

Available online at [www.sciencedirect.com](http://www.sciencedirect.com)

SciVerse ScienceDirect

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/orgdyn](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/orgdyn)

# Toward human sustainability: How to enable more thriving at work

Gretchen Spreitzer, Christine L. Porath, Cristina B. Gibson

Over the last 20 years, we have seen dramatic business and academic interest in building sustainable organizations. Sustainable organizations have the capacity to endure and simultaneously satisfy a triple bottom line of economic, environmental and human performance. Yet, in comparison to the environmental and economic dimensions of sustainability, substantially less attention has been focused on sustainability's human dimension. An important mechanism for understanding the human dimension of sustainability is thriving at work. When thriving, employees are energized to grow and develop. They are creating resources rather than merely depleting resources. Our research shows that thriving is a crucial mechanism for increasing job performance, while also mitigating burnout and improving health. In this article, we contribute to the knowledge base on human sustainability by identifying what can be done to enable more human thriving at work. First, we define thriving, providing examples of thriving individuals at work. Then we draw on nearly a decade of research to provide key evidence for why we should care about thriving at work. Finally, we discuss what can be done to enable more thriving at work.

## WHAT IS THRIVING?

Thriving individuals are growing, developing, and energized rather than stagnating or feeling depleted. Thriving is indicated by the joint experience of vitality and learning at work. The first component, vitality, denotes the sense that one is energized and feels alive at work. When thriving, people feel passionate about what they do. They produce their own energy through excitement for their work. Thriving individuals have a spark that fuels energy in themselves and others too. The second component, learning, is about growing through new knowledge and skills. When thriving, people believe they are getting better at what they do. Thriving individuals aren't satisfied with the status quo – they are

self-learners who actively seek out opportunities to learn new things and develop.

Together, vitality and learning are the key markers of thriving at work. If people lack vitality but are learning, they are likely to feel depleted and eventually burn out. Consider the case of the director of a consulting firm who, despite an intellectually challenging context where he was continually learning, lost excitement and energy for his work. Instead of relishing the opportunity to grow, he felt stretched to his limits and contemplated an early retirement to combat his burnout.

Conversely, if people have energy at work but lack opportunities to learn and grow, they are likely to feel stagnated rather than thriving. For example, consider the employee who snagged a coveted position with a sports marketing/management firm (one of the toughest industries to break into). She felt energized by her colleagues, yet she was looking for a new job because she felt that she was dying a slow death by not engaging her capacity to learn and grow. She eventually left that firm for a job where she had more opportunities to grow and develop.

The two components of thriving can serve as a kind of gauge for people to sense progress in how they are doing. This gauge can help people understand whether what they are doing and how they are doing is increasing their short-term individual functioning and long-term development at work. Like a thermometer, this thriving gauge can help individuals understand if they are overheating (with a propensity for burning out) or too cold (indicating stagnation and depletion). By paying attention to one's sense of vitality and learning, individuals have a mechanism to assess the sustainability of their work.

## Snapshots of Thriving at Work

How do thriving employees make a difference in their work environment? Let us examine two snapshots of thriving

employees – one in a more professional role and a second in a service capacity. First, imagine the airline pilot who might feel it's beyond his or her job description to help passengers as they cope with late or cancelled flights. In contrast, consider Captain Denny Flanagan from United Airlines, who was profiled in the *Wall Street Journal* as a thriver:

He is a rare bird in today's frustration-filled air-travel world – a pilot who goes out of his way to make flying fun for passengers. When pets travel in cargo compartments, the United Airlines veteran snaps pictures of them with his cell phone camera, and then shows owners that their animals are on board. In the air, he has flight attendants raffle off 10% discount coupons and unopened bottles of wine. He writes notes to first-class passengers and elite-level frequent fliers on the back of his business cards, addressing them by name and thanking them for their business. If flights are delayed or diverted to other cities because of storms, Capt. Flanagan tries to find a McDonald's where he can order 200 hamburgers, or a snack shop that has apples or bananas he can hand out.

He thrives by engaging his passion for people and continually trying to get better at what he does. He goes beyond the normal job requirements for a pilot, seeing himself as a crucial ambassador for the troubled airline. What if more pilots had the same approach to their work? Maybe more pilots would choose to stay beyond their eligible retirement age.

Second, consider Candace Billups, who is profiled in a POS Case on Job Crafting. Candace, who works at The Cancer Center at the University of Michigan, describes her work as "I am basically there for the patients . . . my relationship with the families is really important to me . . . I see myself as a positive force at the Cancer Center." Candace sounds like the kind of nurse or staff member we would all love to hire. But you may be surprised to learn that Candace is a janitor. Candace crafts her job to go beyond cleaning up after patients who are sick from their chemotherapy treatments. She makes it her mission to help patients by getting to know them and their families and helping them to smile or laugh amidst even the most difficult circumstances. She generates energy through her positive interactions with patients and staff, and she seeks opportunities to learn how to reach even the most recalcitrant patient or family member. Through her thriving, Candace helps make having cancer just a bit more bearable.

One might assume that these two profiled individuals are special because of some innate qualities that enable them to thrive, almost irrespective of their work environment. Yet, our research suggests that organizations can enable their workers to have a stronger propensity to thrive in their work. How organizations can enable thriving is a key focus of this article, but first, we articulate some key benefits of thriving at work from our research.

## HOW DOES THRIVING MATTER?

Our findings from employees (and often their managers) from more than a dozen organizations across a wide variety of industries (including health care, financial services, maritime, energy, nonprofits, manufacturing, mining, and education) demonstrates that when people report that they are thriving at work, they achieve better job performance while also being

good organizational citizens, going above and beyond the call of duty. In a study of six firms, we found that employees just one standard deviation (less than one point on a seven point scale) above the mean performed more than 16 percent better than those one standard deviation below the mean. What's more – they were 32 percent more committed to the organization, 46 percent more satisfied with their job, and 125 percent less burned out! Across all of our samples, whether professional, nonprofessional, for profit or not for profit, thriving employees were highly satisfied with their jobs.

What is it that enables these thriving employees to perform so well? In a sample of blue collar workers, we found that they take more initiative in the development of their careers by seeking out opportunities to learn and grow. In a sample of young professionals, we also found that they have a more personal mission and purpose about their work, they are more resilient in the face of difficulty, and they have higher quality relationships with those they work with. In samples of university staff and nonprofit managers, we found that collaboration skills were among the strongest predictors of thriving. This included communicating effectively both verbally and nonverbally, cooperating, and problem-solving with those who are different from one's self (such as from a different discipline, organization or ethnic group).

Thriving employees in our samples also tend to be healthier, reporting fewer physical or somatic complaints, far fewer doctor visits, and less burnout or strain, which translates into reduced health care costs. They also missed 74 percent less days of work. The better health and reduced propensity to burn out enables thriving employees to sustain their performance over time. And thriving's impact on these outcomes extends substantially beyond the effects of other factors like job satisfaction or organizational commitment.

We also found that thriving is particularly important for leaders' effectiveness. In a study of executives across different industries, thriving leaders were rated 17 percent higher by their subordinates than leaders who reported lower levels of thriving. The subordinates of thriving leaders describe them as role models of how work can be done, who seek opportunities to take initiative, and who enable others to act. Among the sample of nonprofit professionals, thriving leaders engaged in greater boundary spanning (e.g., establishing relationships with others external to the work group that can assist in meeting objectives) and more empowering leadership behavior (e.g., encouraging followers to participate in setting their own goals, coordinate their own efforts, and seek out opportunities to learn). Thriving leaders are more apt to enable thriving followers. When thriving, leaders' inherent energy is contagious to those they lead.

Finally, when employees report that they are thriving at work, it doesn't necessarily crowd out their capacity to thrive with their family and friends, or in their community life. Our research demonstrates that those who experience thriving in their work also report high levels of thriving in their personal lives. The positive affect inherent in thriving is likely to create a warm glow that spills over into nonwork life.

We should also note that the most positive outcomes of thriving come when levels of *both* learning and vitality are high. Just experiencing learning or vitality by itself is not enough. When experienced simultaneously, the learning and vitality components of thriving help sustain performance. Those with high scores on both learning and vitality have

performance assessments that are 12 percent higher (as rated by their bosses) than those who have high scores on *either* learning or vitality, but not both. This finding is especially true for those who report high levels of learning over time without accompanying high levels of vitality – for those with lots of learning but little vitality; performance and health tend to wane. Stated another way, in one sample of managers, we found that the learning component of thriving reached a “tipping point” – employees experienced increasing levels of performance as learning increased, but only up to a point, after which performance declined. This was not true for the vitality component of thriving. As vitality increased, performance continued to increase – there was no tipping point. This was also true when the two components were considered simultaneously. When learning is combined with vitality, *there is no tipping point*. As thriving continues to increase, so does performance. Why? Too much focus on learning can contribute to overload and diminishing returns. Research by psychologists, neuroscientists, and psychiatrists shows that when the human brain is asked to process extraordinary amounts of data, its ability to solve problems flexibly and creatively decreases, mistakes increase, and risks are underestimated.

In fact, performance psychologists stress the importance of intermittent recovery and restoration for strong mental performance. The concept of maximizing performance by alternating periods of intense development and rest was first advanced by Flavius Philostratus (A.D. 170-245), who coached Greek athletes. Even today, work-rest ratios are at the heart of periodization, a training method used by elite athletes. Researchers point out that this is not only crucial in competitive sports, but across a myriad of professions. The idea is that unless people design and implement routines to renew themselves, their performance and health is likely to suffer.

Our results highlight the value of being continuously attuned to one’s level of vitality and learning, and being mindful and diligent about making behavioral adjustments to self-regulate and recover if your vitality, in particular, wanes. While feedback from others and objective indicators of performance are valuable for assessing forward progress, using the thriving gauge to self-regulate based on how you feel – in terms of the combination of your vitality and your sense of learning – can be very useful.

## WHAT CAN BE DONE TO ENABLE MORE THRIVING AT WORK?

Drawing on our research, we offer two approaches to enabling thriving at work. The first focuses on individual strategies for regulating one’s own level of thriving. The second focuses on features of the organization that enable more thriving.

### Individual Strategies for Thriving

When the thriving gauge suggests low vitality or learning, it’s a signal to make some changes. Our research regarding the “tipping point” for learning when isolated from vitality indicates that it is particularly important to monitor one’s sense of vitality during periods of increased learning, such as when undertaking a new position, a new project, or an

assignment to a new location, such as overseas, when demands for learning are likely to be substantially higher than normal. Without the vitality component accompanying the learning, our findings suggest that cognitive development will only go so far; beyond that tipping point, cognitive gains will be lost. More specifically, research suggests three strategies for recharging. First, when vitality is waning, research on recovery from work demands suggests taking a break – whether that’s a walk or run outside, a meal with friends, or a reading a book for fun. Our research and work by Jim Loehr at the High Performance Institute and Tony Schwartz at The Energy Project suggests that individuals who have healthy eating habits (especially drinking plenty of water, eating a nutritious breakfast, and maintaining modest meal proportions), exercise regularly (both cardiovascular and strength training each week), have good sleep practices (7–8 hours plus regular waking and going to sleep times), and take regular breaks to get the body moving and clear the mind are more likely to thrive.

Today more organizations are advocating these kinds of healthy practices. In many industries, such as oil and gas or mineral extraction in the resources sector and in defense, where employees operate dangerous (and expensive!) equipment, safety codes mandate health breaks, “down tool time” and safety protocols for staying alert on the job. These practices are essential for ensuring that their firms and work units remain high reliability organizations, avoiding accidents/errors, and operating efficiently. In the aerospace industry, firms such as Boeing encourage taking breaks for exercise, and getting sleep (e.g., through even naps at work) to rejuvenate. They report that more teams are hitting performance targets as a result. In addition, Teledyne Brown Engineering employees have access to an on-site fitness center, group exercise, yoga and wellness classes, as well as a weight management program and an array of health screenings and services. They even offer employees who meet their health goals cash rewards. Employee thriving, as well as health, has improved as a result of these programs. Teledyne Brown Engineering has also benefitted through drastically reduced health care costs, a 34 percent reduction in absenteeism, and increased retention – another huge cost savings. Wachovia Bank found that performance could be enhanced by encouraging employees to renew energy. Employees who participated in an energy-renewal program led by Tony Schwartz and colleagues taught employees how to renew energy in four different dimensions. These employees produced 13 percentage points greater revenue from loans and 20 percentage points greater revenue from deposits than those employees in the control group, who did not participate in the energy enhancing program. Participants also reported substantial improvements in engagement at work, relationships with customers, and personal satisfaction. These results are very similar to what we’ve found across companies and industries – those who focus on energy renewal win, especially over time.

Second, our research suggests that to enhance their thriving, individuals seek ways to craft their work to be more meaningful and impactful. Crafting strategies might include looking for opportunities to help someone (e.g., helping tends to be generative for energy regulation) or turning attention to tasks that evoke interest or passion (e.g., intrinsic motivation also energizes). In the sample of

nonprofit workers who often collaborate across national borders, developing a sense of global identity (e.g., feeling as though one belongs to a larger global environment beyond one's local work context) was predictive of thriving. The example of Candace Billups illustrates how even the most menial jobs can be crafted for greater meaning. She is even known to have crafted her job to be a kind of decorator, moving the pictures hanging on the wall from room to room to match the patients' personalities and interests.

Third, our research suggests that to enhance their thriving, individuals look for opportunities to innovate, so they can learn something new or grow a new capability. In the research samples involving university staff and academics and nonprofit professionals, participants completed a measure of thriving before and after a training program designed to enhance their collaboration skills. When they entered into the training highly motivated to transfer the skills from the training to their work place, they reported higher levels of thriving following the training. Thriving individuals recognize the need to have this kind of attitude toward training. For example, an individual might volunteer for a new role or responsibility at work that requires learning something new. Or an employee could seek out learning and development opportunities available at work. For example, employees at WorldatWork, an association representing human resource professionals, can take advantage of mentoring and a tuition reimbursement program for continuing education. Or, employees at Holtz Rubenstein Reminick (HRR), an accounting firm, can choose to be part of an impressive career guidance initiative called CARE – Consulting, Advocacy, Responsibility and Empowerment. CARE matches staff members with HRR company leaders as mentors who help mentees grow and develop along the career path that matches their preferences and aspirations. By taking advantage of these opportunities for learning and development, HRR employees are enhancing their capacity for thriving at work.

If there don't seem to be opportunities for learning and development at work, then thriving individuals might seek opportunities for growth outside of work. Thomas Friedman, author of *Total Leadership* and Director of Wharton's Leadership program, recommends that employees seek leadership and learning opportunities in the community, for example, to hone skills – particularly if you don't have immediate opportunities within the organization. People seeking leadership roles in their work organizations might gain experience by joining a community board, for instance. Many industries are experimenting with mini-sabbaticals, in which employees remove themselves from their day-to-day job role and offer their expertise to nonprofit organizations or entrepreneurs from disadvantaged communities. In the resources sector, where firms are required to assess and document their social, environmental, and economic impact on local communities that might be disrupted by mining or drilling operations, the offering of such corporate expertise to the community is a form of corporate social responsibility. The social impact of the volunteer work on the communities is substantial, but the employees who volunteer their expertise often report gains in thriving themselves, because they are learning to apply their skills in a new context, and a sense of vitality because they are contributing to a greater good. Such programs are an example of how human sustainability can go hand in hand with environmental and economic sustainability.

These three strategies reflect but a few of the many strategies individuals can use to self-regulate their vitality and learning. Through these strategies individuals are regenerating, not just using up, energy that can help them to sustain their thriving over time. Through their proactivity, they are also co-creating the kind of work environment that can sustain and grow their thriving over time. But perhaps even more potent is the role that organizations can play in enhancing the possibility for thriving at work which we describe each of these thriving enablers in the section below.

## Organizational Enablers of Thriving

What can organizations do to enable more thriving at work? Social cognitive theory leads us to suggest that all people have the potential to experience vitality and a sense of learning. But how much thriving potential is realized depends on the organizational context they are embedded in. For example, the organizational system can be a powerful force in fueling or depleting thriving. A person may be eager to grow and develop, but the work context may enable or squash this propensity.

Over the past seven years, we've tested the effects of a number of different contextual features, hoping to learn more about how organizations could best facilitate employee thriving. We learned that organizations can increase the potential for employees to thrive when they: (1) enable decision-making discretion, (2) provide information about the organization and its strategy, (3) minimize incivility, (4) provide performance feedback, and (5) create a climate that promotes diversity. In one study, by focusing on just four of these factors, thriving across the six organizations increased 42 percent. We describe each below.

### *Enable decision-making discretion*

Discretion is defined as the extent to which an individual is authorized to make decisions that affect his or her own work. People do not thrive at work because they are directed to do so by a boss or forced by the system. People thrive when they are exposed to work contexts that foster decision-making discretion. Decision-making discretion encourages thriving through enabling a greater sense of control and choice about what to do at work and how to do it. People feel energized when they have choices, and the resulting autonomy creates opportunities for learning.

Best Buy serves as a great example of using decision-making discretion to enable thriving. As reported in *Business Week*, several years ago, Best Buy embarked on a revolutionary experiment to transform its stressful culture. Survey data showed that employees suffered from jobs with high demands and low control (i.e., always on-site, and no time for personal life). Performance had dropped, turnover was high, and job satisfaction and engagement were low. With competitors gaining ground, Best Buy knew that it needed to improve. They began ROWE, for "results-only work environment." What it meant in practice was that Best Buy had "smashed the clock." Employees had no schedules, and no mandatory meetings. The initiative actually began covertly by a handful of believers and spread to stores around the country. Despite some resistance and early opposition, the results were tough to fight. For example, in the online orders area, an early adopter, productivity skyrocketed, along with

engagement scores, job satisfaction, and retention. Employees raved about their ability to thrive in their work and beyond. As ROWE has grown, productivity increased 35 percent. Employee engagement increased dramatically, too. What's more? They brag about thriving in nonwork activities too, whether that's spending more time with their kids, working out, or traveling.

Given real estate costs for office space, demands for flexible schedules, lost time and energy commuting needlessly, as well as an era of employees working on teams in multiple time zones, this flexible work model, which provides greater autonomy has garnered attention. Many organizations have followed suit, providing greater decision-making discretion to employees. Even more traditional workplaces and industries are experimenting – at least in small doses – with greater flexibility and decision-making. The results have been very encouraging.

A call center environment is notorious for advocating strict protocols for responding to callers. Employees are carefully monitored as to whether they adhere to a script. However, research by Uta Bindl and her colleagues at the University of Western Australia indicates that providing even small opportunities for pro-activity relates to greater gains in customer satisfaction. One employee commented:

When you say to people you need to do this, this and this on top of this, this and this - and as I say the work is monotonous, we do the same thing every day - people will make mistakes. So that is why I . . . said 'I don't agree with checking everything'. This . . . eventually, in the long run, will lead to a happier team, people are going to know what's expected of them and then within that if they are not doing it consistently then I can deal with it from there.

Call center employees are thriving due to their increased discretion in decision making. This kind of discretion permeates the organization. Mistakes are seen as learning opportunities. This decision-making discretion increases employee thriving because it energizes and creates learning opportunities.

#### ***Provide information about the organization and its strategy***

The second enabler, broad information sharing, is the extent to which information (such as information about strategic direction, organizational performance, and competitors) is communicated widely. Information sharing fuels thriving at work because it helps employees better understand the meaning of their work and envision how they can competently contribute. It gives them the requisite knowledge to quickly uncover problems as they arise, make good decisions, and to integrate and coordinate actions across the firm.

At an extreme, sharing information is at the heart of open book management, which advocates that organizations must be transparent in all they do. Access to strategic and financial information should not only help employees do their own jobs effectively, but help them understand how the company is doing as a whole. Southwest Airlines (SWA) cascades information about the organization and its strategy. SWA stresses how informed employees are more confident to use greater discretion and make better decisions. Southwest believes that this information allows employees to "act like owners." To circulate information, SWA sends employees daily news

updates via its intranet. The CEO delivers a weekly telephone message for all employees. SWA also provides detailed financial information, which they refer to as "Knowing the Score," on quarterly earnings. Finally, SWA also provides information to employees through a series of town hall meetings each year.

SWA also has a culture committee, comprised of over 100 corporate missionaries, that disseminates information about employees and organizes various celebrations. For example, members of the culture committee celebrate birthdays and various personal events and distribute information about individual and team accomplishments. In SWA's case, providing employees with more information about the organization and its strategy promotes employee thriving, because it enables learning and builds energy and excitement.

Even in industries such as machine tooling and manufacturing, having information readily accessible regarding the firm's competitors and customers is critical. One large diversified firm in Australia reported substantial increases in sales following the implementation of interventions designed to share such information at all levels of the organization. Catherine Collins at the University of New South Wales found that the increase in sales over time was due to the effect the information sharing interventions had on learning among employees. When such learning did not occur, presumably employees were unable to thrive, and profits suffered.

#### ***Minimize incivility***

Incivility is defined as the prevalence of the exchange of seemingly inconsequential inconsiderate words and deeds that violate conventional norms of workplace conduct. Feelings of vitality and zest arise from relational connections with others. When people are exposed to a climate of incivility, they are less likely to believe that they are valued organizational members. In the face of incivility, they are more likely to narrow their focus to the task at hand, avoiding risks that might offer opportunities to learn. A positive, respectful climate spurs positive energy to participate and contribute to the organization; an uncivil environment grates on people, depleting energy and reducing their propensity to take risks that may enhance learning.

Cisco created a Global Workplace Civility program to provide a more positive environment where employees can thrive. The program utilizes specific levers to minimize the occurrence or escalation of incivility and to foster civility. Cisco created detailed guidelines to help managers and human resource executives respond to incivility episodes. The company trains these managers and HR executives through a variety of cases, exercises, discussions, coaching, and videos. Cisco supplies these managers with a playbook or road-map that provides details on civility as well as processes for resolving incivility. There is also a Web-based resource center with a variety of guides and references (e.g., legal services and employee assistance programs). Cisco utilizes a team approach when incivility escalates. Experts meet to discuss the situation and diffuse it quickly. All of these practices help to build energy and create opportunities to learn about how to get even better. These practices to combat incivility are a fundamental part of enabling thriving at Cisco.

In another example, nearly a decade ago, Microsoft took a look at its culture and decided it needed to change. Microsoft felt it was seen as uncivil to customers and employees, and thus focused on creating a more civil, positive culture.

Microsoft revamped its training and development with an eye toward civility and emotional intelligence, which it believed were crucial to designing the best product. Microsoft adopted courses, such as Precision Questioning, that aimed to build emotional agility and calm, even in intense situations. To do so, participants were taught (in these and other classes) to improve their ability to listen and respond well to constructive criticism. Microsoft also overhauled orientation programs with a focus on building a culture of civility. The company views this kind of civility as crucial for creating the energy necessary for innovating on a daily basis, as well as learning through enhanced listening, better conversations, and more collaborative processes. The end result is that employee, customer, and partner satisfaction have dramatically improved along with retention rates.

The Four Seasons luxury hotel chain has distinguished itself by concentrating on extraordinary guest service. Founder and CEO Isadore Sharp credits the Four Season's success to the Golden Rule: Treat others as you would like to be treated. He explains that basic human needs are the same around the world, and that how you treat your employees is how you expect them to treat the customer. In addition to offering training and development to help employees learn and grow, the Four Seasons also pampers employees to generate positive energy. They get free stays in any of the hotels, and during their visits, are treated like guests. Employees radiate thriving, and deliver top notch customer service as a result. It's no wonder that the Four Seasons has been on *Fortune's* list of "Best Companies to Work For" since the list began in 1998, and that it has a turnover rate half the industry average. The Four Season's culture, and focused attention to facilitate employee thriving (since they see people as the strength of the company), have benefited the company and created a competitive advantage.

#### **Provide performance feedback**

Feedback provides specific information about current job performance or personal progress on goals and objectives to date. By resolving feelings of uncertainty (e.g., about personal accomplishments and superiors' expectations), feedback allows people to more accurately and easily appraise themselves, enabling them to see progress, and reducing individual stress – a deterrent to thriving. Because feedback keeps people's work-related activities directed toward desired personal and organizational goals, it enables thriving.

Zingerman's, a highly rated deli and community of businesses located in Ann Arbor, Michigan, uses open book management to share information in a transparent way through the organization. They also provide real-time feedback about business performance as well as job performance through "huddles." Huddles are weekly strategic forecasting meetings that employees use to determine how they are doing. Leaders of the operating units outline the company and unit's numbers on a white board and then discuss performance issues. Employees need to "own" the numbers and offer a plan on how to get back on track when the numbers indicate a deviance from the plan. The huddles also include "code reds" and "code greens," which document customer complaints and compliments so that all employees can learn from them in the spirit of vicarious learning.

A second way firms can provide performance feedback is by using 360-degree evaluations. By collecting feedback from

bosses, peers, subordinates, and possibly clients or customers, organizations get a much fuller picture of specific employee strengths and weaknesses. Many firms utilize such an approach, and when combined with developmental coaching, this feedback can be incredibly important for thriving. In conjunction with one executive leadership program we collaborated on, we measured thriving before and after a 360-degree leadership assessment, feedback, and coaching session. The participants experienced a significant change in thriving, at least in part due to learning about their own strengths and weaknesses and feeling energized to address developmental opportunities. One participant shared:

The culmination . . . was 360-degree feedback and a career action plan. Personally, this has been a strong compass as I continue to grow and make changes in my personal and professional life and development. As I prepared the plan, I liked the notion but felt some of the future oriented thoughts could possibly be too far-fetched. I have since learned that the tactical steps I outlined in my plan have led me further along the path than I had anticipated at the time. Personal relationships have flourished with a commitment to principles and values that guide my direction. Career opportunities have blossomed as I performed tactical tasks to promote continued learning as well as to augment my career choice.

#### **Promote diversity**

One new lever that we've identified is a climate that embraces and promotes diversity. It's an extension of promoting a climate of respect and trust. Organizations that are committed to enhancing employee inclusiveness, that are accepting of those who appear different from the majority or mainstream, and encourage the view that diversity makes an important contribution to the organization, develop a climate which promotes diversity. Research from both private and public sector organizations indicates that climates for diversity significantly impact a range of career and organizational attitudes. Employment practices such as equal opportunity policies and family-friendly practices contribute to a positive diversity climate. However, equally important is facilitating dialogue and conversation that addresses controversial issues and develops paths for navigating them in the organization. For example, how flexible should an organization be with regard to religious practices, dress, or appearance in order to incorporate views and practices which may incite controversy? When dialogue around such issues is acceptable, employees have the opportunity to express themselves and learn about the values and perspectives and others. Like civility, the inclusiveness created by such a climate provides a safe haven where employees feel supported and encouraged to "be themselves." This climate enables both the learning and vitality components of thriving – we learn about ourselves and others, and in so doing can celebrate and reinforce the cultural identities that comprise who we are. Without such a climate, employees may feel compelled to hide or disguise important facets of their identity, which is draining both cognitively and physically. Feeling free to express and celebrate diverse sources of identity enables thriving – it enhances self-development and is energizing.

Many educational institutions around the globe have been experimenting with an approach developed by Stanford

educator and consultant Glenn Singleton called “Courageous Conversations about Race.” The approach provides a process for embracing diversity and engaging in dialogues about challenging issues at work. Recently, it has been extended to address religion and other sources of diversity, and applied in noneducational work settings in a variety of industries. Researchers Cristina Gibson and Andrew Hinrichs have found that such programs help to develop positive diversity climates, and in turn, increase thriving. For example, assessments of thriving before and after a Courageous Conversations about Race workshop show increases in both perceptions of a positive diversity climate and employee thriving, presumably at least partially due to the skills learned and the energy created during the workshop. One participant shared the following, providing evidence of thriving that resulted following the workshop:

Everyone needs a voice – needs processes to achieve this. It was an aha moment for me because it made me recognize a lot of what I may keep inside and not say to others regarding my identity and what others might say about it and I disagree with. An enlightened sense of self-awareness and renewed energy has resulted.

To sum up, the point is that there are numerous ways organizations can facilitate employee thriving. Many of these initiatives require few resources, relatively speaking. Others are more of an investment. The key is to start. Some organizations started with very small steps. Seeing the positive results and outcomes (and often acquiring more resources), they have tended to sustain these initiatives even amidst difficult financial climates.

When employees are thriving, they act in proactive ways to co-create their job environment in ways that will enable more thriving. Although leaders should strive to set the stage for thriving using the enablers listed above, once set – they should gain additional benefits, as thriving employees develop and shape an environment where they perform better. For example, some people may thrive when they have real flexibility such as Best Buy offers its employees. Other employees may seek more intense camaraderie where they work closely in work teams where everyone is co-located. The point is that when employees are thriving, they chisel out a work environment that nurtures more thriving. What’s more, thriving tends to create positive spirals – for employees, the organization, and others. For example, a contagion effect is likely as others catch their can-do spirit. People want to follow thriving employees – so there is a role model effect that takes root too. By enabling thriving at work, managers, employees, and the organization clearly win.

Before concluding, we would like to address the issue of whether thriving at work might have a “dark side” that reduces thriving in other facets of one’s life (e.g., in one’s personal life). Or conversely, perhaps thriving in nonwork spheres leaves little cognitive horsepower and energy for thriving at work? Our research indicates that this is not true. Thriving at work is positively correlated with thriving in nonwork spheres of life – there was no evidence of a negative relationship, whereby thriving in one domain of life meant lower levels of thriving in the other. In fact, we have evidence

that some of the most powerful interventions are those with dual effects – they promote thriving in work and nonwork spheres simultaneously. Two examples of these are the “mini-sabbatical” volunteer work we described earlier and the 360-degree feedback combined with coaching and action planning. Participants in both of these programs report that they find benefits in both work and nonwork arenas. Some of the same knowledge, skills and physical rejuvenation prompted by the interventions were equally impactful at work and at home, as people engaged with partners, friends, and extended family, and participated in community and leisure activities. This is good news. We don’t necessarily have to choose between one and the other, but can in fact thrive in many ways and contexts simultaneously.

## CONCLUSION

There are many reasons for managers to care about human thriving and its resulting organizational sustainability. The American Psychological Association’s 2010 Stress in America survey reports that three quarters of Americans experience stress at levels that increase their risk of developing chronic illnesses such as heart disease, depression and diabetes. If human sustainability is a goal, thriving is a vital force for enabling healthy, high performing, engaged employees. Our research shows that thriving employees are also less susceptible to stress and burnout – and much healthier, overall.

Fostering an environment where employees are more apt to thrive provides other competitive advantages, including retaining talent. *Fortune*’s editor, Geoffrey Colvin, claims that after roughly 500 years, the scarcest, most valuable resource in business is no longer financial capital – it’s talent. Survey after survey reveals that top Human Resource executives’ and senior managers’ number one concern is talent. The U.S. Census Bureau, National Bureau of Economic Research, the Conference Board, and others have warned that we’re heading into a labor shortage. To attract and retain talent, organizations need to craft an environment where employees can thrive. Today’s employees, especially the new millennials, aren’t content to be merely satisfied with their work. This comes as 71 percent of employees see themselves as disengaged; less than 20 percent of employees see themselves as flourishing in their work (according to the Gallup). Employees seek something more – they want a job situation that enables them to thrive. They want work that doesn’t require substantial recovery in the evening after work, on weekends or vacations. Instead, work can be a place where people feel alive and vital, where they can grow and get better every day. Today’s organizations can and must do better. Our hope is that individuals and their managers will work to create organizations that nurture employee vitality and learning, and in doing so, maintain or improve economic and environmental impacts, while simultaneously sustaining human social performance.



To order reprints of this article, please  
e-mail [reprints@elsevier.com](mailto:reprints@elsevier.com)



## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

For the original theoretical research on thriving at work, see G. Spreitzer, K. Sutcliffe, J. Dutton, S. Sonenshein, and A. Grant, "A socially embedded model of thriving at work", *Organization Science*, 2005, 16, 537–549. Recently, several empirical studies have been conducted to establish the construct validity of the thriving construct and why thriving matters, including C. Porath, G. Spreitzer, C. Gibson, and F. Stevens, "Thriving at work: toward its measurement, construct validation, and theoretical refinement", *Journal of Organizational Behavior*.

Other work focuses more exclusively on the vitality dimension of thriving, including C. Fritz, C. F. Lam, C. F., and G. M. Spreitzer, "It's the little things that matter: An examination of knowledge workers' energy management", *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 2011, 25(3). A classic recovery article is by S. Sonnentag, "Recovery, work engagement, and proactive behavior: A new look at the interface between work and non-work", *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 2003, 88, 518–528.

For more evidence about the effects of incivility and strategies for combatting it, see Pearson, C. M., and Porath, *The Cost of Bad Behavior – How Incivility Damages Your Business And What You Can Do about It* (New York: Portfolio/Penguin Group Inc., 2009). For an interesting example on information sharing, see the Zingerman's case, "Open Book Finance" which can be located at [www.bus.umich.edu/pos](http://www.bus.umich.edu/pos).

For a discussion of positive diversity climates, see D. Hicks-Clark and P. Iles, "Climate for diversity and its effects

on career and organizational attitudes and perceptions", *Personnel Review*, 2000, 29(3): 324–345. The role of dialogue and conversation in creating diversity climates is described in G.E. Singleton and C. Linton, *Courageous Conversations about Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000).

To learn more about sustainable organizations, see J. Pfeffer, "Building Sustainable Organizations: The Human Factor", *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 2010, 24, 34–45. And a wonderful book that offers many practice strategies for energy self-regulation is J. Loehr, and T. Schwartz, *The Power of Full Engagement: Managing Energy, Not Time, is the Key to High Performance and Personal Renewal* (New York: Free Press, 2003).

Several of the examples provided are from our POS case collection ([www.bus.umich.edu/pos](http://www.bus.umich.edu/pos)). More on the Billups example can be found in "Having a Calling and Crafting a Job: The case of Candace Billups." At this site, you may also find many more cases and teaching tools for enabling thriving at work.

## Acknowledgments

We thank our thriving research collaborators (especially Flannery Garnett) for helping us provide empirical evidence for how and why thriving matters. We thank Senn Delaney for their support in data collection and Elizabeth Bulin, who helped with a review of the literature.

**Gretchen Spreitzer** is a professor of management and organizations at the University of Michigan Ross School of Business, where she is on faculty at the Center for Positive Organizational Scholarship. Her research focuses on employee empowerment and leadership development, particularly within a context of organizational change and decline. Her most recent research is examining how organizations can enable thriving. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Michigan as well (Ross School of Business, 701 Tappan St., University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 41804, USA. Tel.: +1 734 936 2835, e-mail: [spreitzer@umich.edu](mailto:spreitzer@umich.edu)).

**Christine L. Porath** is an assistant professor of management at the McDonough School of Business at Georgetown University. Her research focuses on organizational culture and leadership. Her most recent research focuses not only on the effects of bad behavior, but also on how organizations can create a more positive environment where people can thrive; and how individuals and organizations benefit in terms of individual wellbeing and performance. She received her Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (Georgetown University, McDonough School of Business, 37th and O Streets, Washington, DC 20057, USA. Tel.: +1 202 687 3209, e-mail: [cp423@georgetown.edu](mailto:cp423@georgetown.edu))

**Cristina B. Gibson** is Winthrop Professor of Management and Organization at the University of Western Australia School of Business. Her area of expertise is the nexus of organizational behavior, international management, and cross-cultural psychology, with a focus the impact of culture on work behavior. Her most recent research examines how collaborative intercultural competency building helps to increase sustained social impact of corporate community investments. She received her Ph.D. from the University of California, Irvine (UWA Business School Room G59, University of Western Australia, 35 Stirling Highway, Crawley, WA 6009, Australia. Tel.: +61 4 0551 5510, e-mail: [cristina.gibson@uwa.edu.au](mailto:cristina.gibson@uwa.edu.au))