Happy leaders start with themselves

I know I'm fortunate to live an extraordinary life, and that most people would assume my business success, and the wealth that comes with it, have brought me happiness. But they haven't; in fact it's the reverse. I am successful, wealthy and connected because I am happy.

- Richard Branson

If you want to make others happier, you have to start with yourself. As Charlie Kim, the CEO of Next Jump, told me: "You can't give to others, what you don't have yourself."

Imagine a leader who genuinely loves her job. She is engaged in the work itself and enjoys doing it. She likes her people, knows them well and sees and appreciates their qualities. She has a clear sense that her work is meaningful and makes a positive difference in the world. She is not perfectly happy every second of every day (no one is), but she comes to work most days with passion, enthusiasm and a smile on her face. Most days, she leaves the workplace fulfilled and energized after another great work day. While she loves her job, she doesn't work herself to death, making sure that there's always time for her family, friends and hobbies.

This is what being a leader should be like and it's not only good for the leader herself, it has a direct influence on employee happiness and business results. Research shows that happy leaders:

- Make better decisions
- Prioritize scarce resources better
- Manage their time better
- Have more empathy for others
- Are more optimistic
- Make their employees happier
- Achieve more business success

That last point is crucial. Many people think that happiness comes from being successful. Their belief is that "I will work really hard, that will make me successful in my leadership career and success will make me happy." While there is some truth to that, research shows that the link is much stronger in the other direction: People who are happy at work on average achieve more career success and higher lifetime incomes. So leaders don't have to choose between success and happiness. It's about realizing that the two go hand in hand.

The aim of this chapter is not to tell you how to be happy. Everyone is different and what works for other people, might not work for you at all. The goal here is to show you, that you should value your own happiness and then to give you some inspiration for things that might work.

Get happy at work yourself

A 2005 study of health care workers by researchers from the University of Minnesota found that[1]:

Managers who were enthusiastic positively affected their employees' emotions.

Employees of unhappy managers experienced less happiness, enthusiasm and optimism, and experienced a slight increase in irritation, anger and anxiety.

A manager's leadership behaviors affect employees' emotions throughout the workday, even

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1   twincities.bizjournals.com/twincities/stories/2006/02/20/daily30.html

when the employees are not interacting with the managers.

If you as a leader are currently not happy at work, that is where you must start. As long as you are unhappy at work, you are likely to bring everyone else down through emotional contagion (see page XX). Even if you can hypothetically avoid spreading your misery to others (which is hard enough in itself) a situation where you spread happiness around you while remaining unhappy yourself, is just not sustainable.

Furthermore, not only will your unhappiness at work infect those around you in the workplace, it can have terribly negative effects on your private life. Studies show that people who are unhappy at work are:

- Less happy in life

- Less happy in their marriage/relationship

- More prone to stress and depression

- More at risk for heart disease and strokes

- More at risk for some forms of cancer

Simply put, being unhappy at work can ruin your private life and your health and it can ultimately kill you. So if you are not happy at work, there are two choices open to you:

1. Do something to become happier in your current position

2. Find a different job, where you can be happy

The only option not open to you is to do nothing.

The second of these choices is the tough one, primarily because there are strong social biases against quitting. But if you've honestly tried to make yourself happy at work and it just does not seem to work, then it may be time to move on.

If you're happy and you know it...

However, leaders are generally happier than their employees. In 2014 the Pew Research Center found that in the US, 69% of bosses were "very satisfied" with their jobs but only 48% of workers said the same thing. When the survey looked at home life, the difference was still there, but noticeably smaller: 83% of bosses describe themselves as "very satisfied" with their family situation compared to 74% of workers[2].

Why would leaders be happier? They work longer hours on average, have more responsibility and are more socially isolated than employees? Shouldn't that make them more stressed and less happy Or is it just that managers make more money and that makes them happier?

A European study based on data from 2006/7 showed some of the answers. It first agreed that there is a "substantial satisfaction gap between those holding managerial positions and workers." It then concludes that the difference is largely due to the fact that leaders have more autonomy, more influence over the firm's decision and more opportunities to learn[3]. Once you control for these factors, the satisfaction gap between managers and workers almost disappears.

So leaders enjoy more freedom and control and that on average makes them happier than their employees. However, many leaders are afraid to show that they're happy. They feel that leaders shouldn't be happy - they should be *serious*, *competent* and *professional*.

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2 http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/01/09/why-its-great-to-be-the-boss/

3 http://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/bitstream/JRC59720/reqno_jrc59720_managers_happier_eur_report_final.pdf%5B1%5D.pdf

So if you as a leader are already happy, why not make an effort to show it? You can do things like:

- Smile and be positive
- See and appreciate the good things in the workplace
- See and appreciate the good qualities in your people
- Express optimism

I'm *not* asking you to fake being happy. As we saw on page Error: Reference source not found, that actually backfires. Find your own genuine and authentic way to show happiness.

Move

Most of us spend most of the work day sitting down. We sit at our desks, we sit in meetings, we sit down at lunch and we sit down for seminars, phone calls, orientations and just about anything else that goes on during a typical work week. A NY Times article reported that this gives us:

> *...an increased risk of obesity, diabetes, heart disease, a variety of cancers and an early death. In other words, irrespective of whether you exercise vigorously, sitting for long periods is bad for you.*

We all knew that sitting down all day is bad for you, but I at least thought that you could offset this with exercise outside of work. I was wrong.

The article goes on to list two reasons why sitting down is so bad for your health. First, it's passive which means your body burns very few calories while you sit. Just standing up activates your system to a much larger degree and burns more energy. But it doesn't stop there. Apparently:

> *When you spend long periods sitting, your body actually does things that are bad for you. Actively contracting muscles produce a whole suite of substances that have a beneficial effect on how the body uses and stores sugars and fats.*

There's science to back this up:

> *A study of people who sit for many hours found that those who took frequent small breaks — standing up to stretch or walk down the corridor — had smaller waists and better profiles for sugar and fat metabolism than those who did their sitting in long, uninterrupted chunks.*

Moving is also great for your mind[4], giving you:

- Improved concentration
- Sharper memory
- Faster learning
- Prolonged mental stamina
- Enhanced creativity
- Lower stress
- Improved mood

Leaders who are healthy are more likely to be happy, but it's important to get this straight: The science does not show that you must run a marathon every day. The main health benefits actually come from moving a little bit throughout the day.

While actual exercise is also good for you, don't just do it because you have to. Find a form of

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4   https://hbr.org/2014/10/regular-exercise-is-part-of-your-job

exercise that you truly enjoy that you can do together with others. One researcher gave this recommendation[5]:

> *We need to have people do things that they absolutely love, that bring them great joy and pride and build their self-confidence, and things that make them feel less alone and more a part of a larger community working on something that all participants value.*

Sleep

> *"I'm a huge advocate for sleep, and I prioritize it the same way I would prioritize going to the gym and seeing my friends. I aim for eight hours a night but probably get closer to seven. It's so hard because it's the thing that seems the easiest to sacrifice."*
>
> *- Mana Ionescu, president of Lightspan Digital, a Chicago-based digital marketing agency[6].*

Some leaders subscribe to a macho ideal that sleep is for wimps. They may brag about how little sleep they're getting as if it's something to be proud of, when in reality sleep deprivation has tremendous costs[7]:

> *Sleep deprivation is associated with considerable social, financial, and health-related costs. Cognitive functions particularly affected by sleep loss include psychomotor and cognitive speed, vigilant and executive attention, working memory, and higher cognitive abilities.*
>
> *Chronic sleep-restriction experiments—which model the kind of sleep loss experienced by many individuals with sleep fragmentation and premature sleep curtailment due to disorders and lifestyle—demonstrate that cognitive deficits accumulate to severe levels over time without full awareness by the affected individual.*

About 1% of the population are genetically predisposed to need very little sleep, but you are probably not one of them. In fact, as the quote above shows, sleep deprivation may be hurting you directly, without you even being aware of it. This has direct implications for leaders.

Leaders who sleep well, lead well. This is the direct finding from a small but fascinating study on sleep quality in leaders[8]. Each morning for two weeks, 88 leaders filled out a survey on how long and how well they'd slept the previous night. Their employees filled out a different survey at the end of the work day about any abusive behavior from their boss and their work engagement that day. One of the researchers behind the study, Cristopher M. Barnes, sums it up like this:

> *Although most of us have some appreciation that our own sleep influences our own behaviors and outcomes, not many people would expect someone else's sleep to influence one's own behavior. But this is precisely what we found; leader sleep quality influenced subordinate work engagement. Thus, if leaders want their subordinates to be truly engaged, they should start by looking at their own sleep.*

Charlie Kim, the CEO of IT company Next Jump takes this so seriously that he's introduced sleep during the work day[9]:

> *Most company executives would say that they are not responsible for helping how much sleep an employee gets — that's a personal issue. We at Next Jump feel the opposite.*

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5   https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs11002-014-9301-6#page-1

6   http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/02/17/importance-of-sleep_n_6697650.html

7   https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3564638/

8   https://hbr.org/2014/11/research-your-abusive-boss-is-probably-an-insomniac

9   http://www.huffingtonpost.com/charlie-kim/sleep-is-a-companys-probl_b_9668834.html

We saw that as our leadership development programs grew (and people gained more responsibility), people couldn't sleep - they simply couldn't shut their minds off. The dynamic was clear — more senior, more responsibility... less sleep.

We tried nap rooms but found they didn't work. The availability of a welcoming bed didn't address the main problem of why staff members weren't able to sleep... they couldn't shut their minds off.

In the last six months we experimented to find a different solution and we have now rolled out a SLEEP CLASS across all of our offices: New York, Boston, San Francisco and London. We hold a daily 30-minute class from 2:30-3:00pm that has the impact of two hours of sleep.

The message for leaders is clear:

- Make sure you get enough sleep - most people need 7-8 hours. Go to bed earlier, get up later or find time to sleep during the day, whatever works best for you.

- Sleep better. I won't try tell you how - it's different for everyone. Experiment with ways to improve your sleep quality.

Practice gratitude

As we saw on page XX, one of the keys to happiness is to appreciate the good things we already have. This makes perfect sense; if a person never appreciates the good things they have, it doesn't matter how many good things they have, because they're always focused on getting more, rather than on feeling grateful for what they have.

While there is no research to support this, it does seem like many leaders fall into the particular trap. They see themselves as *ambitious*, *driven* and *competitive*, so while they may work hard to achieve certain goals and results, they never seem to enjoy them once they have them. Instead, their focus is constantly on the next goal, i.e. on what they *don' have*.

For some its even a point of pride. Old-style leaders proudly say things like "I am never satisfied. I always want more and that ambition is the key to my success." This is clearly misguided for two reasons. First of all, what's the point of achieving success, if one never enjoys it but is always just driven to want *more*?

Secondly, these leaders fall into the "suffering leads to success" trap (see page XX), when we know that happy people in fact are more successful on average.

So practice becoming aware of and feeling grateful for the good things in your work life. Here are some ways to do it:

- Every Friday afternoon, make a list of 3-5 good things that happened at work.

- Think of someone who has helped you grow personally or professionally at work and call or write to thank that person.

- Think of someone you really enjoy working with. Thank that person.

- Make a list of five things you like about your job.

- Think of the best leader you've ever worked for. Thank that person.

Maintain your relationships

As we've seen again and again (going all the way back to Epicurus) humans are social beings. No one is happy in isolation and even introverts are generally happier, when they're around other

people.

Many people think that being a leader automatically means cutting yourself off from others. "It's cold at the top," is a classic bone-headed maxim. "You can't make friends at work," is another. A Norwegian study of 3,000 managers exposed how wrong that is, concluding[10]:

> *It is worth noting that managers experience significantly less stress when they feel they have a good relationship to their employees, and the employees show a positive conduct and confidence in their managers.*

> *"The best thing a manager can do to prevent work stress, is to develop good relationships with the employees at work," Astrid M. Richardsen recommends.*

One of the most important things you can do as a leader is to have great relations at work and in your private life. Having deep, loving, long-lasting relationships outside of work with your spouse/partner, friends, children, parent and wider family is crucial to your own happiness. Too many leaders sacrifice love on the altar of business success.

Get advice

When I met Jiři Halousek, the CEO and founder of IT company Iresoft in the Czech Republic, he had a startling admission: "Three years ago, I was an asshole." He explained that he used to be a really hardnosed, unpleasant, demanding leader who made his employees and himself miserable - but never realized it himself.

Finally one of his friends suggested that he get a coach and, reluctantly, he did. The first few sessions were tough because he essentially didn't want to do it, but gradually Jiři came to see the value of the process and see how he could change his behavior for the better.

He explained the results like this: "I am now much happier and relaxed at work, my employees are happier and more productive and I don't feel completely isolated in the company like all the responsibility is on my shoulders alone. Oh, and the company is doing much better and growing much faster."

Changing behaviors is much easier if you get some help from a good coach, mentor, therapist or similar who can help you define your goals and make sure you act constructively to achieve them.

Stop and think

When Teresa Amabile, a professor at Harvard Business School and Steven Kramer, a psychologist and researcher, conducted a big research project on how happiness at work affects productivity by making subjects keep a journal of their work life. Every day, the subjects would get an email with some questions about their day. One question asked people to briefly report one event that stood out in their minds from the workday. Here's what they found[11]:

> *Although this question simply asked for an event—a concrete description of something specific that happened and who was involved—we found that, very often, people didn't stop there. They told us, sometimes in great detail, about their perceptions of the event and the thoughts that it engendered. They told us about how the event made them feel. And sometimes they told us how it affected their motivation and performance that day.*

Analyzing the data they gathered clearly showed Amabile and Kramer how our emotions affect our productivity, creativity and resilience, but there was an additional accidental finding: *Journaling*

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10 https://www.bi.edu/research/business-review/articles/2014/08/less-stress-when-work-relationships-are-good/

11 https://hbr.org/2007/05/inner-work-life-understanding-the-subtext-of-business-performance

itself has some very positive effects.[12]

Sarah Kaus, the founder of a company called S'Well that makes insulated drinking bottles, explains what she gets out of keeping a journal:

> *Journaling about work has given me the focus to identify my strengths and the activities that bring me the greatest joy. I have gleaned many lessons about where I can be most engaged and therefore most successful in the workplace. Journaling has also given me patience and sharpened my ability to plan.*
>
> *I am always encouraged to look back and know how far I have come in a year's time, and how major obstacles seem to become minor speed bumps in hindsight. This record gives me great patience and perspective when new challenges come my way. Even now as a very busy entrepreneur, I can't imagine not taking a few moments at the end of each day to record in my journal the progress made and my hopes and plans for the next phases of success.*

Leaders are busy almost by definition. I've met leaders whose every moment for the next three weeks has already been booked for meetings and work, leaving no free time for reflection and thought.

In the excellent article "In Praise of Slack: Time Is of the Essence" from The Academy of Management Executives M. B. Lawson writes about the importance of having time during your work day that is not already taken up with tasks:

> *Increasingly complex systems and technologies require more, not less, time for monitoring and processing information. Future demands for strategic flexibility and for integrating learning and knowledge throughout organizations highlight the need to reexamine the importance of time in organizational work – and to recognize that all organizational resources cannot be committed to immediate output efforts if we are to have time to pay attention, think and benefit from the knowledge gained.*

Do you ever stop and think or are you always busy meetings and working? Here are some ways to do it:

● Keep a daily or weekly work journal. Just before you go home from work, write down 1-2 paragraphs of observations about your day/week.

● Take five minutes of me-time daily. Go somewhere you won't be disturbed and take a few moments to reflect on what's happening and how you feel today.

● Meet regularly with one or more peers for common reflection time.

SEB Pension in Copenhagen picked the last one. All leaders are required to have a buddy and meet with them every other week. Every person picks one theme they'd like to improve on and then use the biweekly meetings to evaluate and support each others' progress. Their Head of Legal Helene Neergaard told me that she is currently focused on the theme of *giving feedback* and how this regular reflection time has helped her directly by:

● Getting tips and ideas from her peers

● Getting clarity on her goals and her progress towards achieving them

● Forming deeper workplace relationships through sharing their challenges and success

Don't overwork

CNN asked 12 well-known leaders including Carlos Ghosn of Nissan, Marissa Mayer of (then)

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12 https://hbr.org/2011/04/four-reasons-to-keep-a-work-di

Google and famous jazz musician Wynton Marsalis how they manage their time and stay efficient[13]. My favorite answer is this one:

> *I know that it's normal for executives to start the day extremely early, but frankly I feel I make better decisions and relate better to people when I'm well rested. So I usually get up around 7.30 after a good night's sleep.*
>
> *I also make sure to work a standard 40-hour week and never work on weekends. This is important to me for two reasons. First of all, I have a life outside of work. I have a family who likes to have me around and friends and hobbies that I also want to have time for. I find that the time I spend outside of work recharges my batteries, expands my horizons and actually makes me more efficient at work.*
>
> *Secondly, if I'm always seen arriving at the office at 6 in the morning and leaving at 9 in the evening, not to mention taking calls and writing emails late at night and all weekend, it's sure to send a signal to my employees that this is what the company expects, that this is "the right way". But it isn't.*
>
> *It's a simple fact that for most leaders and employees, the first 40 hours they work each week are worth much more to the company than the next 20, 30 or 40 hours. But those extra hours spent at work can harm your private life, your family and your health. Which in turn becomes damaging to the company.*
>
> *Frankly, if you can't structure your time so your work fits inside a 40-hour week, you need to get better at prioritizing and delegating.*

Refreshing words. Guess which of the executives said that?

Come on, take a guess!

NONE OF THEM! Not one.

Instead, there's a lot of "I get up at 5 and arrive at the office at 6" and "I work 16 hours a day" and "I take a lot of calls on the drive in to the office" and "I usually leave the office at 7 and then work a few more hours in the evening at home."

I fully expected one of them to go "I get up at 4 in the morning, half an hour before I go to bed, and work a 27-hour day, only stopping for a 3-minute lunch break in which two assistants stuff food down my throat like a foie-gras goose."

Leaders work a lot. One study of 483 executives, managers, and professionals found that[14]:

> *60% of those who carry smartphones for work are connected to their jobs 13.5 or more hours a day on weekdays and about five hours on weekends, for a total of about 72 hours.*

I know it's normal to view people working this hard as heroes of the organization, but research shows they would be more efficient *and* enjoy life more if they cut down their time at work. They would be more open, less stressed, have more fun AND be better role models for their employees.

Cutting down working hours can even lead to *better* results, as this story from Arlie Hochschild's excellent book The Time Bind demonstrates:

> *One executive, Doug Strain, the vice chairman of ESI, a computer company in Portland Oregon, saw the link between reduced hours for some and more jobs for others. At a 1990 focus group for CEOs and managers, he volunteered the following story:*

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13 http://money.cnn.com/2006/03/02/news/newsmakers/howiwork_fortune_032006/index.htm

14 http://www.ccl.org/leadership/pdf/research/AlwaysOn.pdf

When demand for a product is down, normally a company fires some people and makes the rest work twice as hard. So we put it to a vote of everyone in the plant. We asked them what they wanted to do: layoffs for some workers or thirty-two-hour workweeks for everyone. They thought about it and decided they'd rather hold the team together. So we went down to a thirty-two-hour-a-week schedule for everyone during a down time. We took everybody's hours and salary down – executives too.

But Strain discovered two surprises.

First, productivity did not decline. I swear to God we get as much out of them at thirty-two hours as we did at forty. So it's not a bad business decision. But second, when economic conditions improved, we offered them one hundred percent time again. No one wanted to go back!

Never in our wildest dreams would our managers have designed a four-day week. But it's endured at the insistence of our employees.

Temporary overwork is fine - it can even be fun to work hard and focused for an important goal over a short period of time - but permanent overwork is bad for two reasons. First, it can kill you. One study found that "those working a 55-hour week face 33% increased risk of stroke than those working a 35- to 40-hour week."[15] Secondly, we *get no more work done*. An article in Harvard Business Review titled "The Research Is Clear: Long Hours Backfire for People and for Companies" put it very clearly[16]:

Overwork doesn't seem to result in more output.

If you think this doesn't apply to you, there's a simple reason. People who permanently overwork think they're getting a lot of work done and their self-reported productivity is through the roof. However, when their work output is measured objectively, it turns out they get less work done than peers who work regular hours. They also feel more stressed and make more mistakes in their work.

The school of "work your butt off, everything else comes second" is bad for business and bad for people. Permanent overwork kills people while not improving business results. Can we agree that makes it dumb and leaders should stop doing it to themselves and their workers?

One leader who got this was former US vice president Joe Biden. He sent this memo to his staff in 2014 telling them not to sacrifice their private lives for work:

"To my wonderful staff,

I would like to take a moment and make something clear to everyone. I do not expect, nor do I want any of you to miss or sacrifice important family obligations for work. Family obligations include, but are not limited to family birthdays, anniversaries, weddings, any religious ceremonies such as first communions and bar mitzvahs, graduations and times of need such as an illness or a loss in the family. This is very important to me. In fact I will go so far as to say that if I find out you are working with me while missing important family responsibilities, it will disappoint me greatly. This has be an unwritten rule sine my days in the Senate.

Thank you for all the hard work.

Sincerely,

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15 http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/aug/20/working-longer-hours-increases-stroke-risk

16 https://hbr.org/2015/08/the-research-is-clear-long-hours-backfire-for-people-and-for-companies

Joe."