The Power of Positivity: Utilizing Positive Psychology Research to Enhance Partnerships
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We all know the benefits meaningful partnerships can produce; but partnership is hard work, especially when unforeseen circumstances arise and cause a headache. All of us have been there: a department on campus is unable to provide support to sororities and fraternities, or maybe a team member flaked on helping you with a project. Perhaps it was similar to the situation I faced soon after beginning a new job: a well-established partner within the local community informed me they could no longer provide oversight for one of our major programs. Frustrating, right?

I understood their need to pull back. Revenue streams within the organization shifted and funded support was no longer an option on their end. Still, I was disappointed. The organization, Assault Care Center Extending Shelter and Support (ACCESS) had been an invaluable partner to our office for years, especially through Building up Brothers, an intimate partner violence and sexual assault prevention program for men within the Interfraternity Council. Building up Brothers was co-developed by the Office of Sorority & Fraternity Engagement at Iowa State University and ACCESS, and is designed to target behaviors and norms specific to the Interfraternity Council that are conducive to intimate partner violence and sexual assault. The program is conducted within individual chapters over the course of fourteen weeks, and it is facilitated by the chapter president and another emerging leader, who have traditionally been trained and supported by an ACCESS staff member throughout the duration of the program. Given the important role ACCESS played in the success of Building up Brothers, I wondered how we could move forward given such a significant change, and what it meant for continuing dialogue about this topic within the council.

It was also during this time I was reading a book called “The Happiness Advantage: How a Positive Brain Fuels Success in Work and Life” by Shawn Achor. Shawn is known for his TEDx Talk on this very topic, as well as his company, Goodthink Inc., where he serves as chief executive officer while researching and teaching positive psychology. The overarching concept of his approach is simple: true happiness is best achieved through cultivating it ourselves, rather than allowing circumstances external from our control to dictate our state of mind (Achor, 2010). In other words, we can choose to search for opportunities within difficult situations and reframe our mindsets to find the hidden good, even when facing even the most arduous of challenges.

It can be easy to fall into negativity when partnership becomes difficult, especially in our work as sorority and fraternity professionals — the demands of our role require that we capitalize on all opportunities for support from external entities, and we do not have time to work through
constant readjustments. Upon learning about the coming changes, I thought of all the reasons why it would be a problem. I then challenged myself to look for more positive potential outcomes. Just like that, it hit me: Does different have to mean worse? It could, but maybe changing the structure of our partnership with ACCESS could make Building up Brothers even better.

My downward spiral quickly turned upward, and I was able to discover several areas of opportunity: I knew the program was losing momentum in its current state; fewer chapters were participating in Building up Brothers, and the student facilitators were not resonating with the content as strongly as they had previously. We also lacked assessment data for all components of the program, inhibiting our ability to make adjustments and better serve the needs of students as they change over time. I could even create a unique student learning opportunity for a council officer by guiding them through the redevelopment of the program and allowing them to deliver the chapter facilitator training. Rather than seeing an endless list of what could go wrong, I now imagined all that could go right.

The simple choice of changing my mindset allowed the program to transform beyond anything I could have imagined. A meeting with ACCESS was arranged for the council officer, myself, and a few staff members to learn the training content and gain nuanced knowledge of the program. We also collaboratively developed a plan for sustaining Building up Brothers together: ACCESS would provide annual consultations to collaboratively review the program content, work through relevant new developments in prevention work, and update the curriculum with current best practices. They also ensured us they were only a phone call away should we need intermittent support. Together, we also made the decision to try letting the council officer deliver the facilitator training, serve as the primary point of contact for chapters, and provide primary program oversight.

My positive mindset created a self-fulfilling prophecy: Rather than only a handful of chapters signing up for Building up Brothers, as was the case in semesters prior, one-third of chapters within the council elected to participate when it was presented and owned by the students. Additionally, student facilitators left the training energized and excited to foster dialogue within their chapters; something I had not seen the previous semester. We have also developed a more sustainable assessment plan that allows for analysis on how we are moving the needle on sexual assault and intimate partner violence through this program. The vision for Building up Brothers now includes expanding beyond just the Interfraternity Council, as well as developing additional tiers that address intersectionality and deepen the conversation for chapters who have already
completed the initial program. All parties involved believe the possibilities for this program are endless, all because we used drastic change as an opportunity for positive growth.

Positive psychology does acknowledge it is remiss to ignore the reality that sometimes bad circumstances happen, and I am transparent in recognizing parts of this situation really were not ideal (Achor, 2010). However, giving attention to that which is within our locus of control, even if it is only our mindset, produces the possibility for at least a few positive outcomes when it seems there are none.

It is easy to become immersed within the negative when challenges arise within our profession, sometimes to the point that turbulence within a partnership feels like the end of the world. The success achieved through the transformation of Building up Brothers reveals the underlying potential within every partnership, and it proves that partnerships can indeed survive major change. If we wish to create meaningful change through our work, it is critical we seek out the opportunities hidden among the negative and begin to reframe our mindsets as professionals. For you, maybe this means reaching out to the department your office gave up on working with a few years ago, or perhaps it is re-attempting to establish a relationship with an organization's area/regional/inter/national representatives with whom you have never quite developed rapport. Whatever it is, undertake the challenge to expose the existing potential and begin constructing a vessel for mutual growth.

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References