



# The Power of Happy

By Amanda Hug

**W**ould you rather be happy or sad? Would you rather be perceived as happy or sad? Would you rather be around people who are happy or sad?

These are not trick questions. I'm assuming for 99 percent of us, the answers are happy, happy, and HAPPY! Why be sad when you can be happy? Unfortunately, happiness isn't always the emotional state we experience at work. Instead, we may experience stress, anxiety or exhaustion. We feel the weight of our many deliverables, and the pursuit of happiness seems to be an unattainable pipe dream. This may feel even more real right now, as many of us continue to be confined within our homes with our usual outlets for fun and relaxation off-limits.

I believe that work doesn't have to be that way. Work can be fun, and we can be happy doing it! And, although being happy is certainly a good enough payoff in itself, it also has a positive payoff in our work.

## A BUSINESS CASE FOR HAPPY

I first encountered the business case for happiness at the 2015 SOA Annual Meeting & Exhibit in Austin, Texas. The keynote speaker that year was Shawn Achor, a Harvard researcher on positive psychology and bestselling author of *The Happiness Advantage*. His research-backed message is this: "When we are positive, our brains become more engaged, creative, motivated, energetic, resilient, and productive."<sup>1</sup> The dopamine flooding the brain from happiness and positivity has been shown to yield a 31 percent increase in productivity, a 37 percent increase in sales and a 19 percent improvement in accuracy of diagnosis by doctors.<sup>2</sup>

Not only is the research compelling, but I'll bet you're able to spot anecdotal evidence of this phenomenon in your own lives and workplaces. Reflect upon the impact that your attitude, or the attitude of your colleagues, has on others. When someone starts a meeting with a smile and a positive observation about the weather, the team or how their day is going, it sets the mood for



a productive and collaborative meeting. When someone starts a meeting with a frown and a negative remark, it puts people on edge and fosters discouragement and resistance. I know I look forward to meetings with the former people and dread meetings with the latter.

People who are happy are more likely to be liked. That fact is not irrelevant for business outcomes, especially when it comes to the art of influencing and negotiating. One of Robert Cialdini's six principles for persuasion is just that—the principle of liking. It is easier to influence someone when they like you and you have a positive rapport with them.<sup>3</sup> Be happy, and become a better influencer!

## ONE MINUTE A DAY TO HAPPY

So, there is a business case for happiness. But just how do we become happy?

Achor offers a few simple and research-tested techniques to move toward a happier life. I grabbed hold of one of those after that meeting, and I can honestly say that using it has changed

my life for the better. It goes like this: Every day, list three specific things you're grateful for. Simple as that! It takes less than one minute. To be effective, the list should include truly specific items that reflect your present circumstances, not the generic answers of "my family, friends, and health."

For me, normally it looks something like this:

1. I'm thankful on this sunny day for a three-minute walking commute to work (yes, I'm blessed!).
2. I'm thankful that the work presentation I was stressing over on Tuesday was well received.
3. I'm thankful that a friend is visiting me this weekend from out of town.

During COVID-19, it has sounded more like this:

1. I'm thankful I have a stable job where I'm able to work from home.
2. I'm thankful that "Survivor" is on TV tonight (yes, I'm one of those people).
3. I'm thankful that Frank Pepe's Pizzeria is still open for takeout.

The items don't all need to be groundbreaking or cosmic—just find the things in your life that you're thankful for in today's present moment. It could be as significant as a consistent paycheck in today's economy or as simple as a great slice of pizza.

Achor recommends maintaining this practice for 21 days to see a marked shift in your attitude and outlook. I'd suggest it doesn't have to be that formal or continuous. I don't write these things down, nor do I think up a list every day. But I create one every now and then, especially when I find myself getting negative, and, wow, does it make a difference over time. At the annual meeting, Achor said that this practice rewires your brain to scan the world for the positive and not the negative. Now that is the kind of brain I want to have! This simple act can turn a lifelong pessimist into a lifelong optimist.

I know this is the real deal, because I've lived it. Last year a colleague caught me in the hall to say hello, and greeted me with, "Whenever I see you at work, you always seem so **happy!**" Thank you, Shawn Achor. That is the power of happy. ■



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#### ENDNOTES

- 1 Achor, Shawn. 2018. *The Happiness Advantage: How a Positive Brain Fuels Success in Work and Life*. New York: Currency.
- 2 Achor, Shawn. TedX Talk: The Happy Secret to Better Work. May 2011. [https://www.ted.com/talks/shawn\\_achor\\_the\\_happy\\_secret\\_to\\_better\\_work?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/shawn_achor_the_happy_secret_to_better_work?language=en) (accessed June 16, 2020).
- 3 The Uses (and Abuses) of Influence. *Harvard Business Review*. July–August 2013. <https://hbr.org/2013/07/the-uses-and-abuses-of-influence> (accessed June 16, 2020).