

## Why don't all leaders focus on happiness?

*"It's cold at the top."*

*"If my employees are happy, they're not working hard enough."*

*"It's a dog-eat-dog world in business."*

*"Nice guys finish last."*

If you listen to traditional wisdom about leadership, you would never suspect that it has anything to do with happiness. The traditional views of business and leadership are much more about competition, ambition and power.

So if happiness is that fantastic, why don't all leaders focus on it? Why is the world of business dominated by a very different world view? The answer is simple: There are some powerful forces pulling us in a completely different direction, systematically teaching leaders very different mindsets and creating advantages for a very different kind of leader. In this chapter we'll look at some of those forces and how to counter them.

### ***Business schools are stuck in the past***

My latest addiction is the website called Coursera, which offers thousands of online university-level classes free of charge. I have followed fascinating courses in everything from neuroeconomics to osteoarcheology. It's a wonderful way to spend an hour or two in the evening, since it's not only entertaining but will also teach you many new things about the world.

In 2015 I thought I would check out some of their business-oriented offerings so I signed up for a few including one called "Foundations of Business Strategy" offered by the University of Virginia. And let me tell you right away: Where most Coursera courses inspire me and expand my horizons, this one just left me unspeakably depressed.

The entire stated focus of the course was to analyze any given market in order to increase profits for a firm. There was zero mention of topics like culture, employee wellbeing, CSR or sustainability. Not only was there no sense that any of those things *should* matter, the course actively went out of its way to ignore them.

At one point the professor mentioned Southwest Airlines as a case and I sat up straighter and thought "Finally, here it comes." Southwest are of course famous for saying that their main competitive advantage is their employees and making this their top strategic priority. And yet, this course never mentioned that at all.

Let me make this clear: The course examined one of the world's most profitable airlines, where top executives *clearly say themselves* that their success is mainly due to their strategic focus on making employees and customers happy, but then never mentioned any of that and instead chose to focus only on market forces.

If this is what business schools teach people, it's no wonder that their graduates come out into the world holding traditional views skewed entirely towards profits and results. The problem is that business school graduates dominate in leadership. In many workplaces, you will not be considered for management positions over a certain level if you don't have a business degree of some kind.

In addition to business schools, many larger organizations have their own internal leadership academies and I think it's safe to say that not many of those have put happiness on the curriculum yet.

Of course not all business schools are like that. I recently met with two students from the School of Economics and Management at Lund University in Sweden who wanted to interview me for their thesis project on the 30-hour work week.

It turned out that both of these students had quit their studies at two big business schools in Germany and Austria precisely because they were too focused on an outdated and profit-driven view of leadership and business. In Lund, they found a school that gets it, offering a modern, science-based business curriculum that fully acknowledges the role of happiness in business. We need more of those business schools and fewer of the traditional ones.

### **Happy leaders are sometimes weeded out**

*Lisa was promoted to team leader of a call center team in the UK after working in that team for two years. As an employee she'd noticed many problems, that she immediately went about addressing, constantly involving her team of 17 people in defining what kind of culture and working style suited them best. The results were positive - her team became more engaged and results improved vastly.*

*After six months she was pulled aside by her leader and told that her leadership style had been noticed - and that she would have to change if she wanted to stay on as manager.*

*"You're much too chummy with your employees. What if you have to fire one of them? You'll have to create much more respect around yourself as a leader."*

*Lisa was shocked and disheartened that everything she'd done to create a happy team, and which had also resulted in much better results, was not only being ignored by higher-ups but was actively discouraged. She refused to change and while she has remained as manager of that team and results are consistently great, she has received no recognition for it and has not been encouraged to seek further promotion.*

*Meanwhile, other team leaders whose teams are not only miserable but also less productive have been given accolades and promotions ahead of her.*

Given that traditional thinking in business is most decidedly *not* about happiness, it's no wonder that leadership selection and promotion in many workplaces either does not value happiness at all or, in some cases, has a direct anti-happiness bias.

In one study, volunteers were asked to read a speech and rate the intelligence of the person who wrote it. Half the volunteers read a speech that was against the topic, the other half read the same speech, but with a few words changed so the author was now for the topic. The participants rated the negative person who was against the speech as more intelligent on average. This shows a common bias against happy, positive people, seeing them as less competent, less intelligent, less serious and more naive.

Some societies have this to a larger degree. For instance, the French writer Flaubert once wrote:

*To be stupid, selfish, and have good health are three requirements for happiness, though if stupidity is lacking, all is lost.*

This perception is of course completely wrong. I hope I've been able to demonstrate to you that happy people indeed have better functioning minds, more cognitive resources and are more likely to succeed in anything they do.

## ***Unhappy leaders promote in their own image***

We tend to promote in our own image. When a results-driven, hard-nosed, competitive CEO is looking for a new VP of whatever, there is every chance that he will promote or hire someone who is also results-driven, hard-nosed and competitive. And then the cycle repeats itself when that VP goes looking for a new department head.

The company may have very pretty things written on their website about how “people are our most important asset.” They may have inspiring values like *respect* and *integrity*. But if they keep promoting people leaders with a results-only mindset, none of it will ever be more than pretty words.

This can be a true disaster when the company has a jerk at the top. When Stanford professor Bob Sutton started to write a book about the hidden costs of jerks at work he wanted to go full monty and call the book “The No Asshole Rule.” Gasp! Yes! The A-word. He wasn’t writing about jerks or bullies – he was writing about flaming assholes and what they cost people and businesses.

His first choice of publisher, The Harvard Business School Press, were happy to publish the book if he would change the title to something less offensive. So he was forced to change... publishers.

In the book, Sutton convincingly demonstrates using surveys, psychological studies and case stories that workplace jerks are far more trouble than they’re worth. They may be getting results and making the numbers, but they do so at a huge cost to the rest of the organization and to the well-being of the people around them.

Not only that, but assholes *breed*. No, not with each other (a horrible thought in itself)! But not only do jerks tend to bring out the worst in others (creating more jerks) they also tend to hire and promote jerks like themselves. Or they make sure to hire people who are too weak to oppose them.

In order to combat this, many companies have introduced a “No asshole rule” - though that may not always be what they call it.

Quirk, a social media agency in Cape Town, South Africa were forced to introduce a similar rule after they hired a VP who turned out to be a complete jerk and who ended up causing enormous harm to both employee and customer relations.

They never wanted to risk that happening again, so they added a new ingenious hiring practice called “The Christmas Party Test.” After a number of job interviews, the prospective new manager goes out for coffee with the team she will lead. There is no discussion of work or professional skills - this is purely social. On returning to the office, every employee must answer one question: “Do I want to sit next to this person at our next company Christmas Party?” If one employee says no, they don't hire that person.

## ***“Work sucks - everybody knows that.”***

The Drew Carey show was a sitcom that followed a lovable group of losers in Cleveland, Ohio. In one scene, Drew is talking to his coworker Kate, both of whom are miserable in their jobs at a fictional department store Winfred-Louder. Here is their exchange:

*Kate: “I hate my job.”*

*Drew: “You hate your job? Well why didn't you say so. You know, there's a support group for that. It's called EVERYBODY. They meet at the bar.”*

I keep wondering why so many people put up with bad bosses. Why are many people desperately unhappy with their manager (up to 50% according to some studies) but accept this as normal?

Here’s why: We’re carrying massive cultural baggage. Through much of Western history, there has

been a sense that work is hard and unpleasant and that's why we get paid to do it.

This is expressed most clearly in Max Weber's biblically-based work *The Protestant Work Ethic*, which was used by Protestant preachers to preach that hard labor was good for people, good for Christian society, and a salve for original sin. According to Christianity, humans used to live in the Garden of Eden, where everything was perfect. But because of original sin we were ejected and, according to Genesis 3:19, this is our situation now:

*“By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.”*

According to Hebrew belief, work is a “curse devised by God explicitly to punish the disobedience and ingratitude of Adam and Eve.” The Old Testament itself supports work, not because there's any joy in it, but because it is necessary to prevent poverty and destitution.

The ancient Greek word for work is *ponos*, which means sorrow. According to Plato, manual labor was for slaves, while free men were supposed to pursue warfare, commerce, and the arts, especially architecture or sculpture.

So, according to western cultural roots, work is a curse, a punishment for original sin, and only for slaves. In short, life is hell—or “nasty, brutish and short,” as Hobbes put it—work is hell, and we must endure it because we're all sinners but don't worry, we'll get our reward once we're dead! Any questions?

So if the way a leader leads is causing misery, stress and frustration, many people will just accept that as normal. It may never have occurred to them, that it could ever be different. I was

In our quest for happy leadership, we can never forget that we're going up against thoughts and beliefs that have been deeply embedded in our culture for centuries. This is why we need a conscious leadership revolution in workplaces all around the world and why those of us who have chosen to break with the old attitude to work need to support each other.

## ***No pain no gain***

Have you seen the movie *Whiplash*? If not, go watch it first chance you get! It is not only a great movie but also the perfect example of the “success through suffering” narrative that permeates the business world. In this movie a young jazz drumming prodigy is tortured relentlessly by his sadistic teacher and the extreme mental and physical pain he suffers makes him a star drummer.

There are numerous other movies and books that subscribe to the same basic world view, according to which you can only achieve success through sacrifice and pain and the more it hurts, the more successful you will ultimately be.

I've been trying to think of stories in pop culture that have a narrative where someone achieves success through happiness, but the only ones I can think of (like *Forest Gump* and *Big*) are stories where idiots or children achieve success through their innocence and naiveté. This just serves to strengthen the narrative, since only idiots achieve success through happiness. I think this world view is false. I think there is much more success to be found (in business, in art, and in life) in fun, happiness, camaraderie, and in simply enjoying what you do on the whole.

In real life there are many examples. Richard Branson clearly attributes much of his success to the fact that he's enjoyed himself along the way. Ben and Jerry, the ice cream makers, say the same thing and so does Yvon Chouinard of Patagonia, Herb Kelleher of Southwest Airlines, Tony Hsieh of Zappos and many others.

I find it telling that the director of *Whiplash* Damien Chazelle was a serious drumming student as a young man and has this to say about that time:

*[I was in] a very competitive jazz band that was modeled after professional bands. And I remembered being very terrified. That was my overall emotion during those years. Just dread. And not being able to eat meals before rehearsals and losing sleep and sweating my ass off.*

To this day, he still gets nauseous when he sees a drum kit so when it came time to do the movie, here's how he wanted to do it:

*I like a set to be a happy place, where people can feel free to experiment. Especially, for instance, with this set. We only had 20 days to shoot the whole movie. The stress and the anxiety were just inherent in the schedule. So I tried to make it as stress-free of a set as possible.*

The whole “success through suffering” mindset is not only wrong, I think it's become so pervasive that it's become self-reinforcing. Leaders expect work to be tough, expect to have to sacrifice many other aspects of their lives to “make it” – and if that's what you expect, then there's a good chance that's how it will end up.

Leaders with this mindset also look at happy employees and teams with mistrust. They may not directly mind that they are happy, but they harbor a sneaking suspicion that since success comes from suffering, these happy employees could get even better results if only they were working harder and less happily. They may then exert direct or indirect pressures to make people work more in a way that fits their perceptions better.

Also, once leaders do become successful and start analyzing what worked for them, this narrative means that they're more likely to attribute their success to all the “hard work” and their sacrifices – even though their success may just as well have come from the times they had fun, the help they got from people who likes them or a supporting environment they found themselves in.

However, the very idea that you as a leader can slave away in stress and fear and frustration for years and sacrifice everything else in your life and THEN achieve your goals and just turn around and be happy seems very suspect to me. If you've been in pain for that long, that pain is most likely going to stay with you and you will be successful and unhappy.

## ***Power does bad things to us***

It turns out that having power over others can lead to some quite negative behaviors. One simple but fascinating experiment from Berkeley University is called the “cookie monster” experiment. Researchers placed college students in groups of three and gave them an assignment to collaborate on a short policy paper about a social issue. They then randomly told one of the students that he would evaluate the performance of the other two after they finished the task. If he gave them good ratings, they could earn points that would increase their chance to win a cash bonus. That person now had a little more power over the other two.

After they've been working for a while, the researchers casually brought the three subjects a plate with *four* cookies. They found that not only did the disinhibited “powerful” students eat more than their share of the cookies, they were more likely to chew with their mouths open and to scatter crumbs over the table! It seems that whenever we are given power, we become a little more focused on ourselves and a little less focused on others, if we're not careful.

A similar study from the same researchers made people play games of Monopoly that were heavily rigged in the favor of one player who started with twice as much money, got two dice instead of one, and got more money for passing ‘go’. Basically, there was no way that player could not end up winning the game.

As in the cookie monster study, that person became ruder, louder and ate more (and more messily)

from the bowl of pretzels set out for the players. But the scariest finding came from the interviews they did with the winning players after the game. You'd think that they would just admit that the game was clearly rigged in their favor, and that's why they won - but instead they tended to explain their victory more in terms of their own strategies and skills.

If we combine the results of several of these studies, we see that having power and privilege can make leaders:

- Less ethical and more likely to lie or cheat
- Less prosocial and more selfish
- Less generous
- Less empathetic
- More likely to flirt inappropriately
- More prone to risky behavior
- More likely to explain their success in terms of their own actions/skills rather than any privilege they're given
- Less likely to value the contributions of others

It's easy to see how these effects can combine to cause negative behavior in leaders.

### ***The good news***

The forces mentioned here are strong, but they are not all-powerful. While they generally influence leaders to engage in behaviors that undermine happiness, they can be countered and overcome.

And fortunately, more and more leaders realize that this is necessary. A 2014 survey of 300,000 leaders and employees asked what competencies were most important for leaders. The most popular reply was “Inspire and motivate others.”<sup>1</sup>

There are two ways leaders can avoid falling for these forces:

1. Get educated. Leaders who know about these forces, are more likely to resist their effects. So simply by telling you about them, I've now made you less likely to fall prey to them. You're welcome!
2. Find peers who share your beliefs. It's much easier to stick to your guns and do what you know is right, when you have people around you who share your beliefs.

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1 <https://hbr.org/2014/07/the-skills-leaders-need-at-every-level>