Positivity (Happiness) in the Workplace and Organizational Change

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Introduction

In 1987 I joined a large banking group in South Africa as the Customer Communications and Training manager of their new electronic banking division. I knew I was in trouble when during the first week on the job I was told of a photo shoot with the then CEO. Apparently as the photographer was about to take the photograph and said "smile", the CEO stood up with a serious face and said, *"Young man, banking is a serious business, we do not smile around here".* Whether this story was true or not is unimportant. What is important that it was told and re-told many times and ultimately became part of the culture of the company. The corporate culture was harsh and militaristic, indeed a number of senior executives were former military officers. Some months into my new role, I was asked to do a presentation to a group of senior managers. After my presentation, one of the members of the audience approached me and pulled me aside. He said, *"I know you are new here, so I'd like to offer some advice, and that is to remove the emotional words from your vocabulary. Emotional language does not go down well in this organization".* He was certainly correct – the organization was perhaps the most emotionally barren organization I have ever worked with. There were pockets of passion and energy—however these were exceptions and primarily the result of initiatives taken by specific individuals (including my immediate boss, a remarkable individual who was the only reason I continued to work in that environment).

My first exposure to large-scale organizational change came from a brief dialogue with Denzil Busse, [then Managing Director of Standard Bank of South Africa (SBSA), and a personal mentor to me]. Denzil was responsible for the retail bank and had been very concerned with the lack of improvement despite several efforts to improve. Along with the poorest service levels of any major bank, SBSA was also losing market share. But it was no wonder to me that this organization had the poorest customer satisfaction scores of all the major banking groups – great customer service requires passion and a high degree of positive energy and interest in people. "Smiling" and "emotional language" are basic requirements. Denzil had called me to his office to discuss this dilemma, and I expressed my concerns to him. Instead of the emotionally stunted response I had received from other executives, Denzil listened intently. What ensued was one of the largest change strategies I have been involved with. Under the leadership of this remarkable individual, Denzil and I jointly, along with the efforts of many others in the Retail Bank, developed and implemented a process that engaged 22,000 employees in improving business processes and work culture. Eventually SBSA went from being the worst performing bank in customer service and losing market share to the best customer service and improving market share over a six year period. This organizational change could not have been achieved without the positive work environment and energy that Denzil Busse created for this immense effort from these many thousands of employees. A remarkable achievement and a big win for positivity in the workplace.

Positivity in the Workplace

Throughout my career, indeed my life, I have been struck by the observation that most work environments tend towards the negative rather than the positive, and are sometimes even punitive. From my early years, observing my father being unhappy at work to my thirteen years

in the banking industry and more than a decade consulting in companies such as Chevron, Wells Fargo Bank, Levi Strauss and Pacific Gas & Electric, my experience has been consistent – most working environments tend to focus on the negative, and are even punitive and abusive in some extreme cases. My experience with positive work environments suggests that these were always was due to a specific manager or leader, who despite the milieu, created energy, positivity and happiness in his or her scope of influence. Even my 12 months of military service in the South African Air Force demonstrated this fact - where there is a positive work environment, people are happier and they flourish and excel, and where there is a negative work environment, people are unhappy and they flounder and under perform.

In his book "The Happiness Advantage", Shawn Achor (2010, p. 21) cites meta-research of over 200 scientific studies on nearly 275,000 people. He comments …

(The research) found that happiness leads to success in nearly every domain of our lives, including marriage, health, friendship, community involvement creativity and in particular our jobs, careers and businesses"

Achor goes on to note that happy CEOs (unlike the banking CEO described above), are more likely to lead teams of employees who are both happy and healthy, and who find their work climate conducive to high performance.

Clearly being happy at work is not only important from a "feel good" perspective. It is a driver of personal and work success. If this is so, then why is it that so many are not happy in their work and their companies and why is it that so few companies focus on developing a positive work environment? Indeed, according to The Conference Board, only 45 percent of Americans said they were satisfied with their jobs. This is a huge drop from the more than 61 percent who said they were satisfied in 1987, the first year the survey was conducted

What is Positivity and Happiness?

Archor's definition of happiness (2010, p. 39), for me personally, strikes a balance between the notion of happiness being an emotion of simply feeling good and a more constructive and meaningful version:

… the experience of positive emotions – pleasure combined with deeper feelings of meaning and purpose. Happiness implies a positive mood in the present and a positive outlook for the future… For me, happiness is the joy we feel striving after our potential"

I would imagine that the banking CEO I referred to in the Introduction to this paper would have been more supportive of Archor's definition of happiness than what appeared to be his mental image that required no smiling!

Happiness as a general construct has also been described as Subjective Well Being (SWB), a term coined by Ed Diener (2008). Diener described SWB as having three elements, namely life

satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect. The implication being that an individual with high life satisfaction, high positive affect, and low negative affect has high SWB. The scientific term "Subjective Well Being" or SWB is used to avoid the ambiguous meaning of the term happiness.

Fredrickson (2009, p.6) prefers the use of the term "*positivity*" versus "*happiness*" because she considers happiness too vague and overused for scientific purposes. She describes positivity (2009, p. 6) as *"a range of positive emotions – from appreciation to love, from amusement to joy, from hope to gratitude and then some"*. Fredrickson further comments that the term positivity is purposefully broad, including the long term impact that positive emotions have on ones character, relationships, communities and environment. She describes ten emotions that make up her definition of positivity, namely joy, gratitude, serenity, interest, hope, pride, amusement, inspiration, awe and love. These are scientific terms, she says, that can be defined and measured with precision. The importance of measurement in this case is that Fredrickson and her colleagues have identified a key ratio of at least 3-to-1 positive emotions to negative as being the tipping point that predicts whether people spiral into negativity or flourish. While other emotions obviously exist, scientific research suggests that these ten are the major ones that form the foundation of positivity. Fredrickson further describes a range of tools and techniques that can be used in ones daily life to enhance positivity.

Clearly, as implied by these definitions, happiness, positivity or subjective well-being cannot be attained through a permanently easy life, lacking struggle and challenge. The notion of striving towards life and career goals implies that a sense of well being requires some level of striving or struggle. However, success can also not come from punitive and harsh struggle. We need to reframe our notion and description of happiness in the workplace in order to apply the techniques and principles that foster and nurture happiness and use it to enhance the success of the organizations we work with.

The Happiness "Challenge"

I titled this section of the paper "*The Happiness Challenge*" because happiness – or positivity – does not manifest easily, particularly in the workplace – certainly not without effort for most of us and it is particularly challenging in most work environments where deadlines, budgets and performance issues can compromise most people's sense of happiness. Indeed, as Frederickson describes (2009, p. 28), in the United States, despite "*The Pursuit of Happiness*" being guaranteed in the Declaration of Independence, the US was rather forged under the influence of a harsh Protestant work ethic; a philosophy that holds that enjoyment, pleasure and leisure are bad and that people can only show their worth through hard work and toil; Happiness and fun should be shunned in favor of long, hard work hours and deprivation. Without doubt, this ethic was alive and well in the banking group example I described at the beginning of this paper. The US and many other societies have entrenched harshness in the very essence of who we are as a working nation. Its not surprising that even using the term "happiness" in the workplace, as I have personally experienced, can elicit dismissive eye-rolling and even a degree of contempt. As I describe in more detail later in this paper, the change management consulting

methodology known as "*Appreciative Inquiry*", in my experience, faces challenges simply based on its title ("*Appreciative*") and its focus (the positive). It is common, I find, that business leaders focus on "*problems*" as their default lens of attention. Seeking out the positive and appreciating what is good in an organization is dismissed or ignored as irrelevant or even worse, a diversion from what is important and urgent.

The focus on negativity in the workplace can create a culture of anxiety, fear and distrust over time. How often do we experience co-workers arriving at work with full-blown flu or other illnesses because they feel guilty about staying at home, and half-joking comments about co-workers who arrive at work late or leave work early with the implication that they are lazy? Or colleagues who have difficulty taking vacations out of fear that they may fall behind at work. A former boss of mine frequently described how he had never fully completed a planned vacation because he felt compelled to get back to work – this is an individual who had a minor stroke in the office next to mine at the age of 42, and is a perfect example of what Achor (2010, p. 73) calls the "*Workaholic's curse*". Despite writing this paper in what is almost 2012, the workplace is still an environment more commonly characterized by harshness and negativity rather than positivity and upliftment. Indeed, as Fredrickson (2009, p. 28) comments, happiness in the workplace may even be considered "*Un-American*":

> *"The United States - and much of the capitalist world – was forged under the influence of the Protestant work ethic, a philosophy that holds that enjoyment and leisure are sinful, and that only through austere work activities can people prove their true worth. This worldview produces characters who shun all pleasant impulses and activities that might generate joviality … in favor of long work hours and personal thrift. It produces a culture that celebrates intensity, competitiveness and doggedness."*

Positivity and Organizational Change

It has become almost trite to note that "*organizational change is the only constant*." Many of us re-live this experience every working day. Organizations are undergoing disruptive change on a constant basis (Weitz, 2011). Most often these changes are driven through large-scale projects that are time and resource pressured and place great stress on those driving the projects, and more so on those groups undergoing the change. In my twenty years of organizational change consulting I have seldom been exposed to a large-scale change initiative in which employee emotions and positivity are considered a key success factors for the change – the Denzil Busse, Standard Bank example being an exception.

By default, negative emotions of fear and anxiety are far more common in intense, costly and time pressured change initiatives, particularly where there are implications of job redundancies. These are natural emotional outcomes emerging from uncertainty and excessive urgency focused on cost cutting and profits, rather than keeping people energized and positive so that they are able to perform at their best under pressure. What I have personally observed in these

situations of intensive change is that people are more likely to fear change, hide from it, sabotage it and generally resist it with negative talk and destructive collaboration. Little or no consideration in these projects is given to emotions that elicit behaviors of receptivity, open mindedness, appreciation and a positive, high performance work environment.

Hammond (1998, p. 6) comments that "*The traditional approach to change is to look for the problem, do a diagnosis and find a solution. The primary focus is on what is wrong or broken; since we look for the problems, we find them. By paying attention to problems, we emphasize and amplify them*". The focus on what is positive or effective is less common.

Klimosky and Kanfer (2002, p. 10) comment:

> *"The important point … is that many work behaviors may have strong and consistent linkages to negative emotions. In such cases, attempts to change behavioral patterns without first changing associated emotions are likely to be unsuccessful. Positive emotions have garnered less attention than negative emotions for several reasons: they are less differentiated, they are not associated with specific problems needing solutions, and they are not associated with specific action tendencies thought to be necessary for survival"*

Klimosky and Kanfer continue in their description that negative emotions have received far greater attention because they have typically been associated with "*problems needing solutions*" which tends to be a dominant focus in many, if not most businesses.

In my experience, the challenges of organizational change in a modern economy require more expansive and innovative thinking from employees than was required a century ago. Change in a modern economy required the support and involvement of all impacted employees versus a few executives at the top of the hierarchy. More recent research demonstrates that positive emotions broaden people's minds and awareness to new opportunities that change brings and thus stimulates a positive response and adaptability to change. Fredrickson (2009, p. 55), describes the notion of the "*heliotropic*" effect in the plant world (where plants stretch and turn towards the light) similarly happens in humans in the "*light*" of positivity – People turn towards positivity and turn away from the "*darkness*" of negativity. Positivity expands people's interest in new opportunities and change and the notion of what is possible, whereas negativity narrows a person's outlook. I am experiencing this very phenomenon in my current project in Vancouver Canada. The pressures in this $1 billion project are mounting, and numerous leaders are increasingly feeling this pressure. One in particular is responding by becoming punitive and harsh, while another maintains an energetic and positive demeanor, providing encouraging support, regularly smiling and providing positive feedback – her common phrase of encouragement is "*we can do this together*". Where performance is low, the former applies harsh words and frustration, the latter provides support and encouragement. Team members avoid the former, while team members have rallied with the latter and are beginning to show progress. The former team has become fearful and resistant and continues to struggle, while the other is flourishing. This is a practical example of how positivity broadens the mind and

cultivates a "*can do*" attitude, while negativity fosters angst, fear and resistance, and narrows the mind to collaborating as a team to develop creative solutions.

Organizational change projects are almost always urgent and time constrained. Costs limitations, competiveness (for example, getting new products to market) and the need for positive results for share price purposes all contribute to this pressure. Fredrickson (2009) notes that positivity is especially important when the work environment requires creative solutions fast – indeed, this is precisely what is needed in the real world example I described above. Fredrickson describes studies conducted with students who are taught simple positivity techniques (simply having self generated a positive mental image) prior to taking standardized tests, while a control group is not. The positive students perform better than the control group. A further remarkable study conducted with medical doctors showed that simply providing the research group of physicians with a small gift (a small bag of candy) prior to making a diagnosis improved their performance beyond a control group that did not receive the gift. Interestingly, my wife as a senior nurse manager in a large county hospital uses this simple technique often – she frequently provides small gifts of chocolate or other small items to people she manages or with whom she collaborates. It is a simple gesture that says "*I am aware of you as an individual, and I care*". It is remarkable how positively people respond to such seemingly minor positive gestures of kindness and perform better.

Positivity as an Organizational Change Methodology – Appreciative Inquiry

Fredrickson (2009, p. 52) describes positive questioning as the "*launching point*" for Appreciative Inquiry (AI), an approach to organizational change that has "*spread like wildfire through business consulting circles*". She references Cooperrider and Whitney (2008, p. XV), co-founders of the AI methodology, who describe AI as:

"*a philosophy that incorporates an approach, a process (4-D Cycle of Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny) for engaging people at any or all levels to produce effective, positive change…Its assumption is simple:*
Every organization has something that works right – things that give life when it is most alive and effective, successful and connected in healthy ways to its stakeholders and communities. AI begins by identifying what is positive and connecting to it in ways that heighten energy, vision and action for change."

AI leverages the powerful benefits of positivity – namely that of expanding people's creative capabilities and stimulating energetic collaboration between people in the workplace. Most initiatives are fraught with pressure, anxiety and angst – not only do people going through change feel this, often (as my research in Merit's Engage-to-Change research study shows), managers will bully and intimidate employees during these times of stress and pressure. AI turns this upside down. Cooperrider and Whitney (2008, p. 3) note that the traditional and historical approach to organizational change is based on the principle of problem solving. By its very nature, problem-solving implies there is a problem that inhibits change and once that problem has a solution, effective change can take place. This focus on problems has by

implication a negative perspective – something must be broken and must be fixed, versus what is positive and meaningful and can be leveraged for future change and innovation (2008, p. 3-4):

"Appreciative Inquiry is the cooperative co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations and the world around them … In its most practical construction, AI is a form of organizational study that selectively seeks to locate, highlight and illuminate what are referred to as the life-giving forces of the organization's existence, its positive core … What makes AI different from other OD methodologies at this phase is that every question is positive."

AI includes techniques of asking positive, powerful and provocative questions that uncover the positive, versus the notion of seeking "THE problem". This approach is similar to that popularized in the book "*Leading with Questions*" by Michael Marquardt (2005).

Is Too Much Positivity Negative?

I must admit to being somewhat skeptical about what I felt to be an excessive focus on happiness and positivity in the Appreciative Inquiry change model – to the point of ignoring the negative. Dealing with problems (for example in the form of managing risk) is essential for navigating a challenging business landscape; furthermore, the need to focus on these problems is enshrined in the fiduciary responsibilities of corporate board members. While being emphatically supportive of the need for positivity as a dominant focus in organizational change, ignoring negatives or problems seems naïve. For example, while I was impressed with the text "*Strengths-Based Leadership*" (Rath and Conchie, 2008, Gallup Press), I innately felt that ignoring weaknesses is a fundamental mistake – unbalanced in a sense. Zenger and Folkman (2002) in their research of over 22,000 leaders world wide, describe in detail the need to develop the core strengths that form the foundation of extraordinary leadership, and provide unique insights on the multiplying impact of powerful combinations of strengths. But they do not ignore or underemphasize weaknesses and the risks of not overcoming what they refer to as "*Fatal Flaws*". Indeed, Fredrickson (2009, p. 135) describes a "*tipping point*" where too much positivity may be dangerous – ignoring negatives (Zenger and Folkman refer to them as "*Fatal Flaws*") can be damaging. Fredrickson however describes the need for balance, and refers to this balance as "appropriate negativity". Negativity that is appropriate is important to focus on for purposes of identifying real problems and overcoming them to avoid risk and achieve success. In my view, it is important to place some focus on negative issues for purposes of overcoming "Fatal Flaws" and major risks. A key question from my perspective is the manner in which we view these problems or challenges – do leaders become anxious, harsh and punitive and create a negative focus on problem solving, versus an energetic, innovative and collaborative environment to solve these problems? The former approach is destructive. The latter is constructive despite the focus being on a problem or risk issue. The excessive focus on the positive to the exclusion of negatives is risky. Gareth Cook, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, in an article entitled "*The Darker Side of Happiness*" (2011), comments:

Now, though, there is gathering evidence that happiness is not what it may appear. A string of new studies suggests that the modern chase after happiness--and even

happiness itself--can hurt us. Happy, it turns out, is not always the way you want to be. To be happy is to be more gullible. Happy people tend to think less concretely and systematically; they are less persuasive. A happy person is less likely to discern looming threats.

"We have put happiness under the microscope just like we do with every other mental state," says June Gruber, an assistant professor of psychology at Yale University, who coauthored a recent review of happiness research, "and we see that there is this dark side."

There is strong argument that a focus on negative aspects of life and work is important for survival – it's the balance between the positive and the negative that is important. As Fredrickson aptly describes *"without negativity you become Pollyanna with a forced clown smile painted on your face. You lose touch with reality. You are not genuine. Unchecked, levity leaves you flighty, ungrounded and unreal. Appropriate negativity grounds you in reality".*

My initial exposure to Appreciative Inquiry supports this view – AI can be and in my experience has in some cases been perceived as "Pollyanna-ish". I have personally received a degree of dismissive "eye-rolling" responses to what is viewed as an impractically positive approach to my consulting style and approach. In my view, some of the language used in certain of the writings on AI could be construed as simplistic and naïve.

Positivity and the Changing Nature of the Modern Workplace

The workplace of today is very different from the workplace in the first half of the twentieth century. The notion of the work and employment "*contract*" has changed significantly in the last few decades (Marciano, 2010, pg 9). It is a fairly recent phenomenon that people work for more than just a paycheck. The collective body of research and experience in the past half century has shown convincingly that people are more motivated by the intrinsic value from the work itself, as well as the pride realized from working for a company with a positive reputation, than from just a paycheck. It is remarkable however that still in 2011, so many organizations and managers still rely on fiat on the one hand and material rewards on the other, as the primary mechanisms for employees to change, and evidence shows that neither work effectively.

The notion that employees who are happy in their work – or as Archor (2009) describes it are motivated by the fact they are able to pursue their life goals and reach for their potential through their work – is a fairly recent and primarily Western phenomenon. Prior to the mid 20th century, work served primarily as a way of "paying the bills" – not to suggest that this is not an aspect of work today for many people, (indeed becoming more urgent during difficult economic times such as we are living in over the past few years of the "Great Recession"). However, in the past sixty years or so there has been a significant shift in the degree to which people place importance on gaining life meaning and purpose from work versus simply making a living. In Merit's Engage-*to*-Change[SM] research referenced earlier, a remarkable 34% of

respondents indicate that, given the opportunity, they would work for ***less*** money for another company that cared about and engaged its employees more effectively. A remarkable 66% of respondents either plan to look for opportunities elsewhere in their companies (29.8%) or plan to actively seek employment with other companies (36.5%) as the economy improves. Overall, this is not a good vote of confidence for employee happiness and motivation for many of the companies represented in this study.

Despite a large body of research, as well as experiential evidence, that reward and recognition programs do not work in the long term to motivate organizational change and performance, companies today still use them (Marciano, 2010). While there are some situations – like motivating short term changes in behavior – that may be suitable for the use of reward and recognition programs, most that I have experienced have failed to achieve their intended results, namely enhanced employee performance, commitment and motivation. The primary reason for this, as described by Marciano, is that "*programs don't fundamentally change employees' beliefs or commitment to their jobs; they just change their behavior during the course of the program*". Based on this statement, one could argue:simply don't make it a program that ends. Keep it going forever!! Unfortunately, research and experience suggest that this does not work either. For example, most companies that I have worked for or with have had some form on ongoing, annual performance salary increase and bonus system. In no case have I felt motivated by these programs and my anecdotal experience is that employees have not either. Indeed, incentive and reward programs often create greater negativity. The reason is that employees are disconnected from the program – in other words they do not have the notion that they really impact on the outcome. Secondly, they begin to view the program as simply an annual event that becomes part of the company's compensation system versus being a motivator. Marciano comments that these kinds of programs are de-motivators and negative when employees do not get a big enough increase or bonus. These approaches are barriers to positivity and inhibit change and innovation.

Positivity Techniques – Reversing the Negative Spiral

As I described in the previous section, "*change is the only constant*" in companies during the new millennium. And with change that is driven by the need to be competitive or to reduce costs or be more efficient and productive, organizational change can create a pressurized and stressful work environment. This stressful work environment can create exactly the opposite of what is needed to be adaptable to the change all around us. Leaders and managers can apply harsh tactics to produce the results they need to meet their obligations. Toxic leaders can abuse and intimidate their team members and co-workers. Employees become fearful, distrustful and negative. An organizational downward spiral occurs. Fearful employees narrow their outlooks rather than open their thinking to innovative ideas. They are less creative instead of actively seeking greater opportunities to meet company goals. Increasing time is spent discussing negative rumors versus brainstorming new ideas. Time off sick increases, safety in workplace deteriorates and the overall deterioration of company performance accelerates. How do many leaders respond? More pressure, and more harshness and more negativity. The result is exactly the opposite of what is intended. This downturn spiral is predictable. Fredrickson (2009, p. 161) describes this spiral:

> *Negative emotions – like fear and anger – can also spawn negative thinking. This reciprocal dynamic is in fact why downward spirals are so slippery. Negative thoughts and emotions feed on each other. And as they do, they pull you down their abyss.*

It is important to note that the techniques described below, however simple, can apparently have a lasting impact on organizational culture and individual employees. Lyubmirsky, Boehm and Sheldon (2011) comment that "*engaging in happiness-increasing activities (such as committing to important goals, meditating, acting kindly towards others, thinking optimistically or expressing gratitude) has the potential to improve levels of happiness for significant periods of time.*"

"Spiral Up" to Constructive Change

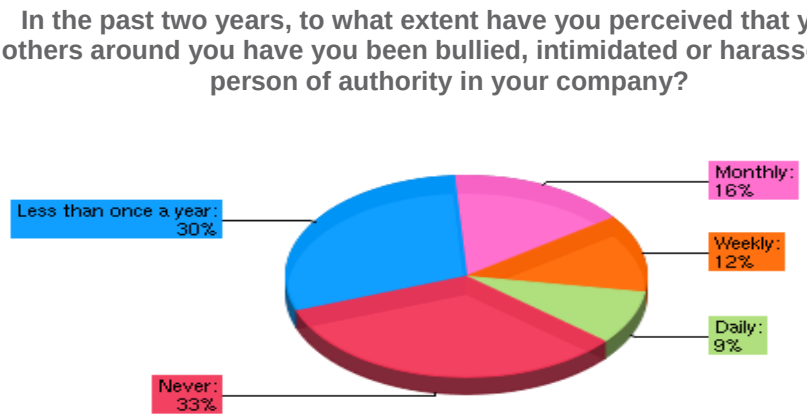
The negative spiral can be stopped and reversed. And for organizational change to be effective and efficient I believe this negative spiral must be reversed. While I firmly believe negative issues must be addressed ("risk" in project parlance) for effective organizational change, our challenge is dealing with risks and problems positively and constructively. Indeed, I apply certain of these techniques on my own consulting practice to good effect. However, they can only be as effective as the broader organization and project will permit and support; furthermore, positivity needs to become a core competence of the organization if the "spiral up" is to be truly effective. The following techniques describe a sample of the methods to achieve this outcome.

Technique 1: Decrease negativity

Negativity is more powerful than positivity – it has greater impact. Frederickson (2009) describes the scientifically confirmed "negativity bias" as "*bad is stronger than good*" - the effects of positivity are more subtle (and therefore have to be more frequent) in comparison to negativity. When employees are faced with a negative experience alongside something positive, they will tend to focus more attention on the negative – much like the reaction most of us have when danger is present – our "*fright, flight or freeze*" response is activated. Frederickson describes the "*positivity/negativity ratio*" that has been independently demonstrated by numerous scientific research studies – a required minimum of at least three positive experiences to 1 negative. The "*positivity offset*" principle suggests that while most people experience more positive emotions on average than negative, unless the positive outweigh the negative by a 3:1 ratio, there is little or no difference in their levels of happiness or success (or, as Fredrickson calls it, "*flourishing*"). The negative denominator is more powerful, so companies need to focus here to begin.

Technique 2: Eliminate "Toxic" Leadership

In a recent research study that the Merit Resource Group and I launched in the San Francisco Bay area, a staggering 37% of respondents indicated that they were personally bullied or intimidated—or they had witnessed others being exposed to this kind of behavior at least monthly, weekly or daily. It is even more remarkable given that a high percentage of respondents were management and executive level leaders (Merit's Engage-*to*-Change[SM] Research):



While it would be important to understand how these respondents interpreted "*bullying or intimidation*", it is apparent from numerous other research studies, as well as anecdotal and personal experience, that management and leadership in many companies do not stimulate positivity in the workplace. It is essential that leaders and managers have a "positivity bias," understand the techniques, and have the necessary skills for reducing negativity and increasingly positivity. At its essence, I believe this is at the core of the ability to lead organizational change. While discussing how to achieve this goal is beyond the scope of this paper, recognizing the existence of this cornerstone is important as a basis for discussing the tools and techniques for improving adaptability for change.

The following are a select number of techniques that various researchers and practitioner propose for reducing negativity in one's life. What I have done with certain of these in this paper is to interpret them in a work setting:

Technique 3: Modify the situation:

Fredrickson (2009) describes a technique of changing interpretations of events that may cause negativity in ones life. An example in the workplace could be an extremely negative work

colleague. Hearing constantly negative dialogue is not only exhausting—it also can be contagious to others. A powerful technique is to view these situations as a challenge – appreciate the opportunity to test your capabilities to modify the situation with subtle modification techniques. People often use negative comments to get attention (even adults). In other cases negativity can be a call for help. Being mindful of these drivers, the use of listening and reframing techniques (such as simply paying attention and listening) may be all that is needed. If this does not alter the negativity, asking questions about the logic behind their negative views can begin to alter the context of negative dialogue. Pointing out alternatives to their negative viewpoints can move the conversation in a positive direction. I personally use this technique with my brother who lives in Malta. He is an accomplished artist and is constantly challenged by the sight of trash, discarded cars, appliances and other garbage as he is painting landscapes on the magnificent coastlines of Malta. His eyes tend to scout out the ugliness rather the beauty. When visiting him I will simply listen and most often he will eventually comment that Malta is generally a beautiful place to live despite the dumping of garbage.

Technique 4: Break the negativity cycle:

For leaders and managers, a valuable technique when faced with a negative employee is to point out positive aspects of what they may be ranting about. For example, when an employee is bemoaning the poorly implemented technology system, break the negative cycle by describing the benefits when it ultimately is implemented. One can even reframe the context of a difficult system: you would not have had the opportunity to learn the system as thoroughly if the implementation had been seamless. The very fact that it was challenging demanded the need to roll-up your sleeves and really learn the system. Again, using the example of my brother, when simply listening does not work, I will gently observe the magnificent cloud formations over the ocean, while he is ranting about the rusted car carcasses lying abandoned at the base of the cliff.

Technique 5: Increase Positivity

While reducing negativity gets the biggest “bang for the buck” in terms of Fredrickson’s 3:1 ratio, ultimately it is the positive experiences and emotions that move people to the tipping point (Fredrickson, 2009, p. 179). Reducing negativity negates the potential for a negative spiral, but it’s positivity that moves people forward and allows individuals to flourish. In the business world when experiencing large amounts of change, reducing negativity limits resistance and the potential for sabotage. But it is positivity that opens people’s minds to the opportunity that change brings and stimulates the creativity that maximizes the opportunities presented by change in the workplace. The five techniques that follow are by no means the only ones available, however they are five that I personally have experienced and observed as powerful, and that the research literature rates as impactful.

Technique 6: The "Big Picture" at work – Find positive meaning

This is more a personal perspective than one based on scientific research and readings – it is primarily based on my own 30 years of working in challenging organizational settings. While Arbor and Fredrickson amongst others describe a variety of tactical tools and techniques for developing positivity in life and the workplace, finding positive meaning in life is for me the most important. It provides the big picture context that makes all of the "*life is difficult*" experiences (a Scott M. Peck quote) meaningful. The tactical tools and techniques are magnified in strength as they take place when a person has purpose in their work. My personal mission is to help companies and people navigate difficult change in a manner that not only brings business benefits, but enriches people's lives – allowing them to deal with changing life circumstances in a more constructive and positive manner. With this end in mind, I tend to explore every difficult project that I am on with a lens of what I can learn so that I have a richer set of experiences from which to draw in my consulting practice. The more challenging, the more valuable. For people who work simply to earn a living and pay the bills, a "big picture' that provides long term meaning may be lacking. Although a difficult exercise, beyond the scope of this paper, finding purpose and meaning in work is, in my experience, essential as a "multiplier" for the tools and techniques discussed next.

Technique 7: Apply Strengths in the Workplace

I am a strong proponent of the "strengths-based leadership" philosophy of Tom Rath and Barrie Conchie (2008) as well as the work of Zenger and Folkman (2002). People that have the opportunity to do what they do best are far more likely to flourish (Fredrickson, p. 189). While this is part of Technique 1 above (from a career perspective), it can also be a tactical approach day by day. For example, my wife is a nurse manager at a large country hospital, and has almost 100 nurses reporting to her. Although her job requires many rather mundane tasks, she specifically focuses on the opportunity to apply her strengths for coaching and developing certain of her nurse reports and dealing directly with patients. It is in these areas that she finds her greatest meaning and purpose when the drudgery of many mundane or negative tasks or experiences have the potential to become overwhelming.

Technique 8: Connect with Others

Edward Hallowell (2011, p. 35) describes the notion that doing things with other people, particularly when that work is valuable and contributes to something important, is maximized when performed with others. The ability to share successes and positive experiences is a multiplier versus simply experiencing a positive experience in isolation. As I described above (Technique 1) above, it is multiplied even more when the work effort is done for long term purpose with the "big picture' in mind.In research on Employee Engagement in the workplace conducted by the Gallup organization (Crabtree, 2004), highly engaged employees are much more likely than others to say that their organization "*encourages close friendships at work*":

"Eighty-two percent of engaged employees showed agreement by rating the statement "my organization encourages close friendships at work" a 4 or 5 (on a 1-5 scale where 5 is "Strongly Agree"), compared to 53% of those who are not engaged and just 17% in the actively disengaged group."

Positivity in the workplace is contagious. Hallowell (2011, p. 84) describes the dyadic and hyperdyadic spread of happiness in the workplace whereby positivity is spread exponentially when people in the workplace form social networks. This is a powerful tool for managers who can create opportunities for employees to get together in and outside of work to get to know one another and develop trusted relationships.

Technique 9: Find Ways to Develop New Skills

Managers and leaders have a unique opportunity – particularly in the current economic environment - to remind team members that work is a privilege and learning new skills is an even greater privilege. Achor (2010, p. 6) describes an experience he had in Soweto, South Africa. I lived within 10 miles of Soweto for most of my life, going to high school, college and eventually working in Johannesburg. Achor describes his sadness while teaching at Harvard Business School witnessing smart students bemoaning the hard work and stress of being at one of the leading universities in the world. On the other side of the world is Soweto, a place he personally had the opportunity to visit, where thousands of previously disadvantaged children now attend decent schools after the Apartheid system was abolished. When he personally asked a groups of classroom children the question "who likes schoolwork?", the great majority smilingly and enthusiastically put up their hands – they view schoolwork as a privilege, something most of their parents did not have the opportunity to experience. On the other side of the world, in the United States, this question, says Achor, is more often met with few positive reactions. Managers need to create an environment in which employees view work as a wonderful privilege and opportunity, in which learning new skills provides the opportunity to grow and add greater value to the others and the world.

Technique 10: Expectancy Theory Applied in the Workplace

Problems and challenges in the workplace can either be presented as issues of great concern, with seriously negative implications, or positioned as challenges that are exciting and can produce learning and growth – same issue, different lens and a completely different expectation from employees. Achor describes a remarkable study performed in Japan (2010, p. 69). Researchers blindfolded a group of students and told them their right arms were being rubbed with a poison ivy plant. Afterward, all 13 of the students reacted with the typical symptoms of poison ivy despite the fact that they had not actually been rubbed with the plant at all. Achor suggests that this is explained by "*Expectancy Theory*", in which our expectations create brain patterns that cause reactions as if they were real. I have applied aspects of this in my project work. One example was with a project team that I inherited some years ago. This team's members had done a rather poor job of creating and managing their project documentation. A project audit resulted in a negative rating and could have created a

negativity spiral, given the intense pressure members of the project team were under. I presented the need for an enhanced document management system with a highly positive and fun approach – that of a game or puzzle to try and find and move documents, with a prize at the end. The expectation was that this would be fun, and with this expectation, it was.

Summary and Conclusion

It is abundantly clear that being happy at work is a lot more important than simply coming home from work with a smile on one's face – it is a cornerstone of individual, team and organizational performance. In retrospect over my career, and my years of study, it is remarkable to me that the subject of happiness has been virtually absent. While in recent years, the notion of employee satisfaction and more recently employee engagement have become a more significant focus, less has been discussed on the subjects and benefits of individual happiness or positivity. Indeed, as previously noted, in my personal experience, these concepts were more often scoffed at than taken seriously in the workplace. More recently, positivity and happiness are becoming better understood. Companies like Google, SAS, Whole Foods Markets, and Cisco Systems (Hallowell, 2011, p.31) are applying techniques that promote happiness, along with the benefits that emerge from happy and engaged employees. But I believe that we are a long way from having positivity as a basic cornerstone of business practice. The methods and tools that many of my contemporaries learned in previous decades do not become "*un-learned*" easily, and organizational cultures do not change rapidly either. Much more progress is needed, and methods such as Appreciative Inquiry being used as a positivity-oriented change management approach provide hope, and as successful companies such as Google lend legitimacy to these methods and approaches, progress undoubtedly will be accelerated.

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