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The Managers Role in Increasing Happiness in the Workplace

by Diane E. Scott, RN, MSN

With the global economy experiencing the most severe downturn since the great depression, managers and employees are feeling unprecedented stressors in the workplace. Employees of every sector are apprehensive about the security of their positions which brings higher levels of self-doubt and conflict into the workplace. With employee stress levels at an all time high, it is not surprising that managers are witnessing employees who are increasingly unhappy at work.

Managers can play a significant role in improving the capacity of their employees to be happier at work. To learn more, we interviewed Jessica Pryce-Jones, a joint founder and partner of iOpener – a consultancy based in Oxford, England, that enables organizations to implement strategy and deliver exceptional performance by focusing on happiness at work.

At a time when many people are happy just to remain employed, why should a manager be concerned about employee happiness?

Ms. Pryce-Jones: Through extensive research, we discovered that in today's workplace environment happiness in the workplace is a key determinant of commercial and organizational success. Happy people are more satisfied with their jobs and perform better at tasks than their less happy peers.

With today's managers mandated to increase efficiencies and productivity, those who really focus on the happiness of their employees will reap the rewards

when faced with obstacles or changes in the workplace. In addition, happy people are more on-task and waste less time and resources. For example people who are happiest at work are an extraordinary 46% more on task than their least happy colleagues. That equates to 1.25 days a week in terms of time doing the job.

And, at a time when economic realities are negating the ability for employers to 'incentivize' their employees financially and with companies needing to be ever more efficient and productive, creating strong leadership and happiness in the workplace has never been more important.

What are the benefits for a work environment if the employees are happy?

Ms. Pryce-Jones: Employers need to think about happiness because happier employees go above and beyond what their jobs ask of them. They are more invested and involved with their jobs and are generally better team workers. Managers will see that happier employees are more proactive and more aware of opportunities for their business. As their employees experience less stress, they are often the ones to make more suggestions for improvement and are more resilient when the inevitable changes within the work environment occur.

What are the signs that employees are unhappy at work?

Ms. Pryce-Jones: Managers should be very attuned to monitoring the signs of declining morale including more tiredness and fatigue around the office, less focus, more waste-of-time meetings and engagement

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in office politics. When people are unhappy the occurrence of workplace conflict increases often in the form of negative language, poor attitudes, and unpleasant rumors.

There are often tangible signs of behavioral change. Watch out for people who are normally confident becoming indecisive, people who are normally immaculately turned out becoming unkempt, or the life and soul of the office becoming unusually quiet and introspective. If an employee is starting to incur more health issues than in the past, that also may be an indicator of unhappiness.

Can you talk more about the link between health and happiness at work?

Ms. Pryce-Jones: There certainly exists real evidence that happiness at work affects one's health. In fact, there is new research that actually equates work stress as dangerous as smoking to the health and physical well being of an individual.

Our research clearly connected the link between happiness at work and sick time. In 2006/2007, iOpener conducted two surveys of managerial employees using its iOpener People and Process Questionnaire (iPPQ), a comprehensive workplace happiness diagnostic tool. The survey found that the least happy reported taking more sick days. In fact, they took more than 200% sick leave than their happier colleagues.

What factors make people happy at work?

Ms. Pryce-Jones: We have interviewed and worked with thousands of employees around the globe. Through our research we discovered three factors that made them happy at work. They are pride and trust in your organization and recognition for your achievements. In other words pride, trust, and recognition act like signposts confirming that a person is achieving their potential.

When pride and trust are high, employees are motivated to contribute more to maintain these positive feelings. Pride and trust remind an employee to look at the bigger picture and is often experienced when a complex or difficult situation arises and an employee is involved with some kind of visible activity within a

group to help with the situation. They will feel an identity and status within their organization, knowing that they can contribute to the mission or the vision within their workplace.

Trust is another significant factor in that it gives social and psychological resources that allow you to focus on your job. Trust has many benefits such as allowing employees to take risks, go above and beyond and feel linked with their organization. Trust flows from two main sources: an employee's colleagues and senior decision-makers. Employees want to believe that they are competent and have integrity and will do what is right and moral. This is especially difficult during these challenging economic times.

The last factor, recognition, arises because of what an employee is, what they do, how they work and how dedicated they are. It is what an employee gets in return by actively engaging everything in an organization or business. It is different from feedback because it is most often done in a public way. Everyone wants and needs recognition if they are going to be motivated to make their best contribution.

How can managers affect pride, trust, and recognition?

Ms. Pryce-Jones: Managers can increase an employee's pride in an organization in several ways. First, it helps if they allow employees to reconnect with the end users or customers and see the impact their work has done for them. By doing this, it reminds an employee why they came to work for the organization to begin with and helps them reconnect with their core work.

It also helps to get the employee's perspective on what an organization would have to concretely demonstrate to increase a person's pride. Do not assume a pre-ordained list of items, but really have a conversation where your only goal is to actively listen to what the employee needs and expects from an organization.

For some, their sense of pride in an organization is irrevocably damaged. Sometimes, this occurs when their job description dramatically has changed or their core work is different from what they signed up for



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when first employed. They no longer have sense of belonging in the organization and a good manager would help those who have very low pride to move to another avenue to pursue their excellence.

The second factor, trust, is often unstable and fragile and very difficult to foster because organizations are not like people. Organizations are much more complex and don't always have clear, delineated processes for every encounter and conflict. It is also important to point out that trust is not generated by doing things strategically and logically. It is generated by doing the right thing emotionally, one interaction at a time. That includes being as honest and transparent as possible. Also, it is helpful to remember that trust-destroying events are more visible and noticeable than trust building events.

Because so many managers are the face of the communication of bad news, high quality face-to-face communications that outline why difficult decisions and choices are being made can really do great damage control. Keep your messages in an SOS form – simple, often, and solid – and be consistent in your demeanor and approach. Also, because of the connection between trust and senior leadership, managers must be especially cautious with their verbal and non-verbal opinions about their supervisors to their direct reports.

Much has been written about recognition in the workplace and the importance of meaningful recognition. This is one of the most important roles for a manager because it acknowledges the very core work of the employee.

Many managers make the mistake of one-size-fits all strategy with recognition. In fact, there is a multi-million dollar industry dedicated to stamping organization's names on everything from pens to plaques that employees receive as company gifts for a job well done. Some employees would much rather forgo the mouse pad with the company logo in lieu of encouraging words that recognize their efforts. Others appreciate some one-on-one time with their boss or an act of appreciation, such as accommodating a schedule change or helping out with a difficult project. It is impor-

tant that one takes the time to learn an employee's specific way that they like to give and receiving recognition in order to effectively make the employee feel recognized.

Any final pieces of advice to managers?

Ms. Pryce-Jones: It is important for managers to know that how they behave, especially in front of their employees, is contagious. If you transmit anxiety, stress, or negativity, it will spread throughout the company quicker than a common cold. You need to be able to lift people and be positive while being honest at the same time. That will have a ripple effect throughout your workplace.

Please be sure that you have a place where you can think calmly. When calm, you generate and evaluate more creative options, make better decisions and structure plans for implementation more effectively. Anxiety and uncertainty, when unchecked, can become particularly corroding and destructive.

Remember, you are not the sole source of your employee's happiness, but you can play a direct role in creating a happy workforce that will demonstrate measurable success for your business or organization.

Jessica Pryce-Jones is a joint founder and partner of iOpener. iOpener is a consultancy based in Oxford that enables organizations to implement strategy and deliver exceptional performance by focusing on happiness at work. For further information contact jess.pryce-jones@iopener.co.uk or visit www.iopener.co.uk.

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