

Science sheet – Happiness

Scientists define happiness as not just experiencing positive emotions but also requires a number of other factors. Happiness includes positive emotions but also pursuit of purpose.

Martin Seligman one of the pioneers of positive psychology breaks happiness into three elements: pleasure, engagement and purpose. His studies confirm that to pursue only pleasure reaps only part of the benefits happiness brings. When people pursue all three they can be said to flourish and this may be a better term in sceptical business cultures.

For many years scientist believed happiness was an inborn trait, you either were or were not happy and your level of happiness was largely set; determined by an hereditary “set point”. This like a number of other brain myths has now been found to be incorrect.

Happiness includes positive emotions but also pursuit of purpose. This has been described as positivity.

Barbara Fredrickson who has for many years studied the impact of positivity says the ten most common positive emotions are: joy, gratitude, serenity, interest, hope, pride, amusement, inspiration, awe and love.

Fredrickson’s “Broaden and Build” theory is evidence of the positive effects of that company was missing out on.

Fredrickson and colleague Marcial Losada developed a “positivity calculus” theory, drawn from fluid dynamics, a subfield of physics in a 2005 paper in the journal American Psychologist. They suggest that flourishing needs a ratio of 3 to 1. Fredrickson has gone on to find that this ratio holds true for successful teams, health, relationships and seems to be a good predictor of a happy culture.

She and others has found that fear and negative emotions narrow focus, taking resources away from the executive brain areas responsible for problem solving, planning and goals pursuit.

Experiencing positive emotions floods the brain with dopamine and serotonin chemicals that make us feel good but also activate the brains learning centres. This helps us organise information, remember it for longer and retrieve it faster as well as make and sustain more neuro connections allowing for more creative and skilled analysis and problem solving. This gives people an edge in the workplace.

The happiness formula at work

Most companies follow the formula: if you work hard, you will be more successful, and then you will be happy. But researching top performers at a number of major institutions like Harvard, the world’s largest banks, and Fortune 500 companies, psychologist Shawn Achor discovered a different pattern According to his research the above formula is scientifically backward. A decade of research shows that training your brain to be positive at work leads to success.

Research on the impact of positive emotions and positive work cultures

Research conducted by the Wall Street Journal and the iOpener Institute. Happy employees:

- Stay twice as long in their jobs as their least happy colleagues
- Believe they are achieving their potential twice as much

- Spend 65% more time feeling energized
- Are 58% more likely to go out of the way to help a colleague
- Identify 98% more strongly with the values of their organisation
- Are 186% more likely to recommend their organisation to a friend

In other research by Lyubomirsky (quoted by Achor) ***it was found that happiness equated to 31% more productivity and 37% better sales.***

Achor says 75% of job success is predicted not by intelligence, but by optimism, social support and the ability to manage energy and stress in a positive way.

Neuro-economist Paul Zak has developed a formula he calls the Ofactor theory of organisational design which states that Trust x Purpose = Joy or happiness. His research has found:

- That trust and developing a strong sense of purpose have a moderate correlation with each other. Organisations that achieve both clearly have happier, more engaged employees. Indeed, Trust x Purpose is positively and highly correlated with how much happiness people reported at work. This result was statistically significant, having a less than 1-in-10,000 chance of occurring due to random causes.
- Zak's team also tested whether happiness led to more effective working. They asked people to do cognitively taxing work tasks which had to be completed accurately and quickly for payment to be made. Comparing those in the top quartile of happiness with those in the bottom quartile, the top group was 5% more productive. People with high happiness scores were also able to reduce stress at work 200% better than those with lower scores. The result showed in their cardiovascular system.

More on this research

Barbara Frederickson <https://www.positivityratio.com/>

The pursuit of happiness <http://www.pursuit-of-happiness.org/history-of-happiness/barb-fredrickson/>

Video. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ds_9Df6dK7c

Video 2 minute tips https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5_BFsWfMkJ4

Video Dan Gilbert. The surprising science of happiness
https://www.ted.com/talks/dan_gilbert_asks_why_are_we_happy

Video Shawn Achor: the happy secret to better work.
https://www.ted.com/talks/shawn_achor_the_happy_secret_to_better_work

Video Matthieu Ricard The habits of happiness
https://www.ted.com/talks/matthieu_ricard_on_the_habits_of_happiness