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# FLOURISHING:

## A New Aspiration for Leaders and Organizations

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## Introduction

I recently welcomed a regular coaching client into a zoom room and was **met with such joy and excitement, it took me by surprise!**

I have been trained as a coach to bring joy and energy to the start of each coaching call because **95% of the time, my coaching calls welcome exhausted and busy leaders** who just need a minute to decompress before starting our session. That day, my client had just made a big decision in their life to pursue a big project and the joy was palpable.

**Should we settle for the status quo of exhaustion and languishing in our leadership and just trying to survive the week to make it to the weekend? Is there something more we can hope for in our leadership and organizational life?**

I'm familiar with seeing leaders who are tired, alone, exhausted, languishing, and making survival their primary goal. It's **completely understandable at this current tipping point in our world** when facing the realities of polarization, pandemic, trauma, inequity, isolation, and economic upheaval.

Yet, survival is a temporary goal and cannot be the finish line for leaders and organizations. Our world needs something better as an aspiration and hope!

**I dream to see leaders and organizations flourishing and operating at their greatest potential.**

I believe all our long-standing institutions need deep renewal that is measured by this new aspiration: flourishing leaders and organizational ecosystems.

I have a personal calling toward the flourishing of leaders and organizations – a renewed and clarified calling for my vocational work as a Senior Design Partner with [Design Group International](#).

## What do I hope flourishing leaders will experience?

I want to see leaders who are experiencing deep levels of personal wellness in all aspects of their whole lives; emotional, relational, financial, spiritual, professional, intellectual, social, and physical. I want to see leaders who are eager to wake up each day because of what is ahead of them because they are operating at their highest and best potential.

Is this realistic all the time and in all circumstances? Of course, not, yet I hope the good moments far outweigh the bad and that the collective arch is moving more toward flourishing and away from languishing.

## What do I hope flourishing organizations will experience?

I want to see organizations that are experiencing the momentum of flourishing teams and cultures highlighted by impactful programs that are making a real difference in the world. I want to see organizational ecosystems flourishing in such a way that they are confident in fulfilling their mission and purpose, ready to level up to bigger challenges, and financially sustainable to meet the real needs of real people.

Is this going to be a reality? Organizations are complex and the challenges faced by leaders, boards, and shareholders are daunting. As Deanna Rolffs often explains, it takes a deep investment to [work toward equity](#) in our organizations. A vision for something better than surviving, including a vision for building inclusive and equity organizations that are flourishing will help move toward something the entire community can be proud of together.

## Positive Psychology: The Foundation of Flourishing

In 1998, the field of psychology took a big step by asking a different question. According to Seligman, the then president of the APA, “**urged psychology to supplement its venerable goal with a new goal: exploring what makes life worth living and building the enabling conditions of a life worth living.**”

This shift in the way the APA started asking more profound questions about what was working to make “a life worth living” in the foundation of [positive psychology](#), and the study and definition of human flourishing. The concepts that began to emerge; happiness, flow, meaning, love, gratitude, accomplishment, growth, and better relationships, created the foundation for what has emerged as human flourishing.

Building upon this foundation of work, Dr. Laurie Schreiner, has designed and developed [The Thriving Quotient](#), a conceptual framework primarily working with college students, on the core aspects of thriving that include engaged learning, academic

determination, positive perspective, diverse citizenship, and social connections. This work is closely related and interconnected with the concept of human flourishing.

## How can we define Human Flourishing?

If something bigger, the flourishing of leaders and organizations, can be a new aspiration for leaders and organizations, it's important to start with a working definition that can align our expectations and collective effort to work, together.

When I ask [webster](#), flourishing is defined as being “**marked by vigorous and healthy growth**” and is “**very active and successful**”. Taken at face value, we can see that flourishing shows health, growth, and success. This definition is helpful in giving a broad picture of flourishing yet isn't quite specific enough to show the full picture.

Martin Seligman, the founder of Positive Psychology, offers a **more complete definition** of flourishing in his book, [Flourish](#).

According to Seligman, to flourish, an individual must experience a combination of **several core elements of flourishing**, including exhibiting **positive emotions**, experiencing high levels of **engagement**, finding deeper **meaning** and purpose, experiencing positive **relationships**, and producing relevant **accomplishments** in their life.

## What is the difference between authentic happiness and well-being?

The early research on flourishing was most connected to authentic happiness as a concept. This included the key elements of positive emotion, engagement, and meaning and purpose.

The larger concept of well-being, most closely associated with a bigger picture of flourishing, adds the importance of positive and quality relationships alongside the need for experiencing accomplishments through setting and achieving goals.

The scholars who were studying flourishing, happiness, and positive psychology recognized that happiness is a construct that is culturally bound and does not naturally account for inequity and systematic inequalities from context to context.

The work of expanding the research and moving toward well-being provides a more inclusive and expanded definition of flourishing that recognizes the importance of relationships and accomplishments.

## The Elements of Flourishing – The P.E.R.M.A Model

Let's explore the **key elements of flourishing**. Flourishing contains several key elements that are broadly described in the **P.E.R.M.A. model**, including:

- **Positive Emotions:** experiencing key positive emotions in your life consistently including joy, gratitude, and contentment.
- **Engagement:** having the capacity to find “flow” in your life and the ability to be absorbed and connected in your tasks and work
- **Quality Relationships:** experiencing a depth of quality and positive relationships with others
- **Meaning:** finding a bigger purpose in your life that connects with your core identity and values
- **Accomplishments:** being able to set and achieve goals in your life and seeing the meaningful results of your efforts

### HUMAN FLOURISHING

The P.E.R.M.A. Model | Seligman, M.



- |  |   |   |  |   |
|--|---|---|--|---|
| ● <b>Positive Emotions</b>                                       | ● <b>Engagement</b>                             | ● <b>Relationships</b>                          | ● <b>Meaning</b>   | ● <b>Accomplishments</b>  |
| Experiencing positive emotions like joy, gratitude, contentment. | Being fully absorbed and engaged in activities. | Finding and maintaining positive relationships. | Finding a purpose that is bigger than yourself to invest in. | The ability to set and achieve goals you are see and are proud about. |

## Positive Emotions

The first core element in flourishing is experiencing **positive emotions** in your life on a consistent basis. These emotions are things we typically find pleasurable to experience, including love, joy, gratitude, [trust](#), contentment, amusement, or happiness. Overall, we flourish when we experience these positive emotions on a regular basis.

Does that mean that all negative emotions are bad and should be avoided at all costs? It's true that negative emotions like anger, fear, frustration, and sadness aren't fun to feel. These emotions can be productive to help us avoid situations and experiences that can harm us and can help elevate the experiences of positive emotions.

Strengthening your **emotional intelligence** is a critical component to building pathways to grow positive emotions and manage negative emotions.

[Emotional intelligence](#) is the ability to understand and manage your emotions and the capacity to recognize the patterns and evidence of emotions in others you connect with each day. Developing the emotional intelligence to recognize and cultivate positive emotions is an essential first step on your path toward flourishing as a leader and organization. Positive emotions can be cultivated through activities like expressing gratitude, savoring positive experiences, and performing acts of kindness.

- **Key questions to consider:**
  - Taking all things together, how happy would you say you are?
  - Are you aware of your emotions and the emotions of others?
  - How can you manage your negative emotions and cultivate positive ones?

## Engagement

The second core element of flourishing is **engagement**, the capacity to find “flow” in your life and work. Engagement involves being fully absorbed in activities that you enjoy, find challenging, and experience as intrinsically motivating. When you are fully engaged in an activity, it can feel like you lose track of time and immerse yourself in the experience, activity, task, or assignment.

When you consider what it means to build engagement, it's important to remember that certain tasks or activities will be easier to fully engage based on your strengths, passions, and interests. What you find naturally engaging may differ from others based on your natural talents, aptitudes, and interests. For instance, I could spend an entire day on the golf course or driving range while my partner would be bored and disengaged after around 12 minutes on the course.

In his book, [Flow](#), Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, describes the key to engagement by finding our **natural state of “flow” by experiencing clarity of focus** through finding the right

balance between the level of challenge of the activity and one's own skills, and by focusing one's attention and energy on the task at hand. In finding an “optimal experience” of flow, we can find deep levels of engagement, creativity, and ultimately, productivity.

- **Key questions to consider:**
  - What are you naturally interested in engaging and what learning feels easy?
  - When do I most experience "flow" in my life?
  - What is holding me back from engaging more deeply?

## Quality Relationships

When Seligman began researching flourishing that moved beyond authentic happiness, he added two key elements that built the framework of well-being. The third element of flourishing is **quality relationships**, experiencing a depth of positive relationships with others.

In short, the pursuit of human flourishing is a relational and interconnected pursuit that intersects the lives and experiences of other people around us in a web of relationships.

The level of positive and quality relationships is important for our well-being, and we need positive relationships with others to feel connected and supported. This element means **we flourish in the community**.

Does this mean we always need to be connected to others and can never be alone? No, solitude and time by yourself can be a space for rest, renewal, and wellness. Time on your own may strengthen relationships as you identify and reflect on your emotions, engagement, and meaning in life.

- **Key questions to consider:**
  - Are there people in my life who really care about me?
  - What would it look like to invest myself intentionally in community?

## Meaning

The fourth key element of flourishing is **meaning**, the important aspect of finding a bigger purpose in your life that connects with your core identity and values.

What may be communicated as obvious, finding a deeper meaning and purpose beyond yourself **may be a life-long pursuit**. The importance of positive emotions and engagement, when combined with meaning and purpose, creates the foundation of authentic happiness within the framework of positive psychology.

How can you find meaning and a deeper purpose beyond yourself? For many, the cultivation of meaning and purpose **draws from a bigger well of faith and spirituality** that provides a place for the created order and function of our world. In addition, the pursuit of the common good and the intrinsic and instrumental good of service, creativity, and contribution to others helps build a framework for meaning and purpose.

You can cultivate meaning and purpose by identifying your purpose and values and using your strengths to contribute to something greater.

- **Key questions to consider:**
  - Do I generally feel that what I do in my life is valuable and worthwhile and has a bigger purpose?
  - What wells of meaning and purpose am I drawing from in my life?

## Accomplishment

The fifth and final key element of flourishing is **accomplishment**, an important factor in setting goals and achieving them. You increase your levels of personal flourishing when you can set and achieve goals in your life and witness the meaningful results of your efforts.

You can increase your accomplishments by breaking down goals into smaller, achievable steps and celebrating progress along the way.

Popular psychologist, Carol Dweck, describes how we can strengthen our ability to accomplish things by **adopting a [growth mindset](#) vs. a fixed mindset**. A growth mindset recognizes that we can strengthen our skills and abilities through learning, growing, and effort. A fixed mindset, in contrast, is an internal belief that we have fixed traits and abilities that will not change regardless of effort and energy to grow and learn.

- **Key questions to consider:**
  - Can name some recent goals and achievements I am proud of in my life?
  - How can I learn and grow to build new skills and abilities?



## Moving Toward Human Flourishing for Leaders and Organizations

Human flourishing can set a new hope for leaders and organizations and help leaders move beyond languishing and surviving toward a new place marked by the signs of flourishing. We've explored together this new vision, offered a working definition of flourishing, looked back at the context of positive psychology, and outlined the five core elements: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishments.

The next step will be the **explore pathways to flourishing for leaders and organizations**. I recognize that this is not an easy path, that languishing is real, and that moving toward surviving can be an important accomplishment for leaders. We will explore where you are as a leader on the continuum from languishing to flourishing and offer some pathways and steps toward flourishing in each of the 5 core elements.

**It's a joy to walk alongside you on your journey toward flourishing as a leader and organization.**

### Matt Visser Senior Design Partner

Matt Visser serves as a Senior Design Partner with Design Group International. Matt's greatest joy is empowering you as an adaptive leader to tackle your most difficult problems and help you build a healthy organizational ecosystem. Matt has invested over 20 years in growing nonprofit organizations focused on leadership development, community engagement, fundraising, and innovation.

### About Design Group International

Design Group International is a group of consultants who have chosen to be part of a community that is committed to the craft of Process Consulting. Process Consulting is our shared foundation, approach, and framework. Our values of listening, helping, and learning help us fulfill our mission to help leaders and their organizations transform for a vibrant future.