

Thoughts on Money, Fulfilment at Work and the Role of Coaching

Happiness..the flavour of the month?

There has been a lot of attention paid recently in the press and political circles to the issue of happiness..or rather, for too many people, the lack of it in modern life. Not only has there been a slew of books on the subject lately, it has entered the realms of serious policy debate through the recommendations of the recent London School of Economics report¹ that government should put more state funding into cognitive behavioural therapy to counter the rise in cases of depression.

The idea that we should want to be happy at work is at once an astoundingly trite observation and strangely radical too. Put simply, happiness is "...feeling good – enjoying life and wanting the feeling to be maintained..." (Layard²). It might seem that everyone involved in creating employment and being employed should ultimately want nothing more than to maximise their own happiness and that of their fellow workers; and yet most people's experience of the workplace is a far cry from this simplistic Utopian vision.

Company directors speak eloquently about the importance of maximising profits, of gaining market share, of beating (or acquiring) their competitors. The more enlightened of them also talk about wanting to reward their staff well financially and to help them develop as their careers progress. Yet almost none of them talks about increasing happiness as being a legitimate, sensible or desirable aim for their organisations.

Indeed, many companies seem to be run on a basis that is guaranteed to reduce the happiness of their employees. More money is no guarantee of more happiness, as study after study has confirmed, and yet it is all that most employers offer and usually at the cost of ever-longer working hours, disrupted home life, increased stress and de-motivation.

Rising living standards have not brought any significant increase on overall happiness. Layard² quotes research that shows that despite real incomes more than doubling in the US since 1945, overall happiness has not increased significantly – with a similar story in Britain. But several indicators of UN – happiness, clinical depression, crime, alcoholism - have increased dramatically over the same period.

All this matters for organisations as well as individuals because employees who are fundamentally unhappy in their lives are unlikely to be especially productive. Quite apart from the visible costs of time lost through absenteeism due to stress and ill health of one sort or another, other by-products of an unhappy workforce include bullying, poor team morale, high staff turnover and more.

Why does more money not guarantee more happiness?

Higher income does not lead to more happiness after a certain point (when basic needs for survival are met) because of the psychological process of habituation – we adjust to successively higher levels of income and each increase produces smaller gains in happiness. We also respond to how well off we are in RELATIVE terms to our comparison group, rather than to absolute income levels – so if income and wealth inequalities increase, those below the richest tiers feel correspondingly less happy even if their own absolute living standards have risen.

So - what makes us happy?

One possible answer to this is provided by Seligman³, who suggests a formula:

$$H = S + C + V$$

Where:

H = happiness

S = set range

C = circumstances of life

V = factors under one's voluntary control

In this formulation: **Set range** is the genetic disposition to happiness that we inherit – tests show that roughly half the scores people get on tests of their happiness is accounted for by the score their parents would have got if they had taken the test.

Circumstances – research has shown that the circumstances that contribute most to raising happiness are living in a wealthy democracy (rather than an impoverished dictatorship), being married, having a vibrant social network and having some spiritual beliefs. Those that have little or no effect are more money, objective health, education and climate.

Voluntarily controllable factors – Seligman distinguishes between those that influence satisfaction with the past, with the present and the future. Satisfaction with the past depends on the intellectual (letting go of an ideology that your past determines your future) and the emotional (voluntarily changing your memories, increasing gratitude about good things in the past, learning how to forgive).

Satisfaction with the future involves learning to acquire an optimistic outlook that engenders faith, hope, trust and confidence by developing skills that enable us to look at a situation from different perspectives, understand what each has to offer and make purposeful choices.

Satisfaction with the present involves developing the skills of being mindful, of sensory awareness and distinguishing between pleasures (eating raspberries) which are enjoyable but do not develop us and gratifications (such as learning to carve in wood) which absorb us completely and allow us to develop a sense of flow.

Happiness v fulfilment

Fulfilment is a concept that, while closely related to happiness, is not identical and which we believe is a useful goal for individuals and organisations. By fulfilment, we mean a vibrant, dynamic state in which people are tangibly making more of their individual talents and strengths through repeated cycles of learning and growth – and are becoming measurably happier in the process. Fulfilment may often involve periods of painful failure and learning, for example, that leave the person feeling distinctly unhappy at the time – and that it is a process, not a final destination that can be reached and then rested at *ad infinitum*. However, we believe that the two concepts are linked, inasmuch as a person who is unfulfilled is unlikely to feel fundamentally happy with their life.

Why is human fulfilment a legitimate and important aim for organisations?

Because:

- A fulfilled workforce is more productive. Seligman argues that the key to increasing employee satisfaction at work is to enable people to use their “signature strengths”. These are character traits that are universally valued, such as curiosity/ love of learning/judgement/ critical thinking/ open mindedness/ ingenuity/ courage/ honesty/ perseverance/ kindness/ justice/ leadership etc. These traits, rather than more money, are what “...transforms a stalled career into a calling...”. If people are engaged in this way, then it is reasonable to assume they will be more productive on average than if they are not.
- A fulfilled workforce will be more healthy, so reducing the costs of employee absence. There is a documented positive correlation between happiness and better health – happier people are less stressed and depressed. Companies mostly already at least state that they regard their people as their main asset and that they regard staff development as a priority. So this should be a small step for many of them to make.
- Companies increasingly have meaningful social goals as well as the aim of maximising shareholder returns. So a policy of aiming to increase the fulfilment of their staff is a natural extension of wanting to work responsibly with suppliers, to foster trade with developing economies, to support local communities etc.

And what does coaching have to offer?

Coaching offers a powerful way of helping people to develop the very skills and outlook on life which Layard, Seligman and others have found are most important for achieving a greater degree of fulfilment. Some of the specific ways this happens are:

- **Values clarification** – helping the client to become really clear about the things that matter to them most in life and which engage their passion.

- **Setting the agenda** – establishing what the big goals are that the client wants to aim for in their work and the rest of their lives, and helping them to expand their sense of what is possible.
- **Making effective choices** – helping the client to become skilled at seeing situations and problems from more than one perspective, moving beyond the prejudices and fixed viewpoints that often hold us back and prevent us from making effective, purposeful choices.
- **Learning from failures as well as successes** – helping the client to see that there is as much or more learning to be had from the “downs” of life as well as the “ups”

Executive coaching, team development workshops and structured programmes are all ways in which these sorts of changes can be effected. Many large organisations in both the private and public sectors now use such interventions regularly as part of their management development programmes because they find that coaching techniques have such a positive impact.

In summary, then, greater employee happiness and fulfilment should be among the most important objectives for any organisation, as achieving these will bring both financial and non-financial benefits. Coaching has a significant role to play in this process as it helps people directly to develop the skills and outlook on life that lead to greater fulfilment.

References

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