

HBR.ORG

# Harvard Business Review



JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2012

REPRINT R1201G

**SPOTLIGHT ON HAPPINESS**

# Positive Intelligence

**Three ways individuals can cultivate their own  
sense of well-being and set themselves up to  
succeed** *by Shawn Achor*

# Positive Intelligence

**Three ways individuals can cultivate their own sense of well-being and set themselves up to succeed**

by Shawn Achor

In July 2010 Burt's Bees, a personal-care products company, was undergoing enormous change as it began a global expansion into 19 new countries. In this kind of high-pressure situation, many leaders pester their deputies with frequent meetings or flood their in-boxes with urgent demands. In doing so, managers jack up everyone's anxiety level, which activates the portion of the brain that processes threats—the amygdala—and steals resources from the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for effective problem solving.

Burt's Bees's then-CEO, John Replegle, took a different tack. Each day, he'd send out an e-mail praising a team member for work related to the global rollout. He'd interrupt his own presentations on the launch to remind his managers to talk with their teams about the company's values. He asked me to facilitate a three-hour session with employees on happiness in the midst of the expansion effort. As one member of the senior team told me a year later, Replegle's emphasis on fostering positive leadership kept his managers engaged and cohesive as they successfully made the transition to a global company.

That outcome shouldn't surprise us. Research shows that when people work with a positive mind-set, performance on nearly every level—productivity, creativity, engagement—improves. Yet happiness is perhaps the most misunderstood driver of performance. For one, most people believe that success precedes happiness. "Once I get a promotion, I'll be

happy," they think. Or, "Once I hit my sales target, I'll feel great." But because success is a moving target—as soon as you hit your target, you raise it again—the happiness that results from success is fleeting.

In fact, it works the other way around: People who cultivate a positive mind-set perform better in the face of challenge. I call this the "happiness advantage"—every business outcome shows improvement when the brain is positive. I've observed this effect in my role as a researcher and lecturer in 48 countries on the connection between employee happiness and success. And I'm not alone: In a meta-analysis of 225 academic studies, researchers Sonja Lyubomirsky, Laura King, and Ed Diener found strong evidence of directional causality between life satisfaction and successful business outcomes.

Another common misconception is that our genetics, our environment, or a combination of the two determines how happy we are. To be sure, both factors have an impact. But one's general sense of well-being is surprisingly malleable. The habits you cultivate, the way you interact with coworkers, how you think about stress—all these can be managed to increase your happiness and your chances of success.

## Develop New Habits

Training your brain to be positive is not so different from training your muscles at the gym. Recent research on neuroplasticity—the ability of the brain to change even in adulthood—reveals that as you develop new habits, you rewire the brain.

Engaging in one brief positive exercise every day for as little as three weeks can have a lasting impact, my research suggests. For instance, in December 2008, just before the worst tax season in decades, I worked with tax managers at KPMG in New York and New Jersey to see if I could help them become happier. (I am an optimistic person, clearly.) I asked them to choose one of five activities that correlate with positive change:



**ARTWORK** Yue Minjun, *Laughing Painter*  
2003, oil on canvas, 70 x 50 cm



**Shawn Achor** is the CEO of Good Think and the author of *The Happiness Advantage* (Crown Business, 2010).



- Jot down three things they were grateful for.
- Write a positive message to someone in their social support network.
- Meditate at their desk for two minutes.
- Exercise for 10 minutes.
- Take two minutes to describe in a journal the most meaningful experience of the past 24 hours.

The participants performed their activity every day for three weeks. Several days after the training concluded, we evaluated both the participants and a control group to determine their general sense of well-being. How engaged were they? Were they depressed? On every metric, the experimental group's scores were significantly higher than the control group's. When we tested both groups again, four months later, the experimental group still showed significantly higher scores in optimism and life satisfaction. In fact, participants' mean score on the life satisfaction scale—a metric widely accepted to be one of the greatest predictors of productivity and happiness at work—moved from 22.96 on a 35-point scale before the training to 27.23 four months later, a significant increase. Just one quick exercise a day kept these tax managers happier for months after the training program had ended. Happiness had become habitual. (See the sidebar “Happiness and the Bottom Line.”)

### **Help Your Coworkers**

Of the five activities described above, the most effective may be engaging positively with people in your social support network. Strong social support correlates with an astonishing number of desirable outcomes. For instance, research by Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Timothy Smith, and Bradley Layton shows that high levels of social support predict longevity as reliably as regular exercise does, and low social support is as damaging as high blood pressure.

The benefits of social support are not just physical. In a study of 1,648 students at Harvard that I



For more on positive intelligence, see Shawn Achor's blog series on happiness and performance in the workplace at <http://blogs.hbr.org>.

## Happiness and the Bottom Line

For companies, happy employees mean better bottom-line results. Employees who score low in "life satisfaction," a rigorously tested and widely accepted metric, stay home an average of 1.25 more days a month, a 2008 study by Gallup Healthways shows. That translates into a decrease in productivity of 15 days a year.

In a study of service departments, Jennifer George and Kenneth Bettenhausen found that employees who score high in life satisfaction are significantly more likely to receive high ratings from customers. In addition, researchers at Gallup found that retail stores that scored higher on employee life satisfaction generated \$21 more in earnings per square foot of space than the other stores, adding \$32 million in additional profits for the whole chain.

conducted with Phil Stone and Tal Ben-Shahar, we found that social support was the greatest predictor of happiness during periods of high stress. In fact, the correlation between happiness and Zimet's social support scale (the academic measure we used to assess students' positive engagement with their social networks) was a whopping .71—for comparison, the correlation between smoking and cancer is .37.

That study focused on how much social support the students *received*. But in follow-on research I conducted in March 2011, I found that even more important to sustained happiness and engagement was the amount of social support the students *provided*. For example, how often does a student help others when they are overwhelmed with work? How often does he initiate social interactions on the job? Social support providers—people who picked up slack for others, invited coworkers to lunch, and organized office activities—were not only 10 times more likely to be engaged at work than those who kept to themselves; they were 40% more likely to get a promotion.

How does social support work in practice as a tool for employee happiness? Ochsner Health System, a large health care provider that I work with, uses an approach it calls the "10/5 Way" to increase social support among employees and patients. We educated 11,000 employees, leaders, and physicians about the impact of social support on the patient experience, and asked them to modify their behavior. When employees walk within 10 feet of another person in the hospital, they must make eye contact and smile. When they walk within 5 feet, they must say hello. Since the introduction of 10/5, Ochsner has experienced an increase in unique patient visits, a 5% increase in patients' likelihood to recommend the organization, and a significant improvement in medical-practice provider scores. Social support appears to lead to not only happier employees but also more-satisfied clients.

### Change Your Relationship with Stress

Stress is another central factor contributing to people's happiness at work. Many companies offer training on how to mitigate stress, focusing on its negative health effects. The problem is, people then get stressed-out about being stressed-out.

It's important to remember that stress has an upside. When I was working with Pfizer in February 2011, I asked senior managers to list the five experiences that most shaped who they are today. Nearly all the experiences they wrote down involved great

stress—after all, few people grow on vacation. Pick any biography and you'll see the same thing: Stress is not just an obstacle to growth; it can be the fuel for it.

Your attitude toward stress can dramatically change how it affects you. In a study Alia Crum, Peter Salovey, and I conducted at UBS in the midst of the banking crisis and massive restructuring, we asked managers to watch one of two videos, the first depicting stress as debilitating to performance and the second detailing the ways in which stress enhances the human brain and body. When we evaluated the employees six weeks later, we found that the individuals who had viewed the "enhancing" video scored higher on the Stress Mindset Scale—that is, they saw stress as enhancing, rather than diminishing, their performance. And those participants experienced a significant drop in health problems and a significant increase in happiness at work.

Stress is an inevitable part of work. The next time you're feeling overwhelmed, try this exercise: Make a list of the stresses you're under. Place them into two groups—the ones you can control (like a project or your in-box) and those you can't (the stock market, housing prices). Choose one stress that you can control and come up with a small, concrete step you can take to reduce it. In this way you can nudge your brain back to a positive—and productive—mind-set.

**IT'S CLEAR** that increasing your happiness improves your chances of success. Developing new habits, nurturing your coworkers, and thinking positively about stress are good ways to start. ♥

HBR Reprint R1201G

### THE PERFORMANCE CONNECTION

# 3x

In a sweeping meta-analysis of 225 academic studies, Sonja Lyubomirsky, Laura King, and Ed Diener found that happy employees have, on average, 31% higher productivity; their sales are 37% higher; their creativity is three times higher.

# 40%

My research shows that employees who score the highest on providing social support are 40% more likely to receive a promotion in the following year, report significantly higher job satisfaction, and feel 10 times more engaged by their jobs than people who score in the lowest quartile.