Are You Unhappy at Work?
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In past articles I have described the unhappiness and disengagement that many individuals experience in the workplace. As an example, my January and February, 2014 columns reviewed a comprehensive report produced by Gallup, Inc. that was titled "State of the American Workplace: Employee Engagement Insights for U.S. Business Leaders." The findings of the report were unsettling in terms of capturing the widespread dissatisfaction felt by so many people throughout the workday.

The Gallup researchers found that only 30% of American employees across a number of settings felt engaged in their work, displaying enthusiasm and commitment and helping to move their organization forward. Another 52% were categorized as "not engaged." They were described as "sleepwalking through their workday, putting time—but not energy or passion—into their work."

A third group, which comprised 18% of employees, were labeled "actively disengaged," characterized as "more or less out to damage their company. They aren't just unhappy at work; they're busy acting out their unhappiness. . . . Whatever the engaged do—such as solving problems, innovating, and creating new customers—the actively disengaged try to undo." These negative behaviors, displayed by such a large number of employees, are estimated to cost businesses in the United States between $450 to $550 billion each year in productivity. Without doubt, actively disengaged employees represent a major burden on any business and on the overall economy of a nation.

The Gallup staff recommended several actions that leadership should assume to address this significant problem, including, (a) selecting the right people to join the organization, (b) identifying and utilizing the strength of employees instead of focusing on remediating their weaknesses, and (c) enhancing the well-being of employees, especially their overall physical health.

Responses to the Gallup Report

I received many responses to my articles about the Gallup survey, both via email and at my presentations. I was told of work environments that were unfulfilling, unsupportive, and sometimes downright hostile. A number of individuals noted that the

behavior of an immediate supervisor was influential in determining their own emotional state.

As an example, a man said to me that at his former job he had a boss whom he described as a "tyrant." He noted, "I hated work. I loved when this boss went on vacation, which wasn't often enough. I knew that when I was having headaches and stomachaches on a regular basis, I had to get out. I began looking for another position and was fortunate that a friend told me about an opening in his company. I applied for the job and got it. What a difference! My new boss is supportive, a real people person who goes out of his way to compliment his staff. My headaches and stomachaches have completely disappeared. I have definitely joined the engaged group."

At a recent talk, a woman who subscribes to my monthly articles told me that she had read and reflected upon all of the ones related to job satisfaction and the emotional culture of an organization. She said that she hoped I would continue to write about "feeling less stressed and more satisfied at work," adding, "What an emotional and physical toll it is to spend so many stressful, unhappy hours of your life in a situation in which you feel trapped and that's how I feel right now."

Recommendations for Happiness in the Workplace

I thought about this woman and others who have offered similar comments upon receiving the latest newsletter from The Greater Good Science Center based at the University of California-Berkeley. The newsletter includes links to articles that address themes that are of great interest to me, including compassion, physical and emotional well-being, happiness, and resilience. One link in the recent newsletter was titled, "The Science of Happiness, In Four Simple Work Habits" and I immediately clicked on it. It was a piece published in *Fast Company* by Judith Humphrey that cited the work of Dr. Emiliana Simon-Thomas, Director of the Greater Good Science Center.

The opening paragraphs were attention getting. "There might be many reasons your work is boring, your manager is terrible, or your company just has awful benefits or a crappy work culture. . . . If you crave more satisfaction at work, you don't necessarily need to find a new job or escape your boss." Humphrey quoted Simon-Thomas' observation that "some people have a greater capacity for happiness than others do"

based on genetics and life experiences, but "if you want to maximize your happiness, there are things you've got to do."

In my writings and presentations I also emphasize the impact of our inborn temperament and our life experiences on our ability to deal effectively with stress and to adopt a resilient lifestyle. I also advise that whatever our genetic make-up or whatever the situations we have encountered in our lives, it is important to focus on what I call our "personal control," that is, our attitude and response towards different events. In the *Fast Company* piece Simon-Thomas provided four suggestions for feeling happier at work. The four resonate with recommendations I have advocated for leading a resilient lifestyle, most notably in the book I co-authored with my colleague Dr. Sam Goldstein, *The Power of Resilience: Achieving Balance, Confidence, and Personal Strength in Your Life.*

What follows are Simon-Thomas' four suggestions or what she calls "habits." I believe that it is important to appreciate that the level of difficulty in accomplishing each of these habits will be based on our individual temperament and the specific conditions of our workplace. However, if we perceive these habits as guideposts they can provide a direction towards generating a more satisfying work experience.

I think it's also important to note that there may be occasions, such as in the example I described earlier about the man who labeled his previous boss as a "tyrant," when attempts to follow these guideposts will not improve our situation at work. At such times, the best path to take, if feasible, may be to search for a new job as this man did.

The Four Habits

Intentionally Savor the Good Times. Simon-Thomas stated, "Two individuals can face the same set of challenges, and one will leave the workplace invigorated, and the other anxious or depressed." She advocated that we should "appreciate and cherish" those times at work that are more pleasurable, adding that this task is "easier said than done, but those who can laugh at their foibles, be mindful, advocate for their own ideas, and dwell on what has gone well will thrive on those challenges."

This outlook reminded me of Appreciative Inquire (AI), a model and questions developed by Drs. David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastra at Case Western Reserve University. AI places the spotlight on the strengths of people and organizations. One AI question intended to reinforce this focus, asks, "Think of a time with your organization

when you have felt most excited, most engaged, and most alive. What were the forces and factors that made it a great experience? What was it about you, others, and your organization that made it a peak experience for you?"

Sadly, some have told me that they cannot think of one such positive moment at work. When faced with this reality, they have to decide if they have within their control any possibility to fashion such an encouraging moment.

Find (or Create) the Purpose in Your Work. Many of my writings emphasize the significance of purpose and meaning in one's life as a basic foundation for intrinsic motivation and resilience. I have long posited, for example, that when students are given opportunities to enrich the lives of others in schools—even for those students for whom school has not been a positive experience—they feel a greater sense of belonging and happiness. They also are more motivated to confront the challenges that school poses.

In a similar way, Simon-Thomas stressed, "Managers need to help team members see why their contributions matter and how their activities advance the goals of the department, the company, and the world at large." In the absence of a sense of purpose, of understanding how what we do contributes to the organization and to others, we are very likely to view our work as a meaningless exercise. When that perspective dominates, disengagement is the likely outcome.

Improve Your Resilience. Although I perceive the two suggestions above as closely aligned with resilience, Simon-Thomas specifically highlighted the concept of resilience in terms of coping effectively with and recovering from setbacks. Humphrey observed that if a project at work is not successful and your boss is unhappy, "you could lash out defensively, stifle your shame, retreat, and decide in the future you'll steer clear of major projects—and your boss. Or you could respond as Simon-Thomas would advise: 'Take a few deep breaths, remind yourself that this episode is temporary, and reflect on the external circumstances that contributed to it.'"

In my clinical and consultation activities, I have recommended that in the process of identifying our goals we also consider obstacles that may occur along the way and then plan for ways in which we will respond to and handle these obstacles. This approach is similar to that proposed by psychologist Dr. Gabriele Oettingen in her thought-provoking book *Rethinking Positive Thinking.* Anticipating obstacles should not be interpreted as

introducing a self-fulfilling prophecy for failure into our mindset but rather as a strategy to deal effectively with the challenges and setbacks that occur in all of our lives.

Practice Kindness. I see this suggestion as also falling under the umbrella of resilience and one that is closely tied to experiencing a sense of purpose, meaning, and happiness. In last month's article I described the work of neuroscientist Dr. Richard Davidson, Founder and Director of the Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Davidson asserted in a *Greater Good Magazine* article, "There are now a plethora of data showing that when individuals engage in generous and altruistic behavior, they actually activate circuits in the brain that are key to fostering well-being." Given these research findings, Davidson and his colleagues developed a "Kindness Curriculum" for preschool children.

Similar to Davidson's research, Simon-Thomas accentuated the importance of positive relationships at work and asked how best to develop feelings of connectedness. "It's by tapping into our innate kindness, taking a genuine interest in others, and showing more empathy, compassion, generosity, and gratitude." She noted that unfortunately the existing culture of some workplaces does not invite expressions of kindness or trust.

I have heard examples of the debilitating impact of gloomy work environments. A woman I saw in therapy reported, "I work in a very negative place, no one says hello, no one smiles, no one gives compliments. It's so depressing." I empathized with her but then asked, "Do you say or do any positive things with your colleagues?" Her answer might have been predicted, "Why should I do it if no one else does it?" Or, I have also heard, "I'm just one person. I can't change an entire workplace."

A person possessing a resilient mindset who subscribes to the notion of "personal control," would ask, "What is it that I can do differently to help change the negative emotional culture of my workplace?" Humphrey, citing Simon-Thomas, wrote that the latter "believes that practicing kindness is one of the simplest and most effective ways" to nurture a positive work environment. "Chances are your efforts will be contagious, making the people around you happier, too."

Small Gestures, Large Changes

There exist negative workplace environments that will continue to sap any sense of joy or satisfaction from us even when we attempt to initiate the four habits outlined by Simon-Thomas. However, if we are able to persevere with strategies that enrich our happiness and sense of purpose, we may also discover that some positive changes are possible. I experienced that with my patient who responded, "Why should I do it if no one else does it. " She decided that as an "experiment" she would begin to smile, say hello, and offer compliments to co-workers.

And the result? She said at first they looked puzzled and wondered what was going on. Soon she was surprised and delighted when others followed her lead. She told me, "I would never have guessed that where I worked could become as pleasant as it has become. We still have room for improvement, but I'm encouraged that it can take place."

Small gestures on her part served as a catalyst for the beginnings of a more positive emotional culture at work. We must never underestimate the power of what I call "seemingly small gestures" to bring about favorable change.

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