

## Is Happiness the Beginning or the End?

By Jamie Anderson

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Happiness is considered so fundamental to the American way of life that it's listed as one of only three "unalienable rights" in the Declaration of Independence. The wording used 200+ years ago – "the *pursuit* of Happiness" – indicated that happiness was to be found only at the end of a chase. Even now, it's still widely believed that happiness is something you have to work hard for in order to earn.

But there's a big problem with that viewpoint: we the people are terrible at finding happiness. A 2013 Gallup poll found that only 30% of us are happy at work; fully 70% of Americans, according to Gallup, "are emotionally disconnected from their workplaces and less likely to be productive" (as cited in Adams, 2013). As a general rule, we can't be happy in life if we aren't happy in work. It's where we spend most of our time, and it's a large part of who we are. So ouch.

How can we get happier at work? It's no secret that business journals and management courses have long been full of strategies for increasing productivity, which is supposed to lead to success and from there to raises and rejoicing all around. Why aren't these ideas getting the job done?

Well, it could be because we've had things backward all this time, and that contrary to what we (and the Founding Fathers) assume, happiness should not be our destination but instead our starting point. Shawn Achor is one researcher who thinks that's exactly the case. Achor began his career teaching a happiness course at Harvard and has since become a business consultant. His firm advertises a simple but lofty goal on its website: "to make you happier" (<http://goodthinkinc.com/>).

Achor uses science to show that the formula of success leading to happiness needs to be reversed. As he writes in his best-selling book, "happiness and optimism actually *fuel* performance and achievement—giving us the competitive edge that I call the Happiness Advantage" (2010, pp. 3-4). Watch his 2011 TED talk, "The Happy Secret to Better Work," for a rundown:



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The short version of Achor's lecture is that our brains are not wired to find lasting happiness from success, because once we achieve a goal, we move the goalposts. If we lose five pounds, we decide we should lose ten. If we get a raise, we soon start thinking about needing another one. In contrast, our brains are designed to respond well to happiness. Happiness stimulates the brain to release a chemical called dopamine, which increases learning and creativity. According to Achor, a happy brain is 31% more productive than an unhappy one.

The good news about Achor's research is that it doesn't just apply to the optimists among us. We can all train ourselves to be happier, by following a five-part process of gratitude, journaling, exercise, meditation, and random acts of kindness. He claims that real world experience proves that just three weeks of practice yields lasting results. Happiness, he says in his 2011 TED talk, is not the end but the beginning:

It's not necessarily the reality that shapes us but the lens through which your brain views the world that shapes your reality. And if we can change the lens, not only can we change your happiness, we can change every single educational and business outcome at the same time.

Now there's a self-evident truth we can all appreciate.



#### **Jamie Anderson**

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