One specific example is a quiz activity that was designed based on the company’s products and policies. This creatively engaged employee to gain knowledge about the organization.”*

These intended outcomes were visible during MOVE. Employees exhibited greater confidence and intent in handling their jobs. The following expressions indicated that by participating in MOVE, employees displayed more focus, attention, and absorption in their jobs, which in turn resulted in better performance for them as well as for the organisation:

*“Sometimes, when I was not very confident to handle customers about certain products and services, I made mistakes. During MOVE, I participated in Event 1 activities. I focused a lot on my work, as I had to gain points for my team. I constantly challenged myself to improve scores, and as a result, our team was a winner for many months.”*

“Being a cashier, I need to be very attentive in handling the cash at the counter. I remember when my colleagues went out for practice, and I had to work extra to support them. That day I handled more than 300 customers with the help of my branch head. I understood that I have so much more capacity and energy than I thought. Now I am ready to take more challenges and go to the next level.”

### 4.3 *Impact: higher performance*

As intended by the leaders, the MOVE initiative impacted the performance levels of the organisation positively. Individual performance improved as employees took on challenging tasks and accomplished them. For instance, during an Event 1 activity, as a captain, an employee had to maximise remittance count to score points for his team. He worked intensively to review his plans based on past data and came up with a new plan that helped him perform better at the event and in his job. He explained:

“Scoring points for my team in one of the Event 1 activities was my goal. As a captain, I looked at the past trends of remittance counts and thought of different plans to maximize counts. My team was scoring at the third position; then, I changed plans. Due to Event 1 (activity) I became clear about my goals and performed better.”

Another employee participated in a quiz related to the company’s products and processes. He worked hard and won the competition. Later, at his branch, a customer asked him about a product that was newly launched. The employee, due to his preparation for MOVE, knew about it and helped the customer. He became a point of contact for employees and customers for new products. This way, he was able to enhance his and his team’s performance.

Events 1 and 2 were closely aligned with employees’ job responsibilities. Higher individual and team performance was noted during and after MOVE, culminating in a higher organisational level performance. This reflected both in profits and higher quality of services as observed by the CFO and organisers of MOVE:

“The kind of enthusiasm that we saw today was explicitly seen in the performance of the year 2011. We reversed all the negative growth trends that we had during the year 2009–10, and we had double-digit growth in all the business parameters of the year. Event 1 taught us how we could continue to be focused and foster our business requirements. Event 2 made us agile in making quick decisions. Moreover, Event 3 and Event 4 fostered team building and how can we synchronize our efforts that we can convert into business.”

“Engaging with the employees, may it be work or otherwise, would give them a feeling that the organization cares. So that has helped us, which has positively rewarded the customers with better approach and service. The quality of service delivered and the enthusiasm by the front-line staff has improved.”

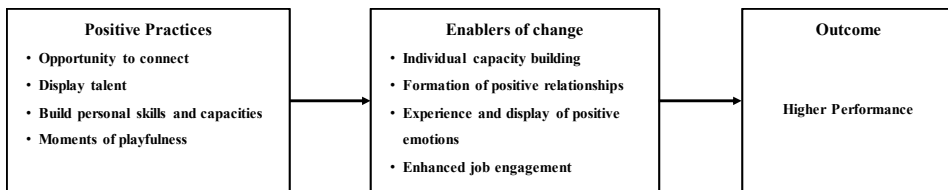
Thus, the organisation implemented a systematic strategic positive organisational change through the MOVE initiative. It incorporated distinct positive practices that generated positive cognitions, emotions, and behaviours, which culminated in improvements in performance for employees and the organisation. Below, we consolidate these insights and present a framework of positive organisational change.

## 5 Discussion and conclusions

Through this paper, we make a case for adopting a positive approach to organisational change and renewal. This approach is particularly useful for organisations striving to recover from a downturn. We identify critical elements of the positive organisational change initiative that made it successful. MOVE exhibited the four connotations of positive change: adoption of a positive lens, an affirmative bias, virtuousness, and a focus on a positively deviant performance (Cameron and McNaughtan, 2014). First, the leaders adopted a positive lens by focusing on generative processes. While competitors were laying off employees, they decided against it. Instead, they reinterpreted the crisis as an opportunity and implemented positive practices through MOVE. Second, we identify an affirmative bias as employees expressed and experienced positive emotions during MOVE events. The events gave them an opportunity to build physical, psychological and social capacities. Third, leaders integrated virtuousness into MOVE. The participating employees shared a common motto to challenge their limits and move towards excellence. A genuine desire to achieve the highest was evident. Finally, MOVE led to positively deviant performance as post the initiative, double-digit growth in all the key performance indicators was observed.

Themes emerging in our study come together in an actionable framework of positive change, presented in Figure 1. The framework proposes that a positive change initiative should incorporate positive practices by providing employees opportunities to connect across the organisation, building personal skills and capacities, displaying their talents, and experiencing moments of playfulness. As employees utilise these opportunities, the following positive individual experiences and behaviours are generated, which become enablers of change: formation of positive relationships, individual capacity building, higher job engagement, and experience and displaying positive emotions. These enablers boost positive energy at work and motivate employees to make more extraordinary efforts, leading to higher performance on both quantitative and qualitative parameters.

**Figure 1** A framework for positive organisational change



### 5.1 Theoretical implications

Our findings contribute towards the developing literature on positive organisational change. They enrich Cameron et al.'s (2011) positive practice dimensions by adding a significant set of four positive practices to extant literature. These practices, when enacted, are likely to enhance the experience of and effectiveness at work, thus making it more meaningful (Thomas et al., 2018). As employees develop positive relationships and exhibit helping behaviours, these practices can contribute to developing a supportive and inspiring work environment (Alfaqueh et al., 2019; Smollan and Morrison, 2019).

We propose that positive practices lead to desired positive results only when they are enacted as intended. In this study, employees actively engaged in the positive practices resulting in positive experiences and behaviours that became enablers of change. A sense of positivity could be discerned in their stories, which amplified capacity-building behaviours (Fredrickson, 2009). The formation of positive relationships (Dutton and Ragins, 2007) emerged as critical to positive change. Employees displayed positive regard, a sense of mutuality (Dutton and Heaphy, 2003), developed connections across hierarchies (Stephens et al., 2011), provided emotional support, and willingly helped others. This led to higher mutual engagement and enabled employees to accomplish their task goals.

We also bring out that positive practices enhance job engagement, which in turn promote better performance. Highly engaged employees invest their “physical, cognitive, and emotional energy” [Rich et al., (2010), p.610] at work and exhibit better work performance (Rich et al., 2010; Yogamalar and Samuel, 2019). We identify positive practices as an antecedent to this relationship. We emphasise the importance of enabling the experience of positive emotions at work. Positive emotions like joy, interest, pride, contentment, or love; broadens thought-action repertoires that build physical, psychological, social, intellectual and personal resources (Fredrickson, 2003). Our findings reflect that positive emotions amongst employees enhance their willingness to make sustained efforts and perform better.

Our study highlights the importance of playfulness as an essential context that enabled employees to connect, display their talent and build capacity. Very few studies have examined the role of play in organisational change (Sandelands, 2010). Playfulness provides a psychologically safe context and liberates employees from professional interaction norms. Play by nature demands high interaction and enthusiasm (Van Vleet, and Feeney, 2015). Play often gets combined with other outcomes such as performance or learning new skills (Linder et al., 2001). Such activities enhance performance and enable employees to express themselves freely, a requirement for creating a positive environment for change. This leads to high task involvement, a positive, friendly organisational environment, higher levels of trust, bonding and social interactions (Petelczyc et al., 2018), thus setting positive organisational change in motion, as also demonstrated in our study.

## *5.2 Implications for practice*

Positive organisational change is challenging to implement, particularly during an organisational downturn when employee morale is low (Vaishnavi et al., 2018). This paper can guide organisations going through similar negative phases, such as the current pandemic crisis. Change agents (consultants/organisational leaders/managers) can directly use this framework to develop and implement positive change interventions. First, they need to identify specific positive practices and develop activities that necessitate the enactment of these practices. For instance, competitions and games can be specifically designed to make employees connect, leverage their strengths or display talent. The next aspect is to create a fun, and playful environment where prevailing organisational relationships take a backseat and space for interaction is created. The role of leadership becomes critical in this process (e.g., Cameron and Plews, 2012). Leaders need to create an enabling psychologically safe environment (Allameh et al., 2018;

Edmondson and Lei, 2014) and exhibit their openness cross-hierarchical interactions and letting go of hierarchical mindsets.

### 5.3 Positive change interventions and bouncing back from a crisis

A crisis such as the financial meltdown of 2008 or the current COVID-19 pandemic is marked by low employee morale, low work motivation and lower performance (Vardarlier, 2016; Pattnaik and Jena, 2020). This was also reflected in the organisation that we studied. However, instead of taking a negative problem-centric approach to resolving the issue, the organisation's leaders took a positive approach. They viewed it as an opportunity to generate positive emotions and relationships amongst employees and boost their morale. MOVE was designed and implemented with this objective. During and after the initiative, there was a significant improvement in organisational performance, which the leaders linked to the positive impact of MOVE. This indicates that positive change initiatives can enable organisations to move toward a positive trajectory after a crisis. By focusing on positive framing, positive change interventions can revive and energise employees. This is likely to reflect in positive outcomes for the organisation as employees engage in their work with renewed vigour, take up challenges and solve problems, thus enabling the organisation to bounce back after a crisis and improve performance.

### 5.4 Limitations and future research directions

In this study, we present enablers of change as independent of each other. However, in the data, they emerged simultaneously and are likely to impact each other positively. For instance, positive relationships lead to positive emotions. These can, in turn, lead to more significant efforts towards developing positive relationships, building individual capacity and experiencing higher job engagement. Similar explanations can be developed, starting with each enabler and examining its impact on the others. A study on how these enablers interact with each other and finally impact performance can further advance positive change literature.

We employed a single-case-embedded study design in our study. While this has led to crucial insights, examining positive organisational change initiatives in multiple organisations can further develop and strengthen the framework that has emerged in our study.

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