Why Happiness?

Why the heck talk about *happiness* in the context of *leadership*? I fully realize that this is going to seem like a strange proposition to many people, but I want to clearly state the case for why happiness not only is an integral part of leading - it should be the ultimate *goal* of leadership.

One reason is that happiness is cropping up almost everywhere else. Domains as different as psychology, economics, self-help, neuroscience, education and popular culture have all had an increasing focus on happiness lately. If it crops up in so many other places, surely it may have some relevance for leadership too.

But far beyond that there are solid philosophical and reasons why good leaders should put happiness first and we will look at them in this chapter and the next. It may get a little theoretical, but stick around - it'll be worth it. I even included a mummified corpse and accusations of orgies and depravity in ancient Greece, just to keep things interesting.

Let's get philosophical

Some of the central questions we humans must ask ourselves are these: "Which actions are right and which are wrong? What is good or evil? What makes a person a good person?" Or to put this in the context of this book: "What is good leadership and what is bad?"

These are not easy questions and throughout history, people have looked for the answers in many different places. Gurus, priests, prophets, holy texts and rulers of many different kinds have offered many different views of what we should and should not do. For some reason, many of them have been especially preoccupied with what we should not do in bed.

Crucially, the idea that there is a right and wrong is embedded in all cultures and there is broad agreement across most cultures that some things are good (charity, kindness, honesty) and some things are bad (lying, stealing, harming others).

But why are some actions good and others bad? Let me introduce you to my favorite philosopher, Epicurus, who lived in Athens around 300 BC and was one of the intellectual heirs of Aristotle, with a slight difference: Where Aristotle held that the goal of life was to be excellent and virtuous in thought and action, Epicurus taught that the ultimate goal of life is happiness and that all the things we need in life in order to be happy are easy to attain. For example, he cites friendship as a main source of happiness, writing :

> *Of all the means which wisdom acquires to ensure happiness throughout the whole of life, by far the most important is friendship. Friendship dances around the world, bidding us all to awaken to the recognition of happiness."*

Epicurus certainly did not ignore the value of a strong character, and absolutely recognized that virtue was important. But where Aristotle made virtue and excellence the end goal of his ethics, Epicurus saw happiness as the end goal and virtue as a path to that goal, writing:

> *It is impossible to live a pleasant life without living wisely and honorably and justly, and it is impossible to live wisely and honorably and justly without living pleasantly. Whenever any one of these is lacking, when, for instance, the man is not able to live wisely, though he lives honorably and justly, it is impossible for him to live a pleasant life.*

He also famously argued that we should not fear death, because fearing death just reduces your enjoyment of life. Besides, he argued, once you're dead, you won't be around for it:

> *Where I am, death is not, and where death, is I am not.*

So the central, crucial insight of Epicurus is to put *human experience* at the center of ethics and define things as good and right when they lead to more happiness in life and as wrong and evil when they lead to more pain.

Epicurus was way ahead of his time. He also set up his own school in Athens called "The Garden," where he taught philosophy to anyone, even *women and slaves*, which was completely unheard of in a time, where philosophy was for only for free men. His many contemporary critics were sure that he was just using them for orgies and debauchery. Why else would anyone invite women and slaves into a school? There was just no way he could be actually teaching them philosophy![1]

Epicurus was wrongly accused of being a mindless slave to pleasure, when his teachings say nothing of the kind. In fact, we still use the word Epicurean to mean "a person devoted to sensual enjoyment, especially that derived from fine food and drink." It's all terribly unfair to Epicurus.

The next big development in the philosophy of happiness came with *utilitarianism*. Here's the formal definition:

> *Utilitarianism is the doctrine that an action is right in so far as it promotes happiness, and that the greatest happiness of the greatest number should be the guiding principle of conduct.*

It is most closely associated with Jeremy Bentham, an English philosopher, jurist, and social reformer in the 18th and 19th century and it's immediately obvious that it is inspired by epicureanism.

Let me just give a quick note on the name utilitarianism, which has always confused the heck out of me, because it sounds like *utilitarian*, meaning "designed to be useful or practical rather than attractive." Bentham defined happiness as the main goals of human life, but he used a more formal term for it that he borrowed from fellow philosopher David Hume, namely *utility*:

> *By the principle of* utility *is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question: or, what is the same thing in other words, to promote or to oppose that happiness.*

That's why it's called *utilitarianism*.

Where Epicurus focused mostly on how individuals should lead their lives, Bentham wanted to use the same principles of happiness to drive societal reforms, which, let's face it, were badly needed in 19th century Britain. This makes him the first person to define what is good or bad in a society based on what increases the happiness or decreases the unhappiness of its people.

Interestingly, though Bentham died in 1832, you can still see him if you take a trip to London[2]:

> *Bentham had made careful preparations for the dissection of his body after death and its preservation. His skeleton and head were preserved and stored in a wooden cabinet called the "Auto-icon", with the skeleton padded out with hay and dressed in Bentham's clothes. It was acquired by University College London in 1850.*
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> *It is normally kept on public display at the end of the South Cloisters in the main building of the college; however, for the 100th and 150th anniversaries of the college it was brought to the meeting of the College Council, where it was listed as "present but not voting".*

So the idea that the ultimate yardstick of good or evil, right or wrong is happiness, has been with us for thousands of years and is more influential now than ever. In February 2017 I was invited as a happiness expert to the World Government Summit in Dubai, an annual event focused on "the future of government" that attracts 4,000 delegates from all over the world.

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1   Source: https://fee.org/articles/what-epicurus-can-teach-us-about-freedom-and-happiness/

2   https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeremy_Bentham#Death_and_the_auto-icon

Somewhat surprisingly, the main theme running through the entire event was not governing or politics or bureaucracy - it was *happiness*, specifically how government policies can further the happiness of citizens.

This is the most recent frontier of happiness: How to run a country based not just on economic growth but rather on the happiness of its citizens.

Figure 1   UK life satisfaction and GDP, 1973–2002
1973 = 100

Source: NEF (2004)
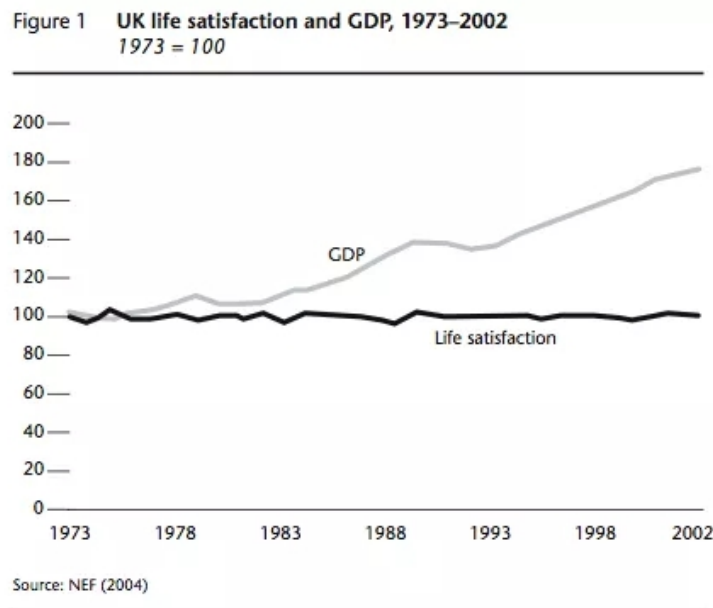
And the two are not the same. It is entirely possible to create economic growth in a way that does not make people any happier. Here is a graph showing how GDP per capita grew consistently over a 30-year period in the UK while life satisfaction stayed flat.

So the idea that happiness matters is increasingly gaining traction. Whether you're leading a team, a business, an orchestra, a charity or a country, the main goal of your leadership should be to increase happiness for as many people as possible. If your leadership does not do that, you're doing it wrong.

The main problem for Bentham and other utilitarians has always lain in defining what makes us happy or unhappy. For the longest time, we had no objective data or satisfying answers to this question. Your guess would have been as good as mine or a bronze age tribe's medicine man's.

But this has all changed. For the first time in human history we have actual scientific research on what makes people happy or unhappy and we're going to look at that in the next chapter.