How to be Happy at Work? Four Traps and Five Strategies

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Not too long ago, people in Hong Kong used to believe that if they worked very hard for some years, they would be able to enjoy a full life in a later stage. Work was like a 10,000 meter race, which required full concentration, total commitment, and a bite-the-bullet attitude towards its hardship. Such concepts as “wellness” and “psychological well-being” at work were regarded as issues for the faint-hearted. Happiness would come after dashing through the finishing line.

In this new millennium, work, to many people, has transformed from a 10,000 meter race into a monster that could eat them alive. Partly because of the Asian financial crisis, which has spawned large-scale downsizing, significant income drop, unbearable workload, and negative assets, and partly because of the competitive threat from enterprising areas in mainland China, many people now suffer from a deep sense of insecurity and helplessness. A survey by the Industrial-Organizational Psychology Division of the Hong Kong Psychological Society suggests that as many as half a million people are under the threat of a layoff. In fact, Hong Kong has been notorious for its excruciating stress, and it is getting even worse. A manager recently told me that his job required him to work until midnight routinely. I also met people who complained that some of their work problems were so intractable that, when driving to work, they thought occasionally of ramming the car into something to end their miserable existence.

The critical question is how much more work stress can people take because tragedies occur? In Japan, another place in which work demands total involvement, karōshi, or death of exhaustion, strikes many people who take a samurai attitude towards work. The suicide rate in Hong Kong is already among the highest in Asia, and we definitely do not want to rival Japan in terms of how many people drop dead at work every year. How do we survive the relentless workplace that constantly demands more for less?

In an era where workloads can increase at the speed of thought, stress management is obsolete because of its defensive tone. “Wellness management”, an offensive approach, is the answer to our plights. We need to be happy at work because it is such a significant part of our lives that we cannot afford to let it become a drudgery. Wellness management involves avoiding depressive traps and building up your happiness proactively. Let me begin with four common traps that chain many people to a nail bed of stress and strain.

- **Whine and die.** A major symptom of stress-induced collapse is a strong sense of being victimized, which fuels a constant outpouring of grievances. One who constantly badmouths other people or things cannot be a happy person. While some venting is therapeutic, excessive grumbling, especially the behind-the-back type, is counterproductive. If you suffer from a terrible job, or a terrible boss, how come you do not move to a new one? The truth is: If you could,
you would. Those who whine constantly do not realize that they are already getting the best deal they possibly can. To get out of the pit, the rational course of action is to improve one’s market value and hence the chance to hop to a more pleasant place. Constant whining consumes energy, distracts you from productive actions, and worst of all, makes you feel even worse.

- **Bad Company.** A robust finding in social psychology is that similarity attracts. People who are unhappy, pessimistic, and self-defeating are likely to befriend those who share these characteristics, and as a result make each other feel even worse. People who enjoy cynical gossips often share their juicy stories with each other, deepening their conviction that the world is a big conspiracy, human nature is decadent, and they are trapped in anguish eternally. It is sad that even when people have choices, they prefer friends who make them feel worse.

- **Obsessed with the uncontrollable.** Some problems are under our control and some are not, and obviously we should focus on controllable problems. In reality, many people are obsessed with or irritated by problems that are important to them, regardless whether they can do something about it. I have met many managers who were disturbed by the incompetence or poor attitudes of their subordinates. I asked them whether these people were bad hires, but the usual reply was that the whole industry suffered from the same problem. Well, we have to work with what we got. In this situation, getting better subordinates is at the mercy of chance, and fantasizing about having better people around won't improve efficiency and reduce work errors. Working with sub-optimal subordinates is actually like driving an old car. If you know how to take care of it, it can run pretty well. I actually felt sad when I had to send my twelve-year old car to the junkyard a couple years ago.

- **Externalization.** Our psychological defensive mechanism often leads us to attribute our problems to external causes. We can easily blame unsympathetic, greedy bosses and customers, and the ultra-competitive environment for our work stress, without even a single thought of whether we are partially responsible for our difficulties. It is a brave act to take a hard look at ourselves and ask whether we have done everything we can to make us happy and productive at work. While the tendency to externalize our problems is often therapeutic, it does not lead to improvement actions and productive coping.

Many people fall into these traps and drift helplessly in a downward spiral of anguish and demise, and I hope you are now wise enough to avoid them. I will now turn to five strategies for promoting happiness at work.

- **Be Optimistic.** If you cut through the hype, you will realize that optimism is a cornerstone of emotional intelligence. Optimists are happy people,
because they can see a failure as the removal of a hurdle to success, and a problem as a challenge. How can we become optimistic? Stick around optimistic people, seek out successes and celebrate them, look for areas that you can score points, and learn from failures to confront your current challenges. Remember that optimism without ability is like charging towards your enemies without a weapon, and ability without optimism is like sitting on a goldmine without knowing it.

• Manage your happiness. Happiness usually does not come naturally when you need it most. Make sure you are happy a few times a day. Manage and plan for your daily events so that you have a stream of happiness running through your otherwise boring and dreadful day. How do we do that? Have a cup of very nice tea in the morning, make an effort to have lunch with a pleasant person, take a glance at the nice potted plants that you have been caring for on the filing cabinet, look at the family photos that bring back happy memories (do update the photos regularly), stare out of the window (if you are luck enough to have one) to appreciate the blue sky, and so on. Don’t be shy to celebrate your successes, and engineer some successes to cheer yourselves (and your colleagues) up in times of immense difficulties. We all need a cheering team to make our work life enjoyable.

• Find your true love. You cannot be happy if you hate your work, and you should find reasons to like your job. Jobs are multi-faceted and there must be elements that you like, and elements you hate. Identify all the key elements of your job, and within the boundaries set by your boss or the company, expand the positive elements and reduce the negative elements. In other words, take a proactive approach to manage your job content. Engage in win-win discussions with your colleagues and your boss in terms of who should do what. Remember that the objective is not to negotiate for less work, or less responsibility, but to look for acceptable trade-offs that enable you to enjoy your work life more.

• Be generous. Generous people are happy people. To give is more fortunate than to receive, and to forgive is more satisfying than to be forgiven. If colleagues or customers offend or insult you, give them the benefit of the doubt. Don’t get upset until they are proven guilty, because a lot of people hurt others with any intention. Even if you are unlucky enough to have the need to meddle with a few wicked characters, focus on the bottom line and win-win arrangements, and don’t let vindictiveness and hatred haunt you and stand in the way of achieving results. Mean, malicious people are problems to be dealt with, just like wastage problems, and you should be clever enough not to let them ruin your emotional life.

• Improve everyday. Nothing is perfect, and everything can be improved. The sense of achievement that arises from doing a good job can make
you a very happy person. I am a firm believer that there are always new ways for achieving more with less. The problem is that most people are trapped in fire-fighting and are reluctant to spare any time for improving their work habits. Would you buy the stocks of a high tech firm that has no budget for research and development? For the same reason, those who do not invest in themselves have no future. Small improvements can add up, and consider the following simple suggestions. Spend a few minutes every morning to set up the key targets for the day and work towards these targets rigorously. Don’t go home without finishing them, and you will gradually master the art of goal setting. Instead of kicking off the day by checking the e-mail or the in-tray, spend the first hour of your workday on tackling a major task. Learn how to say the same thing in half of the time without losing impact. There are many more tricks that can help you save time and produce better results. Don’t repeat the same routine day in and day out; do it better everyday!

It is not easy to stay happy at work, but we don’t have any choice. For this generation, we are looking at forty years of work life. It is up to you to go through this long journey happily or miserably.