



DOCTORAL DISSERTATION AS ACTION AT ONE'S LIMITS – WHAT ARE THE INDIVIDUAL AND CONTEXT-BOUND STRENGTHS OF TOP PERFORMANCES?

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Top performances are based on a combination of various elements—both individual- and context-specific. The purpose is to analyze how the emergence of such positive states can be enhanced and led using a dissertation process as an example of a top performance. This study focused on the following research questions: (1) What are the individual-specific requirements for top performances?; (2) How does the top performance manifest itself?; and (3) What are the context-bound features of top performances? PhD-students ($N = 25$) who had either started their doctoral research or had already graduated as doctors in 2005-2008 participated in the research by writing narratives about their dissertation processes. The data were complemented with email conversations between the supervisor and the PhD-students. The presentation leans on our illustration of human resources as the basis of positive development. When a human being is able to get the most of his or her resources, he or she is likely to get positive feedback and recognition from others, succeed, and have increase in his or her self-appreciation. We claim that this kind of positive cycle lays the foundation to healthy development as it represents the true opportunity of self-fulfillment. Furthermore, we argue that this approach makes it easier to provide circumstances in which flow might occur – that is commonly regarded as the optimal experience of functioning at one's limits. The conclusion is that love-based leadership in the supervision of doctoral theses might be the key element for providing positive experiences, initial excitement, and the enjoyment that is called the flow, leading to top performances at its best.

Keywords: Performance, Flow, Positive psychology, Human resources, Dissertation process, Supervision, Doctoral thesis.

Introduction

The emphasis on top performances starts already at school. Students' progress and learning are controlled continuously through exams and tests both locally (e.g., Konttinen, 1995; Lundgren, 2002; Simola, 2002) and internationally (Baker et al., 2010; Corcoran, 2010; Rothstein, 2009; Wiliam, 2010). The current trend seems to be that students are encouraged and even expected to surpass their limits and reach optimal performances, and this is expected to continue in worklife as well (see e.g., Uusiautti & Määttä, 2014). Is it realistic to expect that? And what is the connection between top performing and flourishing like if one can be recognized?

What are the elements of top performances from the point of view of positive invocation of human resources for successful performances? The viewpoint provided in this article is based on our numerous studies on the psychology of human strengths and positive development (e.g., Määttä, 2011; Määttä & Uusiautti, 2012; Salmela & Uusiautti, 2013; Uusiautti, 2013b; Uusiautti & Määttä, 2013; Uusiautti & Määttä, 2014). This article analyzes the process of completing a doctoral degree as a manifestation of a top performance. The purpose of this article is also to find out how to promote the discovery of personal strengths and balanced utilization of human resources that lay the foundation to top performances.

The core concepts here are the motivational base of performance, human resources, and positive experiences leading to top performances (such as flow). The purpose is to discuss the importance of multiple elements of performing and the positive support and encouragement that fosters the discovery of states of optimal and positive experiences at doing at one's limits. We will limit our analysis on the university world; not only will we study doctors' experiences but we will also pay a special attention to supervisors' opportunities to enhance success in their doctoral students.

The Concept of Performance

The completion of a doctoral thesis is always a performance, and actually quite a unique one. However, the concept of performance is not a simple one and must be defined carefully in this study too. Frequently, performance is confused with its neighboring concepts, such as competence, behavior, or action. It is crucial to realize the differences between them. Behavior, for instance, is a combination of various motivational elements, such as focus, attention, interest, and persistency, and can be influenced by competence, among others. Performance is the result of behavior; it is something measurable and comparable, and a clearly definable result (Thompson, Stuart, & Linsay, 1997).

Thus, an actual performance is a combination of various elements—both individual- and context-specific ones. First, the processes have a holistic nature which means that success is merely a result of the functional interaction of its elements rather than how each element influences entity (Tsang, Jardine, & Kolodny, 1999). Second, the inner processes, such as mental, biological, and behavioral functions, and outer processes, such as opportunities, obligations, and rules, and how well these processes are synchronized contribute to the possibility of a top performance (Mitchell, 1997). Mitchell's (1997) model of performance highlights that connection between the context and individual features and motivation. People respond to the situation with their skills, knowledge, goals, values, and mood, whereas the context includes the task, colleagues or other people connected to the situation, work environment and culture. In addition to each other, these categories can influence motivation. Motivation together with abilities, work knowledge, and context-bound factors leads to behavior, which again leads to performance.

Mitchell (1997) emphasizes that all theories that attempt to describe performance, whether they are belief, goal, efficiency, or expectation value theories, share certain features. Goals describe what we want to do; self-efficacy describes what we think we can do; and expectations describe our best evaluation of the consequences our action can have. All these, directly or indirectly, influence motivation and are also connected to effort, attention, persistence, and strategies. This idea is based on the finding that positive experiences concerning one's own doing make for one of the most central dimensions of good performance (Uusiautti & Määttä, 2011; see also Liden, Wayne, & Sparrowe, 2000).

It is important to analyze some of the core concepts that might help with an understanding of the positive experience of doing. Competence is often confused with performance, but they are not synonymous (Kanfer & Ackerman, 2005). Competence refers to a more stable state or to a person's characteristic (Rychen & Salganik, 2003). Performance is a momentary happening and can vary according to many factors, even if competence is high in relation to the task at hand.

Lynch (2013) names five basic dimensions and two meta-criteria for a performance. He also considers them as manifestation of quality in performance. Kanfer and Ackerman (2005) distinguish two dimensions of performance: maximal and typical performance. The former refers to a person's skills and abilities and describes all that the person can do when inner states (e.g., sleep, concentration, etc.) are optimal and when it is possible to concentrate on the task. The latter dimension is typical behavior, which refers to how the person usually does things or how he or she is likely to perform. The researchers point out that although maximal performance is an interesting research target, it would perhaps be more beneficial to pay attention to the difference between what the person can do and what he or she actually does (see also Stoltenberg, 2005).

The concept of self-efficacy is also closely related to competence and performance. Self-efficacy means a person's assessment of his or her own abilities to use his or her resources and to regulate his or her behavior in order to perform a task (Caprara & Cervone, 2006; Judge, Locke, & Durham, 1997; Mitchell, 1997). It is therefore similar to the aforementioned sense of competence. It has been shown that positive self-efficacy improves a person's performance and well-being in numerous ways (Schunk & Pajares, 2005). People who have high self-efficacy devote more to their activities and persevere more than those who estimate that their competence is weaker. In addition, people with high self-efficacy are likely to select more high-level goals and engage in them (Bandura, 1997; Mitchell, 1997).

In this study, a dissertation process is considered an example of a top performance and acting at one's limits. What kind of mastery of skills would can lead to optimal top performances? How important will the positive emotion as one of the keystones of learning be in a dissertation process (cf., Chafouleas & Bray, 2004)? What are the most salient issues supervisors should consider when supervising PhD-students' dissertation processes?

Method

Research Questions

Along with lifespans, people become rewarded for excellent performances, for example at school (e.g., straight-A graduates see Salmela & Uusiautti, 2013) or at work (e.g., employee of the year nominees see Uusiautti & Määttä, 2014). When people work and study, act, at their limits, they can reach top performances. In this study, we consider a doctoral dissertation as an accomplishment that can be seen as an example of top performances that only a few can achieve in the university context. In this article, our purpose is to analyze the individual-specific requirements and context-bound features enabling the emergence of top performances within the context of a dissertation process. The following research questions were set for this study:

1. What are the individual-specific requirements for top performances?
2. How does the top performance manifest itself?
3. What are the context-bound features of top performances?

Participants and Data Collection

This study focused on PhD-students who had either started their doctoral research or had already graduated as doctors in 2005-2008. They were asked to write about their dissertation processes. Altogether, 25 PhD students and graduates provided their narratives. Their narratives comprised the main data set, which was complemented with email conversations between the supervisor and the PhD-students. The email data comprised hundreds of messages sent over the years during the dissertation processes.

Thus, the aforementioned two sets of data provided multidimensional viewpoint to the dissertation process; on the one hand, it revealed the supervisees' experiences and perceptions of the top performance, and, on the other hand, it also sheds light to the supervisor's role and work during the process. All the participants have given the permission to make their narratives and email correspondence public.

The Narrative Research Approach and Data Analysis

Narrative research can be defined as research that utilizes or analyses data that is collected via narratives (e.g. biographies) or other such ways (e.g. anthropologists' observational narratives). Thus, a narrative can be either a research object or a means to study a phenomenon (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998); in this case, the latter. Narrative research does not focus on objective and generalized facts but on local, personal, and subjective information—this can be considered a strength of narrative research because doctors' voices of can be heard authentically.

Polkinghorne (1995) distinguishes the analysis of narratives and narrative analysis. The former means categorizing, for example by types, and metaphors. The latter refers to the composition of a new narrative based on various original narratives. The first method was used in this research as the analysis typified a category-content-focused approach, with parts of narratives being placed in different categories (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998).

The data have been analyzed with a theory-led content analysis (see also Mayring, 2000). The main themes have been derived from our classification of human resources (see Määttä & Uusiautti, 2014): emotional, social, cognitive, and functional resources. In addition, we have referred to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's (2008) definition of the elements of the optimal experience, flow. Data regarding supervision of doctoral theses were analyzed in the light of caring teacherhood and love-based leadership (Theilheimer, 1991; Uusiautti & Määttä, 2013). However, as the two sets of data provided such a profound and multidimensional viewpoint to the dissertation process, the analysis has also data-bound features, which means that we have given space to features emerging from the data.

When it comes to the reliability of the research, we have every reason to believe that the rich data have provided a profound and trustworthy illustration about the dissertation process as a manifestation of a top performance. To ensure the confirmability of the research, it is important to demonstrate that findings emerge from the data and not from researchers' own predispositions (Shenton, 2004). The purpose is to provide as much space as possible for the doctoral students' voices when introducing the results. The data excerpts represent both the students' essays and email conversations, and the source of each data excerpt is shown within brackets.

Results

The results chapter consists of three sub-chapters. In the first one, we introduce findings regarding doctoral students' individual resources required in top performances. After that, we describe how the students described the experience of acting at their limits through the conceptual framework of an optimal, autotelic experience flow. The third section covers findings regarding context-bound factors, namely the supervision of doctoral theses, and how love-based leadership can be used for enhancing doctoral students' dissertation processes.

Individual-Specific Requirements for Top Performances

As the concept of performance showed, many elements are involved in top performances, and that the use of human resources is depended on both context-bound and individual features that can vary considerably from situation to another. The results showed many ways to categorize human resources. We will introduce a grouping of four elements that each illustrate a separate but yet interconnected area of human functioning (see also Määttä & Uusiautti, 2014).

First, there are positive emotions. Joy and contentment, optimism, being appreciated and feeling of security create positive mood, fundamental positive attitude that affect positively well-being at work in numerous ways (Ghorpade, Lackritz, & Sing, 2006; Huang & Viert, 2004).

"The feeling that I will survive, I can and I will show it was an enormous force of going-ahead."
(A doctoral student's narrative)

Likewise, many PhD-students mentioned how "worries and insecurity turned into joy", and how the dissertation process was not that difficult after all.

"I have been surprised at how easily it all seems to run." (A doctoral student's narrative)

Studying and seizing the new challenges brought joy and positive emotions:

"I started to write my own doctoral thesis after dreaming of it for a long time. I have always enjoyed studying." (A doctoral student's narrative)

Positive feelings enhance intellectual thinking and problem-solving skills, decrease the defending attitude, deliberate, improve memory, and helpfulness. The importance and potential of this may seem surprising as the feelings of happiness are so simple and common in nature (Isen & Reeve, 2006). Another reason why beneficial effects of positive feelings may seem surprising is that people do not usually look for reasons or explanations when things go well. Positive emotions function as *emotional resources*.

Second, people live in the network of human relationships their whole life. Many people find the meaning of life within the framework of relationships. For example, Berscheid (2006) claims that understanding human behavior has suffered because of forgetting this fact. However, most of the behavior takes place in the context of human relationships. Many PhD-students described how they had a change and privilege to lean on the familiar social community that supported them in their dissertation process:

"I have the network ready, and everyone is happy to participate, almost as if they were putting out the red carpet for me." (A doctoral student's narrative)

Everyone needs intimate relationships which provide appreciation, support, recreation, and protection. In a school context, Pyhältö, Soini, and Pietarinen's (2010) study showed that the possibility and ability to use the social resources provided by the environment (especially when combined with a sense of active learning agency) could protect from, for example, experiences of anxiety and emotional distress (see also Billing et al., 2014).

Likewise, the agony of laboring alone is being eased by the new supportive people whom one meets during the dissertation process. The research work involves a number of new people that doctoral students familiarize themselves with; and long-term friendships may spring up between people who are experiencing and going through the same process:

"I also learned that any research is not a product of just one person. The discussions in the seminars, the supervisor's help, the conversations in the method courses mold one's own research and bring new ideas." (A doctoral student's narrative)

Good interaction skills, empathy, flexibility, patience, caring, and interest are significant *social resources* that support the creation and preservation of good and close relationships (see also Thompson & Prottas, 2006).

Third, any great plans and performances or long-term goals cannot be achieved without self-appreciation, perseverance, and commitment as well as the ability to control and channel impulses (Gross & John, 2003). In this study, several PhD-students mentioned how writing a doctoral thesis is basically like ordinary drudgery, systematic working that proceeds step-by-step:

"Writing a doctoral thesis requires rigorous work. The files and references have to be grouped, noted, and kept in order. You just have to sit, read, and write persistently." (A doctoral student's narrative)

The strength of character, self-discipline, and ability to control impulses are important features for good performances (Cullen, Gentry, & Yammarino, 2014). Likewise, optimism has a clear connection to it because, among other things, optimism involves the ability to set reasonable goals, to achieve these goals, and to use efficient learning strategies (Gillham & Reivich, 2004). According to Carver and Scheier (2005), optimistic people achieve their goals because they organize their actions in an intellectual way. Proactive attitude (as opposed to reactive) (see Uusiautti & Määttä, 2011; 2014) also represents such *cognitive resources*.

Indeed, many doctoral studies arise from such a proactive action. PhD-students often grasp to a theme that has emerged at work, in a natural research context:

"In my work, I had to constantly search for more information and knowledge as the field was undergoing a transformation, so why should I not start researching?" (A doctoral student's narrative)

Finally, being able to use one's strengths provides the sense of meaningful doing (see Csikszentmihalyi, 2008). Therefore, it is also important that people are able to do those things that they can, to fulfill themselves and use their talent, to create and develop. Sometimes, it is

necessary to keep one's own work at arm's length (see also Cryer, 2003). Likewise, a doctoral student can face a situation in which he or she must comprehend the significance of a pause:

"Now I have to admit that the whole subject seems repulsive. I have to take a break if that helps to continue." (A doctoral student's email to the supervisor)

"A good outcome is not born by bustling or hurrying." (A doctoral student's narrative)

Still, it may be difficult to detach oneself from the grasp of writing a doctoral thesis. Having a break may be striking or depressing even though *"the saddest thing would be to let the doctoral student think that something is possible when it is not"* (The supervisor's notes).

Locke and Latham (1990) have launched a concept of a "high performance cycle". The concept helps understanding the nature of a dissertation process, too. According to their idea, if the challenge includes expectancy of success, high performance is guaranteed assuming that the person is engaged to the goal, receives adequate feedback, and situational factors do not affect the performance considerably (see also Uusiantti, 2013b). Similar findings have been learned from the various education levels (e.g., Gilpin, 2008; Green et al., 2012; Oades et al., 2011) and hobbies (e.g., Carruthers & Hood, 2005), too. These kinds of resources are *functional resources*.

When a human being is able to get the most of his or her resources, he or she is likely to get positive feedback and recognition from others (McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001), achieve high performances, and have increase in his or her self-appreciation. It represents the true opportunity of self-fulfillment. Along the dissertation process, students are able to proceed with a sense of direction and will realize that scientific thinking, studying, and understanding the complicated phenomena require long-term conversance, demanding consideration, and reflection:

"I have learned that things become apparent progressively. One has to test different thoughts, study the literature, and the data. One has to reflect on them and match up over and over again." (A doctoral student's narrative)

However, the holistic nature of human functioning necessitates that the resources have to be protected and nurtured in order to develop or flourish. Both the supervisee and the supervisor need to rest, too:

"Thank you and sleep well, my supervisor, since you confirmed those to me! This is interesting processing. I have been able to do plenty of specifications today." (A doctoral student's email to the supervisor)

As riveting as a dissertation process may be, the students' positive and healthy development is threatened without the protective leaves of sleep, nutrition, and physical exercise. They make the use of inner resources possible, which concerns a dissertation process, too. It can be quite a life-changing experience as whole:

"If I were to name any positive sides of this hard work pace, I would say I have quit smoking by oversight since I do not have time for it anymore." (A doctoral student's narrative)

Resources and Optimal Experiences

When considered as a top performance, a dissertation process requires several elements of human resources. They were apparent in the PhD-students' narratives, as the previous result chapter showed. Top performances also are closely related to a phenomenon called flow, and the data showed that this experience was familiar to the research participants. In this chapter, we introduce the top performance of a dissertation process as it manifests itself through the phenomenon of flow.

Flow is a subjective state of feeling control—or better yet, feeling that you can act without any control, without hindrance (Csikszentmihalyi, Abuhamdeh, & Nakamura, 2005; Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, & Damon, 2001). Features such as gender and cultural norms affect the experience of flow; however, here, the focus is on the experience of flow as the manifestation of top performances.

Based on the narratives and email conversations, many of the participants had visited “a weird planet”, “the spaces of mind”, or “had alienated themselves from the surrounding world.” The flame of working and doing as well as the feeling of mastery had riveted them, bringing downright the endless feeling of the joy of work.

Doctoral students described experiences that resemble Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's (2008, pp. 49-67) components of flow. Flow is usually experienced when goals are high and feedback is immediate and fair. In addition, the task at hand, the doing the person is committed to, has to include continuous challenges that match his or her skills. Flow is equivalent to the feeling of absorption (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008; Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma, & Bakker). This means that one concentrates fully on what one is doing instead of thinking about something else; action and awareness merge. Clarity of goals and immediate feedback lay the foundation of this experience.

“I was told that we had a lovely hot summer, but I did not have time to notice that as I was excited about sitting at my computer. A surprise visitor marveled at me as I was wearing thick slacks, a sweater, and wool socks although it was really hot weather!” (A doctoral student's narrative)

Flow can emerge through challenging activity that requires skills; if one's skills and abilities match the task at hand. This can lead to high motivation and activity, but first, uncertainty, self-protection, and even mystical expectations that are involved in a dissertation process has to be conquered:

“It is like I was asked to fly a UFO from the point A to the point B.” (A doctoral student's narrative)

Doubts about one's resources are daunting; and goal-setting should be motivating and inspiring instead of discouraging.

“Why on earth should I be doing a doctoral thesis? I could study an interesting phenomenon for the fun of it.” (A doctoral student's narrative)

Indeed, in flow, one always knows what has to be done, and an enjoyable task always has clear goals; a goal of dissertation process is to finish doctoral studies and compile the doctoral

thesis. With this in mind, a PhD-student can analyze his or her work and its proceeding in the light of the set goals:

“Writing a doctoral thesis requires self-discipline. I find my intermediate goals functional; it try to stick to them. I take small steps to finish various parts of the study.” (A doctoral student’s email to the supervisor)

In addition to the fact that one knows what has to be done (the goals), flow always requires information about how well one is doing, and maintaining flow in unresponsive context can be difficult or impossible. From a doctoral student’s point of view, the situations of concern should be handled promptly by the supervisor. Answering “at once,” “immediately,” or “quickly” is helpful and inspiring to a doctoral student, especially when it is a question of facilitating or eliminating problems, offering solutions, or just confirming the selected way. Even matters that seem the simplest or smallest may turn into a stopper if a doctoral student’s feeling of uncertainty swells.

“Oh wow. That is it! Thanks. Now I see it.” (A doctoral student’s email to the supervisor)

“Warm thanks for your quick feedback - I am speechless with surprise and abashed. I was so scared.” (A doctoral student’s email to the supervisor)

The aforementioned elements of flow essentially enhance concentration on the task at hand. What follows from the merging of action and awareness is that distracting issues do not bother when doing the flow-providing work. The work pace may be hard labor in practice or use of mental energy and attention. Working on a doctoral thesis encourages doctoral students to concentrate and to prevent interruptions. Not many complain about fatigue; they merely talk about “*the flame of working*” and “*drive*”: “*Now I am going strong*”.

Often, the experience of working at one’s limits leads to a paradoxical sense of control. The most enjoyable experiences allow people to have a sense of control over their actions. This means that rather than thinking of the actual doing, they feel the possibility of control.

“I do not understand the spree that is going on. I am so unusually impatient and unable to dissociate myself from this.” (A doctoral student’s email to the supervisor)

One of the most common descriptions of optimal experiences is the perception of time and how it does not seem to pass in a way that it ordinarily does. Many people have experienced the changes in time: sometimes it goes faster and usually this happens when doing something enjoyable. In order to perform at one’s limits, one has to become free “from the tyranny of time” as expressed by Csikszentmihalyi (2008, p. 67) himself. In the data of this study, especially the e-mails the doctoral students had sent in the small hours showed how they thrived at the computer and did not always notice the passage of time.

“Thank you for being so patient. I have suspected that you will already close the door. I am so annoyed. Now that I have rewritten the table of contents, I became inspired again. Nor do I know what the time is.” (A doctoral student’s email to the supervisor; This e-mail was sent at 2.23 a.m.)

When dedicating oneself to the inspiring thoughts, some of the students had just noted that *"the day has already changed"* (A doctoral student's email to the supervisor).

Total absorption tells about the loss of self-consciousness, which is an interesting part of flow because it eventually leads to increased self-consciousness and self-awareness; being alone with one's self. The foundation of the loss of self-consciousness is in the clear goals, stable rules, and suitable challenges, and therefore, they involve low risk for the self to be threatened. However, the feeling of alienation amazes doctoral students themselves as well:

"I do not know myself. Am I really me or someone else?" (A doctoral student's email to the supervisor)

To be able to be alone with the doctoral research is like a double-edged sword (see Delamont et al., 2000); it is enjoyable and liberating but also harrowing:

"Working alone and the detachment are the hardest in writing a doctoral thesis." (A doctoral student's narrative)

At the same time, when being wrapped up in one's doing, flow requires very active role for the self (e.g., McWilliam, Dawson, & Tan, 2008). This means that in order to fully employ one's abilities, and even exceed one's skills, one has to have a good self-conception, profound understanding of one's self (Hogg et al. 2004). In the school world, at first glance, this can be easier said than done, but there are means that can be used for creating such optimal learning conditions (Ryan et al., 1999)

Context-Bound Features Enhancing Optimal Experiences: Love-Based Supervision Practices

The data showed how important support and encouragement as well as caring supervision methods were in top performances (see also Määttä, 2011, 2012). Here, we will analyze the data in the light of the concept of love-based leadership (see Määttä & Uusiautti, 2012; Uusiautti, 2013a; Uusiautti & Määttä, 2011, 2013). Love-based leadership refers to leaders' ability to use their position in a manner that exemplifies love-based action (Uusiautti, 2013a). Indeed, authority has been understood in a contradictory way for education and teaching (Seidl & Friend, 2002; Langford, 2010), but we emphasize the viewpoint according to which an adult's ability to affect the pupil is genuine when the authority does not rely on power, but on love and affection (see also Van Manen, 1991).

The fundamental idea is that love can be considered an ability (Uusiautti & Määttä, 2011) and related to the virtue of humanity (Seligman, 2002). But what is the most important is the awareness of love being something that can be defined an ability: according to our definition, it consists of emotions, action, and knowledge and skills (Uusiautti & Määttä, 2011). Love is therefore learnable and observable.

Love-based leadership in education can lead to a positive learning environment, which contribute such factors as (1) comfort, (2) clarity, (3) respect, (4) caring relationships, and (5) responsibility (Theilheimer, 1991; see also Uusiautti & Määttä, 2013). Next, we will introduce the findings concerning caring supervision categorized according to these elements.

Comfort in a supervision relationship means that the supervisor of a doctoral thesis can create a feeling of safety, accommodates errors, and gives the doctoral student the freedom of expressing him or herself without constraints.

Writing a doctoral thesis takes every student to the edge of his or her limits. During the dissertation process, the doctoral student and the supervisor learn to know each other as personalities with distinct characteristics, working methods, ways of responding, and behavioral habits. What things will hurt, excite, anger, cripple, or spark off the doctoral student and the supervisor during the process? A doctoral student is willing to admit several limitations and improvement demands if he or she receives, along with criticism, positive feedback, and appreciation of the well-designed parts of the thesis. Therefore, the value of compliments cannot be underestimated and there is hardly ever too much positive reinforcement and acknowledgement included in a dissertation process:

“This part is excellent,” “Here you have already finished paragraphs,” or “You have done very this thoroughly” can be determining comments when crossing the nodes of a thesis.

Comfort can also be provided by the peer group attending doctoral seminars. The supervisor creates the feeling of belonging to peer group at the doctoral seminars, which was also noted important by the doctoral students as shown in the previous result chapters. A post-graduation seminar provides an opportunity for testing the feasibility of one’s own thoughts and solutions in a safe and confidential atmosphere (see Boud & Lee, 2005).

Another important part of a caring, love-based supervision is *clarity*. The supervisor has to be able to provide clear instructions, break down material to smaller chunks to maintain the feeling of accomplishment, however small, in doctoral students. The positive parts of a thesis may easily be ignored as if they were considered obvious. A supervisor would tend to—when trying to motivate a doctoral student to proceed—focus only on pointing out the limitations and revisions, ignoring the strengths and positive sides of a thesis. Equally important is to say that a doctoral student is a consummate writer, well-oriented to the source books of the research theme, and capable of critical study; these will keep up the feeling of being capable of accomplishing this demanding process.

When it comes to clear instructions in a dissertation process, it is important to emphasize the importance of writing. One learns to be a good writer by writing—that is the only way. Every obstacle that prevents writing has to be removed by weighing various means. Instead of leaving a doctoral student to worry about or predict the difficult prospective decisions or choices, he or she can be encouraged to write about those things that feel the easiest at that moment or that should be included in the thesis anyway:

“This you can do and will be a part of your work anyway—concentrate on this and write about it at first.” (The supervisor’s email to a doctoral student)

Often, writing about the phenomenon at hand opens a door to the next phase, and solutions to problematic questions become clear step by step. Likewise, researchers might set too much pressure for themselves and their work or think that the demands and expectations set for a doctoral thesis are overwhelming. Therefore, dissecting a thesis together with a supervisor at various phases will secure the progress.

The language used in supervision and the questions concerning a thesis change during a dissertation process. Sometimes, it is important to agree on the timing and doing the different phases of the work, “the pieces,” with a doctoral student. Even the correction suggestions can be divided and suggested one section at a time:

“Would you like to do this section next and we will discuss again after that?” (The supervisor’s email to a doctoral student)

Instead of a large entity, proceeding phase by phase guarantees propitious progress and may prevent unnecessary work. Even if a supervision relationship was warm and friendly, the lack of structure in a supervision discussion invalidated otherwise good supervision. Students appreciate a professional supervisor who goes over the issues in a structured way, and interacts warmly and emphatically.

The third element of a caring supervision relationship is *respect*. This refers to the mutual respect between a doctoral student and the supervisor. Actually, respect in a supervision relationship is manifested in various ways. For instance, the supervisor must be aware of the personal importance of the thesis for a student; often the doctoral research gets so close that a certain sensitivity when discussing it must be kept in mind.

When criticizing or suggesting corrections, the supervisor has to take the risk that the doctoral student is going to be disappointed and annoyed, and quit. How should one describe the deficiencies so that the new challenges will not discourage a student? After working at the limits, revision suggestions or demands can hurt, and one tends to defend oneself or underestimate these correction suggestions. The more concrete an evaluation is, the easier the criticism is to perceive as feedback that helps to improve the research. At its best, corrective feedback makes one think, *"Why didn't I notice this at once?"* (A doctoral student's email to the supervisor).

Surprisingly, often the doctoral student had also thought of the problems that the supervisor has pointed out, being aware of the same insufficiencies, or unclear vague parts:

"I was considering the same part, too." (A doctoral student's email to the supervisor)

Respectful behavior and guidance helps receiving and understanding feedback and advice instead of using energy to resistance.

In a supervision relationship, respect should be reciprocal. From the supervisor's perspective, it is also important that a doctoral student thinks of thanking a supervisor for constructive, beneficial, and innovative comments. This makes a supervisor able and willing to facilitate a doctoral student's journey. Still, respect also involves the realization that the journey is not always easy and straight, and achieving the final goal requires from a supervisor and a doctoral student humbleness and testing of their ideas and thoughts. The major reward is mutual thanking not only verbally but also in a way that they both feel appreciated.

The *caring relationship* during a dissertation process means that the supervisor attends each PhD-student individually and provides a sense of becoming heard and being important. This is particularly important in such a demanding top performances like a dissertation is, because a supervisor cannot predict which factors or which phase will be problematic in a research process for a student. Therefore, constant communication is important for a supervision relationship. Anyone who is seriously writing a doctoral thesis will not mind if a supervisor asks once in a while about the progress of writing. Simplified questions like the following can be deciding factors:

"How are you?," "How have you proceeded?," "Is everything OK?," "Is there anything that I can do for you?," "Should we meet?," or "When can I expect to get your text to read or are you able to continue?"

Based on the data, this kind of activity from the supervisor's side was welcomed by students because they became convinced that the supervisor is there for them, willing to help, and genuinely interested in and concerned over their learning and progress.

“We all have the ability to bring joy—an ear that listens, an eye that sees, a laudatory word, a holding hand.” (Text in a card received from a doctoral student)

Finally, the supervision relationship can be described with the element of *responsibility*. In this context, the responsibility means that the PhD-students are given a degree of control over decisions concerning their learning and progress with their doctoral theses. As mentioned, in a caring supervision relationship, the supervisor’s ability to ask is important, but it is not enough. Although good questions make a student realize the quintessence of the work, these questions will be better concretized if a supervisor is able to suggest alternatives giving a student the responsibility to make decisions:

“What if you concentrated on this...” “Would it be possible to order the theory section in a way that...?” “Would it be better to create this to the background of the research questions..?” “Would you be able to add to the results...?” “Would it be possible to reflect the results merely from the perspective of this theory?” “Try to get more...?” “Would it be better to highlight...?” (The supervisor’s emails to doctoral students)

This kind of supervision provides students with the sense of ownership over their research and they will realize that, eventually, they are responsible for the completion of their theses; they make the top performances happen.

Discussion

Leadership in the supervision of doctoral thesis seemed to have a salient role according to the findings of this study. We have analyzed it through the concept of love-based leadership (cf., Uusiautti, 2013a). In this chapter, we will sum up the results and discuss the relationship and interconnectedness of top performances, ultimate experiences, and love-based leadership in a dissertation process.

According to our analysis, the dissertation process when considered as a manifestation of a top performance and when guided by love-based leadership can lead to the perceived meaningfulness, which actually is one of the basic tenets of positive psychology (Seligman, 2002). Likewise, its connection to flow is evident as shown in the PhD-students’ descriptions of becoming riveted by the dissertation process. This notion is crucial because positive experiences, such as flow, can enhance students’ productivity, engagement (Hakanen, Perhoniemi, & Toppinen-Tanner, 2008), coping and problem-solving skills (Carver & Scheier, 2005; Judge, Locke, & Durham, 1997), and overall well-being (Schunk & Pajares, 2005). Most importantly flow also is involved with one’s skills which also is closely connected with satisfaction and sense of meaningful doing.

In addition, the multidimensional data used in this study, as it highlighted both the PhD-students’ experiences and the supervisor’s perspective, brought up how important it is to recognize one’s strengths. Therefore, action at one’s limits is also a matter of self-awareness and authenticity. If the supervisor wants to find pleasure from leadership in a supervision relationship and act in a love-based manner as a supervisor, he or she has to be ready for self-disclosure and increasing self-awareness (Gardner, Avolio, & Luthans, 2005). This is how an open and confidential relationship with the student can be built. Likewise in caring supervision, the student can be oneself and fully engage to the process knowing that he or she is appreciated and accepted as is. The conclusion is that love-based leadership might contribute to not only to doctoral

students' optimal performances, but also supervisors' work by providing them with positive teaching and supervision experiences, initial excitement, perceived successes, and positive feelings (see also Csikszentmihalyi, 2008; Isen & Reeve, 2006).

According to the ideology of love-based leadership in education, the supervisor can enhance doctoral students' ability to recognize and utilize their own strengths through various love-based practices in the supervision relationship (see, e.g., Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2009). The companionship between a supervisor and post-graduate students is special and significant by nature. The seminars can turn into a "feast" epitomized by supporting the exchange of experiences, posing clarifying questions and perspectives and appreciation. A supervisor's task as "a master of ceremonies" according to the Sokratesian metaphor comes true if the students attain an enriching interaction (see Himanen, 2007). The fundamental assumption is that supervisors as love-based leaders are in a position that they can act as guides, motivators, and organizers of doctoral students' progress (see also Rutledge, 2009) in such ways that are likely to lead students to top performances and enhance their sense of using their abilities to the fullest.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study focused on the elements of top performances from a select point of view introducing a dissertation process as an example of such optimal action at one's limits. As the analyses showed, top performances are sums of many factors, and not just dependent, for example, the individual student's abilities. Actually, support and guidance by the important people surrounding the student seem play almost equally important role. Therefore, we want to conclude the article by discussing how to enhance the emergence of such positive experiences and top performances already in childhood because we believe that this can be the foundation of positive development and willingness to seize challenges—opportunities to act at one's limits—also later in life.

When a human being is able to get the most of his or her resources, he or she is likely to get positive feedback and recognition from others, succeed, and have increase in his or her self-appreciation. This kind of positive cycle lays the foundation to healthy development as it represents the true opportunity of self-fulfillment, and boosts top performances. At its best, education offers a positive environment that enhances the development of children's strengths that are important to survival in the modern world: self-confidence and self-esteem, balanced emotional life, judgment and responsibility, the ability to control one's own behavior and make healthy choices, empathy as well as the ability to respect and appreciate other people represent such features (see Määttä, 2007). Actually, childhood is the optimal time to promote the recognition of children's strengths and building on those strengths (Brown Kirschman, Johnson, Bender, & Roberts, 2009).

Seligman (2011) has surfaced that pupils' flourishing "will be aided by positive education, in which teachers embed the principles of well-being into what they teach, and the depression and anxiety of their students drop and their students' happiness rises" (p. 240). We also consider that by having the emphasis on the positive, by focusing on maintaining and nurturing pupils' resources, and through these action, pursuing to top performances, the competition- and efficiency-oriented world would become much healthier as the expectations could be met with positive strategies (Diener, Lucas, & Napa Scollon, 2006; Locke, 2002).

The conclusion is that love-based practices at school provide positive experiences, initial excitement, and the enjoyment that is called the flow, leading to top performances at its best. Our fast-changing society requires a new kind of professionalism of teachers that answers to this

expectation (Seidl & Friend, 2002; von Wright, 2009). Teachers who use love-based leadership try to find the road to better learning, development, performance, contentment, higher motivation, and the sense of self-efficacy in children—and in older students as well.

Määttä (2012) has divided the elements of a good supervisor into commitment, proficiency, knowledge, and actions. The same features are required of a doctoral student, too. Even the most caring and skillful supervisor cannot do doctoral theses on students' behalf, but they must achieve the top performance by themselves. Still, the symbiosis between the supervisor and doctoral student can be “especially delicate, bruisingly touching, and empowering” (Määttä, 2012, p. 146). Love-based leadership can be the method that could best respond to the sensitive and demanding nature of a dissertation process.

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