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Conclusion

Overview
To do good things better:
• focus on the good things
• promote awareness, valuing, understanding, endorsement and action
• turn doing the good thing into a habit
• act at the individual level and at the collective level.[1]

There are plenty of good things happening in the world, but they seldom receive much attention compared to nasties like war, murder, torture, exploitation and poverty. That may be the explanation for why there is relatively little public attention to good things and how to do them better.

However, agreeing on what is good is not always easy. Critics abound concerning widely touted goals such as education, religion, national prosperity and environmental protection. So to start examining good things, it is useful to choose things widely endorsed as worthwhile and to restrict discussion to their positive aspects. An example is friendship: it is widely thought to be a good thing except when used for nefarious purposes such as organised crime.

It can be a challenge to focus on good things and to think about protecting and promoting them. The usual emphasis is on

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1 I thank Lyn Carson and Ian Miles for valuable feedback on drafts of this chapter.

problems and how to fix them. In organisations, addressing problems is the standard approach, which is why appreciative inquiry, with its attention to what is working well, is such a contrast.

Many good things, such as happiness and expertise, have been studied in depth, though most people know little about the research. Nearly all this sort of research is specific to the topic studied. Research on happiness seldom intersects with research on expertise, and neither has been connected with research on honour systems. Because research most commonly delves into topics in depth, learning more and more about ever narrower topics, there is a role for pulling together findings from in-depth investigations, providing an overview of a field and indicating areas needing further study.

My aim has been a horizontal kind of investigation. Rather than delving ever deeper into narrow topics — a vertical style of investigation — my approach is to look at diverse case studies, across a range of topics, and see whether there are common patterns. Some of the case studies I've chosen are in well-established research fields, such as happiness. For these, I can draw on the findings in the fields. Other case studies I've chosen are less commonly studied, like amateur chamber music and citizen advocacy. For these, I've drawn on personal knowledge.

In a traditional scholarly analysis, this would be the point at which I review other research on the same topic. The trouble is, I haven't been able to find very much that is relevant. There's certainly plenty of research in some areas, like happiness and health. But I haven't been able to find studies that look at disparate good things and find commonalities in the ways to promote them.

There are several possible reasons for this research gap. One is the usual emphasis on fixing problems rather than doing

good things better. Another is research specialisation: researchers know an incredible amount about their topics. In research fields, there is high status in becoming an authority in a well-defined area. In contrast, there is little encouragement to develop cross-disciplinary syntheses, because experts in each discipline see that as encroaching on their territories. Few scholarly journals publish integrative treatments of diverse issues.

I diverted even further from scholarly norms by deciding to write this book in an accessible style, avoiding the typical academic prose that so often is indigestible to anyone outside a field and sometimes to those in it too. An impenetrable style does not guarantee insights, nor does an easy-to-read style mean lack of content, though that is a usual assumption in scholarly circles, in which "journalistic" is a term used to condemn writing that is readable and hence, presumably, not sufficiently rigorous or serious.

Personally, I set myself the goal of writing about challenging topics in a way that is easier to read and understand than the usual academic prose. I have introduced personal experiences as an aid in this. It isn't necessarily easier to write this way: it is a different approach and requires its own discipline.

The five methods

By surveying a wide variety of good things, an important pattern emerges. Five key methods are valuable for supporting and promoting good things: awareness, valuing, understanding, endorsement and doing. These might seem obvious — and they are in quite a few cases. However, it is useful to point them out because sometimes they are absent or inadequate.

Awareness To support a good thing, it helps to be aware of it. This might seem trivial, but there are quite a few good things

that people don't know about. Citizen advocacy is a wonderful way of protecting people with intellectual disabilities, but it is little known aside from those directly involved. Similarly, amateur chamber music and student honour codes are not well known to non-participants.

Even for things that are familiar, awareness may be per-functory. Everyone is aware of happiness, but many people only think about it occasionally.

Greater awareness can help in promoting good things. For example, citizen advocates often tell friends and neighbours about their relationships with their protégés. Citizen advocacy relationships are inspiring good news stories, and deserve a wider circulation. The implication is that when a good thing isn't widely known, promoting awareness is a key task for those who believe in it.

There is plenty of promotion in the world, notably by advertisers, and good things have to compete in a marketplace of aggressive selling. Supporters of good things can have a tough task organising a campaign of promotion — or they may not bother, simply assuming that good things speak for themselves. Unfortunately, this is seldom the case. Promoting awareness — in appropriate ways, to suitable audiences — is a key task for promoting good things.

Valuing To support a good thing, it's important that people value it. That seems almost too obvious to mention, but actually there are plenty of worthwhile things going on that people don't value very much, often because they take them for granted. Many people — especially young people — take their health for granted. They are aware of good health as an abstract concept, but don't take care of their own bodies. They can get away with poor diet, lack of exercise, smoking and heavy drinking for years or even decades, sometimes not appreciating the absence of

serious disease until it is too late. If asked, they might say they value good health, but this abstract commitment isn't pursued in daily behaviours.

Understanding To support a good thing, it's helpful to know why it is worthwhile, and furthermore to know what keeps it going. Consider happiness. Most people are aware of happiness and think it's worth pursuing, but have mistaken ideas about what makes them happy. So they may spend endless effort on a fruitless quest, never realising what is going wrong. Studying and applying the latest research on happiness — or, alternatively, ancient wisdom — is the basis for a far more effective search.

Understanding is especially important for those who try to help others, for example coordinators of citizen advocacy programmes or designers of public health programmes. A deep understanding aids in developing, maintaining, testing and improving the most effective systems.

Endorsement Most people are influenced by what they believe others think and do. If your friends and family members act as if something is good, then you're more likely to agree. When respected authorities — doctors, scientists, experts, or perhaps politicians or celebrities, whoever you look up to — support a cause, then you're more likely to as well. Endorsement can come from the bottom or top of the social pyramid: sometimes children's preferences influence parents, though more commonly it is the other way around.

Without credible endorsement, promoting a good thing is far more difficult. Some courageous individuals proceed in the face of indifference or hostility, but they are a minority.

The implication is that winning over others is crucial to promoting a good thing. This applies especially for relatively

unknown options like citizen advocacy and honour systems that are fully supported in only a few places. But it also applies to familiar things like happiness. Martin Seligman sought to get the numbers to become president of the American Psychological Society so he could use his status to support positive psychology and thus put happiness research on a stronger footing. In essence, he was seeking the power of endorsement to influence his colleagues in psychology.

Action The most important method of promoting good things is to do them. The appropriate slogan is "do it." This is slightly different from Nike's marketing slogan "just do it" because "just" implies doing it is all that's required. To be effective in doing a good thing, the aim should be to turn it into a habit. So maybe the slogan should be "do it in a way that ensures you keep doing it."

Action is especially powerful because it changes the way people think. If you feel shy but pretend to be confident, namely act as though you are confident, then after several months of pretending you may actually feel more confident. What happens is that the mind adapts to the behaviour. This is not necessarily positive: people who commit crimes can eventually see their behaviour as normal or justified. But action for good things works in a positive direction. You are more likely to justify your behaviour, seek out information about it, notice endorsements for it and value it. In short, action contributes to all the other methods of promoting good things.

Action is the core technique for promoting the good things I've looked at. For example, the foundation of the writing programme is regular writing — a habit of writing. In citizen advocacy, it is often quite hard to find someone to commit to being an advocate, but once a person makes the commitment and starts the relationship, it is far easier to keep going. In debates

about whether to institute honour systems, there are plenty of objections. In an actually functioning honour system, support comes far more easily because participants understand, through their actions, what is involved and can see that it works.

Maintaining the habit

The key techniques for promoting good things are awareness, valuing, understanding, endorsement and action. So far, so good. But there's another step: how to turn these into habits. Without regular reinforcement, good things might only be here today, gone tomorrow. So the challenge is to set up systems that maintain the habit.

An individual can set up a personal system. This might be a personal ritual for expressing gratitude, an arrangement with friends to exercise together or membership in a writer's group. Personal systems can be quite effective, but they still rely on individual initiative. Only some people are able to set up such systems. Furthermore, there may be contrary pressures, for example temptations to eat unhealthy food or to read emails instead of doing daily writing.

The most effective systems for maintaining habits are built into the way social life is organised. An honour system is, in effect, a system for maintaining a habit of honesty in student work. Citizen advocacy is a system for initiating and maintaining an ongoing relationship — a sort of habit — with a person with a disability who is in need.

The crucial challenge in promoting good things is to make changes at the system level. Doing good things needs to become the easy option. It should be the way people do things when they go about life doing what seems natural.

In lots of areas, there is a long way to go to reach this sort of situation. In western societies, achieving happiness is largely

left to individuals who face all sorts of distractions and temptations, such as the pursuit of money or getting drunk. There is plenty of information available from happiness research about ways to achieve more lasting satisfaction, but the effort largely relies on individual initiative. The collective systems — the economic system, the education system, and so forth — are not built around maximising happiness, and often push people in opposite directions.

Citizen advocacy is itself an intervention at the system level. In the world, there are many people with intellectual disabilities who have serious unmet needs — and sometimes a friend or even a stranger decides to advocate on behalf of one of these individuals. That is a good thing, developing spontaneously. Citizen advocacy aims to set up more relationships like this. But it is hampered by lack of awareness, lack of understanding and lack of authoritative endorsement.

Looking at good things through the framework of tactics provides guidance for both individual and social action. Individuals seeking to do good things — for themselves or for others — can look at the five standard methods: awareness, valuing, understanding, endorsement and action. That's a start. The next step is to set up systems around each of these methods so that they foster a habit.

At the social action level, campaigners can proceed using the same five methods. It's easy to say but often not so easy to do. Especially hard is keeping the focus on good things. It's so easy to start complaining about the negatives!

One of the problems with promoting good things is that often there is no obvious enemy. There's no group consciously trying to prevent people being happy or becoming better writers or setting up honour systems or running for fitness. Actually, there are quite a few people trying to promote these and other

good things, and seldom any organised opposition. The obstacles are built into the way social life is arranged, and in some ways changing social arrangements is far more difficult than confronting enemies.

In classic Hollywood movies, there are the good guys and the bad guys. The set-up is good versus evil, personified by individuals. Real-world problems are different. There are lots of complexities; personalities are only part of the story. It's easy to understand Hollywood story lines, because they tap into familiar ways of thinking about the world. In principle, ways to promote good things are also easy to understand: use a set of methods, and help change systems so good habits are easy to maintain. But this story line is not nearly so familiar. The challenge is to make it seem so obvious that everyone gets it, and participates.