

*'Rens has systematically and effectively implemented the best of positive psychology in a number of settings, from elite sports to corporate teams. My hope is that many more individuals, teams and organisations will benefit from his important work in the near future.'*

Tal Ben-Shahar, lecturer and author on the topic of happiness, former teacher of the happiness course at Harvard University

*'A workshop like this should be in any university curriculum, especially in a demanding environment like Oxford.'*

Matthijs Vakar, president of the Clarendon Scholars' Council, University of Oxford

*'Rens's reputation preceded him. Before our first encounter I'd heard positive things about him, his work and his company. At our first meeting, I was a little surprised to be greeted by a smiling, fresh faced, athletic man bubbling with enthusiasm at the prospect of working with my team. From the first moment, Rens hit the right chord with me. The mixture of science-based knowledge and "feeling the moment" fitted my vision perfectly. Rens joined the team at the start of a recycle phase. As expected, the first half of the season was a tough period. Results were not what we wanted. With pressure high and confidence low, the team played amazingly in the second half of the season. Finally, we finished second overall. A great achievement for a new team coming from such a low league position. Rens played a key role in the success and growth of the team in the 2013–2014 season. For his effort and work I have the greatest respect and feel honoured to have worked with him.'*

Russell Garcia, head coach of HC Bloemendaal field hockey club

*'Rens is the most sought-after expert in his field among my clients. His innovative methods are grounded in the latest scientific research and are consequently tailored to the specific needs of individuals in order to help them achieve their aspirations. This, combined with his relentless energy, genuine empathy and engaging positivity, helps bring people into continuous action unlike any other coach I have seen.'*

Kayvan Kian, McKinsey & Company

*'Rens has made the team more conscious of their strengths and the power of their (sometimes unconscious) beliefs. He has introduced practical ways to change our performance in a positive way.'*

Alex Pastoor, former coach of SBV Excelsior football club

*'In 2013, I led a team of six to cross the Atlantic Ocean by kiteboard. When facing one of the heaviest setbacks in our preparations, Rens came to support us. Just like a compass can help a sailor maintain his course through a storm, teambuilding exercises can help a team maintain its course during setbacks. Within two days Rens had set the stage for our team spirit to sort itself out — and regain the confidence needed to cross the ocean.'*

Filippo van Hellenberg Hubar, founder of Enable Passion and the HTC Kite Challenge

*'We had the pleasure of having Rens as one of our keynote speakers at our PwC leadership masterclass. During his speech he let the audience work on themselves with some very tough personal questions, something that is not easy to do, especially in the big groups we had for our masterclass. Yet, with a pragmatic approach, he succeeded in planting some seeds within the participants for them to continue to work on their journey to happiness. Rens proved to be a very suitable speaker for our leadership masterclass and was right at home on our "one happy island" of Aruba.'*

Ruben Goedhoop, director of PwC Aruba

*'Rens helps you see what is important to see, but what you might not want to see. He's fairly straightforward about what he thinks and sees, and he truly enjoys helping in that way. He has a unique view of the world and what can be done to make it a better place, which is very inspiring.'*

Annelie Pompe, professional freediver and world record holder in variable weight freediving

*'Every session with Rens provides me with new insights. There is a great dynamic between Rens and the team, which makes the players open and ready to discuss important matters freely. Especially the awareness of specific mental aspects is relevant for the team, and for me as their coach.'*

Marinus Dijkhuizen, head coach of SBV Excelsior, football team

The background of the page is decorated with a pattern of isometric cubes. These cubes are arranged in various clusters and lines, primarily along the top and right edges, with some smaller groups scattered in the upper left and center. The cubes are rendered in a light gray color with thin black outlines, creating a three-dimensional effect.

## **BUILDING POSITIVE ORGANISATIONS**

*‘Treat people as if they were what they ought to be, and you help them to become what they are capable of being.’*

JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE



**RENS TER WEIJDE**

# **Building Positive Organisations**

**A PRAGMATIC GUIDE TO HELP PEOPLE  
AND ORGANISATIONS FLOURISH**

**Warden Press**

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- + Martine Kveim, for providing unlimited kindness to all the people around her and supporting me in my work

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



As a psychologist, Rens specialises in the application of good-to-great psychological techniques to build the performance and well-being of his clients. His clients include many renowned companies, as well as some of the world's best athletes. Rens recently founded Purpose+, a company that aims to create a more meaningful business paradigm.

As well as being a psychologist, Rens is also a part-time athlete. He trains daily to realise his personal goals in life, which include climbing the famous seven summits and surfing the best surf spots on the planet. In his free time, he loves to meditate, surf, scuba dive, hang out with friends and study physics. He currently lives in Amsterdam, the Netherlands.



# FOREWORD

As a licensed clinical psychologist and researcher at the University of Toronto Scarborough, my expertise includes positive clinical psychology, strength-based resilience, post-traumatic growth and positive education. Although I am a clinical psychologist, I try to push the envelope of clinical psychology — expanding it to explore traditionally non-clinical niches. I try hard to genuinely and deeply explore the best in people and then work with clients to creatively use their intact resources to change their less than desirable emotions and experiences. I do this within the framework of positive psychotherapy (PPT), an innovative positive psychology-based therapeutic approach that I devised with Dr Seligman during my post-doctoral training at the University of Pennsylvania. I am quite passionate about advancing the scientific practice of positive clinical psychology. My passion takes me to interesting places where I meet interesting people. One of the interesting people I have met is Rens ter Weijde, a sport and performance psychologist turned management consultant, who's now on his way to put into action the science of happiness in organisational milieu. Rens, in my view, truly brings high energy to the table, and I can see how he works with clients to realise the impact. In fact, I couldn't help but leave a present for him after we met in Amsterdam for a workshop (I gave him the book *Superbodies* by Greg Wells). I believe this energy is needed now, since we have seen quite some research on happiness, but still few practical applications. This is especially true for corporate organisations, where the economic crisis has made long hours and stress inevitable for many, but where few people have a clear sense of purpose, creatively integrated with pleasure and engagement in their working lives. The absence of these elements creates, at best, a lack of motivation

and, at worst, recurring stress. Positive psychology, with its empirical foundations, can offer a lot to make work-life pleasant, engaging and meaningful, and Rens's book is an admirable effort in this regard.

*Tayyab Rashid, licensed clinical psychologist, researcher at the University of Toronto Scarborough, and writer of the Positive Psychotherapy Manual*



## PROLOGUE

# THE BIRTH OF PURPOSE+

As a psychologist I've been lucky. Where many of my friends had a hard time finding a good job after their study of the human mind, I had the chance to work with some of the most inspiring people on the planet right from the start of my career. Where most psychologists around me chose to focus on the safety of a job in a larger company, I did the opposite: I started a company in a domain I cared a lot about: sport psychology. Sport psychology essentially deals with the possibilities of the human mind, and is focused on improving the health and performance of those using it, either for individuals, or for teams.

Looking back, my choice proved to be the right one. Although it was hard — sport psychologists do not make a lot of money, and there is little room to build a company in a market that only has a limited number of athletes to begin with — it has been worth the effort. Whether it's been the athletes I've met that aspire to do the impossible, or the radical company executives that want to change their organisations for the better, I've always had the opportunity to do great things with them and explore what's possible when people start seeing the world in a different light. Working with these people has been a thrill and an honour, and in the process, it has taught me a lot about myself. In this first part of the book, I'd like to tell you how I became the person I am today.

I grew up in a small town in the Netherlands, called Haarlem, just west of the famous Dutch capital, Amsterdam. Haarlem was a good place to grow up, and I spent most of my childhood outside. Our house was between the city centre and the beach, and I lived there with my mother (Marja), sister (Wieke) and father (Paul) until I was 16. My

time as a child was well spent, I remember taking long walks through the forest, spending time on the beach with friends and enjoying many games outside.

Although Haarlem proved to be a great place to live, I struggled to get through my teenage years. I had a hard time accepting who I was, and no longer connected well with friends on many of the things I had been interested in. Looking back, I feel this disconnect was due to me being very different than most other teenage boys: I mainly read Buddhist scriptures and meditated while my friends spent most of their time on social activities (usually combining soccer with beer).

I felt misunderstood and lonely at times, and I responded by studying martial arts intensely. I had done judo as a child for fun, but later I started training in multiple martial arts, including Ninjutsu, Aikido, Taekwondo, and visited every seminar I could find. I vividly remember training the same sword cut for hours in my mother's backyard, bare-foot and in the snow, believing it would 'strengthen' me mentally and physically and therefore make me a better person. I spent countless hours practising punches, kicks and other fighting moves on a punch bag in the small attic room of our house.

To show my commitment to the practice, I got into the habit of waking at 7 am every day and starting with a 'mental resilience' exercise (in a push-up position with my wrists on the floor for 7 minutes — I invite you to try it) followed by a 30 minute meditation and then a cold shower. I travelled to India to find and practise the origin of all martial arts, which can partly be found in the ancient art of Kalaripayattu. Luckily for me, they still practised this in the southern regions of India, and I was able to train there for a few weeks. All in all, it was a difficult period for me, and I was lucky to find strength in martial arts at the time. I believe it has made me a better person and taught me what you can achieve if you work really hard for it.

At 19, I decided to study psychology at university in Amsterdam. Like many of my friends, I moved to Amsterdam. Amsterdam turned out

to be a melting pot of different cultures, with a strong intellectual and 'free' vibe that I still appreciate to this day. I enrolled in a degree programme that was hugely popular at the time, with hundreds of people listening to lectures in large conference halls. However, I felt that my motivation was different from most people: I didn't really care about Western psychology and science, my prime focus was on becoming a better martial artist through insights into the human mind.

Not surprisingly, I didn't find the course rewarding and found most of the lectures to be lacking any real value. I also discovered that I wasn't the kind of person who could sit still for hours while listening to a story told at the teller's pace; I needed more speed to keep me engaged. I therefore soon stopped going to the lectures, and decided to only read the books and show up for the exams. Although I was disengaged for most of my university years, I did manage to finish within the recommended time. More importantly, I never lost my interest in the human mind, so I kept reading more interesting (i.e. Buddhist) books on the side.

During my studies something important happened: I lost interest in martial arts. The practice that had given me strength for many years had begun to backfire; I felt it no longer served its purpose of making me a better person. The key moment came when my little sister, Wieke (who is 2.5 years younger than me), told me honestly that she felt it no longer made me a better person, instead it made me seem aggressive and overly protective at times, like a war veteran that is continually on the lookout for trouble.

Her feedback resonated with me and touched me, and I realised the practice had lost its meaning for me. I believe my sister's message hit me so strongly because I had already felt it in my heart: when walking the streets of Amsterdam, I became aware that I was continuously checking everybody's distance to me. Distance and time are key components in any martial arts practice (e.g. you have to bridge the distance to perform a successful attack with a sword).

I had also become increasingly uncomfortable with most of my martial arts teachers, since I felt they didn't always show the 'selfless mastery' that I was looking for (although I have fond memories of a few great teachers: Simon Deering, Marco Barends and Jan Boy Bosma). But, finally, my sister's comments gave me the final push to quit martial arts, and I changed my habits almost instantly.

After finishing my four years at university, I was still not in love with the field of Western psychology and had serious doubts about pursuing a career as a psychologist. I had always worked as a physical trainer and martial arts instructor while studying, and felt that I would be happier in a physical line of work of that nature.

Luckily, this all changed when I encountered a sport psychology minor at the University of Amsterdam. It was another six months of studying, but doing it changed my perspective. I loved the content, although the field was still in its infancy in many ways, and decided that it was *the* way to bring my knowledge of martial arts, physical training and psychology together to satisfy my intellectual needs and find a job in the future.

Although the sport psychology course didn't have much content at the time, it affected me a lot. I realised that I was much like the athletes we spoke about in the class: with a similar drive and persistence to reach the goals I value in life. I finished the 6-month course, worked with the founder of the course to design the Master's degree that was available soon after, and then founded my first company in the field (called Peak).

I made a conscious choice to become the best sport psychologist in the Netherlands. It has led me to work with professional base jumpers, soccer teams, circus artists, sailors, freedivers, hockey players, martial artists, singers and national teams. Through this, I have truly experienced the possibilities of training the human mind. My work has led me to spend time with people able to freedive to 126 metres on a single breath, people with asthma climbing the highest mountains on the

planet, base jumpers flying unprotected through the air at speeds of up to 250 km/h, and kite surfers crossing an entire ocean with their kites. It has truly showed me what is possible when people choose to set their mind to something.

Three years after I graduated in sport psychology — and plenty of beautiful experiences later — I got in touch with McKinsey & Company to discuss a talent profile they needed for their employees. A friend of mine, a recruiter at a small firm, had recommended me to the director of staff at the Amsterdam office for the job, and we organised a time to meet and have a chat. If I'm honest, I hadn't researched the firm before I arrived that day and couldn't care less about what they were doing. At the time, I firmly believed that being a sport psychologist was about as good a job as you could possibly have and large organisations were dull, boring places that would never change the world for the better. I had even regularly tried to convince my girlfriend at the time (Ilona, who was a consultant at the multinational IT company, Atos) to leave the 'grey world' because it seemed to be such a waste of the valuable time we have on this planet. Little did I know that the meeting with McKinsey & Company would change my perspective completely.

I remember cycling back from the meeting and receiving a call on my mobile. The lady I spoke to was very direct, saying they would not consider me for a role in designing the talent profiles right away (it was a full-time job and I had offered to do it in a few days, which seemed ridiculous to her, and it probably was). Instead, she asked if I was interested in having more talks to become a full-time Organization Practice consultant at the company. I felt somewhat honoured, but didn't know how to respond. I thanked her and went home to discuss the offer with my girlfriend. My recollection of that conversation is that she said something like, 'I know you think you've figured it all out, but I think you should give this a shot to see where it brings you.' And so I did. Just months later, I stopped working as a sport psychologist and joined McKinsey's Organization Practice, learning everything there is to know about organisations, the value of underlying mind-sets and beliefs in large organisations, and effective leadership in uncertain times.

The firm suited me much better than I had expected. I had been a lone wolf until then, but at McKinsey I learned that there were people out there with ideas very much like my own. I understood what they were saying in their discussions and soon connected well with many people at the office. I still have many friends there, and am happy to be one of the ‘Advisors to McKinsey’, helping the firm with specific cases related to good-to-great psychology for teams and organisations.

As time went by, I felt that my work with athletes had spoiled me a little as a psychologist. I found many of the projects with businesses quite boring — they had little impact or weren’t human enough in my view — and I longed to go back to a world where the effect of my work on people was more visible. But I also learned a lot, and decided to hang around for a bit.

Until joining McKinsey, I had believed I was a good coach, capable of helping people with whatever problems they had. After a few months in management consulting, I began to doubt my qualities more and more. I realised that I had coached people primarily on *how to achieve their goals*, (‘There’s the summit, here’s how you can get to it’), but in companies I often had to deal with *why* questions (engagement issues, for example, or people who were not willing to change behaviour, or where management didn’t clearly see the company’s purpose). I realised that, in many organisations, people don’t have the clear direction in life my former group of clients had. I saw that, for many people working in organisations, the meaning of what they were doing was not clear, and it was often hard to see how the organisation was really contributing to something positive on a larger scale.

I needed to learn fast to become successful in my new position, and change the way I worked so that I could become useful to a new group of clients. With a lot of support from some great people in the firm (notably Arne Gast, Michiel Kruyt and Kayvan Kian), I found the knowledge I was looking for from a field known as positive psychology. I see it essentially as sport psychology for non-athletes. The essence? Helping people lead the most fulfilling life possible, which

also leads to better performance over time. Or, in more popular language: helping people move from good to great. I fell in love with the scientific rigour behind many of the concepts in positive psychology and, within months, I met some of the greatest thinkers in the field, and was able to give workshops with them and explore the subject in depth.

Although I was grateful for many of the things I learned with McKinsey & Company — and even more so for the friends I made — I still felt that I wasn't delivering the impact I wanted. My clients — athletes and corporate managers — were all at the top of their field, and I had not yet found a way to move beyond this group. I believe that most psychologists are driven by the notion of helping people and that it doesn't really matter if the people you're helping are famous and/or successful already. For that reason, I felt I needed to leave the firm and start something that would have a real impact on a large scale. The formula I had in mind was:  $\text{McKinsey} + \text{Happiness} = \text{Consultancy 2.0}$ . I felt that my new firm had to combine positive psychology with strategy in order to build the 'positive sum game' organisations of the future. At the same time, I believed my organisation had to be open source, to make it accessible to as many people as possible.

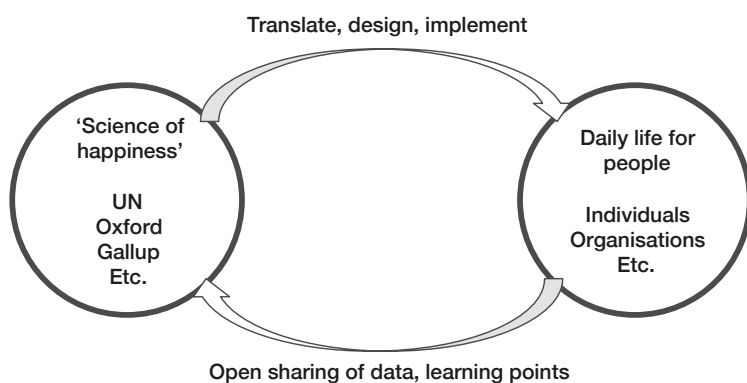
I started my research with what entrepreneurs would call the 'sensing' phase: gathering information about the market, the people in it, and the needs that exist in different customer segments. I quickly found that the amount of people 'flourishing' in Europe was considered to be a mere 17% by a recent estimate,<sup>1</sup> and I discovered that there are many sound methods to get an insight into the well-being of individuals (from classic surveys to real-time measurements with apps). I also learned that happiness is the popular word for what scientists call well-being.

However, what I didn't find was a market for the work. There was no one translating positive psychology to organisations, or teaching positive psychology to executives, or doing anything with it at all on a substantial scale. I realised this could mean only two things: either the

market didn't exist, or it's a blue ocean (a place with good fish, but no fishermen).

I decided to take the leap, convincing myself that 'starting a purpose-driven business is a good thing, even if it fails in the end'. I quit my consultancy job as I had stopped martial arts, abruptly. Directly afterwards, I kick-started the world's first ever 'happiness consultancy', called The Energy Strategy back then, and now called Purpose+. The organisation would be the first to translate the positive sciences to organisations on a large scale, and would focus on doing workshops for the first few years in order to create a 'critical mass'. My end goal, as I told my friends, was that organisations of the future would include purpose in their annual report, and would start measuring it as rigorously as their financial indicators. The name, therefore, implied that purpose (loosely defined as having a positive impact on something bigger than yourself) should come first, and monetary rewards are not the be-all and end-all of business. Below is an illustration of how I envisioned the company, and how I still explain it to people.

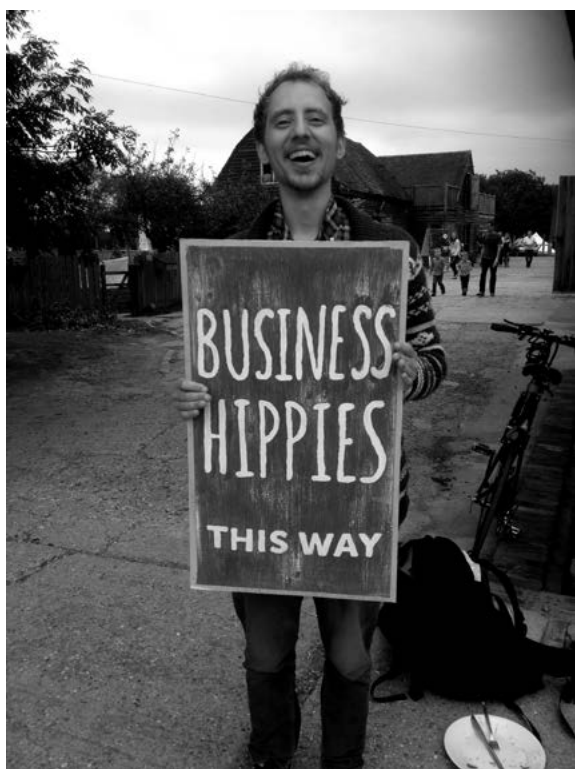
The start was rough. Many people told me the ideas were 'fluffy' and probably unrelated to hard business outcomes. Some corporate leaders said that happiness was the wrong track to follow, and that they



*Figure 1 The essence of what we do: translating the science of happiness in a pragmatic way to the daily lives of people, in collaboration with scientists on the topic*

considered happiness to be a personal affair. Others believed it would be better for employees to be slightly unhappy since that would make them work harder. And others told me they were already ‘doing something like this’, and then mentioned the current surveys on employee engagement. The positive science of leading a happy, meaningful life, it seemed for a while, was only valuable to a small group of university professors and maybe bookstores with their shelves of self-help books.

As the content of my new company received some serious scrutiny, the original strategy I chose faced criticism as well. I called it ‘give before you get’. In short, this strategy entailed giving away all the material in open workshops to which anybody could sign up. We even created an open cloud environment containing all the relevant literature and



*Figure 2 Spencer Heijnen, one of our P+ consultants in the Amsterdam office with a sign that shows how we were perceived in the beginning*

## EXPERIENCE

### *First talks with company executives on happiness*

When I left my job as a consultant and started focusing purely on happiness, my choice raised quite a few eyebrows. I was asked questions like, 'Why throw away a career in one of the most prestigious firms on the planet?' Others were more comforting, noting that, 'It cannot really go wrong when you are trying to do something useful, it's worth the experiment.' I remember many of the conversations I had with clients, where I tried to explain what I was trying to create.

One of the first of these conversations was with the head of 'people development' at a large microchip manufacturing company in the Netherlands. During the conversation, he insisted on knowing the 'bottom line' impact of the work in financial terms, and noted that he already measured 'engagement'. In the end, I explained that I couldn't predict the bottom line results exactly, but that I believed the happiness of his employees was reason enough to try. He told me he couldn't sell that to the CEO, who was keen on numbers. I told him that I understood his point of view, but that we were really in the well-being business. If he was looking for more efficiency, or a leaner and meaner business, there were other firms out there. We laughed, and I walked out the door agreeing we would be in touch in the future, and I gave him an experiment to try: do one random act of kindness (RAK) every day for the next week, and let me know what it meant to him. I received word a week later that it had been awesome, and quite impactful for him personally. Later I learned he left the company to do something closer to his heart.

Another conversation that I vividly remember was at one of the largest insurance firms in the Netherlands. I went to the company wearing a T-shirt and green trousers (my favourite trousers at the time). When we entered the elevator, the company's executive stared at me for a while, before noting that, 'We need more people

who come in here like that'. We had a great conversation afterwards, noting the difference between employees of the new generation (Generation Y) that needs purpose in their work, and the older generation who fail to really address this. We are now good friends, and meet every two months to update progress in the field.

A third, highly engaging experience happened when I was asked to give a presentation to the leadership council of a large, international, bank. The leadership council consisted of the global CEO, all his country CEOs and the other relevant executives at the same level. When I entered the room, I realised I was – as usual – severely underdressed, wearing a T-shirt while the others wore expensive suits. I decided to make a joke of it, and dive into the topic right away. The executives had filled in a well-being survey beforehand, and it seemed they were much happier (20% more) than the average scores in the database. I immediately got their attention by starting my lecture with: 'Everybody, here (large screen with a PowerPoint presentation) is your data. I see two explanations for this: either you're all extremely happy, or you haven't been entirely honest with me. I would bet on the second option. What do you think?' They started laughing, and we ended up having a great discussion on what it means to be well and how to integrate this into organisations.

courses, and people could request access to it if they wanted. I remember a phone call with one of my former bosses at McKinsey & Company where he told me that what I was doing was a 'movement, not a company'. I wasn't really bothered by the criticism since the strategy worked very well for us. In the first year we trained around 2,000 people face-to-face in positive psychology, a number that I knew no company on Earth could match. Although we weren't making a lot of money (meaning: I ended up spending more money than I got in), I had faith in the power of networks. The idea, and the positivity around it, would spread, and it would not be long before we would have our first money-making projects as well.