

## **The Pursuit of Happiness? A challenge**

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### **The Happiness Thing**

The 'happiness thing' has become quite an issue. Business schools are running courses on happiness and numerous books on the subject have appeared. Some economists are even suggesting that their subject has had it all wrong and that economic development isn't the be-all-and-end-all of a nation's needs. The happiness of the population is touted as the new measure and organizations are starting to listen to the happiness merchants.

At one level it is a welcome admission that many economists have been too blinkered in the past. Also the finding that, above a certain level, extra income does not necessarily bring extra happiness is a useful antidote to narrow materialism – and it does make organizations think about their role in career progression and rewards policies. However we have to consider whether the new emphasis on happiness is not itself a trap, in that it also produces a narrow focus on life.

One problem with the concept is that it is promoted as an objective reality. Using questionnaires as the research method the claim is that such instruments produce objective measures of happiness and therefore we can have a new science of happiness. This claim is quite dubious. Happiness is a description of feelings not the feelings themselves.

I have never seen 'happiness' – only people behaving in certain ways such that they would describe themselves as happy. The error is, as Gregory Bateson put it, like going into a restaurant and mistaking the menu card for the meal (and therefore eating the menu card instead of the meal). Happiness is the generalized noun that people use to describe particular (real) feelings. It is a subjective response to an interaction between the person and their environment.

Our subjective responses to the world vary rapidly. A person may have an argument over breakfast and feel unhappy and then have a delightful walk to work in the sunshine and feel happy. They may get to work and find that they have been criticized for poor

performance by their manager and feel unhappy. And so on. These responses may also be perfectly sensible reactions to each situation.

## **Beyond happiness**

Recently I sat with my wife's family watching my wife die from cancer. All of us were desperately unhappy at her death. But it was the right thing to do – to be there and to grieve. And if on that day someone had given me a happiness questionnaire to complete the answers would not have been positive.

Leading a good life means not being happy all the time, recognizing it and committing to something more than the pursuit of happiness. Doing the right thing in particular circumstances may not make us happy.

Clarence Darrow was one of America's foremost defense lawyers. In his life he defended a total of 104 people who were on trial for murder and who faced the death sentence. None of them was ever executed. He was a wonderfully courageous lawyer who, because of the principles he espoused (especially opposition to racism and to the death penalty), had a tough life. As he put it:

‘Most of life is hard for those who think. No doubt there are those who believe that ‘God's in his heaven and all's right with the world’. If one can live on this delusion, it would be foolish to awaken from this dream. But if we really think and feel, life is serious and hard.’

Now Darrow may be over-emphasizing the hard aspects of life, but to imagine that we only have a responsibility to be happy for ourselves (and perhaps those closest to us), but no responsibility to the wider world may be a limiting - and limited - goal. Nelson Mandela could have chosen an easy path in life. He did not need to commit to eradicating apartheid in South Africa and he did not need to spend most of his adult life in prison. Clearly personal happiness for him – and many others – has not been their sole goal in life.

I want to suggest instead that leading a **good** life is the aim. Good is an equally subjective a noun as happiness – and I would make no claim to being able to scientifically evaluate who is leading a good life and who is not. Each person has to define, with others, what a good life will mean for them. Being happy – when it is appropriate – can be a part of a good life, but for a life to be meaningful it goes beyond this.

Anyone who has read Lance Armstrong's books will know how much he emphasized the pain and suffering he, and other Tour de France

riders, have to go through just to finish the race. In describing his punishing training schedule he does not invoke the notion of being happy – rather his focus is on the suffering he had to endure. But this suffering was in the cause of something he saw as a good thing to do. The learning he had to undertake was, by any stretch of the imagination, mostly not fun.

The case for leading a good life as opposed to narrowly pursuing happiness deserves a fuller treatment than I can provide here. However if there is an inkling that there may be something more than happiness to aim for in life then we can look at the implications for our work in promoting learning and development in organizations.

### **Learning and Development and Organizations**

For learning and development professionals there is a need to consider what our aim is in helping people to learn. I hope that we may want to help people to learn to lead a good life in a good organization. A good organization needs, inter alia, to be effective in serving its customers/clients and in providing meaningful work for its employees.

Sometimes, in order to do the right thing, painful decisions have to be made. For instance in order for an organization to survive people might have to be dismissed. This isn't a happy thing for anyone involved – but it may be the right thing to do. However leaders who face tough decisions and act appropriately can feel satisfaction with their endeavors. (And maybe that old fashioned term 'satisfaction' is another measure of leading a good life.)

In learning and development work we may need to help people to face and deal with tough matters. There is a moral dimension to this. For instance, many managers, in order to avoid problems, do not confront performance issues in their staff. They may want to remain popular and be seen as a nice person. They may wish to avoid personal unhappiness by their avoidance strategies. However their staff could then move on to a manager who is more honest and they then find that they have not developed in ways that make them effective, because of their previous 'nice-guy' manager. I have seen many quite senior people fired for performance issues because no-one had told them the honest facts about their performance in earlier roles.

Therefore one aspect (among many) that demands of us to focus less on happiness and more on goodness is the need to create cultures where uncomfortable learning and development issues can

be addressed. Learning is not always fun and trainers who try to make it so do a disservice to their organizations.

Later in this edition of the journal there is reproduced the 'Declaration on Learning'. I was involved in creating this so perhaps have a bias but I do believe that it provides something that can assist us to create good organizations that give people a chance for a good life.

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