



## Cultivating Happiness

The United States is not the happiest place on Earth. It is not even in the top ten. The happiest countries tend to be those around the Baltic and North Seas: Finland, Denmark, Iceland, Sweden, Norway, all make the top ten. About three-fourths of Icelanders describe themselves as content, compared to about one-third of North Americans. These are places that may have only five to seven hours of sunlight in the winter, so sunny skies do not equate to happiness. Sheep outnumber humans in Iceland about two to one, but it is an unlikely causation!



Happiness is not about days full of smiles and jovial moments. It is a deeper concept, and includes: well-being, deep satisfaction with life, feeling more positive than negative, living purposefully, and a sense of humor, even in adversity. A sad day or moment does not make someone unhappy; life itself sometimes provides for both hardship and good fortune. Perhaps some people are born with greater happiness than others, but my experience in executive coaching for 25 years has concluded that more than anything, happiness is a cultivated trait. Aside from extraordinary moments in adversity, general happiness is something that leaders organize toward in every day of their life. Leaders do not wait for happiness to find them or their team.

Happiness, beyond its own intrinsic value, is good for overall health, having more satisfying relationships, increased productivity, greater generosity, coping better with stress, lower turnover, and seeing issues and opportunities in a larger context. Reuven Bar-On, an expert in emotional intelligence, defines four basic qualities for happiness and positive well-being: self-regard, a sense of purpose, optimism, and healthy interpersonal relationships.

People spend more waking hours at work than in any other activity; creating an environment where happiness is welcomed and encouraged is a responsibility of leaders to improve the lives of others and to improve organizational outcomes.

On the next page are places to look to support cheerfulness in yourself and your team:

Cultivating leaders others **want** to follow

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- Gratitude of the Present: Leaders can becomewhelmed by analysis of the past and doing their best to anticipate the future. Analysis and forecasting are hard work and necessary components of leadership, but attend to how much time is spent in these activities. Happiness is experienced in the moment, and brings people back to the present.
- Gratitude of the Past: I have yet to meet the leader who has not overcome something significant; those trials by fire help us in the present moment to provide a base of self-regard. Own how you survived and then thrived through such hardship.
- Kindness: Kindness is the consideration of others and generosity of spirit. It is not weakness. Invoke kindness as a daily practice. Everyone is carrying a burden of which we do not know, and kindness invites openness and genuineness. Studies have found that being altruistic can increase our happiness not just in the short term, but increases our happiness set point (our basic level of happiness).
- Purpose: Do what you love. Love what you do. Show others how happy you are when you are on purpose. If you are unhappy at work, ask yourself if purpose has slipped away. Create an atmosphere that involves people doing meaningful work rather than getting things done. The happiness of completing something is short-lived; being engaged in something meaningful helps people work through hardship rather than living a life focused on the hardship itself.
- Connection: Much of what people do with one another is transactional in nature. We do not get to meet the “artist” much anymore, yet we are surrounded by people who have an individual brilliance of their own. Do not just read the report or analysis, go speak with the author about it and express gratitude.
- Movement: All the large muscles in our body are designed for propulsion, yet most people’s work environments focus on the small muscles. Activating the large muscles creates chemicals that support a sense of well-being and happiness. Instead of having that next meeting across from a table, go for a walk together.
- Equality: Create an ethos of equality – not in position of organization structure, but that everyone adds value from their knowledge base and perspective. Make sure people are happy to share their opinions, not just obliged.
- Community: Create social cohesion in your organization. America prizes individuality, something that has its merits, yet people gain much from feeling a part of a community that works together toward meaningful outcomes. Those countries in the North and Baltic Seas create a greater sense of communal societies than America; perhaps living and surviving in northern latitudes historically required that.
- Deliberately discuss happiness in your organization, how happy people are, what obstacles there are to it, and how to increase it.