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Half-empty or Half-full? Finding Fulfillment During Good Times and Bad.

By Pauline Fleming, MCC

Three men are found smashing boulders with iron hammers. When asked what they are doing, the first man says, "Breaking big rocks into little rocks." The second man says, "Feeding my family." The third man says, "Building a cathedral."

---An old story

Do you focus on a life filled with warm memories, exciting moments, connected relationships, laughter, thankfulness, opportunity and pleasure? Or, do you focus on what's missing, chasing dreams, seeking external satisfaction and seeing the world through a lens of "reality".

Much like the man building a cathedral, our level of happiness and satisfaction is determined largely by how we view and interact with the world. While there *can* be some positives that come from half-empty thinking, there is growing research that the half-full way of approaching life has numerous life-affirming benefits.

Happy people are healthier.

In 2008, *The Journal of Happiness Studies* did an analysis of 30 follow-up studies on happiness. They found that while happiness will not prolong the life of seriously ill people, happiness *does* prolong the life of healthy people – at the same rate that non-smokers outlive those who smoke.

Another study done in the United Kingdom during the 1990's found that happy thoughts can double the production of certain antibodies within the immune system within 20 minutes of having pleasant thoughts. On the flip side, Thomas Wright, a professor at Kansas State University's School of Management, reports that managers who are pessimistic or unhappy cost their company \$75 per week per person in lost productivity. In a company with 100 employees, this could translate into an annual loss of \$390,000.

Happy people build on their strengths.

As a result of his pioneering research on happiness, Martin Seligman, Ph.D., a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, and considered the father of Positive Psychology, says there are three components to happiness: pleasure (in-the-moment good feelings), engagement (the depth of involvement with one's family, friends, romance, work and hobbies), and meaning (using personal strengths to serve a larger end). Of these three, he concludes that pleasure is the least important.

"The good life consists of the roots that lead to flow," he said in a 2005 *Time* Magazine article. "It consists of first knowing what your signature strengths are and then re-crafting your life to use them

more – re-crafting your work, your romance, friendships, leisure and parenting to deploy the things you're best at. The more you deploy your strengths, the more flow you get in life."

Seligman and his colleagues at the Positive Psychology Center identified 24 character strengths that are organized into six categories, or virtues. They are strengths of:

- **Wisdom & Knowledge:** Creativity, curiosity, love of learning, open-mindedness and perspective.
- **Courage:** Bravery, persistence, integrity and vitality.
- **Humanity:** Love, kindness, and social intelligence.
- **Justice:** Social responsibility, fairness and leadership.
- **Temperance:** Forgiveness and mercy, humility, prudence and self regulation.
- **Transcendence:** Appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humor and spirituality.

According to the researchers, the more we "play from strength" the happier and more fulfilled we will be.

Happy people are grateful.

It's easy to be thankful when things are going well. The real test is during tough times. Gratitude at *all* times is a necessary ingredient for fulfillment. In fact, being thankful reaps significant for "half-fullers". Research has shown that people who practice daily, conscious practices of gratitude actually are healthier, live longer, are more likely to meet their goals, have more energy and are more resilient during difficult times.

Robert Emmons, a researcher at the University of California, Davis, says that gratitude is the "forgotten factor" in happiness studies. In conducting a long-term study on the dimensions of gratitude, Emmons reports that, "Those who kept a gratitude journal on a weekly basis experienced fewer physical symptoms, felt better about their lives as a whole, and were more optimistic."

Gratitude also has a significant effect in the workplace. Since being thankful on a regular basis improves health by reducing stress and shielding against illness, organizations that practice gratitude can expect to experience less absenteeism, fewer worker's compensation claims, have higher employee retention rates, and experience more productivity.

Organizational gratitude begins at the top. When senior executives express their gratitude to junior executives, the trickle-down effect is palpable. While it may be difficult to require gratitude, demonstrating a consistent practice of gratitude will definitely have a

positive effect in the work environment. And, during tough times, this can be an essential factor in how well an organization weathers a storm.

Happy people experience meaning.

While pleasure is a “moment-in-time” experience of happiness, and deeper engagement leads to more frequent flow experiences, meaning is the fuel that energizes a fulfilling life.

Based on findings from a study by executive coach Marshall Goldsmith and Northwestern University’s Kelly Goldsmith, they found that meaning plays a significant role.

In an article published in *BusinessWeek* in December, 2009, they say that “There is an incredibly high correlation between people’s happiness and meaning at work and at home. Those who experience happiness and meaning at work tend also to experience them outside of work. Those who are miserable on the job are usually miserable at home.”

They also reported that overall satisfaction at work increased only if both the amount of happiness and meaning experienced by employees increased simultaneously.

“Companies may want to reduce communications designed to encourage employees to make sacrifices for the larger cause. They may also want to cut out ‘fun’ morale-building events that lack a meaningful purpose.” The Goldsmith’s said.

According to psychologist Michael F. Stegner, meaningful work is comprised of three essential components.

- The work must make sense (knowing what’s expected and what resources are available to get the job done).
- The work must make a point (being able to see how our activities fit into the purpose of the company).
- The work must benefit some greater good (connecting our work to providing a tangible benefit to other people).

Meaning is highly individualized. In coaching my clients, it’s safe to say that meaning would be defined differently for each. The secret is maintaining clear, honest and open communications that lead to understanding what drives their happiness and meaning. The same can be said for managing people. Based on the research by Goldsmith, instead of the company seeking to provide meaning for employees, managers may want employees to ask of themselves, “What can I do to increase my happiness and meaning at work?”

Happiness is a choice.

Research has proven conventional wisdom true, “Money can’t buy happiness.” What the scientific community has proven is something most people in business understand through practical application: success (happiness) is largely dependent on our attitude. And attitude is a choice because, barring an extreme situation, we have complete freedom to focus on either the glass being half-full or half-empty; and we have complete choice over how we respond to difficult circumstances.

But, we haven’t been taught to be happy. The mechanics of fulfill-

ment have largely been left to each of us to figure out for ourselves. However, based on all the happiness research going on today, there are some clear-cut practices that will condition you to be happier and more fulfilled on the job and at home.

Focus on the positive. Seeing the glass as half-full actually stimulates greater well-being, better health and a more optimism.

Accept that you are human. In other words, give attention to your emotions. Express them. Unexpressed emotions lead to frustration, even depression.

Practice gratitude. Clearly there are many benefits to being thankful. Even in the most difficult of circumstances gratitude can be present, “I am thankful for this opportunity to learn. I am grateful to be alive.” Keep a weekly gratitude journal; take time everyday to take a “gratitude break”, spending 15 minutes saying out-loud what you are grateful for at that moment.



Savor life’s joys. It’s real easy to focus on the bad stuff (because there’s a lot of it in this world). But, everyday there are numerous joys to be experienced. Maybe it’s a particularly vibrant sunset; the color of a bird you see while looking out a kitchen window; the aroma of fresh brewed coffee. Take notice and appreciate.

Learn your strengths. And act from them. The more you are focused on your strengths, the more satisfaction you’ll experience.

Take care of your body. Exercise, good nutrition, appropriate amounts of sleep: all contribute to overall mind-body well being.

Protect yourself: Eliminate the buzz-killers. This includes anything that drains your energy (like unhealthy food, negative people, schedule fillers and unnecessary errands, news reports and water cooler gossip. These energy drainers are guaranteed to limit your happiness potential. So, start saying “NO” to these things.

Accept appropriate challenges. Pushing ourselves to move beyond our current circumstance is a component of having more meaning. And, by making *learning* be the desired outcome, often we experience even more accomplishment.

Practice kindness. Being kind is other-oriented. The more we do for others, the better we feel about ourselves.

Is your glass half-full or half-empty? No matter what the economic climate might be, we all have a choice in how happy and fulfilling our lives can be. Whether you break rocks or build a cathedral, the choice is yours.

Are you ready to fill your glass to the rim? Contact Coach Pauline at www.ProActiveBusinessLeadership.com. Coach Pauline partners with businesses that want to grow their leaders, and leaders who want to grow their business. You have permission to use the above article so long as this contact information is included.

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