

THE ATLAS CORPS EFFECT

The Atlas Corps Effect:

Reframing “Shouldering the World” to “Sharing the World” through Positive Psychology

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Abstract

Atlas Service Corps, Inc. (Atlas Corps) supports a global community of social change leaders dedicated to driving social and cultural change by providing world-class training, experiences, and opportunities. Coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic, what was originally developed as a temporary virtual leadership program due to restricted travel has now become a core program offering that they hope to expand from 300 to over 5,000 annual participants in the next few years. One of the challenges that social change leaders face is burnout due to long hours, limited resources, and complex problems. To support Atlas Corps' social change leader community, a series of positive psychology lessons were developed to help them learn about high-quality connections, positive stress response, and thinking traps and apply learned skills in practice. These lessons were specifically designed for their virtual leadership program, which could then be applied toward other populations, including in-person program participants, alumni, and Atlas Corps staff themselves. The implications and desired outcomes include fostering improved connections virtually and in-person, enhancing resilience and stress management strategies, and ultimately preventing burnout particularly within the context of a diverse population of nonprofit leaders and the organizations they serve.

Keywords: high-quality connections, stress, burnout, resilience, positive psychology, nonprofit leadership, global, social change leaders, social entrepreneurs, social connection

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Introduction and Background

Atlas Service Corps, Inc. (Atlas Corps) is a Washington, D.C.-based 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization whose mission is to address critical social issues by training a global community of skilled social change professionals and maintaining a network of social sector leaders and organizations to address the world's 21st century challenges (Atlas Corps, 2023a). Social change is a broadly defined category centered around individuals and organizations driving cultural and social change in various communities – local, national, global – and spanning many business sectors (Dunfey, 2019). Atlas Corps' team of 15 employees (including full-time employees, contractors, and interns) supports these change agents by providing two core types of programming. First, Atlas Corps operates a “reverse Peace Corps” model, bringing young, social change professionals, called Fellows, to the U.S. for 12 to 18-month long programs and providing them with in-person development training, along with full-time placement at nonprofit, private sector, or government organizations (M. Bednarczyk, personal communication, January 23, 2023). Secondly, Atlas Corps developed their Virtual Leadership Institute (VLI) in 2020, providing another set of social change professionals, called Scholars, the opportunity to participate in a six-month virtual professional development program. Both Atlas Corps programs are focused around three themes: Developing Self, Developing Others, and Leading Movements (Atlas Corps, 2023d). By supporting the development of global social change leaders across the globe, Atlas Corps strives to make an impact on solving the world's biggest social challenges.

Atlas Corps Organizational Background

Atlas Service Corps, Inc. was founded in 2006 by Scott Beale, who believed talent was universal, but opportunity is not (M. Bednarczyk, personal communication, January 23, 2023). He founded Atlas Corps to bridge that gap, by connecting global talent with opportunities to

work at organizations in the United States and network with other nonprofit leaders, NGOs, and organizations. Since its inception, Atlas Corps has grown significantly, with fiscal year 2020 revenue exceeding \$4 million for the first time. Funding primarily comes from two sources – donations from organizational host partners (~67% of total) and global, governmental or embassy grants (~33%) (Internal Revenue Service, 2020). The 12 to 18-month fellowship program has since been recognized by the Brookings Institute as a “best practice” in international exchange and a model social entrepreneurship program (Atlas Corps, 2023a). Their programs to date have supported over 1,500 social change leaders from over 115 countries as well as more than 400 organizations (Atlas Corps, 2023b).

The global COVID-19 pandemic led to challenges with obtaining visas for individuals entering the United States and as a result, the VLI was launched in 2020 to continue serving the mission of developing social change leaders during the pandemic. Originally intended to be a stopgap while Fellows waited for their visas, due to its success, it has now evolved into a core offering of Atlas Corps, even serving as a pipeline for their Fellowship program. Increased funding from international embassies for virtual programming, greater comfort and familiarity with virtual training, along with lower overhead costs, have combined to make the VLI a valuable core offering. Atlas Corps plans to significantly scale up their Scholar participant count since inception from 300 to reach 5,000 total program participants by 2026. (M. Bednarczyk, personal communication, January 23, 2023).

Atlas Corps has also experienced recent changes in leadership, with Scott Beale stepping down as CEO in January 2021 (remaining on the Board of Directors) and Bidjan Nashat stepping into the role in September 2021. Although the mission of Atlas Corps remains the same, the recent change in leadership, staff turnover, and post-COVID considerations, have created a

timely opportunity for “positive disturbance” to enhance and modernize current programs, including alignment of the leadership development programming for Fellow and Scholars (H. Jemaneh, personal communication, January 23, 2023).

Sector Overview: Social Change Leaders

Social change leaders (SCLs) is a broad category to describe individuals who work in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or other public or private organizations to affect change and improve their local, national, regional, or international communities. These humanitarian leaders serve in a broad range of sectors including public health, economic development, social services, and education. International NGOs have played critical roles in delivering emergency aid and supporting economic development around the globe for more than 100 years (University of Oxford, 2022). It is estimated that there are close to forty-thousand active NGOs internationally (Navajas-Romero et al., 2020).

Another common name for SCLs is the term “social entrepreneur” which has grown in popularity over the last few decades to describe those who bring together a mission for social change with innovation and a set of business-like approaches and practices (Dees, 2001).

According to Zimmer and Pearson (2018), social entrepreneurs bring value through a set of activities, including meeting the needs for vital products and services to those in need, acting as first responders during a crisis, innovating to address a range of social issues, and empowering and creating agency for self-directed change and programs within communities.

A broad range of high-level skills are needed for a SCL to be effective. These include perhaps most significantly leadership ability, skills to manage organizations and/or an effort, and the ability to build and maintain support across a complex range of stakeholders (Hailey & James, 2004). SCLs face a set of significant challenges, the most acute of which are fund-raising

and maintaining the right human capital, according to a set of interviews of social entrepreneurs (Doherty & Pulido, 2016). Raising capital can be even more difficult for women, minority, and indigenous social entrepreneurs (Zimmer & Pearson, 2018). A number of NGOs and philanthropic entities have created programs to develop and support SCLs through a mix of leadership and skill development programs, funding, and networking opportunities. These include Atlas Corps, Acumen, Ashoka, the World Economic Forum, and the Skoll Foundation, among others.

Given the daunting breadth, complexity, and urgency of the issues SCLs tackle, and the long work hours involved, it is not surprising that chronic stress that can lead to burnout is rampant. Of a group of successful social entrepreneurs surveyed in 2018, pre-COVID-19, over 50% reported experiencing burnout and depression (Zimmer & Pearson, 2018). It is likely that percentage has continued to increase in the aftermath of COVID-19. In addition to building leadership skills, it is imperative to support these SCLs with tools to manage their own resilience and support their well-being.

Atlas Corps Social Change Leaders

Atlas Corps facilitates 12 to 18-month in-person or blended 14-month Fellowships for SCLs at nonprofit, private, and government sector organizations in the United States (Atlas Corps, 2023b). The blended program (combined home country and US-based experience) was created to accommodate COVID-19 travel limitations and features the same curriculum as the in-person program. In addition to the full-time commitment at their host organization (typically 40 hours per week), each Fellow also participates in over 200 hours of development training through the Global Leadership Lab (GLL), delivered in English both in-person and virtually (Atlas Corps, 2023d). The target demographic for Atlas Corps Fellowships is rising young

professionals ages 35 or younger, with 2-10 years of experience, most frequently at an NGO or nonprofit, and coming from countries eligible for U.S. J-1 exchange visas (Atlas Corps, 2023c).

The gender breakdown of Atlas Fellows is 64% female and 36% male with an average participant age of 29 (Atlas Corps, 2020; Atlas Corps, 2023a). Fellows are most commonly from Sub-Saharan Africa (31%) and South & Central Asia (23%), with the Western Hemisphere (14%), MENA (14%), Europe (12%), and East Asia & The Pacific (6%) composing the remaining 46% (Atlas Corps, 2020).

Despite the selective application process for Fellows – only 1% of applicants are accepted – a challenge Atlas Corps faces is ensuring enough host organization roles that can support the Fellows’ professional growth through their US-based placement experience. Atlas Corps Fellows are experienced professionals in their respective fields; when they have roles that are not commensurate with their abilities and former responsibilities, some Fellows end up viewing the program as a “gap year.” Atlas Corps recognizes these challenges and is actively working on solutions, both internally and with their host organizations (M. Bednarczyk, personal communication, January 27, 2023).

Emerging SCLs, or Scholars, can also apply and be selected to engage in the Atlas Corps VLI for 3-5 hours per week over six months (Atlas Corps, 2023b). This English online learning community enhances professional skills, builds global networks (with other Scholars and Fellows), and culminates with an individual project focused on professional development or positive social impact within the community they serve (Atlas Corps, 2023a). Demographics of each VLI cohort is largely dependent on the timing of country embassy grants which may offer sponsorship for citizens and residents only. While young professionals are still the target demographic and basic program requirements mirror the Fellowship program, participants in the

VLI may be up to age 40. (M. Bednarczyk, personal communication, January 23, 2023). As most VLI participants maintain full-time employment, Atlas Corps has also been working to streamline and reduce VLI requirements and assignments based on participant feedback.

However, as VLI content is similar for all cohorts, Atlas Corps has received some feedback that some of the content can be too basic for professionals coming from Western English-speaking countries (M. Bednarczyk, personal communication, January 23, 2023).

Potential Application of Positive Psychology

Stemming from their desire to continually improve the program offerings for SCLs, Atlas Corps requested an analysis to explore how positive psychology training or interventions might be able to augment the existing programming for Fellows, Scholars, or the Atlas Corps staff, who are themselves affected by many of the same challenges facing the SCLs. The current professional development curriculum is focused on three themes: Developing Self, Developing Others and Leading Movements (Atlas Corps, 2023d). Our initial analysis of the curriculum uncovered a number of positive psychology concepts like emotional intelligence, meaning-making, and resilience that are already embedded across the modules under other names. Before we get into recommendations of how to apply positive psychology at Atlas Corps, we will first look at the participant feedback of the current programs.

Atlas Corps has a robust evaluation system to determine the effectiveness of the professional development programs for the SCLs and collects detailed feedback on both the Fellow and Scholar programs (Atlas Corps, personal communication, January 27, 2023). This robust measurement allows Atlas Corps to report results to the U.S. Department of State and grant officers as well as to find opportunities to continually improve programming. Although the Fellow placement experience still has its inconsistencies, the evaluations of the programmatic

professional development offered by Atlas Corps within both Fellow and Scholar programs win overall consistently high feedback (M. Bednarczyk, personal communication, January 27, 2023). Applying positive psychology training or interventions is not needed due to any gaps identified in evaluations, but rather, is drawing from the most significant challenges for SCLs based on our sector overview, the planned Atlas Corps roadmap, and feedback shared by Atlas Corps (M. Bednarczyk, personal communication, January 27, 2023).

Given the needs of the Atlas Corps' population, our focus is on how to address the risk of stress and burnout through resilience strategies. As we think about the level of the organization to target our work, we have considered the groups of leadership program participants (e.g., Fellows and Scholars) as well as Atlas Corps team members. Within these groups, we are initially exploring three potential approaches to apply positive psychology to support the mission of Atlas Corps:

Resilience Module/Training. Resilience is defined as the ability to navigate adversity and grow and thrive in the face of challenges (Reivich & Shatté, 2002). Resilience training could have a positive effect on SCLs, the teams that SCLs lead, and the staff at Atlas Corps. The MAPP Red Team could provide a comprehensive evidence-based program that aims to build leaders and teams that can navigate challenges they encounter.

- SCLs (Fellows and Scholars): As we have already noted, according to a survey conducted at the World Economic Forum in 2018, 50% of SCLs reported having experienced burnout and/or depression due to the immense challenges they face (Zimmer & Pearson, 2018). Resilience training is already included as a part of the Developing Self module, but due to this significant risk of burnout, the resilience

content could be enhanced. The existing modules would be analyzed for opportunities to increase leaders' capabilities to build resilience for themselves.

- SCLs (Fellows and Scholars): According to Craiovan (2015), not only are the SCLs experiencing stress, burnout, and depression, but so are the teams that they lead. SCLs need to develop resilience for themselves, but they also need to teach resilience to their teams (and lead resilient teams). This would entail a module being added to the Developing Others section to help SCLs bring resilience programs to their organizations to build organizational resilience.
- Employees of Atlas Corps: Atlas Corps employees are not immune to stress and burnout and the organization has experienced high turnover (M. Bednarczyk, personal communication, January 23, 2023). Resilience training for the Atlas Corps staff may be beneficial and could potentially reduce turnover and help the organization prepare for the planned growth of VLI participation.

As a result, the themes and areas of opportunity identified above are not limited to only one demographic. Concepts like resilience could have broad application for the Scholars, Fellows, program alumni, and the Atlas Corps team at large.

Literature Review

Our situation analysis revealed that SCLs face numerous organizational challenges and accompanying long hours, which can lead to stress and burnout. Combined with Atlas Corps' increased focus on the VLI and ambitious goal to scale their total participation to 5,000 Scholars by 2026 (M. Bednarczyk, personal communication, February 15, 2023), we have identified an opportunity to enhance the resilience content of the VLI Developing Self module to teach

resilience skills and create interventions to boost resilience, in order to serve as a buffer against the stressors commonly reported by SCLs.

Atlas Corps' preference is to support and focus initially on the Scholar and Fellow communities they serve. (M. Bednarczyk, personal communication, February 15, 2023). Atlas Corps will be able to leverage the learnings and assignments designed for Scholars and Fellows within their internal team as well. The following sections outline the opportunities in depth, with particular attention to research-backed interventions and evidence within global communities and the nonprofit sector, where available.

Positive Interventions

Positive interventions are research-backed, deliberate actions taken with the intent of increasing or improving well-being. A study conducted by Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) suggested that uncontrollable factors like genetics or life circumstance only explain half of the variance in individual well-being. That leaves over a third unexplained, which may be influenced by positive interventions.

The most effective positive interventions tend to be intrinsically aligned and repetitive with novelty. Intrinsically aligned means two things, ensuring "fit" of an activity with an individual's strengths and well as attuned to cultural context (Schueller, 2014; Pedrotti & Edwards, 2017). Repetition with novelty refers to repeated intervention actions or behaviors that eventually become habit, while still maintaining enough variety to avoid hedonic adaptation, the natural process of diminishing well-being returns (Bao & Lyubomirsky, 2014).

Intersectionality, the many cultural facets that make up individuals, including race, ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic level, directly influences the way an individual perceives and interacts with positive psychology (Pedrotti & Edwards, 2017). Historically, much of

psychology has been narrowly viewed through Western culture and White identity. New studies have demonstrated the construct and interpretation of happiness or well-being can differ between cultures, as do other things like character values and strengths (Pedrotti & Edwards, 2017). As a result, there may be limited research specifically looking at resilience and other stress management interventions for sub-Saharan Africa or South & Central Asia populations, which make up over 50% of Atlas Corps Fellows (Atlas Corps, 2020).

However, the Pawelski (2020) Elements model breaks down positive interventions into their various components – starting with desired outcome (the impact to the participant), tracing it back through the target system and active ingredient, back to the activity (in this case, the sample VLI assignment) itself. In this manner, in the absence of evidence for a specific intervention on a target population like SCLs, theoretical research and evidence at each step can be used to develop new, evidence-based interventions that are also culturally relevant.

Given the global population of the Atlas Corps community, it is also likely that a singular intervention may not resonate with their entire community. As a result, it is important that our recommendation provides space for cultural context as well as options for individual person-activity fit.

Stress

Stress was identified as a challenge for both the Atlas Corps team and the SCLs that Atlas Corps serves. Understanding the causes of stress and looking into ways to manage stress and navigate challenges that cause stress may be an area that will support the success of Atlas Corps. Stress is any stimulus (intrinsic or extrinsic) that causes a biological response; the reaction to which is called the stress response (Salleh, 2008). If we look at our evolutionary roots, our stress response is what helped our ancestors survive. When early humans encountered a threat (e.g., a

saber-toothed tiger), their minds would immediately perceive the stimulus as a threat, causing a release of chemicals and hormones to surge throughout their bodies that increased focus, enhanced cognitive function, and increased energy to increase our chances of survival. This stress response is what allowed our ancestors to survive, passing along the genes of stress-response to us. Our bodies react to psychological stressors in a complex and integrated manner to prepare us for the challenge or threat (Boyce & Ellis, 2005). Humans are no longer being chased by tigers, but instead, experience psychological stress in different ways (e.g., being behind on an important project). Regardless of whether a stressor is physical or psychological, the body will move into a stress response; however, the level of the stress response can vary widely based on the transactional as well as built-over-time level of stress (Carr et al., 2011). Stress is inevitable, but different kinds of stress can have different effects.

Stress can both be *helpful* and *harmful* (Cranwell-Ward & Abbey, 2016). A common perception of stress today is that all stress is harmful and should be avoided. This is simply not accurate (Cranwell-Ward & Abbey, 2016). Our stress response is helpful when it enables us to avoid an accident or meet an important deadline. Our stress response helps us grow and develop as we learn how to tackle new and different challenges. Some stress (short-term stress) has been shown to be healthy for our bodies by boosting our immune system (Yaribeygi et al., 2017). In the workplace, a lack of any stress or challenge can be harmful as it can decrease motivation and performance and can lead to boredom and complacency (Salleh, 2008). On the other end of the spectrum, chronic stress can be harmful to performance, health, and wellness. Too much stress at work decreases performance (Carr et al., 2011). Chronic stress can compromise the immune system, leading to a host of diseases or trouble sleeping, contributing to further stress (Yaribeygi et al., 2017; Kalmbach et al., 2018). Given the two faces of stress as both helpful and harmful,

knowing how to extract the benefits of short-term stress and avoid the dangers of chronic stress is important for performance, health, and well-being.

Different people respond to stress differently. The factors that impact how someone responds to stress are genetics, personality, coping style and quality of relationships (Salleh, 2008). To reduce the harmful effects of chronic stress, individuals can improve their stress response by choosing a stress-coping intervention that works best in their life (e.g., meditation or exercise). Prosocial behavior can also help to mitigate the negative effects of stress. Prosocial behaviors are actions people can take that are intended to help other people, such as offering assistance, sharing, or comforting others (Raposa et al., 2016). Additionally, by simply changing your mindset of stress (from “stress is bad” to “stress is positive”), you can positively change your cognitive, emotional, and psychological responses to stressors (Crum et al., 2017). The ability to cope with stress is not just an individual concern, it is an organizational one as well (Carr et al., 2011). In organizations, high levels of stress at work negatively impacts job satisfaction (Abouserie, 1996). When employees are not happy, their performance declines and turnover increases (Achor, 2010). Organizations that provide individual and organizational-wide resources and interventions to decrease the harmful effects of chronic stress can increase organizational and employee performance and well-being (Carr et al., 2011).

Burnout

Burnout is a global concern as chronic stress in the workplace is a major factor that wreaks havoc on employee health and well-being, as well as negatively affects organizational results (Carod-Artal & Vázquez-Cabrera, 2012). Burnout is a threat at Atlas Corps for both the team and the SCLs they serve, consistent with findings within the social entrepreneur sector (Zimmer & Pearson, 2018). Burnout is defined as a “prolonged response to chronic emotional

and interpersonal stressors on the job and is defined by the three dimensions of exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy” (Maslach et al., 2001, p. 351). The first dimension of burnout is when an employee feels chronically exhausted, lacking mental and physical energy. The second dimension of burnout is cynicism, where the employee feels emotionally disconnected from their work and stops caring about their job, causing a negative attitude toward others, irritability, and withdrawal. The third dimension of burnout is inefficacy, where the employee does not feel like their work makes a difference (Maslach et al., 2001). When employees experience burnout, their career, health, and happiness suffer. In a study of emergency room physicians, those doctors who were burned out also were more likely to be depressed and have a low quality of life (Lu et al., 2015). Leiter et al. (2015) state that burnout can erode dignity, spirit and will, which can have a deleterious effect on a person’s well-being.

With chronic workplace stress and burnout being a very costly problem for organizations (World Health Organization, 2022), organizational psychologists have researched how to both “diagnose and treat” high burnout and how to prevent burnout from occurring. The prevention of burnout is the preferred strategy for organizations and is consistent with the positive psychology movement’s approach of helping people in organizations thrive versus fixing a broken organization. Given high burnout prevalence, leaders need to be armed with strategies to do both: fix burnout and prevent burnout.

When organizations are experiencing high levels of burnout, action must be taken to improve the well-being of the organization and the employees. To reduce high levels of burnout, the best results were reported in studies where both individual interventions and organizational interventions (to change the situation that employees worked within) were simultaneously administered (Leiter et al., 2015). Individual interventions are designed to allow individuals to

better cope with stress. Examples of individual interventions are resilience training, meditation, time management, interpersonal and social skills training, relaxation, and stress inoculation training. These interventions demonstrated promising results, but the best results come from organizational interventions to change the situation that causes stress in employees (Awa et al., 2010). Examples of situational factors that organizations can impact are reducing workload, increasing the resources and support to complete work, improving the quality of social connections between employees and job-person fit (matching skills and interests to jobs). When both organization and individual interventions are simultaneously administered, organizations enjoyed the best rates of success in reducing burnout (Awa et al., 2010).

For those organizations not experiencing burnout, proactivity to ensure they are implementing strategies to *prevent* burnout is wise. The strategies that prevent burnout are maximizing employee engagement, understanding employees' experience and perspectives, and providing employee training and resources to effectively handle stress (Moss, 2019). To maximize engagement of employees, leaders can provide challenging work, recognition, autonomy, and a sense of importance at work. This protects against the contributing factors of cynicism and inefficacy that lead to burnout. In order to manage the workload and ensure employees have the resources they need, leaders need to ask a lot of questions, listen, and provide employees with what they need to do their best work. Most of the responsibility for preventing burnout is the responsibility of the leadership in creating the right culture of engagement, but employees also play a role. There will always be some stress and challenges to handle at work, so providing resilience training and well-being resources can help employees successfully cope with and handle stress. It is the combination of both organizational and

individual strategies that create the recipe for maximizing the motivation and engagement of employees to prevent burnout (Moss, 2019).

High-Quality Connections (HQCs)

High-quality connections (HQCs) are a critical component of thriving organizations as humans are inherently social and have a need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1968). However, HQCs are not defined at a community or organization level, but at a person-to-person interaction level. More specifically, they are positive, short-term dyadic interactions, characterized by increased energy, positive regard, and mutuality (Stephens et al., 2011). These quality connections also have a higher capacity for emotional expression, resilience in the face of setbacks, and openness to new ideas (Stephens et al., 2011).

HQCs matter because they are correlated with many positive well-being outcomes at the individual and organizational level. Individuals experiencing HQCs report increased health, adaptability, resilience, job satisfaction and lower role conflict and overload (Dutton, 2003). At the organizational level, HQCs are correlated with greater cooperation, adaptability, and creativity (Dutton, 2003). In an organization such as Atlas Corps with many different communities – Fellows, Scholars, Alumni, staff, and host partners, each micro-interaction can be meaningful and have a meaningful impact on the participant – particularly for those in the VLI with more limited synchronous communication. Given the numerous time demands SCLs face, a workplace characterized by HQCs can foster greater community and cooperation, psychological safety (a belief that one can take risk, express ideas, or admit mistakes without fear of negative consequences), and lower burnout.

Most encouraging is that HQCs can be intentionally built, and do not always require significant time investment. Dutton (2003) identifies trust (acting in ways that convey integrity,

dependability, and benevolence), task enabling (supporting teammates and setting them up for success), respectful engagement (communicating in ways that convey regard for and another's worth), and play (having fun together) as four focus areas to develop HQCs. However, given the significant differences in work culture and management style across countries, interventions to bolster HQCs will need to be adapted appropriately to resonate within the cultural context for SCLs in their home countries.

Resilience

According to Kellerman & Seligman (2023), resilience is the most critical bedrock for a thriving workplace in the 21st century. Additionally, cultivating, developing, and encouraging resilience enhances well-being and can help people lead happier lives and experience greater life satisfaction (Reivich & Shatté, 2002). Resilience is the ability to navigate adversity, grow, and thrive from challenges (Bruch, 2021). Resilience skills are valuable because they support individuals in responding to events in real-time, preparing for events they anticipate, and processing events after they happen (Kellerman & Seligman, 2023).

Resilient people can successfully adapt to adversities (Tabibnia & Radecki, 2018) which matters in navigating significant events or traumas (capital 'A' adversities) and managing life's everyday challenges (lowercase 'a' adversities) (Reivich & Shatté, 2002). Although there is some degree of heritability, resilience is not a trait. Resilience is an active process, and individuals benefit the most from continually learning and cultivating resilience practices (Reivich & Shatté, 2002).

Institutions play a pivotal role in whether resilience is nurtured or not within their organizations (Bruch, 2021). Five primary psychological and behavioral skills are critical for building resilience in today's workplace environment: 1) emotional regulation, 2) optimism, 3)

cognitive agility, 4) self-compassion, and 5) self-efficacy (Kellerman & Seligman, 2023).

Emotional regulation refers to an individual's capacity to manage their emotions flexibly and efficiently, especially negative emotions, to achieve their goals. Emotional regulation is necessary for thinking clearly and critically; evidence suggests it may be the most valuable skill in today's workplace environment (Kellerman & Seligman, 2023). The second factor, optimism, is defined as having positive and confident expectations for the future (Scheier & Carver, 2018). Cognitive agility denotes the ability to be adaptable by mentally shifting through multiple scenarios before narrowing down and acting on the most promising possibility (Kellerman & Seligman, 2023). Self-compassion refers to one's ability to extend compassion to oneself for one's own suffering, failure, or perceived inadequacy. A critical aspect of self-compassion is understanding one's problems through the lens of the broader scope of common challenges facing humanity currently and throughout history (Neff, 2011). Lastly, self-efficacy is one's belief in what one can do and the confidence that one can accomplish what one wants. Self-efficacy is a significant determinant of behavior and actions and how much individuals persevere through challenges and obstacles (Maddux & Kleiman, 2021). Closely related to self-efficacy is human agency, the belief that we can change future events (Kellerman & Seligman, 2023).

The research reviewed above reinforces the promising opportunity to enhance Atlas Corps' training modules by integrating positive psychology concepts and potential interventions which address the concerns of stress and burnout risk in the Atlas Corps SCL and staff populations, in a way that effectively takes into account cultural diversity and the need for personally relevant interventions across a range of people. *Note, we initially considered additional topic areas including self-compassion, hope, and meditation, but did not pursue for various reasons. We have included this research in Appendix D.*

Application Plan

Atlas Corps has a robust training curriculum for its Scholar program, which includes positive psychology-related topics like self-compassion, resilience, and emotional intelligence. Nevertheless, in our work with Atlas Corps, we identified an opportunity to enhance their curriculum further to address chronic stress and provide participants with direct and indirect tools to reframe stress, improve resilience, and build high-quality connections (HQCs).

The VLI is a priority for Atlas Corps as they seek to increase total Scholar participants to 5,000 by 2026. To better align with the VLI, they are also reformatting the Global Leadership Lab (GLL), which serves their Fellow population (M. Bednarczyk, personal communication, February 15, 2023). Given these strategic priorities, Atlas Corps requested we focus on the more stable VLI curriculum. In the future, Atlas Corps wants to incorporate these VLI assignments into the GLL and other programs targeting alumni and staff (M. Bednarczyk, personal communication, March 6, 2023).

The VLI leverages Canvas as the virtual learning platform and consists of three core content *modules* – Developing Self, Developing Others, and Leading Movements (Atlas Corps, 2023d). Within these modules are numerous one- to two-hour *assignments*, each focusing on a specific topic. Atlas Corps typically divides assignments into the following parts:

1. Learning component (e.g., reading an article, watching a video)
2. Reflection activity
3. Experiential graded activity (e.g., reflection worksheet, discussion board post, voice thread)

Based on feedback from previous participants regarding time commitment, Atlas Corps provides flexibility for how many assignments Scholars are required to complete. In each module, they

must complete at least two assignments, although they are encouraged to complete more (M. Bednarczyk, personal communication, February 15, 2023). To earn a point and complete an assignment, Scholars submit a deliverable (e.g., worksheet, discussion post, video) on Canvas (M. Bednarczyk, personal communication, March 6, 2023).

To enhance the VLI curriculum without creating additional requirements for Scholars, we are proposing the creation of the following new assignments for the Developing Self module:

- Rethinking Stress: How to Make Stress Your Friend
- High Energy through High-Quality Connections (HQCs)
- Overcoming Thinking Traps that Can Get Us Stuck

VLI Assignment #1 – Rethinking Stress: How to Make Stress Your Friend

Due to the high level of stress social change leaders experience (Zimmer & Pearson, 2018), we propose developing an assignment as part of the VLI to build stress response skills. By developing healthy ways to think about and mitigate stress, Scholars can increase their psychological well-being, physiological well-being, and performance (Jamieson et al., 2018). The objectives of the *Rethinking Stress* assignment are 1) to increase awareness of how a stress mindset can affect a healthy or unhealthy stress response and 2) to teach individual stress management skills that will contribute to resilience. The instructional design will match the current style and format of the VLI. Different media types will be used to teach stress concepts and theory coupled with meaningful activities to maximize engagement and learning (Tsai et al., 2018). The total instructional time will be under 75 minutes. The *Rethinking Stress* assignment will include the following:

- An introduction to stress
- An exploration of the benefits and risks of stress

- Strategies to manage stress in a healthy way

Part 1 will begin by defining stressors and stress response and how stress response can impact individuals' well-being, health, and performance (Crum et al., 2017). The benefits and risks of stress will be presented, highlighting that not all stress is harmful (Cranwell-Ward & Abbey, 2016). After the foundation of stress theory is established, individual stress management interventions will be introduced (mindset and stress-reducing activities) in Part 2. The first skill taught and practiced will be changing one's mindset from "stress is the enemy" to "stress is my friend" (McGonigal, 2013). Stress is neither "good" or "bad", but rather the amount of stress and how it is perceived can have a "good" or "bad" impact on the individual. According to researchers Robert Yerkes and John Dillingham Dodson (1908), too little and too much stress has a negative impact on engagement and performance. The sweet spot is an optimal level of stress (moderate), which is correlated with learning, growth, and optimal performance. Changing one's cognitive appraisal of stress, can positively change their cognitive, emotional, and psychological responses to stressors (Crum et al., 2017). There will be a recognition that some sources of chronic stress are external, organizational, or potentially outside of one's control (e.g., health issues, economic instability, turbulent political situations, lack of resources in an organization). The focus will be on managing the individual stress response and will include a note encouraging people to get professional support if needed.

In addition to stress mindset, the assignment will review various stress-coping interventions (e.g., exercise, meditation, and prosocial behavior) (McGonigal, 2016). They can then select one or more that best fit their life. Scholars will end the *Rethinking Stress* assignment with Part 3, the submission activity that will earn them a point for completion. The submission will be completing a *Rethinking Stress* worksheet and journal where they will share what they

learned about stress and how it will be applied to leverage the upside stress (and mitigate the downside of stress). The worksheet and journal will include asking the Scholars to experiment with 1-2 stress management strategies in real life and submit a reflection on their experience. The *Rethinking Stress* assignment will conclude by highlighting key takeaways and how they relate to the other proposed assignments (e.g., resilience, HQCs) so that Scholars can take advantage of additional assignments that relate and deeper understanding.

VLI Assignment #2 – High Energy through High-Quality Connections (HQCs)

Through the literature review and discussions with our Atlas Corps partners, we determined that HQCs would be one of our focus areas. HQCs have a positive impact on resilience, as well as on other areas relevant to Scholars, including increased job satisfaction and adaptability (Dutton, 2003). These tools will be helpful for the Scholars themselves, and beneficial for them as leaders to foster greater community and psychological safety and protect against burnout within their teams (Dutton, 2003). Atlas Corps identified an additional goal of using HQCs as a tool for Scholars to build stronger connections and bonds across the VLI community, given they have fewer synchronous interactions with cohort members and Atlas Corps staff (M. Bednarczyk, personal communication, March 6, 2023).

To help Scholars utilize HQCs, we propose creating an assignment, *High Energy through High-Quality Connections*. The objectives of this assignment are 1) to build understanding of what high quality connections are and the benefits they bring and 2) to build skills through diverse activities that help the Scholars experience, practice, and reflect on building these high-powered positive interactions. The *High Energy through High-Quality Connections* assignment will be designed to take less than 75 minutes to complete and will include the following:

- An introduction to High Quality Connections

- An exploration of the four pathways to building HQCs
- The impact of HQCs
- A set of interventions (with options for person-activity fit) designed to further explore, highlight, and teach different elements of HQCs.

Part 1 will begin by introducing the concept of HQCs and the four pathways to creating HQCs (respectful engagement, trust, task enabling, and play), highlighting that HQCs can be created in even short interactions. Next, we will highlight the research that shows the impact of HQCs on individuals, teams, and organizations, as well as the risk of poor-quality connections. Mixed media including video, voice over PowerPoint, and a short reading selection (of less than ten pages) will teach the concepts in an engaging and concise way.

After the foundation of concepts and value have been established, Part 2 will introduce a set of additional activities and reflections. This is intended to deepen and personalize the experience and the learning.

Activity 1. Reading a short chapter by Jane Dutton on HQCs and recording key takeaways.

Activity 2. Watching a short three-minute video and completing a leadership self-assessment on utilizing pathways to develop HQCs.

Activity 3. Given the different cultural backgrounds of the Scholars as well as the need for person-activity fit (Schueller, 2014; Pedrotti & Edwards, 2017), we propose offering a few different activities in this part to give participants a choice of what feels most appropriate for them. The Scholar will have the choice of one of three intervention options (but of course can do more).

- Option A: This activity would involve having the Scholars put together an action plan to identify three people with whom they would like to connect in a high-quality way. The task would be to connect with all three using the HQC tools they learned.
- Option B: This activity would focus specifically on task enabling. The intervention will start with a video highlighting an example of task enabling, followed by some reflection questions about what they noticed in the example. Given the need for different approaches based on individual and the cultural context, we would ask participants to identify how they could best and most appropriately task enable for peers, direct reports, or others in their organization.
- Option C: Reading a short blog (Cessanese & Ryan, n.d.) on Jane Dutton's Workties site with suggested questions to spark HQCs. Scholars will then be asked to set up a session with 2 other Scholars to practice HQCs and reflect on the experience. In addition to giving the Scholars a chance to practice the skills, this structure would also offer them the opportunity to work together in a group, which is not a frequent opportunity through the VLI and one that the Atlas Corps is keen to encourage (M. Bednarczyk, personal communication, March 6, 2023).

Part 3 will include their recorded takeaways, plans and reflections on a worksheet.

VLI Assignment #3 – Overcoming Thinking Traps that Can Get Us Stuck

Our situational analysis and literature review indicate the value of creating an intervention to help Scholars build resilience skills via the VLI. Atlas Corps has an existing VLI assignment, '2-2 *Strategies for Personal Resilience (2-2SPR)*;' however, they indicated an additional need to expand on this content (M. Bednarczyk, personal communication, March 6, 2023). We propose doing this through an *Overcoming Thinking Traps that Can Get Us Stuck*

assignment. The lesson will teach individuals to understand and identify common thinking traps, mental cues, and critical questions (Reivich & Shatté, 2003).

The resilience intervention is a valuable element for Scholars, equipping them with skills critical to the here and now and the workplace of the future (Kellerman & Seligman, 2023). The intervention will support individuals in responding to events in real time, preparing for events they anticipate, and processing events after they happen (Kellerman & Seligman, 2023). In addition, research indicates that adult learners are autonomous, self-directed, and goal-oriented and value the immediate implementation of knowledge (Prakash et al., 2019). We designed *Overcoming Thinking Traps that Can Get Us Stuck* to help Scholars become aware of whether their thoughts are helping or harming them (Reivich & Shatté, 2003) and practice shifting their thoughts through practice and reflection.

The assignment is an engaging and educational exercise that participants should be able to complete within 75 minutes. *Overcoming Thinking Traps that Can Get Us Stuck* begins by reconnecting the participant with the learnings from 2-2SPR, including the definition of resilience (Reivich & Shatté, 2003). Part 1 of the assignment will introduce what thinking traps are and discuss common thinking traps. Part 2 will identify strategies to counteract thinking traps. Parts 1 and 2 will include written content and a video. The assignment will conclude with Part 3, the graded activity. The proposed prompt of the thinking traps activity will be:

“Put your knowledge into practice! Spend at least one full day noticing your thinking traps (e.g., can you identify when you are engaging in ‘mind reading,’ ‘catastrophizing,’ etc.?). Describe which thinking traps you observed. Identify mental cues and critical questions for each thinking trap you noticed. Share at least two ways you plan to apply this skill could be applied in your personal and or work life.”

Limitations

The assignments proposed for the VLI Developing Self module work together to help Scholars build skills to reduce stress and prevent burnout. We propose to address this in a few ways by reframing their thinking about stress, fostering HQCs, and developing direct skills to dispute thinking traps, which will indirectly address chronic stress and burnout. Although these assignments focus on Atlas Corps' Scholars program, they can leverage them for other groups.

Historically, most of the positive psychology research was based on Western culture and White populations (Pedrotti & Edwards, 2017). Additionally, limited empirical research explicitly reviews interventions within sub-Saharan African and South & Central Asia populations, which frequently make up VLI Scholar cohorts (M. Bednarczyk, personal communication, February 15, 2023). Given the geographic diversity of the Atlas Corps population, we have included suggested intervention options to allow for cultural adaptation and person-activity fit within each assignment (Schueller, 2014; Pedrotti & Edwards, 2017). The individual may further customize these to suit their specific situation and learning outcomes, although this may dilute the intervention impact.

Lastly, while the assignments and activities focus on the Scholars themselves, they do not operate in a vacuum. As surfaced during our literature review, teams also face similar challenges. Burnout reduction is most effective when individuals, and the organizations they work in, both take steps to address the causes of stress (Craiovan, 2015; Awa et al., 2010). While integrating skills to manage stress into each of the VLI modules is outside of the scope of this proposal, we plan to close the assignments with a framework to outline other areas of work and life to which Scholars could apply the stress management skills from the Developing Self module. Based on the participation in and feedback about the Developing Self module assignments, additional

content could be developed to build out and carry these critical topics into the Developing Others and Leading Movements modules.

Measurement Strategy

Atlas Corps includes Scholar assessments at the beginning, during, and end of each cohort to measure growth throughout the program. To measure assignment effectiveness, we could include abbreviated, validated scales for the topics in the existing assessment. As the end goal of the additional created assignments is to provide multiple skills to support SCLs in managing stress and preventing burnout, our suggested measurement scales focus on resilience. For example, we could use the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC) or a portion of the 56-question Resilience Quotient (Connor & Davidson, 2003; Reivich & Shatté, 2002) in the existing Atlas Corps evaluations. Abbreviated self-report questions could include:

- I am able to adapt when changes occur.
- Having to cope with stress can make me stronger.
- Under pressure, I stay focused and think clearly.
- I think of myself as a strong person when dealing with life's challenges and difficulties.
- I have close relationships that I can rely on for support when needed.

However, we do note that limited evidence could be found specifically confirming the validity of these resilience scales across cultures, particularly those represented within Atlas Corps demographics.

This approach is optimal, as it includes integrating a validated scale into the existing Atlas Corps broader measurement strategy. Since individuals are completing the assessment throughout the program, we could evaluate pre- and post-program resilience scores on two

fronts. The assessment could include 1) whether increased resilience is observed for those completing the new Developing Self assignments, and 2) determining whether there were statistically significant improvements in resilience between those who completed all of the new assignments and those who opted to complete other Developing Self assignments available.

In addition, at the end of each VLI assignment, Scholars can provide feedback which includes a rating, the amount of time it took them to complete the assignment, and any additional comments. This qualitative information, along with the number of Scholars that completed the assignment, can be used to further evaluate, and subsequently refine, the effectiveness of the proposed content.

Application Materials

The full copies of the application materials are included in the Appendices. Appendix A is an introduction and an overview of the three assignments created in partnership between the University of Pennsylvania MAPP Student Team and Atlas Corps. Appendix B contains the *Rethinking Stress: How to Make Stress Your Friend* assignment and student worksheet. Appendix C includes the *High Energy through High-Quality Connections* assignment and the student worksheet. The final assignment, *Overcoming Thinking Traps that Can Get Us Stuck*, is not included in this document and will be developed and delivered to Atlas Corps by October 2023.

The application materials were created and formatted with a similar look and feel to the existing curriculum with an aim to seamlessly integrate the new materials into the existing VLI curriculum on Canvas. In addition, they were designed to highlight the partnership with the University of Pennsylvania MAPP Student Team and include references to demonstrate the scientific evidence behind all content being presented. Each topic (with application materials

containing content to teach and exercises to practice) is referred to as an *assignment* in the VLI. Each assignment starts with an overview of positive psychology and how the topics relate to SCLs. The learning objectives are highlighted, followed by the learning material which is a combination of text, reading, and high-quality videos, to provide multiple learning modalities. Each assignment concludes with practical tips for SCLs and an experiential reflection and exercise to complete, which will be submitted for assignment credit in the VLI. Additional resources are provided for those that want to learn more about the topic.

Per the request of Atlas Corps, we provided all application materials in a format that could be easily integrated into Canvas for immediate use with Scholars. In addition, all materials created proudly highlight the partnership between Atlas Corps and the University of Pennsylvania MAPP Student Team at the request of Atlas Corps. This co-branding will allow Atlas Corps to promote these assignments while enhancing the credibility of the VLI.

Conclusion

Atlas Corps is committed to building a global community of diverse SCLs dedicated to driving social and cultural change. By supporting the development of SCLs across the globe, Atlas Corps strives to make an impact on solving the world's biggest social challenges. While SCLs face a myriad of challenges, we hope these positive psychology lessons will act as an engine for connection, resilience, and well-being in their lives and work. We are excited and energized that through positive psychology, we can support Atlas Corps in their mission to train a community of social change professionals dedicated and committed to creating ripples of impact across the world.

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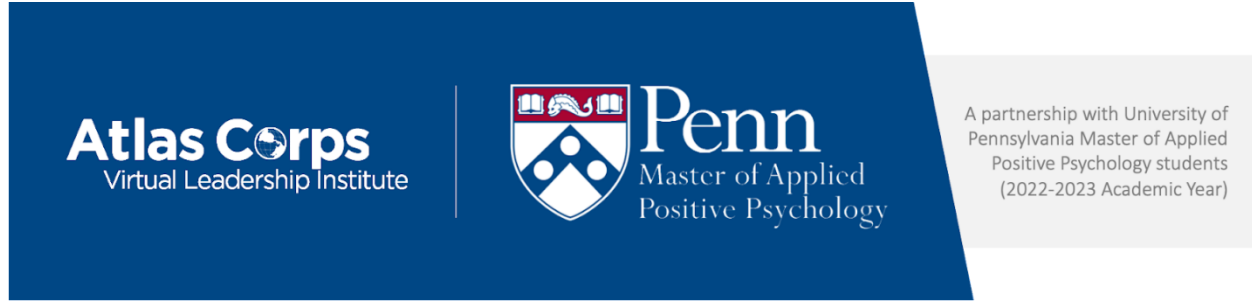
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Appendix A – Introduction and Assignment Overview



Atlas Corps partnered with a team of students from the University of Pennsylvania Master of Applied Positive Psychology program in the 2022-2023 Academic Year to bring additional training and education around the topic of **Positive Psychology** to the Scholars of the Virtual Leadership Institute (VLI).

For more information on the University of Pennsylvania Master of Applied Positive Psychology program, [click here](#). Specifically, this partnership was part of the [Service Learning Project](#) MAPP curriculum.

The student team (see below) created a three-part positive psychology series specifically designed for Atlas Corps global social change leaders to bolster well-being through development of stress management, high-quality connection, and resilience strategies. The titles of the virtual learning courses are:

- **Rethinking Stress: How to Make Stress Your Friend**
- **High Energy through High-Quality Connections (HQCs)**
- **Overcoming Thinking Traps that Can Get Us Stuck (*coming soon*)**

These assignments were developed in partnership with University of Pennsylvania Master of Applied Positive Psychology students (2022-2023 Academic Year). The student team consisted of [Amira Leifer](#), [Matthew Chee](#), [Noelle Ybarra](#) and [Jill Schulman](#).



Amira Leifer



Matthew Chee

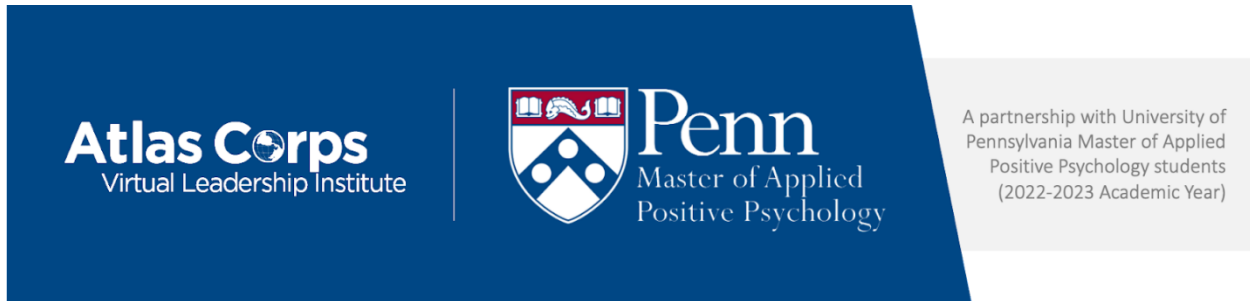


Noelle Ybarra



Jill Schulman

Appendix B – Rethinking Stress: How to Make Stress Your Friend



Rethinking Stress: How to Make Stress Your Friend

**This assignment was developed by University of Pennsylvania Master of Applied Positive Psychology students (2022-2023 Academic Year) for Atlas Corps.*

This assignment is one part of a three-part **positive psychology series** specifically designed for Atlas Corps global social change leaders to bolster well-being through the development of stress management, high-quality connection strategies, and resilience (*coming soon*).

What is Positive Psychology?

Positive psychology is the scientific study of well-being and what makes life worth living. Beyond simple observations, positive psychology suggests evidence-based strategies for enhancing well-being, building resilience, and thriving, while also recognizing cultural and geographic differences. The application of positive psychology supports individuals in cultivating a more fulfilling and meaningful life, all while contributing to a more thriving and compassionate world.

To thrive and live our best life, we need to be able to handle the inevitable stress that we encounter in a healthy and productive way. This assignment will teach positive psychology strategies to turn stress from your enemy to your friend. Stress is a constant in the world; how we perceive it and respond to it is within our control.

Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this assignment, you should be able to:

- Define stress and the stress response (Why do I feel stressed?)
- Identify the difference between bad stress and good stress (Yes, there is such a thing!)
- Identify evidence-based strategies to manage stress in a healthy way (How to turn bad stress into good stress)
- Develop and execute a plan to mitigate stress in your life

Part 1: Learning about Stress

What do you think about stress? Is it bad, good, or maybe both? Should we strive to eliminate all stress from our lives to live our most successful and fulfilled life? Or could the lack of any stress make our lives less exciting or fulfilling? Could there be a positive side of stress that helps us learn, grow, and fulfill our potential?

Introduction to stress:

As a social change leader, you are likely working long hours and dealing with multiple challenges in your role. Sound familiar? It is no wonder that up to 50% of social change leaders can experience a high level of stress that can lead to burnout (Zimmer & Pearson, 2018). To be a successful leader of your social change organization, it is critical to learn the skills to mitigate stress. It is not only good for you, but it is good for the cause that you lead.

This assignment is designed to help you develop a healthy way to think about and mitigate stress so that you can increase your well-being to successfully lead your social change organization. We will examine what the experts have discovered as the secrets to handling stress in healthy ways to support your psychological well-being, physiological well-being, and performance (Jamieson et al., 2018). Let's get started by defining stress.

What is stress?

Stress is *any stimulus that causes a biological response* (heart racing, sweating, etc.). If you were asked to get up in front of a group of 100 people to speak, how might you react? This reaction to the stimulus is called the stress response (Salleh, 2008). Both extrinsic (outside of oneself) and intrinsic (within oneself) stimuli can cause a stress response. An example of an extrinsic stressor might be turbulence on a flight (outside stimuli) that causes the stress response. An example of an intrinsic stressor is worrying that you may make a mistake (internal stimuli). Stress is a natural human response that prompts us to address a variety of challenges and threats in our lives, whether they are extrinsic or intrinsic.

Why do humans have a stress response?

If we look at our evolutionary roots, our stress response is what *helped our ancestors survive*. When early humans encountered a threat (e.g., a saber-toothed tiger), their minds would immediately perceive the stimulus as a threat, causing a release of chemicals and hormones to surge throughout their bodies that increased focus, enhanced cognitive function, and increased energy to increase our chances of survival. This stress response is what allowed our ancestors to survive, passing along the genes of stress response to us.

Our bodies react to psychological stressors in a complex and integrated manner to prepare us for the challenge or threat (Boyce & Ellis, 2005). Humans are no longer being chased by saber-toothed tigers, but instead, experience what feels threatening in different ways (e.g., being behind on an important project). “It is important to realize that our bodies do not distinguish between physical and psychological threats” (Carr et al., 2011, p. 34). Our bodies have the same response to stress whether we are facing a life-and-death situation, or we are feeling overwhelmed at work. Stress is inevitable, but different kinds of stress can have different effects.

Good stress and bad stress

Stress can both be *helpful* and *harmful* (Cranwell-Ward & Abbey, 2016). A common perception of stress today is that all stress is harmful and should be avoided. This is simply not accurate.

Good Stress. Our stress response is *helpful* when it enables us to avoid an accident or meet an important deadline. Our stress response helps us grow and develop as we learn how to tackle new and different challenges. Some stress (short-term stress) has been shown to be *healthy* for our bodies by boosting our immune systems (Yaribeygi et al., 2017).

Bad Stress. On the other end of the spectrum, chronic stress can be harmful to performance, health, and well-being. Too much stress at work decreases performance (Carr et al., 2011). Chronic stress can compromise the immune system, leading to a host of diseases (Yaribeygi et al., 2017). Stress can lead to trouble sleeping, contributing to more stress (Kalmbach et al., 2018).

Some sources of chronic stress are external or outside of one’s control (e.g., health issues, economic instability, turbulent political situations, lack of resources in an organization, etc.). Although it is natural to ruminate over fears or potential outcomes, it can be beneficial to reframe and focus on what can be controlled. To learn more about how to avoid ruminating and build resilience, please see **Overcoming Thinking Traps that Can Get Us Stuck** (coming soon).

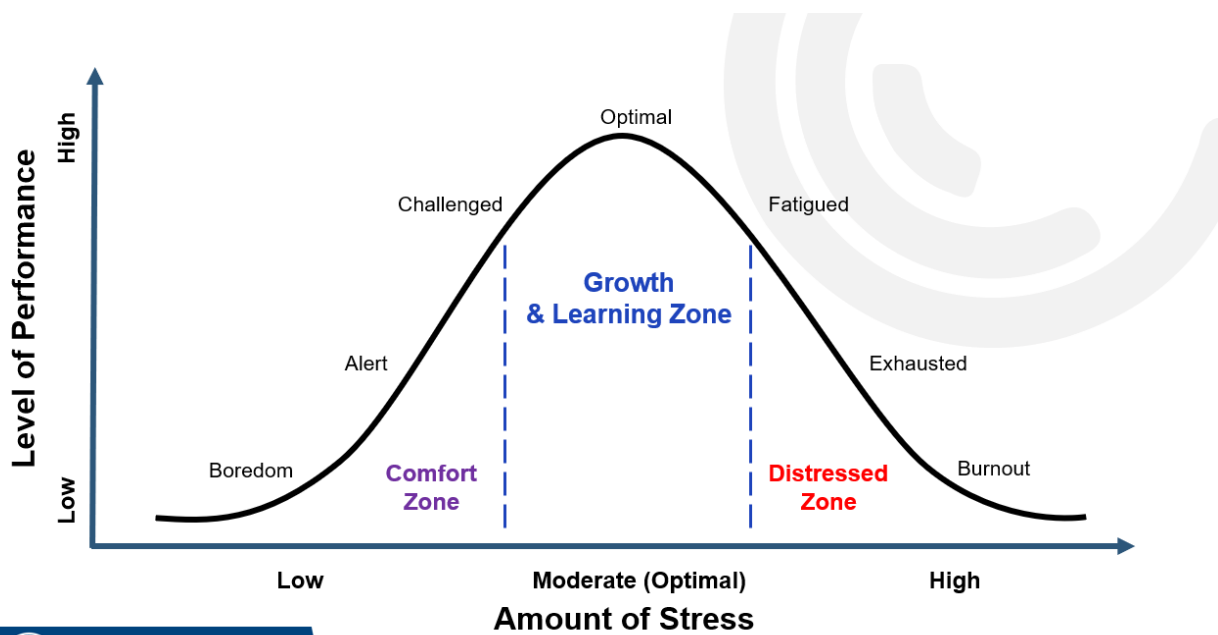
Important: The strategies you are learning in this assignment can teach you how to improve your relationship with stress and develop skills to mitigate the stress you encounter in your life. While we hope that these strategies benefit you, sometimes you may need additional support. Millions of people around the world seek support to improve their mental wellbeing. When stress becomes too much to handle on your own, consider seeking professional help.

No Stress. A lack of any stress or challenge can be harmful as it can decrease motivation and performance and can lead to boredom and complacency (Salleh, 2008). Eliminating stress does not improve well-being or performance.

Stress can be both helpful and harmful, so knowing how to extract the benefits of short-term stress and avoiding or managing the dangers of chronic stress is important for performance, health, and well-being.

The stress performance curve

Sometimes a picture is worth a thousand words, so please look at the image below of the *Stress Performance Curve*. This image examines the relationship between levels of stress and performance. According to researchers Robert Yerkes and John Dillingham Dodson (1908), too little and too much stress has a negative impact on performance. The sweet spot is an optimal level of stress (moderate), which leads to higher engagement and performance. This model suggests that stress can help us learn and grow, leading to optimal performance.



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(Yerkes & Dodson, 1908)

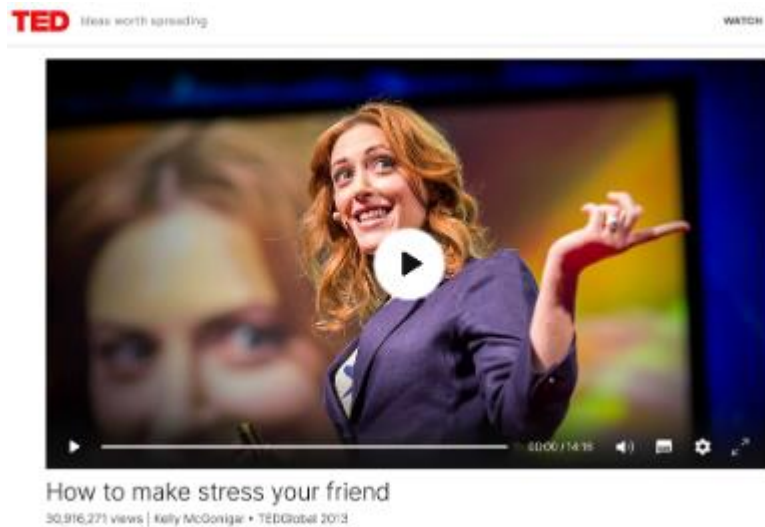
Strategies to turn bad stress into good stress (stress being helpful vs harmful)

The key to making stress helpful versus harmful is to focus on *improving your stress response*. When you focus on how to improve your stress response, you can impact your well-being, health, and performance (Crum et al., 2017). The three evidence-based strategies you will learn in this assignment are A) changing your mindset of stress, B) leveraging stress-coping interventions, and C) connecting with and helping others.

ACTIVITY A) Shift your mindset from “stress is bad” to “stress is good”

The first skill to improve your stress response is changing one’s mindset from “stress is the enemy” to “stress is my friend” (McGonigal, 2013). By changing your perception of stress, you can positively change your cognitive, emotional, and psychological responses to stressors (Crum et al., 2017). To learn how to shift your mindset, watch the video of the Ted Talk by Kelly McGonigal. *Please take notes on your key insights from the video; you will need these notes to complete your submission assignment.*

WATCH VIDEO (14 minutes) [How to Make Stress Your Friend TED Talk by Kelly McGonigal](#)



ACTIVITY B) Leverage stress-coping habits

To reduce the harmful effects of chronic stress, you can improve your stress response by choosing a stress-coping habit that works best in your life (e.g., meditation or exercise). To learn about various stress-coping habits that you can incorporate into your life, click on the link below to learn about different evidence-based interventions. Everyone’s life is different, so spend 10 minutes exploring the site and choose 1-2 habits that you can incorporate into your routine. *Please take notes on the stress-coping strategies from the link below; you will need these notes to complete your submission assignment.*

[EXPLORE STRESS-COPING STRATEGIES](#) (10 min)

ACTIVITY C) Connecting with and helping others

Relationships with others and helping others (which is called prosocial behavior) can help with your stress response. Let’s learn about both. *Your submission assignment will include reflection questions on how you can leverage relationships to mitigate your stress response.*

Relationships

The quality of relationships with others is a factor that helps your stress response (Salleh, 2008). Not only are relationships a protective factor that enables you to respond to stress in a healthy way, but relationships contribute to happiness and well-being because humans are inherently social creatures (Kellerman & Seligman, 2012). To learn more about how to create high-quality connections that can create and nurture relationships, please see **High Energy through High-Quality Connections (HQCs)**.

To create new relationships or nurture existing ones, consider:

- **Taking an interest:** Try to learn more about others in your life. Demonstrate an interest in others by spending time with them and getting to know them to build rapport and strengthen the relationship.
- **Making relationships a priority:** If you're stressed, you may not feel like you have time for friends or family, but this is the time when you need to prioritize relationships. Set aside time to maintain connections with existing friends and family that bring you joy and that you can lean on when needed.
- **Committing to meeting new people:** Find events or join groups that share a common interest and meet regularly so you can develop new friendships. What is a hobby or a sport that you enjoy? Find local community groups to enjoy your hobby and make new connections.

Prosocial behavior

Helping others (prosocial behavior) can also help to mitigate the adverse effects of stress. Prosocial behaviors are actions you can take that are intended to help other people, such as offering assistance, sharing, or comforting others (Raposa et al., 2016). When you help someone else out in need, not only do they benefit, but you will, as well.

The impact of stress on your organization

The ability to cope with stress is not just an individual concern, it is an organizational one as well (Carr et al., 2011). In organizations, high levels of stress at work negatively impact job satisfaction (Abouserie, 1996). When employees are not happy, their performance declines, and turnover increases (Achor, 2010). Organizations that provide individual and organizational-wide resources and interventions to decrease the harmful effects of chronic stress can increase organizational and employee performance and well-being (Carr et al., 2011).

Part 2: Reflection & Action Plan

Throughout this assignment, you have learned a lot about stress and how to mitigate it so that you can live your best life and thrive. Learning about concepts is great, but

applying what you have learned to be happier and more successful is our aim. It is now time to summarize your key takeaways and develop a stress mitigation action plan. This can help you turn your stress from your enemy to your friend.

Please complete the ***Rethinking Stress Reflection Worksheet and Action Plan*** and submit it on Canvas for credit for this assignment.

Directions: As you are learning about stress and stress management strategies, please capture your answers to the reflection questions listed for each section.

Additional resources if you want to explore deeper (Optional):

- [Mindset Matters TedTalk by Alia Crum](#)
 - [10 Techniques to Manage Stress & 13 Quick Tips](#)
 - [Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction](#)
-

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Rethinking Stress Application & Reflection

Directions: Complete this worksheet and submit it on Canvas for completion credit.

As you are learning about stress and stress management strategies, please capture your answers to all reflection questions below. Learning about concepts is great, but *applying* what you have learned to be happier and more successful is our aim.

Name:

Date:

The Stress Performance Curve

Reflection questions:

- Have you ever been in a job with little or no stress? If so, what was your level of performance and job satisfaction at that time?

- Think of a time when you were performing at your best. Did you have enough stress to challenge your skill set to help you grow and learn? How did this affect your performance and well-being?

- Finally, have you ever felt exhausted due to too much stress? How did this impact your performance and well-being?



Make Stress Your Friend TED Talk Video by Kelly McGonigal

Reflection questions:

- What did you learn from the video?
- How can this help you with your stress response?
- What is a short message you can write to yourself to remind you that “stress is your friend”?

Leverage Stress-Coping Habits

Reflection questions:

- What did you learn?
- What is one stress-coping habit you will incorporate in your life?
- What steps will you take to ensure that you make this habit a priority?



Relationships

Reflection questions:

- Who is someone you know but would like to get to know better? How can you get to know them better to strengthen the relationship?
- Who are the people who are important in your life? Are you spending time with them regularly? If not, how can you schedule time at regular intervals to maintain or deepen your relationships with them?
- What is a group that meets regularly that shares a similar interest that you could join?
- How can you form connections with your Atlas Corps VLI Cohort?

Prosocial Behavior

Reflection questions:

- Who is someone in your life that could use your help? Make it a priority to give them the help or support they need.



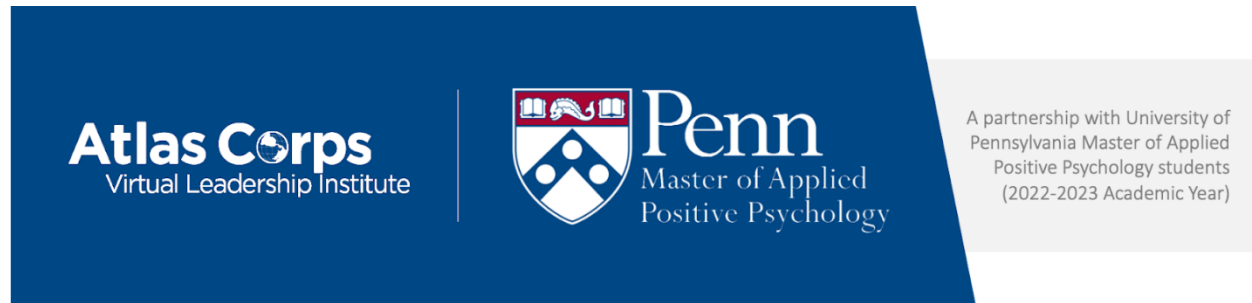
- Who is someone in your life that may be stressed out? What strategies have you learned that you can share with them?
- How might you help others within your Atlas Corps VLI Cohort?
- Is there a place you could volunteer in your community to offer assistance or comfort others? Consider volunteering there to benefit them and you.

The Impact of Stress on Your Organization

Reflection question:

- This assignment was intended to help you manage your stress response in a healthy way. How could you bring these learnings to your organization to help others do the same?

Appendix C – High Energy through High-Quality Connections (HQC)



High Energy through High-Quality Connections (HQC)

**This assignment was developed by University of Pennsylvania Master of Applied Positive Psychology students (2022-2023 Academic Year) for Atlas Corps.*

This assignment is one part of a three-part **positive psychology series** specifically designed for Atlas Corps global social change leaders to bolster well-being through the development of stress management, high-quality connection strategies, and resilience (*coming soon*).

What is Positive Psychology?

Positive psychology is the scientific study of well-being and what makes life worth living. Beyond simple observations, positive psychology suggests evidence-based strategies for enhancing well-being, building resilience, and thriving, while also recognizing cultural and geographic differences. The application of positive psychology supports individuals in cultivating a more fulfilling and meaningful life, all while contributing to a more thriving and compassionate world.

One of the most potent factors that contribute to well-being is the quality of our relationships. Creating high-quality connections contributes to positive relationships and can contribute to individual and organizational thriving. You will learn how to make high-quality connections to benefit you and your social change organization.

Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this assignment, you should be able to:

- Explain the definition of HQCs
 - Describe the four pathways to create HQCs
 - Describe the multi-level benefits of HQCs
 - Identify your HQC strengths and areas of opportunity
 - Demonstrate HQCs in application activities
-

Part 1: Learning How to Create High-Quality Connections

Can you think about a time when you have walked away from an interaction with a colleague feeling more energy as a result of the exchange? What did that experience feel like in your body? Did it contribute to any other positive impacts? Can you contrast this with an example of a negative (or even “toxic” interaction) with a colleague and what the impact was on your energy?

Introduction to High-Quality Connections:

As a social change leader, you likely work with many stakeholders - executives, team members, external partners, and volunteers just to name a few. When the many demands of your role pull you in different directions or require multitasking to keep up, it can be a good reminder to stop and think about the dedicated people working toward the same cause. To be a successful leader of your social change organization and to keep you and your team members strong, it is important to be deliberate about fostering strong relationships in the workplace.

This assignment is designed to help you think about the relationships you have and provide tools to intentionally build relationships to boost the individual, team, and organizational well-being and performance. Let's get started by defining high-quality connections.

What is a High-Quality Connection?

High-Quality Connections (HQCs) are positive, energy-creating interactions between people. These connections can happen at work or in one's personal life and are felt through increased energy, trust, positive feelings for, and active engagement with the other person (Dutton, 2003). They are also mutual, meaning they are felt as energy-giving and positive by both people (Stephens et al., 2011).

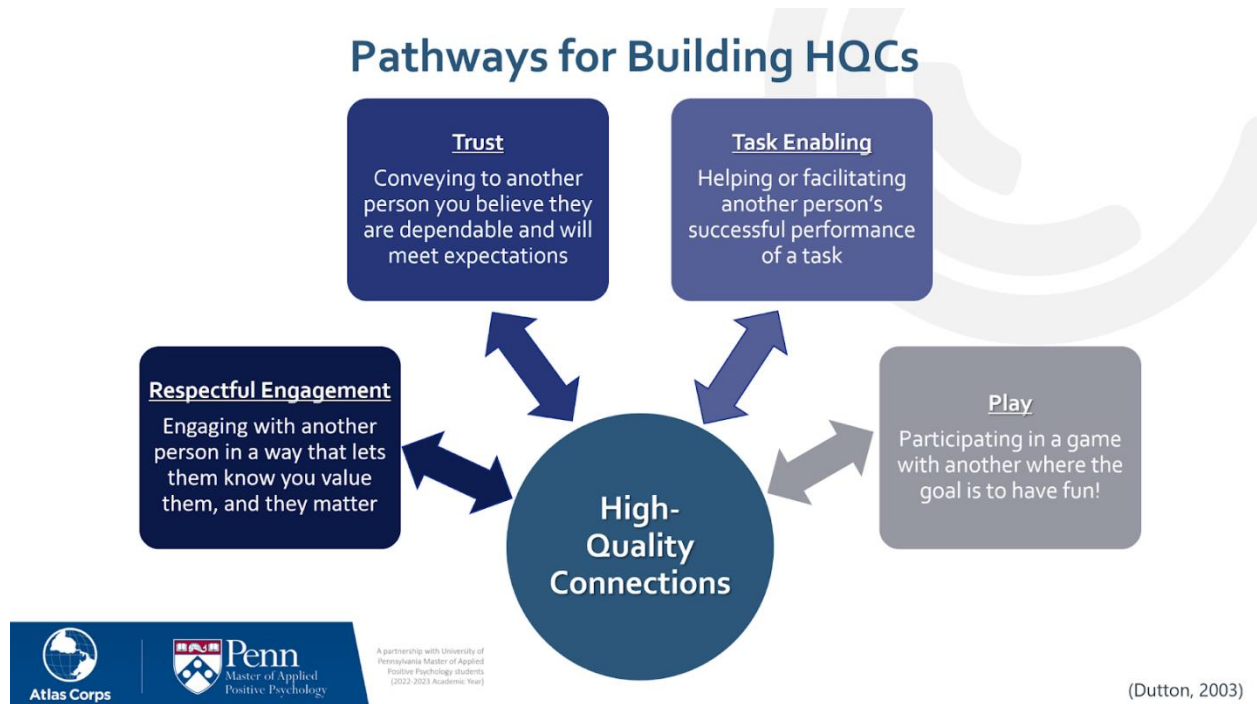
How much time is needed to create a High-Quality Connection?

You may be thinking that HQCs must take time and effort to create, right? Both short *and* longer interactions have the potential to create sparks of positivity that create energy that spreads.

Based on Dutton's (2003) research, in a very short timeframe, you can create a positive, energy-creating interaction. Has this ever happened to you when someone made you smile and increased your energy after only a minute? It could be a warm smile and a genuine 'hello' and 'have a wonderful day' as someone opens the door for you. It could be a local shopkeeper with whom you exchange questions about each other's families. It could be engaging in small talk with a colleague during the few minutes while you are waiting for a meeting to start. HQCs don't require a long time to generate energy and positivity that has the potential to spread.

Pathways to build High-Quality Connections

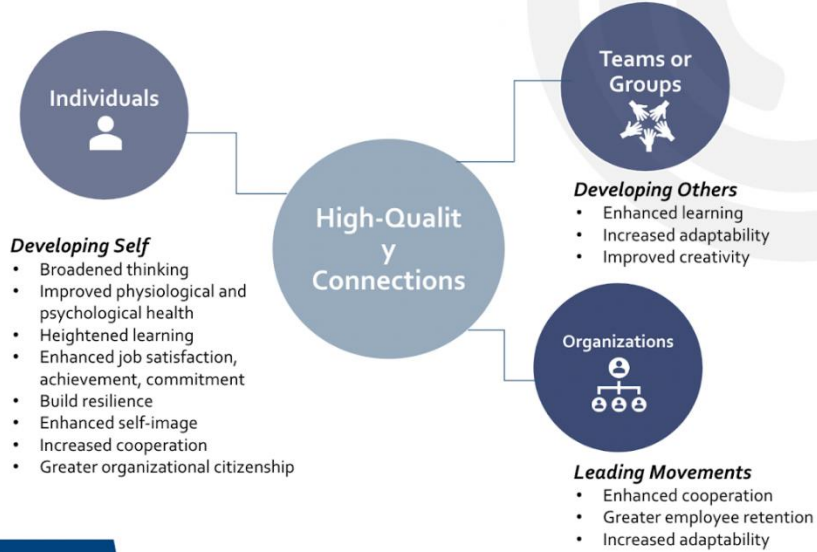
There are four pathways for building HQCs. They are respectful engagement, building trust, task enabling, and play. *Please watch this 4-minute video to learn more about each of these pathways. The transcript of the video audio can be accessed here.*



The multiple impact levels of High-Quality Connections

Research shows that HQCs are very powerful and can contribute to several positive outcomes for individuals, teams, and organizations. *Please watch this 3-minute video to learn more about the positive benefits of HQCs. The transcript of the video audio can be accessed here.*

The Multi-Level Impacts of HQCs



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(Ryff & Singer, 2003; Reis et al., 2000; Kahn, 1998; Baker, 2000; Fredrickson, 1998; Orr, 1996; Gittel, 2003; Labianca et al., 2000; Lave & Wenger, 1991)

For individuals, HQCs can contribute to higher resilience, job satisfaction, and better physical health (Dutton, 2003). HQCs can even help protect against the negative effects of stress and reduce burnout. For more information on evidence-based stress reduction strategies, see **Rethinking Stress: How to Make Stress Your Friend**.

The risk of Poor-Quality Connections

Can you recall an interaction that had an energy-depleting effect on you? How did it impact your mood, focus, and performance?

Poor-quality connections are the *opposite* of high-quality connections. These interactions are the ones that drain energy and make one feel unappreciated, undervalued, and sometimes anxious. Not only do poor-quality connections make people less happy at work, but that negativity can spill over to one's personal life. Poor-quality connections can be toxic to the person and the organization. The antidote? Replace poor-quality connections with high-quality connections.

ACTIVITY A) Learn from the Master, Professor Jane Dutton

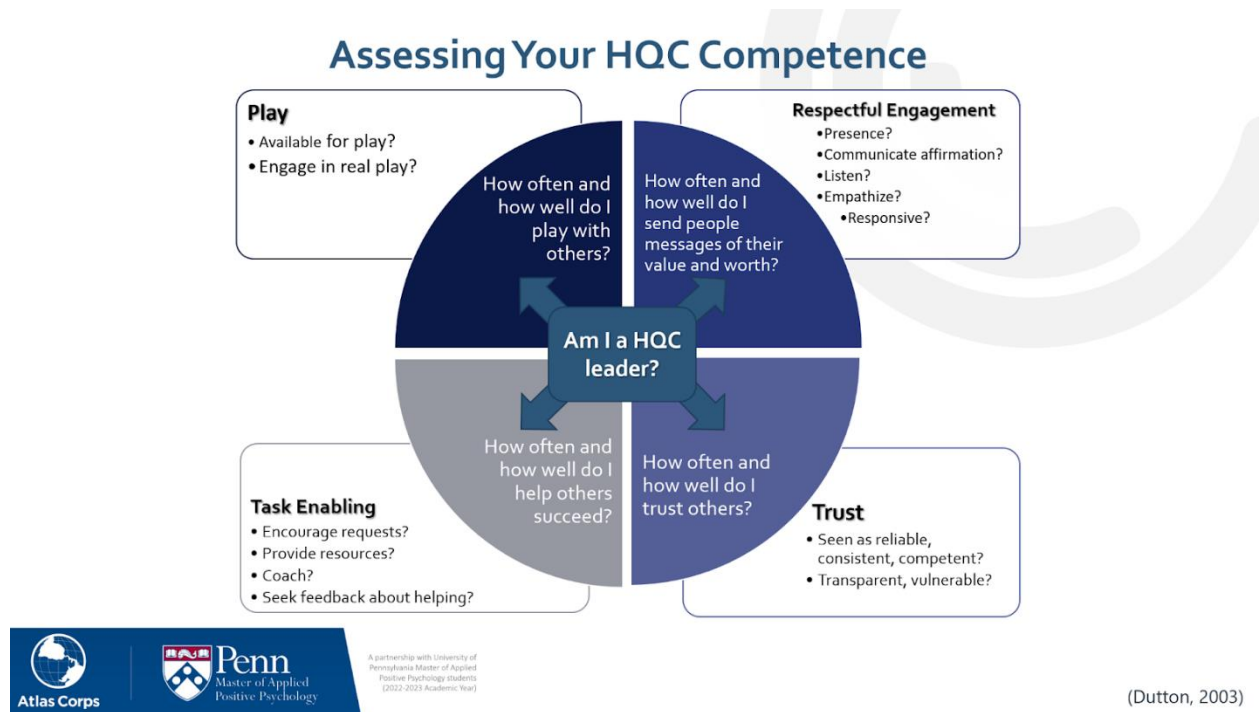
Read this Chapter on High-Quality Connections (12 minutes) to deepen your understanding of what they are and how to create more of them. The author of this chapter is [Jane Dutton](#), a leading researcher in HQCs and Professor Emerita at the Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan. *Express written Permission has been*

granted from Author Jane Dutton and Publisher Berrett-Koehler to use High-Quality Connections chapter for Atlas Corps VLI.

Please take notes on your key insights from the chapter; you will need this to complete your submission assignment.

ACTIVITY B) Assess your High-Quality Connection competence

What is your level of competence in each of the four pathways that create HQCs? Please watch this 3-minute video to reflect upon your own HQC competence and answer the submission assignment questions to evaluate what you are doing to support HQCs today, and the opportunities you have to improve. *Transcript of the video audio can be accessed here.*



ACTIVITY C) Learn more about connection-building questions and task-enabling

To deepen your understanding and to give you practice with these tools, we have provided further learning resources and a set of activities that follow. *As you learn, take notes to apply this knowledge when practicing the skill of HQCs in Part 2 (below).*

- **Read Jane Dutton's [blog post \(3 minutes\)](#)** to explore suggested questions that are effective in sparking HQCs.
- **Watch this [short video \(4 minutes\)](#)** to better understand Task Enabling (one of the four strategies to enable HQCs).

Part 2: High-Quality Connection Application and Reflection

Throughout this assignment, you have learned a lot about strategies to build HQCs and their many benefits to individual, team, and organizational thriving. Learning about concepts is great, but *applying* what you have learned to be happier and more successful is our aim. It is now time to summarize your key takeaways and practice building HQCs to start fostering energizing connections in your organization.

Please complete the ***HQC Application and Reflection Worksheet*** and submit it on Canvas for credit for this assignment.

Directions: Complete the three activities and update the document before submitting.

1. Take notes on the Chapter you read (min of 3 key learnings)
2. Complete the HQC Competence Self-Assessment
3. Choose one application exercise to complete out of the three provided. *You are only required to complete ONE of the three activity options (A, B, or C) but are free to do more if you want.*

Additional resources if you want to explore deeper (optional):

- [High-Quality Connections and Relationships at Work](#)
- [Professors Jane Dutton and Monica Worline leading a one-hour interactive workshop on building HQCs.](#)
- Jane Dutton's book on High Quality Connections: [Energize your workplace: How to create and sustain high-quality connections at work.](#)

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High-Quality Connection (HQC) Application and Reflection

Directions: Complete this worksheet and submit it on Canvas for completion credit.

1. Complete Page 1 (required) - Reading notes
2. Complete Page 2 (required) - HQC Self Assessment
3. Complete **one** application exercise on Pages 3-5 (you are only required to complete **one of the three options**)

Name:

Date:

1. Reading Notes: Capture your notes on key takeaways from reading the [Chapter on High-Quality Connections](#). Please write a minimum of 3 takeaways below (feel free to do more):



2. HQC Self-Assessment: Assess your HQC Competence by giving yourself an honest rating of an overall score for each pathway.

Pathway Skill	Questions to assess skill level. <i>Use these questions to do an honest assessment of where you are strong, and where you have an opportunity to improve.</i>	Overall Self-Score (1-5)	Development Opportunity? Yes or No
Play	How often and how well do I play with others? Am I available for play? Do I engage in real play? Would others say that I am playful & fun?		
Respectful Engagement	How often and how well do I send people messages of their value and worth? How present am I when engaging with others? How well do I listen with empathy?		
Trust	How often and how well do I trust others? How reliable, consistent and competent am I perceived to be by others? How vulnerable am I with others (share mistakes, open up)?		
Task Enabling	How often and how well do I help others succeed? How often do I ask how I can help? Do I encourage others to ask for help? Do I provide resources to help others?		

Reflection:

What things am I currently doing well that contribute to HQCs?

What is an opportunity to improve? What specific skill do I want to work on to create more HQCs in my work and life?



3. Choose ONE application assignment (A, B or C): Everyone has different areas of opportunity or skills they want to work on so we are offering three different activities for you to choose from. *In Positive Psychology, this is called “person-activity fit.”* Please choose and complete ONE of the three practice activities below for completion credit. *Feel free to do more, if you wish (but this is not required).*

Option A: Create an action plan to increase the quantity and quality of HQCs with three people in your life (work, family, friends, or community) over the next week. You will strive to initiate these HQCs (choose people you will interact with over the next week) and write about your experience after.

Name of Person <i>Think about people from work, home, or community.</i>	What will I do to create HQCs? <i>Identify the pathway and the specific action(s) you will take for each person. Identify how you will intentionally generate positivity and energy in the interaction.</i>	What was the impact? <i>Write very positive, positive, neutral, negative, or very negative</i>

Option A Reflection: Please describe the experience of trying to create HQCs. What worked well or didn't work? What did you learn?



Option B: Task enabling exercise. Please read this [short article](#) and watch the embedded video example of task-enabling.

1. Reflect on what you observed in the video.

- What did the man do to help the girl sing?
- What was the impact of his actions (task-enabling)?

2. Reflect on how you can use task-enabling in your organization.

- What would appropriate and effective task-enabling look like in your organization?
- What would be helpful to you as an individual? What are the specific steps you could take to build that support around you?
- What specific steps could you take within the next week to support others through task-enabling?
- How could you create awareness of task-enabling and build habits of providing support within your organization and/or team?



Option C: Create HQCs with other Scholars in your cohort. This is an opportunity to practice your HQC skills and get to know others in your cohort better.

1. Set up a 30-minute meeting with two other Scholars (for a total of three people).
 - Scholar 1:
 - Scholar 2:
2. Practice short conversations that spark positivity and create energy (high-quality connections).
 - For each round, there will be:
 - One person initiating the conversation to create a HQC
 - One person to be on the receiving end of the conversation
 - One person as an observer
 - Switch roles so that each person has a chance to practice (for a total of 3 rounds)
 - Spend about 5-7 minutes in each of the three interactions for a total of 15-20 minutes.
3. Debrief about the experience for about 10 minutes. Capture your notes from the debrief session below.
 - *How did the exercise make each of you feel?*
 - *What were the more effective strategies?*
 - *What are your takeaways in terms of how to build these HQCs within your organization?*

Appendix D – Additional Positive Psychology Research

Self-Compassion

As the Dalai Lama said, “caring for others requires caring for oneself.” Self-compassion (SC), a psychological concept based on Eastern Philosophy, is the approach of turning compassion inward to help to deal with difficult emotions and situations (Neff, 2003).

Compassion is defined as being touched by the suffering of others and wanting to be kind and ease their pain (Neff, 2003). Similarly, SC is made up of three parts: self-kindness (extending the same kind approach to yourself as you would to someone else); recognition of common humanity (all people suffer); and balanced awareness (being able to recognize emotions and look at a situation objectively to make good decisions) (Neff, 2003). Extensive research since the introduction of the concept has supported SC’s efficacy on multiple dimensions, including greater happiness, and lower levels of stress, anxiety, rumination, and fatigue (Neff & Germer, 2017). SC can be looked at as a way to manage one’s internal stress system (Iacono, 2017) and provides a protective factor to aid resilience to stress and burnout (Neff & Germer, 2017). Although some may worry SC can lead to selfishness or self-indulgence, the data suggests that by connecting to compassion for oneself, one can better connect to others (Neff, 2003) and experience higher motivation (Toth-Kiraly, 2021).

SC is measured by the Self Compassion Scale (SCS), a validated tool (Neff et al., 2021). Studies have provided evidence that structured programs to teach SC can increase SCS scores with accompanying benefits of heightened physical and mental well-being (Iacono, 2017). Research has been done focusing on the “helping professions” such as health care and social work, showing increases in “compassion satisfaction” (finding caring for others rewarding), decreases in stress, and increases in feelings of personal accomplishment, with an accompanying

decrease in burnout (Neff et al., 2020; Iacono, 2017), findings which could be extrapolated to Atlas Corps' SCLs. Furthermore, there is evidence that emotional intelligence, a growth mindset, and goal setting may also be enhanced by SC training, with clear implications for SCL leadership skills (Neff, 2003).

An important note given the global and cross-cultural representation of Atlas Corps participants is that there are cultural differences in the SCS measure and in attitudes about SC based on cultural norms (Toth-Kiraly & Neff, 2021). However, data shows that SCS measures can be raised across cultures and there is a correlation between SC and well-being across different cultures (Toth-Kiraly & Neff, 2021).

Hope

Hope and optimism are sometimes used interchangeably to describe a forward-looking mindset. A distinction is that hope is that a “desired” outcome will happen, and optimism is that a “positive” outcome will happen. This highlights a differentiator of hope – agency and action. It is not wishful thinking. According to Snyder et al. (1991), hope is a cognitive mindset consisting of successful agency (goal-direction action) and pathways (goal planning). Pathway thinking includes setting clearly defined goals and then the development of specific strategies to achieve them. Agency thinking is the leveraging of self-efficacy, the belief that one can achieve the goal, to act on those strategies toward goal attainment (Maddux & Kleiman, 2021; Magyar-Moe & Lopez, 2015) Together, hope theory is the combination of the will and the way to achieve goals (Snyder et al., 1991).

Hope matters because studies have linked higher levels of hope to greater job satisfaction, performance, commitment, and lower burnout (Youssef & Luthans, 2007; Pharris et al., 2022), all significant factors for SCLs. In both studies, perhaps most surprisingly, hope was found to be

a larger predictor of these positive outcomes than resilience. Individuals with higher levels of hope may be more committed to seeing goals through, in addition to creatively finding alternative pathways to success when faced with obstacles. Unlike self-efficacy and resilience, hope as a construct includes taking goal-oriented action when facing adversity (Pharris et al., 2022). Hope can also be empirically measured using a few methods, like the Adult Hope Scale or State Hope Scale (Snyder et al., 1991).

Hope therapy is a type of intervention focusing on increasing hope levels using current goals and exploration of possibilities and past successes, from a strengths-based framework, instead of focusing on problems and past failures (Magyar-Moe & Lopez, 2015). The purpose of these interventions is to develop the skills associated with hope – conceptualizing clear goals, identifying multiple ways to achieve those goals, and then motivating action to achieve those goals despite obstacles. Examples of these interventions include identifying personal or vicarious hopeful stories (finding), sharing them with others (bonding), applying hope thinking (enhancement) and reinforcement of past hopeful successes (reminding) (Magyar-Moe & Lopez, 2015).

Although hope is generally considered a universal positive trait, how it manifests, is cultivated, and is received can be different in each country. Findings from Chang and Banks (2007) suggest different types of interventions may be more suited for various ethnic groups. In addition, individuals who are part of a marginalized community, for example ethnic groups or immigrants, may be subject to more hope impediments such as prejudice, stereotyping, poverty and more (Lopez et al., 2000). As a result, research suggests that identifying hope and goals within the specific cultural context is critical. While the previous studies cited by Yousef and Luthans (2007) and Pharris et al. (2002) do not exactly match the profile of Atlas Corps

participants, the results still provide insight on hope within the workplace and among high stress and turnover populations.

Meditation

Mindfulness is typically defined as paying attention to experiences in the present moment in a non-judgmental way (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). The components are made up of attention regulation, body awareness, emotional regulation (which includes reappraisal), and broader change in perspective on the self (Hölzel et al., 2011). The practice of mindfulness meditation often includes focusing attention on the breath or body, and allowing emotions, thoughts and physical feelings come into awareness and then pass without engaging, judging, or analyzing. (Hyland et al., 2015).

Meditation training has been shown to facilitate a variety of psychological, physical, and cognitive well-being outcomes, with improvements in experience of stress, anxiety, and pain and an increase of positive emotions (Hölzel et al., 2011; Hyland et al., 2015; Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Sharpening of attentional focus with increased activity in the prefrontal cortex (executive function) and decreased activity in the amygdala (fear response) can be seen with as few as five days of meditation practice (Hölzel et al., 2011) and sessions as short as five minutes two times a week have been shown to have a statistically significant impact on reducing stress (Nicksic Sigmon et al., 2021). Workplace meditation programs have been shown to be effective at helping employees to decrease and manage stress more effectively (Hyland et al., 2015). Learning how to recognize the flow of thoughts and emotions leads to better emotion regulation (Good et al., 2015), which can provide a protective factor against stress and burnout (Hölzel et al., 2011) and bolstered self-efficacy (Garland et al., 2015) through the reappraisal process (the process through which stressful events can get re-interpreted as neutral, meaningful, or even beneficial with

emotional distance) (Garland et al., 2011). Studies have shown that people with high stress jobs can benefit from meditation showing lower stress levels, lower blood pressure, lower inflammation, higher energy levels, increased happiness, and better cognitive functioning. The emotional exhaustion and accompanying burnout of jobs in high stress fields (such as SCLs, for example) is reduced, job satisfaction is higher, and attrition is lowered (Hyland et al., 2015). Studies indicate that meditation practice is also linked to higher levels of self-compassion, optimism, and resilience (Good et al., 2015; Hülshager et al., 2013).

Cultural sensitivity in implementing meditation programs is important in global settings like Atlas Corps, as religious and cultural factors may affect overall openness to meditation (Neff et al., 2020), as well as openness to a more Western approach taken out of its original religious context within Buddhism (Kirmayer, 2015). Achieving positive effects from meditation may depend on the individual's own culture, values, and social context (Kirmayer, 2015).