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# **Positive Organisations: Mindful, Compassionate Leadership with a Coaching Mindset**

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# Positive Psychology Centre - White Paper Series

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# Welcome!

It is my pleasure to welcome you to our first white paper publication on Positive Organisations under the Positive Psychology Centre.

The Positive Psychology Centre was established in 2017 and has been steadily engaged in research and outreach ever since. Our research has covered topics such as hope, fear, courage, and motivation. During the early days of the global pandemic, we launched our first scholarship project and in early 2022, our first wave of CPD training events began.

It was during our second CPD training event on Positive Organisations that the paper you hold here was conceptualised. The event – held across three webinars – brought together seven different speakers, all qualified Positive Psychology professionals, including Ilene Berns-Zare, PsyD.

Working with Ilene and the other speakers on this series was a rich and rewarding experience. Each of us brought different yet complimentary perspectives on how to create positive organisations, cultures, and communities.

I hope you enjoy reading this paper and that it prompts you to consider the roles mindfulness, compassion, and coaching might play in your leadership roles.



**Reece Coker**

*Director of Research*  
Positive Psychology Centre

# Ilene Berns-Zare

**Ilene Berns-Zare, PsyD, PCC**, is a Certified Executive Coach and ICF Professional Certified Coach, psychologist, author, and principal of IBZ Coaching, LLC.

She has a Doctoral degree in Psychology from Illinois School of Professional Psychology/National-Louis University, a Master's degree in Human Resource Development from National-Louis University, and a Bachelor's degree in Education.



Ilene brings 25+ years of corporate, academic, wellness, and life experience to her work, helping her clients and students tap into their strengths, purpose, and potential to flourish in their personal and professional lives.

Ilene serves as adjunct faculty at Georgetown University's Institute for Transformational Leadership in Washington, DC, and is a Distinguished Fellow Coach for BetterUp, an international coaching company that helps individuals and leaders accelerate their performance. She writes a monthly blog for Psychology Today called Flourish and Thrive: Navigating Transitions with Mindfulness and Resilience. Her current research explores the convergence of positive psychology, resilience, mindfulness, spirituality, and personal development.

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"In organisations of every size and occupation, leaders who live and work with mindfulness and compassion have greater potential to inspire others, catalyse positive change, and promote wellbeing and effectiveness."

Neff, 2022; Dreher, 2015; Goleman & Boyatzis, 2008; Lanaj, Jennings, Ashford & Krishnan, 2021

"When employees believe they can trust a leader, they tend to perform better."

Kouzes & Posner, 2011

# **Positive Organisations: Mindful, Compassionate Leadership with a Coaching Mindset by Ilene Berns-Zare, PsyD**

There are many kinds of leaders and emerging leaders in today's world. Twenty-first century organisations are strengthened by positive leaders who are self-aware, unlocking their potential and empowering their people. Many of us have the capacity to lead, whether professionally at work or informally in our own lives, leading, collaborating, and building relationships with countries, communities, businesses, organisations, schools, families, or one-to-one.

Perhaps the salient question before us is not just how to be a leader, but how to be a positive leader. How can leaders create a culture that enhances employee capacities to thrive and achieve organisational objectives? How do we foster organisational cultures of psychological safety, growth, and relationship – cultures in which people can bring their authentic selves to work (Edmonson, 2019; 2014)? And in these uncertain times, how do we adapt, grow, and strengthen resilience and occupational flourishing?

Of course, there are many theories of leadership and summarising these is beyond the scope of this White Paper. When you consider well-known leaders from Mahatma Gandhi to Martin Luther King, Winston Churchill to Margaret Thatcher, Bill and Melinda Gates to Barack Obama to today's emerging leaders, their leadership styles and their ways of being in the world were and are quite different. Yet, while there are many ways to be a positive leader, the purpose, strengths, values, and skills we bring to leadership greatly impact our presence, choices, and actions.



Positive leaders bring out the best in people. Leadership involves a skillset and a way of being present that we can learn and practice to empower people and organizations. Many positive leaders are strong, resilient collaborators, sharing responsibility with others as they resolve challenges and create organisational performance and effectiveness.

The term flourishing refers to living and working with an overall sense of wellbeing and resilience. Flourishing has emerged from the field of scientific study called positive psychology, which focuses on the factors that contribute to a life well-lived (Seligman, 2011). According to Martin Seligman, PhD, the acronym PERMA refers to five significant components that are building blocks for psychological wellbeing – Positive emotions, Engagement in work, love, and activities, Relationships, Meaning or purpose, and Achievement/mastery. PERMA, which has been explored in over eight thousand studies, offers a blueprint to support human resilience and flourishing. When components for PERMA are in the spotlight, people are more likely to be engaged, thriving personally and professionally (Kellerman & Seligman, 2023). When we, as individuals and as leaders, are not flourishing, our teams and organizations are disadvantaged.

Our complex world benefits when leaders are mindful and compassionate, at work, in relationships, and life. While mindfulness and compassion have gotten some attention in leadership training, they have not been front and center. In organisations of every size and occupation, leaders who live and work with mindfulness and compassion have greater potential to inspire others, catalyze positive change, and promote wellbeing and effectiveness (Neff, 2022; Dreher, 2015; Goleman & Boyatzis, 2008; Lanaj, Jennings, Ashford & Krishnan, 2021).

In today's constantly changing, uncertain times, it will take transformational skills like mindfulness and compassion to empower individuals and positive organizations to thrive. Mindfulness and compassion are potent strengths and transformational tools that invite us to step beyond our habitual patterns of responding (Salzberg, 2014). Thus, it's not surprising that these skills and practices have gained greater attention in scientific inquiry (Goleman & Davidson, 2017; Neff, 2022; Neff & Dahm, 2015; Shapiro, 2020). Substantial evidence links mindfulness with positive emotions, compassion, enhanced life satisfaction, and overall wellbeing. Many organisations, including

Fortune 500 companies, recognise mindfulness as a valuable tool and employ it in their organisations (Shapiro, 2020).

A growing cadre of studies describe the benefits of mindful, compassionate leadership for individuals and organizations (Dreher, 2015; Lanaj, et al, 2021). Today's leaders can thrive with greater effectiveness and create psychological safety for their teams when they are self-aware, able to regulate their own emotions, attune to the emotions of others, and navigate greater equanimity and balance in the face of challenges.

Mindfulness is a practical way to train the mind and can help leaders boost their self-observation skills, cultivate greater compassion and empathy for themselves and others, and improve cognitive flexibility, problem solving, creativity, and innovation (Shapiro, 2020; Goleman & Davidson, 2017; Davis & Hayes, 2011). Neuroscience research shows that regular mindfulness practice helps people learn how to experience greater calm and respond less reactively and more flexibly in uncertain situations.

According to mindfulness expert, Jon Kabat-Zinn, PhD, mindfulness "arises when you pay attention, on purpose, in the present moment, nonjudgmentally, and as if your life depended on it" (2012, p. 17). Learning to pay attention in this moment and tempering reactivity in challenging circumstances invites leaders to respond more thoughtfully, rather than react impulsively, leading to more optimal choices and greater effectiveness.

Just as mindfulness research has advanced in recent decades, compassion has also attracted greater attention. Mindfulness is a key component of compassion for self and others (Neff & Dahm, 2015; Shapiro, 2020;). Boyatzis, Smith & Blaize (2006) contend that compassion is integral to mindful leadership, strengthening leadership capacity, wellbeing, and effectiveness. Thus, when leaders experience compassion and practice it while leading others, they're more likely to experience greater wellbeing and create an environment that helps employees thrive.

Researcher Kristen Neff, PhD, cites three elements of self-compassion: (1) Mindfulness vs. over-identification: willingness to observe thoughts and feelings with acceptance, openness, and clarity, without getting lost in negativity or reactivity (Neff, 2022; Neff & Dahm, 2015). (2) Self-kindness vs. self-judgment: offering yourself warmth and

kindness even when you fall short or are suffering. (3) Common humanity vs. isolation: recognizing that imperfection, suffering, and feelings of inadequacy are common human experiences.

## **Integrating Coaching with Leadership**

In these uncertain times, the demands of dynamic workplaces are often too complex for one person to have all the answers. This paper's central premise proposes an integration of mindfulness and compassion with a coaching mindset to empower leaders, their relationships, and their organisations. With this formative shift in the leadership skillset, positive leaders can blend relevant coaching skills with a mindful, compassionate lens to inspire their people and enhance occupational thriving.

Only twelve percent of workers feel their leaders listen to and care about them (Maritz Research, 2011). And a 2012 survey by the American Psychological Association found 93% of employees who reported feeling valued at work are motivated to do their best (APA, 2012). By employing skills and competencies from the coaching toolbox, leaders can listen to, inspire, and strengthen employees and organisations as they navigate the complexities of their work lives and strive to reach their personal and professional potential.

Several coaching core competencies established by the International Coaching Federation are also traits of effective leaders (ICF, 2019). Both excellent leaders and coaches bring out the best in people. Positive leaders ask questions and listen deeply, as good coaches do – they help people utilize their strengths, and pursue personal and professional development as creative, resourceful and whole human beings. A coaching mindset can help positive leaders build their people's capacities for occupational flourishing, enhancing their sense of feeling valued, seen and noticed, and more empowered. This White Paper proposes three ICF core competencies to complement positive leadership and strengthen PERMA: Cultivating trust and safety; Maintaining presence; Listening actively (ICF, 2019).

**Cultivating Trust and Safety:** This competency centers on sharing empathy, respect, and caring, acknowledging the client's strengths, values, and insights. When

employees believe they can trust a leader, they tend to perform better (Kouzes & Posner, 2011). This competency can promote greater psychological safety, inviting mutual respect, transparency, authenticity, and credibility at the individual, team, and organisational levels (Edmondson, 2019).

**Maintaining Presence:** Presence involves focusing on the current moment -- awareness without willfulness or an agenda. This competency invites openness and grounded flexibility and can integrate holistically with mindfulness and compassion. The positive leader who maintains presence can practice greater focus, calm, and empathy with less over-reacting and over-identifying. This compassionate presence supports the leader's ability to patiently observe and tolerate their own thoughts with greater openness rather than sliding into negativity or automatic reaction, especially when the individual, team, or organisation falls short of expectations.

**Listens Actively:** This competency involves listening fully with the intent to understand what is being communicated directly and indirectly by the speaker, keeping in mind the context and systems in which they are engaged. With this kind of reflective listening, the positive leader can engage people with respect, helping to draw out their strengths, perspectives, creative problem solving, and engagement.

## **Six Strategies to Strengthen Positive Leadership**

Positive leadership can be strengthened as the leader unlocks their potential from the inside out. Building self-awareness through a mindful, compassionate lens and employing a coaching mindset can help leaders inspire their people and empower their organisations. Here are six strategies for positive leaders:

**1 – Learning and practicing mindfulness and self-compassion.** Heightening self-awareness and nurturing our own resilient minds is uniquely human and a foundation for positive leadership. Mindfulness and compassion are learnable skills that we can develop, and can be accessed anywhere at any time (Berns-Zare. 2017; Goleman & Davidson, 2017; Gonzalez, 2012; Neff, 2022; 2015; Siegel, 2011). It's not enough to simply learn about mindfulness and compassion. Repeated, deliberate practicing strengthens the habit and leads to more benefits (Ericsson, 2006).

Positive leaders can create space each day for one or more brief mindfulness breaks to pause in the present moment and reflect. These brief intermissions offer opportunities to check in with one's self, facilitating greater calm, focus, and a more mindful presence at meetings with individuals and groups. My leadership coaching clients have found these practices to be helpful:

- Pausing for scheduled or impromptu moments throughout the day to notice the breath or other anchor.
- Scheduling time daily or weekly for self-reflection, self-compassion and mindfulness.
- Blocking 15 to 60 minutes weekly to reflect on objectives, strategic planning, other initiatives.
- Relaxing during lunch and pausing to eat mindfully.
- Taking a walk during the day or evening.

## **2 – Approaching meetings and other encounters with mindfulness and compassion.**

A mindful brain can lay the foundation for interactions in everyday life and work. Our thoughts tend to wander and intentional, mindful moments and practices can help positive leaders bolster their attention, focus, and concentration.

Before a group encounter, rather than mindlessly shifting from one task to the next, the leader can intentionally invest a moment or more to create some mental space -- to pause, pay attention in the present moment, and center themselves.

A simple strategy is using a phrase or mantra such as: *pause and breathe*, and then setting an intention for how we want to be present during the encounter. For example: *During this meeting, my intention is to be calm, listen deeply, and be open to the possibilities as they present themselves.*

The positive leader may choose to begin meetings by suggesting a moment to "settle in," "take a mindful pause" or "get centered." When the leader models this quiet spaciousness, a compassionate opening is created, inviting others to transition to this moment and this objective. Creating momentary intermissions can offer a compassionate, safe space to optimize calm, focus, wellbeing, and effectiveness.



**3 – Modeling presence.** Positive leaders can model being present in the moment. With awareness and intention, the leader can “encourage the heart” with authentic behaviors that show caring and appreciation for the values and spirits of their people (Kouzes & Posner, 2011). Rather than getting lost in the past or future, the leader can model a focus on the current moment by listening deeply, fostering an environment that inspires greater psychological safety, trust, and authenticity, with less judgment toward the individual or team in that moment.

This respectful partnering acknowledges the unique insights of others and reduces habitual liking and not liking, approving and disapproving, and negative reactions. Less caught up in their own needs, the positive leader with a coaching mindset can model trust without willfulness, respecting the other as creative, resourceful, and whole. Modeling presence can inspire others to act with their own mindful presence, self-awareness, and focus (Burmansah, et al, 2019; Dreher, 2015; McKee, Boyatzis & Johnson, 2008).

**4 – Lovingkindness.** In her book, *Real Happiness at Work*, mindfulness expert Sharon Salzberg writes that self-compassion and compassion for others can radically improve happiness in our daily work lives (2014). Lovingkindness, the wish that others be happy and at peace can bolster our own wellbeing and openness to others even amidst challenging workplace situations (Dreher, 2015; Neff, 2021; Salzberg, 2014).

Sitting comfortably in a safe space, with eyes open or closed, we can say to ourselves: *May I be safe. May I be well. May I be happy. May I be peaceful* (Salzberg, 2014).

Thinking of someone we care about or who has been kind to us, we can say to ourselves: *May you be safe. May you be well. May you be happy. May you be peaceful.*

Thinking of others internationally, we can say to ourselves: *May all beings everywhere be safe. May all beings everywhere be well. May all beings everywhere be peaceful.*

**5 – Learning coaching skills.** Coaching skills training can help positive leaders grow as individuals, while strengthening and expanding their leadership capacities.

Key coaching competencies, whether through formal training courses, reading, or getting coached themselves, can empower leaders with greater self-awareness, utilizing, for example, powerful inquiries and self-reflection. Furthermore, a coaching mindset can strengthen their capacity to help others develop their potential, expanding thinking, problem solving, and creating a rich learning environment across a diverse range of needs and outcomes.

**6 – Expanding your growth mindset.** Growth mindset is the belief that anyone can cultivate improvement with effort and action (Dweck, 2016; 2006). Termed “the power of yet” by Stanford University researcher, Carol Dweck, PhD, the views we adopt for ourselves and those we influence can have a profound effect on the present and future. Growth mindset can bolster resilience and promote personal agency, the belief that one’s effort can generate action empowering organisations and people to withstand the hard knocks in today’s uncertain world. Recognizing that we and our people can overcome adversities, obstacles, and learn new skills can impact every facet of our own lives and the lives and work of the people we encounter each day (Bandura, 2001; Dweck 2016; Yost, 2016).

## **Conclusion**

In summary, integrating mindfulness, compassion, and a coaching mindset into the positive leadership toolbox can help leaders unlock their own potential from the inside out. This leadership skillset can further equip leaders to meet the demands of today’s changing, uncertain world, inspire greater wellbeing, and empower leaders as catalysts for their people to be more resilient and thrive in the contemporary workplace.

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# Positive Psychology Guild

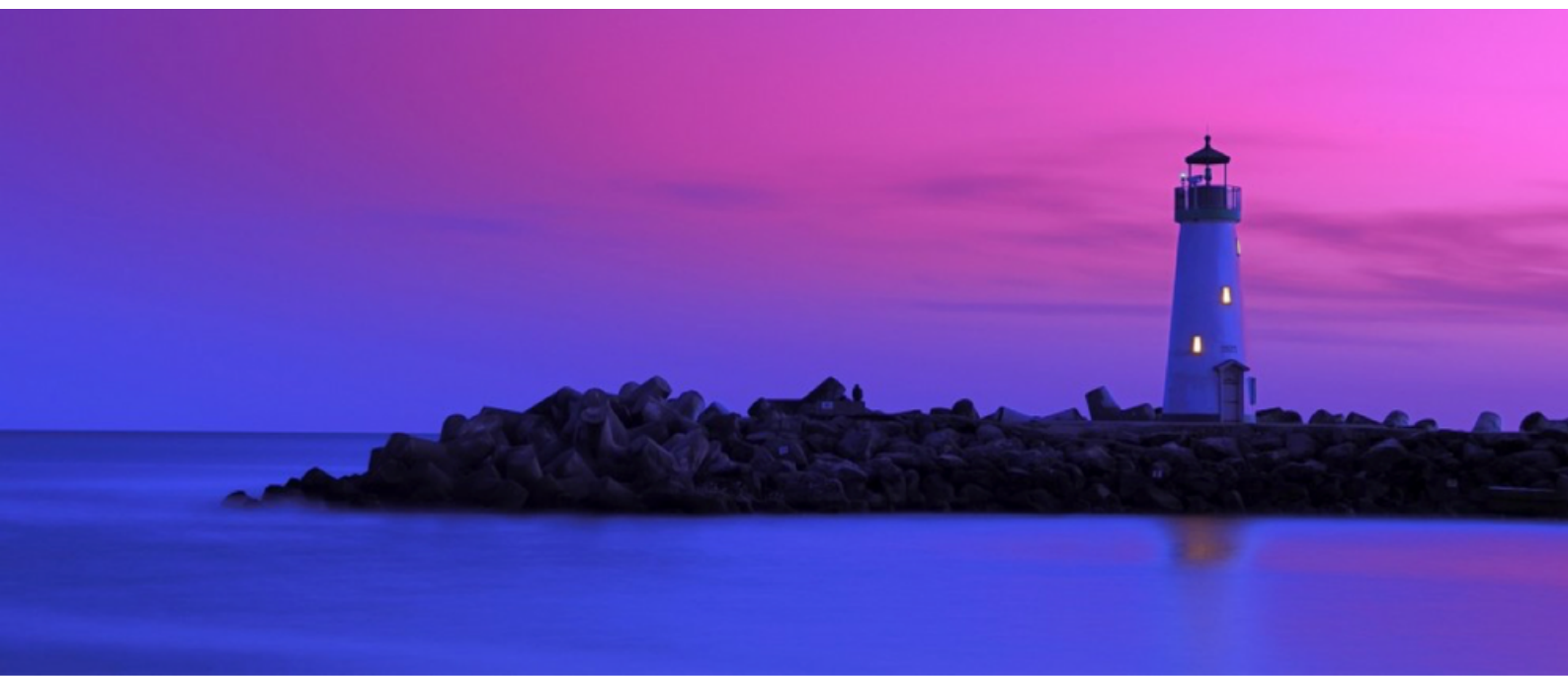
The Positive Psychology Guild is a Not for Profit Organisation and a government registered learning provider with a UK Provider Reference Number: 10067939. We are also a CPD Group Certified Provider dedicated to raising the standards of training and continuing professional development.

## Charter

The Positive Psychology Guild (PPG) was formed with a constitution and a charter containing the following objectives:

- A professional membership body for Positive Psychology Practitioners and Autism Awareness Practitioners, including coaches, trainers, facilitators, educators, and counsellors;
- Independent Accreditation for non RQF Positive Mental Health & Wellbeing Training;
- Dedicated to providing training and educational activities for disadvantaged and disengaged members of the community;
- Enhancing human potential, happiness, wellbeing and flourishing;
- A thought leader within the field of Positive Psychology and Autism Awareness, and their applications across industry, culture and communities.

**For further information, please contact: [membership@ppnetwork.org](mailto:membership@ppnetwork.org)**



# Positive Psychology Centre



The Positive Psychology Centre was founded in 2017.

The following year, it set about furthering Positive Psychology studies in under-researched areas. It has since published research studies on hope, fear, and motivation in partnership with Bucks New University. Today, it facilitates three Positive Psychology Applied Research Initiatives on Violence & Post Traumatic Growth, Mental Health & Wellbeing, and Somatics & Kinaesthetics.

The Centre focuses on bringing qualitative research methods related to practical applications or Positive Psychology in real world settings. It encourages interdisciplinary research approaches and collaborations within and beyond Psychology research and practice. Its aim is to offer a bridge between the rigorous research methods of academia and the dynamic needs of professional practice.

The Centre also runs CPD training events on Positive Education, Positive Health, and Positive Organisations for Positive Psychology Practitioners and other professionals. These are available as live events and via recording, and offer progressive routes to qualification as a Positive Psychology Practitioner or further research.

**For further information on CPD training, please contact: [events@ppnetwork.org](mailto:events@ppnetwork.org)**

**For further information on research, please contact: [research@ppnetwork.org](mailto:research@ppnetwork.org)**





# Positive Psychology Academy



The Online Positive Psychology Academy was founded in 2020.

It was created during the early months of the global Covid-19 pandemic and has since evolved into a thriving online community of students and teachers.

The Academy is home to more than 120 students from the UK and around the world, all making their way through the following courses:

- Level 3 Award Positive Health
- Level 3 Award Positive Education
- Level 3 Award Positive Organisations
- Level 3 Certificate Positive Psychology Practice
- Level 5 Diploma Positive Psychology Fundamentals
- Level 5 Diploma Positive Psychology Practice & Coaching
- Level 5 Diploma Positive Psychology Practice & Training
- Level 5 Diploma Positive Organisational Psychology
- Level 7 Certificate Applied Positive Psychology Research

The Academy offers quiet and social spaces for adult learning and certification in multiple pathways to Positive Psychology in Practice and Research.

**For further information on qualifications, please contact: [training@ppnetwork.org](mailto:training@ppnetwork.org)**



# Autism Centre



The Autism Centre was founded in 2017.

The Centre works with many students who have an interest in autism. Our founder, who completed the MAPP Programme at Bucks New University – is currently undertaking a PhD at Sheffield Hallam University Autism Centre – studying courage through an autistic lens. He is also a member of the Doncaster Autism Partnership Board, a consultant for the National Autistic Society, and Honorary Senior Lecturer at Manchester University within the field of autism.

The Autism Centre runs a Neurodiversity Inclusivity Confident Award. The Centre's lead objective is to help make workplaces more inclusive for people with neurodivergent profiles that are often "hidden" or masked, such as autism, ADHD, dyspraxia and dyslexia, and not taken into consideration when developing workplace cultures and norms. The Award is open to applications throughout the year. If you or your organisation is interested in learning more, please contact: [training@ppnetwork.org](mailto:training@ppnetwork.org)

The Centre also runs the following professional qualifications:

- Level 3 Certificate Neurodiversity & Inclusion (Train the Trainer)
- Level 5 Diploma Autism in Research, Theory & Practice

**For further information on qualifications, please contact: [training@ppnetwork.org](mailto:training@ppnetwork.org)**





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ILENE BERNIS-ZARE, PSYD