



Where we belong

If you want a happy and productive workplace,
people need to feel comfortable and accepted

Writing Tracy Powley

The case for happiness at work is clear. Researchers at Warwick University carried out experiments to see whether happy employees work harder. Their results showed that happiness made people 12% more productive.

There is also a high level of interest in happiness from an international policy-making perspective, as indicated by rankings such as the United Nations' *World Happiness Report* and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Better Life Index. Finally, from a personal experience, we know what a difference it makes when we feel positive about work and our lives.

And yet we are not doing very well at being happy. Unhappiness, particularly in the form of stress-related illness, is worryingly high.

According to the Labour Force Survey, 15.4 million working days were lost due to work-related stress, depression or anxiety in the UK in 2017/18. Meanwhile, figures from the Health and Safety Executive estimated that the cost of work-related injuries and illness in 2016/17 was £15 billion.

So, what would help us to feel happier at work? Stanford Graduate School of Business identifies four key drivers:

- 1 Higher purpose** People want to feel that they are part of something bigger than themselves, and that the shared goal matters.
- 2 Autonomy** People want to feel that they are trusted and in control of their work.
- 3 Meaningful relationships** These are achieved through creating shared experiences for people, which support collaboration.

4 A positive impact People are happier if they see the concrete, measurable and positive difference that their actions have on others. This leads to a sense of being valued.

Neuroscience supports this argument. Experiments by neuroeconomist Paul J Zak have shown that trust and having a sense of higher purpose stimulates oxytocin release – the chemical that produces happiness. So a prerequisite for happiness is enabling trusting relationships at work. For this to happen, however, we need to create workplace cultures where people feel comfortable and accepted.

Consider these questions to assess whether your own organisation has this kind of culture:

- How freely do your people feel able to express their thoughts and offer suggestions to each other?
- How open are they to hearing other people's point of view?
- How 'accepted' do they feel, and how much of their 'real selves' do they bring to work?

Or, are feelings and thoughts suppressed, self-esteem worn away and true selves masked? These are all indicators that people are unhappy.

Part of the community

The word 'belonging' is increasingly being used to capture the idea of a culture where everyone is accepted and welcomed for who they are. It taps into the strong need we all have to feel part of a community. Communities come in many different forms – families, activity and interest-based groups, local communities in your home town – but one of the most significant for many is their workplace.

Professional services firm EY's *Belonging Barometer*, a study on belonging at work, clearly shows the effect of people not feeling comfortable or accepted in their workplace community – being excluded, in other words.

A lack of acceptance can lead to a sense of isolation, loneliness, sadness or even anger – the complete antithesis of happiness. Again, the neuroscience backs this up – high stress inhibits oxytocin release. When we feel stressed, we don't interact well with others. Think short fuse or shutting down.

The things that can lead to that feeling of exclusion are often unintentional. It could be banter at someone's expense, being teased for something we have said or done, or even how we look. Or it could be unthinking comments that relate to us being part of a minority group.

If we work to remove these barriers to 'belonging', we start to create an environment

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where people can be themselves and can thrive. We create the conditions for happiness.

So what practical steps can leaders and managers take to create these conditions? The good news is that some very simple actions can be incredibly powerful:

- **Hold regular check-ins** These should be especially between manager and team members, but also among co-workers. The check-ins should not only cover operational matters, but also be used to see how the other person is. Simply asking "How are you?" or "How are things going?" helps people to feel that someone else is taking genuine interest in them as a person. It makes a world of difference.
- **Take proactive steps to break barriers down** The more people get to know each other, the more we avoid assumptions, which may otherwise damage working relationships.
- **Nip situations in the bud when they are making someone feel uncomfortable** A manager can easily move jokes and banter on by saying something like "Let's have a new joke today."

And if you want to gauge levels of happiness in your teams, there are some very simple ways to do this, too.

David Tomas, general manager at Spanish digital marketing agency Cyberclick, and author of *The Happiest Company in the World*, advocates asking people three key questions at the end of each day and getting them to rate their response with a traffic light system:

- What mood did you arrive in today?
- What mood are you leaving in today?
- On a scale of one to four, how much did you like the tasks you did today?

When we get the culture of belonging right, people are more open, more able to cope with pressure and less resistant to change. They put their energy into their work rather than into hiding aspects of themselves, or coping with feeling 'different', left out or picked on.

As leaders and managers, we benefit from a powerful sense of cohesion and an environment where happiness can flourish.

If we can 'join the dots' between all these elements, the business benefits of happiness, such as increased productivity and better retention, will naturally flow. And, as well as helping the UK to climb the happiness indices and barometers, we will genuinely be making a difference to people's lives. **E**

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