



HAPPINESS IS RELEVANT

At a long mahogany conference table, my new consulting client described a major project the organization had just piloted. When they finished the recap I asked “were you *happy* with the outcome?” All eyes fixed on mine, and what was already a serious atmosphere turned downright grim. A quiet young woman gently explained, “we don’t use the word ‘*happy*’ here.” From that day forward, I eliminated the simple, seemingly childish word from my workplace vocabulary. I have toiled ever since not once uttering the shunned word. However, I have begun to reconsider. This article will serve as the official reversal of my policy: I am bringing “*happy*” back. Here is why you should too.

People who are happy are better workers. Their greater energy allows them to work faster and accomplish more. There is a clear relation between positive emotion at work, high productivity, low turnover, and high loyalty. Those are the findings of the renowned psychologist Martin Seligman in his book [Authentic Happiness \(2002\)](#). Given these findings I believe we have an obligation to our firms and businesses to hire employees who are more likely to be happy, to consider whether there are steps we should take to enhance our own happiness and to create office environments conducive to happiness.

According to Seligman, lawyers are unusually unhappy. Despite the prestigious and remunerative nature of the profession, 52 percent of practicing lawyers describe themselves as dissatisfied. Seligman states that one of the principle causes of the demoralization among lawyers is pessimism. While pessimism makes it harder to succeed in many professions, pessimists actually do better at law.

“A prudent perspective enables a good lawyer to see every conceivable snare and catastrophe that might occur in any transaction. The ability to anticipate the whole range of problems and betrayals that nonlawyers are blind to is highly adaptive for the practicing lawyer who can, by so doing, help his clients defend against these farfetched eventualities.” [Authentic Happiness](#), p. 178

This presents a dilemma: we need to be pessimists in order to be effective lawyers, but *happiness* makes us and our staff, more productive. We must find a way to reconcile the the need for skepticism with the need to have a positive outlook. Furthermore, it’s a fair bet that your non-lawyer staff is significantly affected by the lawyers’ outlook, as negativism is as contagious as my children’s recurring bouts of strep throat. “Energy is

highly infectious, and negativity feeds on itself. Leaders have a disproportionate impact on the energy of others.” (The Power of Full Engagement, by Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz (2003)) Think of negativism as a “pebble in the pond” and consider the far-reaching effects of an ugly disposition. Even if you are someone who actually enjoys being negative, you can be sure that most of the people around you do not.

I offer three suggestions on how to manage this dilemma:

- (1) Avoid generalizing pessimism beyond the law itself. Just as many of us aspire to leave our work at the office and our personal problems at home, we need to compartmentalize skepticism and pessimism in a way so as not to have it affect everything we do and say at work. It might be interesting to note during the next week how often your lawyerly skepticism travels to areas of your work life that might benefit from a more open-minded approach. Are you a healthy or harmful skeptic? Through awareness and practice, it is possible to acquire a more optimistic approach.
- (2) Cope with workplace negativity by limiting time you spend with chronically pessimistic people. You won't have complete control over this as reporting structures and project partnerships will dictate with whom you spend time. However, we can usually limit our interactions with these people. You can also identify people with positive outlooks and consciously carve out time to spend with them, because the good news is that a positive outlook is also contagious.
- (3) Recognize that applying happiness principles to your practice means finding ways to use your strengths every day. Seligman defines the “signature strengths” as wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity and love, justice, temperance, and transcendence. His Strengths Survey, which gives detailed feedback about your signature strengths, can be found at <http://www.authentichappiness.com/>. (There are other questionnaires on the website that purport to measure your happiness.) It is important that we craft our jobs in ways that allow us to utilize our strengths as often as possible and to help our staff find ways to utilize their strengths in the performance of their jobs.

Yet another part of the equation is “the wrong side of the bed” syndrome, i.e. what is your happiness starting point when you pass through the door of your office each morning? Do you come out of the gate happy until something goes wrong or do you start out gloomy and wait for some kind of victory to lift your spirits? What kind of positive energy do you contribute to your workplace in terms of recognizing people for their accomplishments and attributes? How enthusiastic are you when exploring new ideas that are crucial to progress? No matter how serious your responsibilities are, an optimistic, up-beat approach can serve you and your organization well. Given the economy, rising unemployment, a hobbled stock market, corporate scandals, and war, being ebullient may be a particular challenge right now. Despite these forces, I am determined to welcome the word “happy” back as a relevant part of my workplace vocabulary. Perhaps you should too.

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