

Happiness paves the road to prosperity

by Martyn Newman

People who feel better work better – so making people happy makes good sense

In today's business world – driven by competitive advantage – success, wealth and happiness can easily be relegated to a wishful aspiration. But as we look for ways to succeed in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, can the ancient goal of happiness bring us both personal wellbeing and business prosperity?

Three decades of research has established clear links between specific emotional skills and our health, wealth and wellbeing.

We have found that high levels of emotional capital lead to increased productivity and, as many studies show, happy people are more creative, solve problems better and more quickly, live longer and enjoy high levels of leadership influence.

In other words, when people feel better, they perform better.

But everyone experiences happiness differently. Some people describe moments of deep peacefulness in nature. Others describe the excitement of anticipating a long-awaited event such as the birth of a child or a career success. Still others talk about the thrill of doing something meaningful for others.

In all these experiences there seem to be two conditions – the feeling of peaceful, positive emotions and the absence of inner conflict.

But how can we feel more happy more of the time? Three big findings have emerged from the happiness research and they may surprise you.

First, external conditions and other general factors are much less influential than you may imagine. Take money, for example. A number of studies have shown that once your essential needs are met, additional income contributes minimally to raising your level of satisfaction with life.

So for most of us, it seems that money can buy many things, but happiness isn't one of them.

What about your IQ? Are smarter people happier? Apparently not, since the research suggests neither education nor a high IQ leads to greater happiness.

What about the excitement of being young? No, in fact older people are more generally satisfied with their lives than young people, and they're less inclined to depressive moods.

Being in a relationship? A complex picture: people in partnerships are generally happier than singles, but certain studies suggest that this may be because they were happier in the first place.

Taken together, these outward conditions account for no more than 10 to 15 percent of the factors that contribute to satisfaction.

Second, although there is some level of genetic predisposition for being happy or unhappy, our future life satisfaction is not set in stone.

We know that genes influence such traits as having a positive, easygoing personality, dealing well with stress and feeling low levels of anxiety and depression. However, a systematic study of 4000 sets of twins, in which life satisfaction data was compared for identical versus fraternal twins, concluded that only about 50 per cent of life satisfaction comes from genetic programming.

As Aristotle wrote: "Happiness is the consequence of a deed. Happiness isn't a coincidental or divine gift, but is given to him who makes optimal use of the available possibilities."

In other words, our emotional wellbeing is more in our control than we ever imagined.

This view is consistent with the third discovery in the research – we can exert considerable influence on our experience of happiness and unhappiness by the way we live and think, how we perceive life's events and how we react to them.

Two fairly recent insights for brain research provide startling new insights into how this works.

One concerns the part of the brain that produce a sense of wellbeing: our brains have special circuitry for enjoyment, pleasure and euphoria. We have a happiness system. Negative and positive emotions are constantly opposing each other. We can take the edge off the negative feelings, however, by directly awakening positive feelings. In other words, we often have more freedom than we realise to improve our perception of a situation, even when we can't directly change the situation itself.

The other still more surprising discovery is that the adult brain continues to develop and change. These changes are triggered by thoughts, but even more by emotions.

Therefore, much as we can learn a new sports skill, we can train our natural aptitude for positive feelings and increase our capacity for emotional wealth.

A number of studies show that emotional intelligence significantly differentiates happy people from unhappy ones, and happiness goes hand in hand with several emotional and social skills.

The first is self-reliance, which is the emotional power to accept responsibility, back our personal judgment, and be self-reliant in planning and making decisions.

This skill enables you to have the courage to do what matters to you. Emotional wealth in the long run has less to do with finding the best idea, organisational system or business model than with discovering what matters to us as individuals and having the courage to back ourselves.

Unhappy people tend to believe themselves to be at the mercy of fate. But extraordinary people, teams and organisations are simply ordinary people doing extraordinary things that matter to them.

Self-confidence is another key emotional and social skill. Emotional capitalists don't rely on the approval of others. They have the courage to take the initiative despite social pressures.

Paradoxically, there is a natural lack of ego I genuine self-confidence. This creates a peacefulness that cannot be threatened by external circumstances or inner fears.

I call this the Mandela Model. During his captivity Nelson Mandela was threatened many times and offered incentives that would compromise his integrity. After 27 years, he emerged to lead his nation while demonstrating a remarkable degree of humility and emotional wellbeing.

Using optimism as a strategy can also be an effective way of dealing with difficulties and sensing opportunities. Emotional capitalists look on the brighter side of life and sense opportunities even in the face of adversity. The brain's expectation system releases a sense of anticipation as soon as we set a goal, and we experience triumph when we reach it. Thus, optimistic activity of this kind almost always leads to positive feelings.

Optimistic people are also resilient. They often have a history of significant failures, losses and bitter disappointments but display a remarkable ability to bounce back. But if we give in to negative emotions, like disappointment or sadness, we not only fail to ease them, we reinforce them.

Repeated emotions – like joy or sadness – act like drops of water on a rock. Each one evaporates quickly, but over time, many drops carve out a channel.

Fortunately, it is not only negative emotions that can become entrenched with regular use – optimism, too, can become a habit.

Love it or lose it, emotional capitalists are passionate and know how to manage their reserves of emotional energy.

Loving what you do is a necessary condition to maintaining your emotional wellbeing. Passionate people spend twice as much time thinking about what they've accomplished, how achievable the task ahead is and how capable they are of achieving it.

The persistent frustration of not loving what you do makes you a difficult character to be around – and has been clinically proven to damage your health. When you take a moment to shift your attention from the stressful stuff to something uplifting and apparently unrelated (particularly if it's one of your passions) your state of mind improves.

So, with organisations focused on just surviving the downturn, is happiness something that business leaders should be focusing time and energy on, and can we learn to be happier?

The most fundamental finding from the science of happiness is that almost every person feels happier when they're with other people, especially when they are contributing to others.

Practicing kindness, compassion and other virtues lifts your stocks of emotional capital. Giving makes you feel good about yourself and it creates meaning in your life. You have a sense of purpose and feel more connected to others.

Happiness makes you more effective because building your emotional capital goes hand in hand with your capacity to maintain peace of mind. When your mind is peaceful, your mood lifts, you take in information effectively and your mind becomes agile and creative. A consistently positive mood also enables you to foster positive feelings in the people whose co-operation and support you need.

Happiness is good for business.

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