

231 views | Jul 17, 2019, 09:00am

Happiness: A Contagion You Won't Regret Spreading At Work



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I'm not obsessed with metrics, but I have noticed that my most viewed *Forbes* [article](#) yet happens to focus on promoting employee happiness. Without reading too much into a single metric, it does appear to confirm my sense that today's leaders want their employees to be happier. But exactly how does one start to realize this goal?

Many leaders appear convinced that happiness necessarily starts by giving the green light for a new HR wellness initiative. Such initiatives can be effective, but they certainly aren't the beginning or end of workplace happiness.

Promoting happiness on one's team and within one's organization ideally starts instead with one's own happiness.

Understanding Happiness

Happiness has long been understood in relation to two components: hedonia and eudaimonia. In psychology, these concepts are generally boiled down to pleasure and meaning. In the workplace, this means that to be happy, one not only needs to experience pleasure in their work but also feel like what they are doing matters. In essence, happiness is about finding that sweet spot between joy and achieving a strong sense of social value or purpose. But happiness isn't simply something that happens in the social world.

Parts of the brain, including the amygdala and hippocampus, and certain neurotransmitters, including dopamine, help control happiness. Thus, happiness is a state of mind that is affected by external factors (e.g., working conditions). But when we feel happy, the feeling itself is the result of something occurring on a neurological level.

The real challenge is figuring out how to spread the joy around.

Happiness Is Contagious

When someone smiles, it's natural to smile back. This, as psychologist Silvan Tomkins [noted](#), is just one very basic way in which happiness is contagious. The problem is that negative emotions such as fear and depression also appear to be contagious. The obvious way to foster happiness in those around you, then, is to first find happiness yourself.

Since Tomkins' research on emotions in the mid-20th century, the contagion hypothesis has gained more support. In the early 1990s, Elaine Hatfield and

her colleagues carried out a [study](#) that found our emotions trigger similar emotions in those around us.

More recently, James K. Hazy and Richard E. Boyatzis reached a similar conclusion. But their research also highlights the specific ways this is especially good for organizations. Hazy and Boyatzis's [2015 study found](#), “through emotional contagion, a proto-organizing state emerges within the population, and this is the mechanism that enables coordinated action, including rational planning activities and the implementation of action plans.”

This Summer, Spread The Joy And Reap The Rewards

Happiness, as suggested so far, spreads from person to person. It follows, then, that happier leaders lead happier teams. They also reap some notable rewards.

One of the first studies to substantiate the link between [happiness and productivity](#) was a 2015 study carried out by a team of economists at the University of **Warwick**. In four controlled experiments, the team found that after a “happiness shock,” workers were more productive. The happiness shock helped workers switch their attention from worrying to solving problems. This, in turn, spiked productivity.

A *Harvard Business Review* [article](#) by Emma Seppälä and Kim Cameron highlights similar findings and illustrates how happiness can spread not only from leaders to employees but from frontline employees to customers. As Seppälä and Cameron explain, “When you know a leader is committed to operating from a set of values based on interpersonal kindness, he or she sets the tone for the entire organization.”

Seppälä and Cameron go on to explain precisely how this chain reaction works: “A positive work climate also leads to a positive workplace culture which, again, boosts commitment, engagement, and performance. Happier employees make for not only a more congenial workplace but for improved customer service. As a consequence, a happy and caring culture at work not

only improves employee well-being and productivity but also improved client health outcomes and satisfaction.”

Looking for a summer project that will not only make you happier but also have a great impact on your teams' productivity and business results? Try taking time out to focus on what makes you happy.

Remember, happiness is about finding that sweet spot between taking pleasure in what you are doing and feeling a strong sense of purpose. But the activity doesn't need to be something monumental to promote happiness. It could be a long weekend unplugged and outdoors, more time with friends and family or pursuing an old hobby you've given up due to lack of time. Once you cultivate your own happiness, carry your positive energy back to your team or organization. There is growing evidence that the potential returns are too significant for leaders to ignore.

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