5 Pillars of Psychology

Idea In Short

Leaders, chief human resources officers [CHROs], organizational psychologists, management consultants and executives who want to build high-performing organizations should structure their people strategy around Seligman's PERMA model — the five-element framework that defines the conditions under which individuals and organizations flourish. Martin Seligman, the founding father of positive psychology and Nicholas H. Endowed Professor at the University of Pennsylvania, introduced PERMA in his 2011 book Flourish, positioning it as a replacement for his earlier single-construct focus on happiness. PERMA stands for Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment — five independently measurable elements that together constitute psychological well-being. Research linking PERMA scores to work performance, retention, engagement and organizational commitment is now substantial enough to treat the model as both a diagnostic and a strategic development framework rather than simply a wellbeing program. A 2022 paper published in Frontiers in Psychology developed PERMA+4 — an extended organizational version of the model — confirming that PERMA elements "show positive associations with work performance", with the four additional organizational dimensions reinforcing those outcomes at the team and system level. The decision is direct: assess your organization's PERMA profile, identify which elements are systematically undernourished and build targeted interventions around the deficits before they appear as retention, engagement or performance problems.

Seligman's trajectory toward PERMA began with his 1998 presidential address to the American Psychological Association [APA], in which he reoriented his research agenda — and invited the field to reorient its — from pathology and disorder to the study of What makes life worth living. That address launched the positive Psychology movement.1 His earlier theoretical contribution, the Authentic Happiness theory (2002), proposed that well-being was equivalent to happiness and could be measured by a single construct — life satisfaction. By 2011, Seligman rejected that position, arguing in Flourish that happiness is too narrow to serve as the goal of positive psychology and that well-being is a multi-element

construct that cannot be reduced to a single measurement.

The five PERMA elements satisfy three criteria Seligman sets for inclusion in a well-being theory: each element contributes to well-being, each is pursued by People for its own intrinsic sake rather than as a means to another element and each is defined and measured independently of the others.2 This independence criterion is analytically important for organizational practitioners: it means that an organization can score high on some elements and low on others, producing a differentiated diagnostic profile rather than a single engagement or wellbeing score that masks the specific deficit requiring intervention.

The Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania institutionalized PERMA as the theoretical foundation for its PERMA Workshops and organizational consulting engagements and has since built a normative dataset that allows organizations to benchmark their workforce's PERMA profile against comparable organizations.

Positive Emotion

Positive Emotion is the first and most immediately visible PERMA element. It encompasses the full range of positive affective states — not only happiness and joy but also gratitude, inspiration, pride, awe, serenity and interest. Seligman draws on Barbara Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory to explain why positive emotion matters beyond subjective experience: positive emotions broaden an individual's cognitive and behavioral repertoire — they expand the range of thoughts and actions a person considers — and over time build lasting personal resources including intellectual, social and psychological capital.

In organizational contexts, Positive Emotion is not reducible to a "happy workplace" culture program. Its operational significance is that employees in positive emotional states demonstrate higher creativity, stronger problem-solving capacity, broader collaborative behavior and greater resilience under pressure — all observable performance dimensions with measurable organizational consequences. A culture that systematically suppresses positive emotion — through chronic overload, punitive feedback norms, recognition deficits or psychological threat — does not merely produce unhappy employees; it produces cognitively narrowed employees whose performance under complexity is structurally limited.

Engagement

Engagement describes the state Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi termed "flow" — the complete absorption in an activity that occurs when challenge and skill are in balance and the person is fully deployed in the task at hand. Seligman adopts Csikszentmihalyi's construct and positions it as the second PERMA element because of its direct connection to performance: engagement is the psychological state in which people do their best work.

In organizations, Engagement maps onto what practitioners measure through engagement surveys — but with a behavioral precision that most engagement surveys do not capture. An engaged employee in the PERMA sense is not simply satisfied with their job; they are in a state of active, absorbed deployment of their strengths in work that challenges them appropriately. This definition has direct organizational design implications: roles that are too narrow for the capabilities of the person filling them produce chronic under-engagement; roles that are too demanding relative to available capability produce anxiety. The manager's structural role in the Engagement element is role design — ensuring the challenge-capability fit is regularly recalibrated as people develop.

Relationships

Relationships addresses the quality of social connection at work — and Seligman's framing is important to distinguish from the more conventional "team cohesion" language that organizational practice typically uses. For Seligman, Relationships are not valued instrumentally for their contribution to task performance; they are valued as a PERMA element in their own right — sought for their intrinsic worth, independently of their organizational utility.

In organizational contexts, this distinction carries strategic weight. Organizations that build team cohesion programs focused on task collaboration — cross-functional project teams, matrix structures, collaborative tools — address the instrumental dimension of Relationships but not the intrinsic one. The Relationships element requires that leaders create the conditions for genuine interpersonal connection: psychological safety, recognition of people as individuals rather than role-holders and the management behaviors that signal human regard rather than purely transactional accountability. McKinsey's 2021 research on psychological safety confirms the performance relevance of this relational dimension directly: "Leaders who work to build a culture of psychological safety unlock strong team performance and high employee engagement".3

Meaning

Meaning addresses the sense that one's work contributes to something larger than personal gain or task completion — what Seligman describes as the "why" that puts everything into context. Finding Meaning is discovering that one belongs to and serves something that transcends the self. Seligman argues that Meaning, like the other elements, can be built and developed — it is not a fixed property of individuals or of work roles.

In organizational practice, Meaning is the element most directly connected to what leaders say and do around purpose. Organizations that articulate a credible, specific and motivationally resonant purpose — and that demonstrate that purpose through their strategic decisions, resource allocation and leadership behavior — create the conditions for Meaning to be experienced at the individual level. Organizations that state a purpose but contradict it through daily operational decisions create a Meaning deficit that engagement programs cannot compensate for.4 Research published in Frontiers in Psychology (2022) examining transformational leadership's effect on firm performance found that leaders who communicate a compelling vision — the behavioral expression of Meaning creation — produce statistically significant improvements in employee performance outcomes, confirming the causal pathway from Meaning to organizational performance.5

Accomplishment

Accomplishment is the fifth element and the one Seligman treats as the most behaviorally distinctive. He notes that people pursue Accomplishment — the drive for achievement, mastery and success — even when it does not produce positive emotions, meaning or social relationships. It is pursued for its own sake, making it irreducible to the other four elements and therefore a necessary independent component of the model.

In organizational contexts, Accomplishment maps onto the motivational structure of goal-setting, performance management and recognition systems. Employees who experience a sustained sense of achievement — through meaningful milestones, skill mastery, visible progress and recognition of completed work — demonstrate higher discretionary effort and stronger organizational commitment than those whose performance management experience is dominated by deficit-focused feedback. The Accomplishment element directly challenges performance management cultures built around gap analysis and development planning at the expense of progress recognition: these cultures systematically deplete the

psychological resource that Accomplishment provides.

The PERMA+4 Extension

In 2022, an international research team developed PERMA+4, extending the original model with four additional constructs to address the organizational dimensions that PERMA's individual-level framing does not fully capture. The four additions are: Physical health — the role of physical wellbeing in sustaining psychological flourishing; Mindset — the growth versus fixed mindset dynamic that shapes how people respond to challenge and setback; Work Environment — the structural and physical conditions that support or undermine PERMA elements; and Economic Security — the degree to which financial stability enables rather than constrains psychological wellbeing at work.6

A systems-informed study examining PERMA+4 across an international sample — published and documented through the Scribd academic repository — tested the combined predictive power of PERMA+4 elements and psychological safety on work-related wellbeing and performance outcomes. The findings confirmed that PERMA+4 elements interact with psychological safety as a system: interventions that address PERMA elements without building psychological safety capture only part of the performance improvement available, while organizations that develop both capture the full compound effect.7

Organizational Deployment

Organizations deploy the PERMA framework most effectively through three mechanisms: diagnostic measurement, leadership behavior change and structural intervention. The diagnostic step requires measuring the workforce's PERMA profile — not through a generic engagement survey but through a validated PERMA-based instrument that produces element-level scores.8 These scores reveal the specific element deficits driving engagement and performance shortfalls — which most organizations cannot identify from engagement survey data alone.

Leadership behavior change addresses the PERMA element that leaders most directly control: they create or destroy the conditions for Engagement through role design, for Meaning through purpose communication, for Relationships through their interpersonal conduct, for Accomplishment through recognition practice and for Positive Emotion through the emotional climate they model and reinforce. Bailey and French, in their organizational

application of the PERMA model, note that most organizational wellbeing initiatives address physical and mental health symptoms rather than the positive psychological conditions — the PERMA elements — that produce genuine flourishing. The shift they recommend is from reactive symptom treatment to proactive structural development of each element.

- 1Positive Psychology Foundation, Penn. PERMA Theory of Well-Being and PERMA Workshops. ppc.sas.upenn.edu.
- 2Wikipedia. PERMA Model. wikipedia.org.
- 3McKinsey. (2021). Psychological Safety and the Critical Role of Leadership Development. mckinsey.com.
- 4Management 3.0. (2024). Using the PERMA Model for Building a Positive Workplace. management30.com.
- 5Frontiers in Psychology. (2022). The Role of Transformational Leadership on Firm Performance. frontiersin.org.
- 6University of Twente. (2022). PERMA+4: A Framework for Work-Related Wellbeing, Performance and Positive Organizational Psychology. ris.utwente.nl.
- 7Scribd. (2025). Systems-Informed PERMA+4 and Psychological Safety Predicting Work-Related Well-Being and Performance Across an International Sample. scribd.com.
- 8International Journal of Applied Research in Business and Management. (2025). PERMA Positive Psychology: A Contemporary HR Strategy to Foster Employee Wellbeing and Organizational Performance. wr-publishing.org.

Summary

Martin Seligman's PERMA model, introduced in Flourish (2011), defines the five independently measurable pillars of psychological wellbeing — Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment. Validated through organizational research and extended to PERMA+4 in 2022, the model provides both a diagnostic framework for measuring workforce wellbeing and a strategic architecture for building the conditions under which individuals and organizations perform at their fullest capacity.