

Happy Brain Science

Fostering productivity, creativity & happiness through
the application of cutting-edge brain science.



WHAT IS THE REAL VALUE OF HAPPINESS IN THE WORKPLACE?

TRANSCRIPT

Practice Positivity

Thrive From Nine to Five: The Science of Happiness at Work

Next section, practice positivity. What does practice positivity mean? It means, to be really blunt, that some kind of corny, cliché-sounding stuff you've probably heard before really works. So why am I going to tell you some cliché-sounding stuff you've heard before? Because you hear a lot about happiness. If you watch TV for a few hours, you will likely hear that happiness comes from soda, cars, prescription drugs, and other things. What science can help us with is sorting out what really works and what doesn't work. And science says some of that stuff you've likely heard before about positive attitude really works. Looking on the bright side works. Seeing the glass as half full works. Seeing the best in your colleagues works to feed your brain happy information, boosting your mood, broadening your attention, building resources that you can use to solve problems.

Attitude matters. Positive attitude simply works for most of us most of the time to boost our happiness. Optimism works. One specific intervention that scientists recommend is being actively optimistic. This means writing down your best possible future for, let's say, three years from now at work, your ideal future for three years from now at work. Now the word "possible" is important. If you write down that you'll be quarterback of three different NFL teams in three years, that little fantasy is not going to bring you any happiness. But best possible future, everything goes as well as it possibly can, what does work look like in three years for you? Writing that down alone boosts your optimism, which boosts your mood, which boosts your brain function, and makes that best possible future more likely to come true.

So please take about three minutes right now. There's some blank space in your handout. We have pens if people need them. Write down just for yourself in silence, please. This is just for you. What is your best possible future at work three years from now? Please write for a few minutes.

When you pay attention to something, you not only take in more of what you're paying attention to, but your brain starts actively suppressing other information from reaching your consciousness. And because you, and I, and every other human being on the planet is wired with a negativity bias, we tend to focus not on what's right, but on what's wrong. So, let's take, for example, the personalities

of your colleagues, right? Kirsten, can I make you a bad person for this example cause I know you're such a sweetheart? You have a thick skin? Okay, good.

Excellent. Okay, so you work with a team of people, and you really enjoy most of your colleagues, and then there's that one woman, right? Why does she sit there with that look on her face in meetings? Who told her to dress that way? What is it about her? She thinks she's so much ... We soak in the person who bugs us. Rrrrrr, why? When we focus on that person we don't enjoy as much, not only do we soak in more of what annoys us, but our brain starts actively suppressing input from the colleagues we enjoy more. You do this all the time because it's a survival advantage. If your great-great-great-great-great grandfather saw a big juicy apple at the end of a skinny branch over a 200 foot cliff drop and thought, "Apple! Hooray!" then he died, and you don't exist.

So, in a mixed environment, you are wired not to focus on the opportunities, but to focus on the threats and the issues and the irritations. If you feel like you always get in the wrong line at the grocery store, you don't. It's when you get in the right line and everything just goes quickly, your brain says, "Never mind." When you get behind that woman who forgot her wallet and says, "Wait. How much is this? Wait. I might have to put this ... How much is it? Can I write you a check? I don't have my ID." "Yeah, we need a cash aisle seven." Your brain says, "Must remember this in vivid detail. Must remember the threats and deal with the threats. Why am I always in the wrong line at the grocery store? Why do I always have to work with these annoying people?"

You don't. It's just that you pay more attention to them, or that's what you're wired to do. So, this may sound easy, paying attention to the positive. You actually have to overcome your natural brain wiring to think, "Man, I love working with Ed and Mark. They are awesome, aren't they?" When I focus there, I take in less of that person who might annoy me a little more. Can we have a quick round for Kirsten cause she's so awesome, and she's such a good sport? Thank you for being my completely fictitious example of an annoying person. Thank you.

Pay attention to the positive if you're not going to act on problems because your attention is so powerful. It is a gate to the world. Your brain cannot consciously process most of what's going around you all day long. There's simply too much information. Vision is a great example. You feel like you see the whole scene. You're actually seeing in detail a tiny little part in the center of your vision, and the rest is sort of an impression. Similar things happening with your other senses and what you're consciously thinking about. So, pay attention to the positive if you're not going to fix a problem. Pay attention to the positive. Soak in the positive. Savor the positive to feed your brain happy information and boost your happiness and your brain's effectiveness.

Paying attention to the positive includes the work of other people. I want you to nurture positive meetings and positive group interactions because this is data from 60 teams doing annual business planning. Who's going to do what? Which team's going to work on what? What do we need to buy? Who do we need to hire? Annual business planning being done by these teams. Scientists evaluated the success of these teams as objectively as possible with things like revenue, profitability, and essentially elaborate 360 degree feedback. What they found is that 15 teams performed especially well. Their data's on the left. 19 teams performed especially poorly. Their data is the right, and the rest were the medium performance teams. The scientists didn't interfere with these annual planning meetings at all. They just observed them and tracked several things.

The data that I'm showing you here is the ratio of positive to negative comments in those meetings. That is for the teams that performed best for every negative comment, this is confusing, Crabtree, there were over five positive comments. "Nice. Good point. Like it. Interesting. Say more." Now I know you don't have any idea cause you're not a scientist tracking data, but I just want you to go by gut feel and memory. My question for you is, have you been in a meeting with five people or more in the past five months with anything close to a ratio of five positive comments for every negative one? If so, stand up, please. If you've been in a very positive, very high amount of positive comments for every negative one in the past five months, stand up.

Excellent. Excellent. Awesome for the few of you standing. Thank you. You can sit down. And a shame for the rest of you. Not shame on you, but shame for you because it suggests you're missing your best work from each other. Now skeptics may be thinking, and rightly so, "There's no causality here, Crabtree. This is pure correlation. The brilliant teams have nice things to say to each other because they are brilliant." But the data, and the scientists, and therefore I suggest otherwise. Lead scientist behind this study is a brilliant woman named Barbara Fredrickson, who in academic circles, science of happiness circles, is a rock star, award-winning rock star who largely achieved her success and fame through her broaden and build theory.

I'm going to illustrate that theory I've been hinting at all along with an example with these gentlemen, if they're willing. I am in a meeting with these nice guys, and Todd says a compliment about my idea. In that moment, both of our moods go up. My mood goes up because I received a compliment. Todd's mood goes up even more because he felt and expressed gratitude. Because his mood went up, he notices more. He's taking in more information. He heard something that Richard started to say under his breath before he stopped cause Terry was going to speak. He processed it, triggered a new thought. Todd shares his idea. Terry compliments that idea. Same things happens.

Mood boost in both of them. Therefore broadened awareness, processing more information, and more creative thinking. Terry comes up with an idea that he would not have come up with if he had not said something positive to Todd. Because of our interactions, we are building resources in the moment. We're broadening our thinking and bringing awesome, uniquely creative layers of human brain real estate online. We're building resources for the moment and also long-term. I'm more likely to go ask Todd for help on a sticky problem because he was nice to me in a meeting. Their relationship is better because of the positive interaction in the meeting. That relationship fuels happiness, which fuels health and success.

So, we're broadening our thinking and building resources, both for the moment and the long-term. Now Richard wasn't going to share his idea because he got teased so mercilessly about the whole low rider dental chair idea, but he decides to share his idea because this seems like a pretty positive meeting where people are being nice and supportive with each other. So Richard shares his idea, and it turns out to be an excellent idea that we act on. We do better work because we are being positive with each other, and not just some positive with some negative, but a lot more positive than negative.

Now there's some controversy in this study very recently about the exact ratio you need between positive and negative comments. So there's some debate about that. What there's no debate about is that we weigh negative comments more heavily than positive comments, much more heavily,

which means that if you take the traditional approach, which is to give them a feedback sandwich... You've heard this, right? Something good, something not so good, something good again. Do you mind playing along, David?

Goes like this, something like this. Hey, David. Great job on that project. Hey, the jokes you're making in meetings are really offending people, and I need you to watch the jokes cause they're really disturbing some people, but really good effort lately. Keep it up. I walk away. He feels bad, cause it takes much more than two positive comments to outweigh that one negative one. According to the data, it takes at least three positive comments, and more like four or five, before I leave a meeting or a conversation and leave someone feeling good.

Am I suggesting you stop being critical with each other in meetings? Absolutely not. You have to be critical with each other to do great work. Let's face it. A lot of us have very mediocre ideas on a fairly often basis, right? Hey, how 'bout a low rider bouncing denti-... No. That's not a good idea, okay? Let's move past that one. If someone says, "Hey, I've got a terrible idea, a way we could waste a million dollars," say so, but also say the positive. I know that I've been in meetings... I know this might take a little imagination. Imagine I'm just a genius, right? Imagine I'm a genius, and I present 25 genius slides, and then slide 26 has an error on it. In some organizations where I worked, what would I hear for the first 25 slides? Exactly. Not a word. Slide 26. "You realize you've mislabeled the Y axis? If that were true, our process would cost like a billion dollars each, you idiot." Okay. Did you hear or see anything from my first 25 slides? Cause what I got from you was nothing.

Is it okay to criticize each other? Of course it is, but bring the positive. Start with the positive. Start meetings with a section of recognitions, gratitudes to each other to get to a high ratio of positive to negative comments, because high ratios of positive to negative comments nurture good mood, happiness, broadened awareness, increased creativity, and better results, at least for creative meetings.