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Leadership Inspiration: Positive Psychology

By Jeffrey Stock

Editor's Note: In the Leadership & Development Section's Leadership Inspiration Contest, entrants were asked to tell us what inspired them to be a better actuarial leader. Here is the winning entry.

Most of my career-defining moments were recognitions for contributions, as I'm sure is true for most actuaries. But one defining moment that stands out from the rest was my introduction to positive psychology.

It started in 2010, when we had a "Lunch Actuarial & Finance Learning Series" and listened to the American Management Association's recording¹ of *The Happiness Advantage* by Shawn Achor.

"My vision is to kick-start a positivity course offered to all employees through my employer and demonstrate medical cost savings and productivity improvements."

By coincidence, Achor was a keynote speaker² at the 2011 Health Spring Meeting in Boston. He spoke about the evidence-based research around what makes people happier and more productive, and that's when I decided to really listen to the message, which I will summarize here.

Research shows job success is only predicted 25 percent by intelligence and technical skills. The remaining 75 percent is predicted by other variables. Optimism, defined as "belief that your behavior matters," our social support network at work and at home, and how we cope with stress all matter as much as intelligence.

Positive employees have been shown to be better at securing and keeping jobs, and are more productive, more resilient, have less

burnout, less turnover and greater sales. They also take fewer sick days and are perceived as having more charisma.

And because of the concept of mirror neurons, one person's happiness or unhappiness can spread across a room. There are many ways to boost happiness and positivity. Achor highlights five and explains the evidence behind them!

1. Write down three things we are grateful for when we come into work. This changes the brain to scan for good things. When managers start to do this, it affects their entire team.
2. Journaling—Journal about one positive experience you've had over the past 24 hours and savor these moments of meaning. This increases the meaning you see at work, and the brain can't differentiate between real and imagined experience.
3. Exercise.
4. Meditate by watching your breath go in and out for two minutes. This prevents multitasking.
5. Acts of kindness (bucket filling)—Writing a two-sentence email praising someone every day for 21 days increases social support and activates 21 people.

Personally, I've challenged myself to these five exercises every day and built them into my daily habits using outlook reminders, an accessible journal, and having a regular exercise partner. I also am taking a positive psychology course through the Wholebeing Institute (which I recommend).

My vision is to kick-start a positivity course offered to all employees through my employer and demonstrate medical cost savings and productivity improvements. I envision this to be a springboard to spread positive psychology as a wellness offering and possibly a product to offer alongside other insurance products. And to conclude, I am grateful for recognizing positive psychology as a defining moment and the opportunity to share this information with the Leadership & Development Section. ■



Jeffrey Stock, FSA, MAAA, is working toward his certificate of positive psychology at the Wholebeing Institute. He enjoys roller hockey, running, bridge and tennis. Stock can be reached at 860-502-0725 or Jeffstock79@gmail.com.

ENDNOTES

¹ The recording is free at the following link: http://www.amanet.org/training/media_files/2010/Happiness/index.htm.

² Achor was also a keynote speaker at the 2015 Society of Actuaries Annual Meeting & Exhibit.