**VIA Power of Positive Psychology Conference**

Sponsored by VIA (Values in Action)

Friday, February 25, 2000 to Saturday, February 26, 2000

The Four Seasons Hotel, Philadelphia, PA

**Participants**: Gwendolyn Bennett, Alan Blankstein , Melissa A. Brotman, Esteban V. Cardemil, Joseph Conaty, Katherine Dahlsgaard, Lois Gelfand, Jane Gillham, Carrissa A. Griffing, Cathie Harvey, Terry Kang, Nicole Kurzer, Donna Mayerson, Neal H. Mayerson*,* Deb Pinger, Karen Pittman, Gordon Raley, Karen Reivich, Peter Schulman, Martin E.P. Seligman, Myrna Shure, Andrew Shatte, Sue Spence, Shannon W. Stirman, Daniel R. Strunk, Alicia Terry, Alan Williams, Steven Wolin, Sybil Wolin. Edward Royzman: Recording Secretary/Integrator.

**The Purpose of the Conference**: The primary purpose of the conference is for the Values In Action Institute (VIA) and its review team to identify programs from the field of psychology, which show special promise in terms of impact and market acceptance. Secondarily, it is expected that each participant will benefit from the rich perspectives offered during the conference and from new networking opportunities. VIA will use its start-up capital to build organizational infrastructure and to invest immediately in one or more programs. VIA also intends on raising additional capital as necessary to support the development and promotion of additional programs. The ultimate vision is for VIA to represent a portfolio of programs, which the youth serving and education markets can depend on for high quality information and resources.

Purpose of VIA: VIA is a non-profit organization whose purpose is to bring knowledge and resources from the field of positive psychology to organizations that work with youth. It intends to influence positively youth development by providing youth development programmers and practitioners with high quality training resources and by providing positive social scientists with the resources needed to put their program research in the hands of those who can put it to work.

Review Criteria of Special Interest:

1) How readily can the program-targeted skills be acquired -- how many training sessions, how much practice and coaching?

2) What resources need to be developed -- e.g. videos, training manuals, web site, printed materials, etc.?

3) How much ongoing support may be needed to maintain newly acquired skills over time?

4) How many important life outcomes do the program-targeted skills influence?

5) How useful might the programs be in various markets - are the targeted variables of interest, unique, and is the program format readily adoptable?

6) How amenable is the program to the effective use of Internet and broadcast technologies?

7) How cost- effective can the program be to deliver?

8) How well aligned are VIA's interests with those of the program principals?

THE PRESENTERS

Karen Reivich, PhD, is co-director of Penn Resiliency Project and co-author of Optimistic Child"

Andrew Shatte, PhD, is Research Associate for Penn Resiliency Project.

Myrna B. Shure, PhD, is Professor at MCP Hahneman University and author of "Raising a Thinking Child."

Susan H. Spence, PhD, MBA, is Professor at School of Psychology, University of Queensland.

Steven J. Wolin, MD and Sybil Wolin, PhD, are co-directors of Washington-based Project Resilience and co-authors of "The Resilient Self."

THE REVIEWERS:

Alan Blankstein – President, H.O.P.E Foundation. Founder and former president of the National Educational Service and Senior Editor of Reaching Today's Youth.

Joseph Conaty. Ph.D. – Director, Reading Excellence Program, U.S. Department of Education. Dr. Conaty is also responsible for the 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program, which is approximately a $450MM Dept. of Education funding program.

Cathie Harvey MSW – Director of Training, RISE, the leading producer of technology assisted training in developmentally appropriate practice for childcare providers/preschool teachers and preschooler parents. Cathie designs and oversees production of interactive educational programs for broadcast over satellite TV networks.

Donna Mayerson, Ph.D., M.Ed. – Trustee of the Manuel D. and Rhoda Mayerson Foundation, child psychologist, and special educator.

Neal H. Mayerson, Ph.D. – President of the Manuel D. and Rhoda Mayerson Foundation and clinical psychologist.

Deb Pinger – CEO of RISE, the leading producer of technology assisted training in developmentally appropriate practice for childcare providers/preschool teachers and preschooler parents.

Karen Pittman – Senior Vice President, International Youth Foundation Executive Director, IYF-US.

Gordon Raley – CEO of the National Assembly of Health and Human Services Organizations, the preeminent national association of 27 of the most active youth development organizations in the United States, as well as other health and human service organizations. Their youth serving organization members provide services to more than 40 million young people.

Martin E.P Seligman, Ph.D. – Professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania.

Alan Williams – Vice President of International Operations for Quest International.

HISTORY AND OVERVIEW

The conference emerged from the Values In Action Institute (VIA)'s initiative to identify strength-building intervention programs from the field of positive psychology, with an eye towards developing and disseminating these programs to various national markets, which cater to youth. VIA is a non-profit organization whose purpose is to bring knowledge and resources from the field of positive psychology to organizations that work with youth. It has been VIA's intention to use its start-up capital to build an organizational infrastructure, to invest immediately in one or more youth-oriented intervention programs, and to then seek to raise further funds, as necessary, to bolster the development and promotion of additional programs.

The primary purpose of the conference was to enable developers of selected youth-serving interventions to outline their respective projects before the VIA's review team (Alan Blankstein, Joseph Conaty, Cathie Harvey, Donna Mayerson, Neal H. Mayerson, Deb Pinger, Karen Pittman, Gordon Raley, Martin E.P. Seligman, Alan Williams) whose task it would be to recommend programs that show special promise in terms of impact and market acceptance.

The first day of the conference (February, 25, 3-5) featured opening addresses by Drs. Mayerson and Seligman, followed by informal introductions among the participants. Day two of the conference featured formal program presentations (February, 26, 9-5) including:

 I Can Problem Solve and Raising a Thinking Child by Dr. Myrna Shure

 The Resilient Self by Drs. Steven Wolin and Sybil Wolin

 Penn Resilience Program by Drs. Andrew Shatte and Karen Reivich

 Problem Solving for Life by Dr. Sue Spence

The second day of the conference ended with a reviewers' discussion (February, 26, 7-9) concerning the relative merits of the four programs and their thoughts on the mission of positive psychology and its possible contributions to youth development.

OPENING ADDRESSES

Dr. Mayerson opened the conference with brief remarks on the history and purpose of VIA's initiative to bring the best of positive psychology to the sphere of youth development.

Dr. Martin E.P. Seligman spoke next. He began by recounting a personal experience -- a conversation with his five-year-old daughter, Nikki –- which, on the eve of his taking the reins of the American Psychological Association, moved him to recognize that the psychological field, notwithstanding its promise and potency, has been side-tracked by its prodigious emphasis on the pathological and sub-optimal aspects of human functioning. Working within a theoretical framework of compensation for personal frailties and reparation of misshapen childhoods, psychology seemed to have forgotten that people's lives were not all, or even primarily, about weakness, damage, and the relief of suffering, but also about happiness, strength and virtue. The field seemed to have forgotten that even if the "damage-repair" psychology were to become utopianly successful, it could offer its consumers and votaries nothing more than a shift from the negative zone to the zone of indifference, leaving many people's aspirations to lead happy, productive lives, not merely lives devoid of misery and vexation, sorely unfulfilled.

Reviewing the history of the field, Dr. Seligman pointed out that prior to World War II, psychology had three missions: curing mental illness, making the lives of ordinary people better and more productive (such, for example, were the aspirations of pre-war industrial psychology), and identifying and nurturing genius (consider Terman's studies of giftedness). With the creation of the Veterans Administration in 1946, practicing psychologists discovered that they could get reimbursed by the federal government for the treatment of mental disorder. A year later, with the birth of the National Institute of Mental Health, psychologists realized that grant money was readily available for research on mental illness. The juxtaposition of these factors created a system of economic incentives that has lead the profession to orient itself primarily towards the study and treatment of psychological dysfunction. This intense focus on the aberrant side of the human psyche yielded its victories: by Dr. Seligman's estimate, at least 14 previously untreatable mental illnesses became tractable either through pharmacological or psychotherapeutic interventions. Moreover, in the course of its coordinated and vigorous attack on mental disorder, the psychological profession came to develop sophisticated and precise research methodologies and effective diagnostic procedures.

The downside of this development was the virtual neglect of two other central missions of pre-war psychology – uncovering and developing genius, and making all people's lives more fulfilling. Dr. Seligman commented that he had spent the last couple of years building the infrastructure for the new science, which would breathe new life into these two these once paramount missions of psychology. He noted that the current positive psychology network is structured around three "pillars": understanding and promoting subjective well-being, organizing and developing human strengths, and identifying and enabling of positive institutions, such as schools and religious organizations. Dr. Seligman went on to say that the intervention programs represented at the conference, the much anticipated "fourth pillar" of the positive psychology edifice, had at their core an understanding of the need to identify and build human strengths which could then be used against vicissitudes otherwise conducive to sub-optimal human functioning. He expressed his belief that the opening of the conference marked a beginning for the development of such positive intervention programs. Dr. Seligman also addressed the need for academic psychology to regain some of its applied focus by asking which "real-life" psychological phenomena its theories can model and reconstruct, thus encouraging better commerce and interplay between academic theory and practice. He emphasized that the development of human strengths and positive human institutions is important not only as a means of preventing or curing psychological disorder but is a worthwhile end in and of itself. Dr. Seligman concluded with hopes that the conference and its aftermath might suggest the means for creating and legitimizing positive psychology interventions which would be the positive equivalent of clinical practice, and which would be geared towards making all people's lives better in terms of vocation, intimacy, and positive strength.

This overview of positive psychology was followed by Dr. Mayerson's opening address. Dr. Mayerson established as his goal conveying to the meeting's interdisciplinary audience the intricacies involved in translating a pure academic idea into a useful market application. Due to the academia's overriding concern with concept making and validation, he said, most academic enterprises end at the point where a workable laboratory prototype of an idea has been built. It is, however, precisely at this point where the difficult "going to market" phase of idea development commences.

Dr. Mayerson delineated three basic steps in the "going to market" phase of idea development:

1. Acquisition of the relevant market knowledge (in this case, knowledge regarding the needs and constraints of various educational / youth-serving organizations).
2. Customizing "the educational product" so as to meet the needs of the relevant market niche.
3. Distributing "the product" to its target audience in a way that maximizes its applicability and use.

Dr. Mayerson went on to illustrate the realities of disseminating a program in today's educational markets by presenting the audience with the hypothetical scenario of marketing an intervention program to "The Boys' and Girls' Clubs of America."

Due to this organization's lack of centralized, directive control over its local cites, a successful distribution effort in such a case would require negotiating successfully not only with the National Headquarters but also with each of its local chapters. However, even with the acceptance of the program at both national and local levels, the battle is only half-won. The third step of the distribution process would often require securing financial support from an independent set of funding agencies. With the necessary funds in place, local organizations must then articulate the advantages of the program to their respective constituents.

Dr. Mayerson stated that each of these four stages would require its own presentational style and set of materials. The distribution task appears even more daunting if one considers that putting many an educational product (e.g., self-help book) in the hands of its prospective user guarantees neither consistent use nor proper application. Yet, only if the latter takes place can the dissemination of the original idea be considered a success. Notwithstanding the daringness of this task, Dr. Mayerson urged optimism and went on to restate VIA's purpose to serve as a stable conduit between the world of cutting-edge academic research in positive psychology and the domain of youth-oriented markets.

Exploring the ways to expedite this effort, Dr. Mayerson advocated the need to switch from the traditional expert-based mode of social programming ("We know what is best for you") to a more customer-based mode characteristic of commercial product distribution ("What kind of programs would be best for you?"), selecting programs of greatest potential reach and better intervention-to-person matching. Consistent with these objectives, Dr. Mayerson counseled the presenters to discuss their ideas not only in terms of their original dependent variables but also it terms of their broader possibilities, so that the scope of application of these ideas could be appropriately gauged

Dr. Mayerson concluded his presentation by stressing the importance of respect on the part of the practitioners for the core integrity of the original idea, combined with the understanding on the part of the idea-originators for possible adjustments and adaptations the idea may need to undergo in the process of its being transformed into a successful market application.

OVERVIEW OF PRESENTATIONS

I Can Problem Solve

Dr. Shure spoke first. She described "I Can Problem Solve," a primary intervention program for schools, running from pre-school to grade 6. The program is complemented by the "I Can Problem Solve" approach for home and by "Raising a Thinking Child," the comparable "I Can Problem Solve" program for families. Dr. Shure also announced the recent availability of a program aimed at parents of 8-12-year-olds, called "Raising a Thinking Teen."

Dr. Shure proceeded to describe the general principles of the "I Can Problem Solve" (ICPS) intervention, why it is needed, the skills ICPS identifies as most relevant for children, the basic ways of implementing the program, and the potential reach of the program.

Dr. Shure said that the program grew out of her personal fascination with manifest differences in the ways 3-4-year-olds negotiate their conflicts ("He's got a toy truck; I want it.") with other children. In particular, she observed that the most successful negotiators (in terms of how quickly they got what they wanted and the emotional consequence for themselves and the other child) were the 4-year-olds who, by spiting the conventional wisdom of the day, were able to inquire actively into the reasons why the other child balked at relinquishing the toy ("Why do you need the truck?") and accommodate the child's responses by meshing his/her needs with their own ("You need it to pull the rock? Let's pull the rocks together.").

Based on Spivack's pioneering analysis of children's interpersonal dramas, Dr. Shure went on to study this type of successful negotiating more closely in contexts normally conductive to physical aggression, teasing, nagging, social withdrawal, and emotional upset due to an inability to wait (all of which, as Dr. Shure pointed out, were related to later behavioral problems). This led her to recognize the importance of teaching children to identify alternative solutions to a problem, to decide which solution would best meet one's goals and constraints, and to consider the consequences of implementing a particular solution. Dr. Shure also developed ways of conveying to children a set of pre-problem solving skills, such as learning a problem-solving vocabulary ("There are DIFFERENT ways to solve the SAME problem," A solution might work for SOME, not for ALL"), empathy for one's own and others' feelings, and learning sequencing and timing of events.

Dr. Shure presented data which suggests that pre-schoolers who successfully acquired such skills were less likely to display aggression and impulsivity, were more likely to lead rewarding social and emotional lives, were more self-confident and independent, and achieved more academically. She also spoke of the benefits of ICPS for teachers and parents. Dr. Shure described various "fun and effective ways" (games, stories, role-playing) in which such skills could be imparted to children, and she made a case for the ease with which ICPS could be integrated with, and in fact reinforce, other curriculum goals.

Project Resilience

Drs. Steven and Sybil Wolins spoke next. They stated that at the crux of their presentation is the issue of front-line staff training, looked at from a combined perspective of positive psychology and youth development. Drs. Wolins described the purpose of their program as teaching cognitions (e.g., "There is more to a story that meets the eye," "Teens can be understood") and corresponding competencies (e.g., "Withhold judgment," "Be empathic") necessary to deliver services to youth based on youth development and the positive psychology perspective. The history of their efforts followed.

Founded in 1987, Project Resilience sought to identify and ultimately devise methods of teaching the specific strengths that account for resilience in the face of hardship. The initial effort was stimulated by a series of informal "How did you do it?" interviews with 25 adults who were currently leading satisfying and productive lives, despite having grown up in seriously disrupted homes. Based on the analysis of the narratives, the investigators put forth (1) the Challenge Model, "a paradoxical formulation of resilience that accounts for both the strengths and weaknesses in individuals who have struggled with hardship," (2) an empirically derived taxonomy of strengths, and (3) the "talking about strengths" one-on-one intervention module. This practical application of the vocabulary of strengths (Insight, Independence, Relationships, Initiative, Creativity, Humor, Morality) is aimed at fostering resilience in youth and adults. It proceeds by teaching individuals to reframe their earlier traumatic experiences in more positive, self-emphatic terms, utilizing the vocabulary of resilience and strength derived from the investigators' earlier interviews (a videotape of Dr. Steven Wolins' interview with a former gang member was played to illustrate this process of trauma-to-strength conversion). According to the presenters, such a re-framing process is conducive to invoking a special "survivor's pride," enabling people to reorder their lives in a more gratifying, constructive, socially responsible manner.

One of the main messages of the Drs. Wolins' presentation was that, if applied positive psychology is to succeed without becoming a sitting duck for the accusation of Pollyanism, social insensitivity, or caricaturing by the media, it must be presented in a larger social context of struggling with and prevailing over adversities that ordinary people can relate to (hence the title of the investigators' latest work: "The Struggle to Be Strong," comprised of teens' stories of persistence in the face of adversity) .

Thus, PR lays particular emphasis on taking into account both human vulnerabilities and human strengths. It tries to capture the interplay between the two forces as they evolve over time. The presenters pointed out that, unlike other strength-building interventions, the Resilient Self model explicitly acknowledges damage and adversity in people's lives, but says that there is more to the story. In doing this, it hopes to achieve a more balanced and sympathetic model of human struggle for optimal existence than could be attained by emphasizing positivity alone.

The crucial message of the presentation was that the essential challenge that applied positive psychology needs to face in the sphere of youth development is one of gaining the support of front line staff "who operate out of a deeply entrenched negative or deficit psychology that is supported by prior training, 'the system', and the professional, as well as public surround." In this regard, the investigators described their aspiration to test and implement a model program of comprehensive, long term, competency-based training in implementing positive psychology for the full staff at a pre-selected agency, combining several days of didactic sessions for front line staff (based on their current Think Resilience! Workshop) with the Resilience in Practice workshop for agency directors, with emphasis on embedded supervision and on-going staff development as well as regularly scheduled peer group conferences.

The presenters went on to say that evidence of the effect of their training on staff, and in turn on the youth they serve, is anecdotal but substantial, "emerging even among populations that are the most difficult to serve." They cited, among others, the case of the program's dramatic hope-building effect (as reported by the corrections officer implementing the program) in juvenile offenders facing long-term incarceration in Madison Correctional Facility in Ohio.

Drs. Steven and Sybil Wolins concluded their presentation by stressing their belief that the ideas of positive psychology will not reach youth until front line staff persons, operating from the perspective of the deficit-model, accept its principles as personally relevant, sound and useful.

Penn Resilience Program and Problem Solving for Life

As was suggested by one of the reviewers, the two presentations that followed (Andrew Shatte and Karen Reivich's Penn Resilience Program [PRP] and Sue Spence's Problem Solving for Life [PSL]) could be easily construed as two incarnations of the same basic idea, the idea of dramatically enhancing young people's natural protective capacity (optimistic attributing style, rational problem-solving orientation, capacity for forming and maintaining relationships, etc.) by teaching them a set of cognitive-emotive, problem-solving, and interpersonal skills responsive to the principles of cognitive-behavioral therapy.

Consistent with this reviewer's comments, the two intervention strategies may indeed be appropriately clustered together on the basis of their theoretical underpinnings (Ellis' ABC model of the mediating effect of beliefs on emotions and behaviors, Beck's cognitive-behavioral approach to monitoring one's thoughts and testing them for accuracy, and Seligman's pessimistic/optimistic explanatory style dichotomy). They programs also appeared comparable in respect to the contents of their cognitive skills component (a sequence of visually engaging exercises in belief-detection and belief-modification), demonstrated clinical efficacy, the age range of their primary target populations (young adolescents), the comparability of the requisite time investment and delivery format (with the complete PRP protocol requiring 12 week, 2-hrs per week small group tutorial sessions; the PSL requiring eight 3-4 hrs. weekly workshops) and their potential extendibility to broader youth audiences. Also, in the case of either program, the investigators had evidence of the interventions' efficaciousness with non-clinical populations and their potential applicability across a variety of ethnic groups.

Both Dr. Sue Spence and Drs. Shatte and Reivich expressed a belief that their respective interventions could be taken to scale (e.g., via web-based technologies) without any essential loss to the programs' core therapeutic ingredients.

Concluding Consensus

By the end of the discussion, all the reviewers came to share the view that VIA's major priority lies in the development of a taxonomy of the strengths and associated structured interview and measurements, some elements of which, per Donna Mayerson's comment, could already be gleaned from the programs outlined in the course of the conference. Judging by the participants' previous comments, such an endeavor may go a long way in bolstering the field's academic standing, assuring its eminence in the test-focused climate of today's educational institutions, and expanding its ranks both vertically, i.e., by involving practitioners/public-policy makers in the sphere of education and horizontally, i.e., by gaining solid allies in related academic disciplines.