

What is happy leadership not

The challenge of using the word “happiness” in conjunction with anything work-related is that it gives some people the wrong idea. “So we’re just going to have fun at work and never get any work done?” is a classic objection. Or how about “But what if I have to give someone negative feedback? Won’t that make them unhappy?”

So this chapter is all about defining what happiness at work *isn't*.

It's not short term

Maybe one of the biggest misunderstandings of happiness is, that we should aim to be constantly happy. That is not only impossible it would honestly be kinda creepy.

What we're aiming for is as much long-term happiness as possible for as many as possible - it's not about making sure that every single person is happy every single moment. This means that sometimes you do things that make people unhappy now, but will increase happiness over time.

Addressing interpersonal conflict is a great example. If two of your employees have a long-standing conflict, you must address it. Calling them in for a meeting to address the situation is unlikely to be fun for anyone but the emotional cost of not addressing a conflict is just a lot higher down the road. Studies in conflict resolution find that the longer it is allowed to go on, the harder it becomes to resolve.

Happy leadership is not about pleasing everyone all the time. Sometimes we do unpleasant things now either because they must be done or because not doing them will cause even more unhappiness later. Fortunately, we're all used to these kinds of trade-offs and perform them all the time. I doubt that brushing your teeth or cleaning your home makes you happy, but you do it anyway because you know that losing all your teeth or living in a messy home will make you unhappy.

It's not about a comfortable/easy work life

When I met Garry Ridge, the CEO of WD-40, I of course wanted to learn more about this highly successful company, but I had one main goal, which was to tell him the following joke:

Did you know that all problems in life can be solved with either WD-40 or duct tape?

If something moves and it's not supposed to, use duct tape.

If it doesn't move and it's supposed to, use WD-40.

Sadly, he'd heard it before.

WD-40 has a strong culture and while people are definitely happy at work there, this is not because work is easy, predictable or comfortable. Quite the contrary, every single person there is expected to constantly do a great job, take responsibility for their own work life and always challenge themselves to improve. This is codified in the WD-40 Maniac Pledge, which every new employee must take:

I am responsible for taking action, asking questions, getting answers, and making decisions.

I won't wait for someone to tell me. If I need to know, I'm responsible for asking.

I have no right to be offended that I didn't "get this sooner."

If I'm doing something others should know about, I'm responsible for telling them.

They recognize that being happy at work does not come when work is easy or simple, but when you are challenged and growing.

The American psychologist Theodore Isaac Rubin put it like this:

Happiness does not come from doing easy work. It comes from the afterglow of satisfaction after the achievement of a difficult task that demands your best.

It's not positive thinking

One German IT company came up with the perfect solution to whining in the workplace – it's made cheerfulness a contractual obligation. What's more, the CEO declared that those who weren't happy enough in the morning should stay home until they cheer up.

Some people take happiness to mean that you should *always* be happy. This is the idea of *Positive Thinking* - a poorly defined concept which at its most extreme says that in every situation you can choose your own mood and your own reactions. No matter what happens to you, you can always choose a positive attitude¹.

"Fake it till you make it," they say, claiming that faking happiness actually makes you happier. Basically, if you don't feel happy every moment of your life, it's just your own damn fault for not trying hard enough.

Now, this idea is not completely unfounded. In many situations, you can actually change your mood and outlook through conscious effort. Let's say you're stuck in traffic on your way to work. In a situation like that you can probably change your mindset and switch from being annoyed about the delay to a more positive interpretation of the situation. "Great, I have more time to listen to this interesting radio program," or whatever. Nothing wrong with that.

But the most fanatic proponents of positive thinking go much further. They claim that you can always change your thinking in any situation, and that external circumstances don't matter at all. No matter what situation you're in, they say, you can simply choose to be happy.

Tell that to someone who's seriously ill, who's just been fired or who is suffering from severe depression. Actually, you should never tell them that, because telling someone in a rough life situation that they should think more positively is incredibly condescending and a terrible way to trivialize their pain. You could say I positively hate positive thinking :)

Happy leadership is definitely not about forcing yourself or others to be happy, because studies show that actually backfires. German researchers set up an experiment to test what happens, when we force people to fake being happy at work²:

The team set up a fake railway customer complaints call centre and asked 80 university students to take part in experiments while acting as staff. Half of the group were told that they could verbally defend themselves against rude customers, but the other half had to remain friendly and polite at all times.

The volunteers' heart rates were measured and preliminary results showed that the group that was allowed to verbally defend themselves had only a slightly increased heart rate. But the heart rates of the group who stayed polite shot up and continued to beat at a noticeably greater rate long after they had ended their telephone calls.

Professor Zapf said, "Based on previous stress research, we know an increased heart rate

1 A quick note: One thing that often bugs me is that some people confuse positive thinking with positive psychology, which I wrote about back on page XX. They're not the same thing - the only thing they have in common is the word "positive".

2 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1420709/>

can lead to cardiovascular problems and is a clear indicator of a higher psychological workload. It's about time we did away with the concept that the customer is always right and showed more respect for those in customer service jobs."

"We call this kind of faked emotion 'emotional dissonance.' We found that the amount of time actually spent with customers was irrelevant when measuring stress compared to the amount of time workers had to demonstrate emotional dissonance."

So faking happiness actually makes us *less happy and more stressed*.

It's also worth reminding yourself that negative emotions are a natural part of work, as this story from an IT systems project manager demonstrates:

I had a big client in France who couldn't make up their mind. In every single meeting, the customer changed the specs for the IT system we're developing for them. First they want this, then they want that. First they want it this way, then that way. I try to explain that this is not a good way to work, but it still goes on. Meanwhile, I'm quietly going crazy.

Finally, I lose my temper in a meeting. They introduce change number 283 (by my loose count), once again going back on what they've told me previously, and I snap. I actually pound the table with my fist, slam my project folder shut and say through clenched teeth "No. This can't go on. This system will never get off the ground if you keep changing your mind at every meeting. We need to make decisions and stick to them".

In this situation I felt AND showed anger - a negative emotion. I could've forced myself to be positive in that situation, but it would have been a betrayal of my work and myself and it would have felt even worse. Not only was I authentic by being angry, that outburst finally got the client to respect me and established a much better working relationship going forward.

The thing to remember is that negative emotions are not called that because they're wrong, but simply because they're unpleasant. Sometimes a negative emotion is exactly the right emotion and if you're always forcing yourself to be positive you're being both less authentic and less effective. When your circumstances are bad, there is nothing wrong with being unhappy; it is only natural. It's an excellent motivator to do something about it.

Another reason why positive thinking is bad, is that it can contribute to quelling dissent and ignoring problems in the workplace. Ever heard someone say "In this workplace we don't have problems, only opportunities"? I hate that phrase with a vengeance, partly because it's wrong but mostly because it's so often used to stifle dissent and criticism. No workplace is perfect. No job is without problems. If we consistently marginalize and criticize people who are unhappy at work by telling them to be positive and never complain, we lose some very valuable voices of reason and realism in the workplace.

Finally and most importantly, positive thinking just doesn't work. An excellent article from Harvard Business Review³ examined the science behind positive thinking and concluded that:

...across dozens of peer-reviewed studies examining the effects of positive visions of the future on people pursuing various kinds of wishes — from health-related, such as losing weight, quitting smoking, or recovering quickly from surgery, to the improvement of professional or academic performance (for example, mid-level managers wishing to reduce job-related stress, graduate students looking for a job, or school children seeking to get good grades) — we've consistently found that people who positively fantasize make either the same or less progress in achieving attainable wishes than those who don't.

Happy leadership is not about faking happiness or demanding that everyone be happy at all times.

3 <https://hbr.org/2014/10/stop-being-so-positive>

It's about being emotionally authentic and recognizing that negative emotions are an integral and important part of work life.