

Happy Brain Science

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the application of cutting-edge brain science.



WHAT IS THE REAL VALUE OF HAPPINESS IN THE WORKPLACE?

TRANSCRIPT

Flow to Goals

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

Flow to Goals is talking first and foremost about progress. Progress towards clear and meaningful goals. I want you all to make progress towards clear and meaningful goals, because progress is a fantastic driver of happiness.

Many of you may be thinking: "Well duh, Crabtree, everybody knows that, right?" You may be thinking that for a couple of reasons. One may be what the scientist call the hindsight effect. The way the hindsight effect works is a soon as you hear something, if it sounds plausible and logical to you, your brain says: "Yeah, I knew that." Whether you actually did or not. I point it out to you because when Harvard scientists surveyed a lot of wise business leaders like you, and asked them what are good motivators? What engages your people, what makes them happy at work? What leads to what we call quality in our work life, happiness and engagement at work? Wise business leaders like you didn't mention progress.

The scientists thought: "Well maybe it's so obvious, it's like oxygen and pay, that people just aren't mentioning it. Let's put it on a list with other things people are mentioning, such as recognition, promotions, pay raises, etc." Wise leaders like you ranked progress last, and according to the data it is first and foremost your number one tool for getting engagement and happiness at work.

We know this from a study led by a Harvard scientist named Teresa Amabile and her colleagues, looked at 12,000 daily work journal entries. 12,000 answers to the question: What's going on around you at work? How do you feel? They tried to find any correlations they could. What drives quality in our work life? Happiness and engagement at work. They found several factors; by far the strongest was simply progress towards clear and meaningful goals.

Let's see how we're doing on the clear and meaningful goals part. Please stand up if you have goals at work. I'm so glad this is all of you, or almost all of you, indeed all of you, because over 200 studies show that having goals motivates higher performance, so great. Now please stay standing if your goals at work are written down. Any honest people going to sit down? No? Good, good, because people say goals that aren't written down are more like thoughts.

Okay, so you have goals written down. I'm not sure your culture, would you describe your goals as SMART? Do you use this acronym? Most people do. Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Time-bound or some variation thereof? If you believe all your goals at work are SMART, stay standing. Some honest people dropping, thank you honest people. Most of us still standing, good.

Now the meaningful part is what we tend to leave out. We tend to capture the business nuts and bolts, but not why we care. Not how it's going to have positive impact on somebody's life. If you would say at least one of your goals at work has personal intrinsic meaning to you, you know how achieving that goal is going to result in some positive change in the world for example, or bring some other meaning to your life, stay standing. If you have meaningful goals. More honest people sitting down. Thank you honest people and a bunch of you standing still; fantastic. You can sit down.

It's not just any goal that motivates people and brings happiness, it's progress towards clear and meaningful goals. Obviously the first step is to get clear and meaningful goals. Now, non-rhetorical question, I'm looking for out loud answers from you wise, experienced people. How do you get, how do you emphasize, how do you enable progress at work?

Communication.

Communication? Ironically I couldn't hear you very well. Communication? Good. Communication about what?

About your goals.

About your goals, excellent yes. If your boss brings you a goal and it doesn't mean much to you? "We need to reduce the error rate on this piece of tubing here by 5% by Thanksgiving." And you're like "Okay, I don't get why." That's not going to bring you much happiness, but if you understand through conversation why it's an important goal, yes, progress towards it is more likely and more meaningful.

What else do you do to make progress possible?

Male 1: [inaudible 00:05:06] Way to measure it.

Scott Crabtree: You measure it, yes. Measure what matters. Absolutely. And?

Female 2: Prioritize it.

Scott Crabtree: Prioritize progress, yes. How? What else do you do?

Male 2: Ask for input.

Scott Crabtree: Ask for input, yes. What else?

Male 3: Coach.

Coach, excellent. I play a lot of drums and a lot of trumpet, so really shot loudly for me, would you? You were saying?

Male 4: Get the tools necessary to accomplish your goals.

Get the tools, yes. Great way to frustrate people is, give them a goal and not what they need to reach it.

Great way to get progress, give a clear meaningful goal, communicate about it, make sure people have the tools and resources they need to reach it.

What else do you do to encourage progress, please?

Female 3: You empower people to act.

Empower people to act, yes. If people have to climb a mountain of bureaucracy to get approval from every single person in the organization before they do anything? You're not encouraging progress. Yes, empower people to act.

What else?

Male 5: Ask for [inaudible 00:06:14]

Female 4: Recognize the small steps.

Recognize the small steps, yes. All of my friends who play video games like I do, how many times have you played a game in your life where you start the game, play, end, and there's not points, level, bonuses, or anything else along the way? Zero, right? Because game developers like me know how to engage people and we engage you with lots of progress updates. Bing, 10 points. Bing, 10 points. Bing, multi ball you achieved this new armor. Hey new level! Progress all along the way.

When you define these clear and meaningful goals, don't just say what the end of the project looks like, measure multiple milestones along the way. Those milestones encourage you to savor the progress along the way. What about visualizing progress? We talked about measuring it earlier, that's great. It's even better if people can see that measurement.

That famous movie company that I am fortunate enough to teach at, when I teach there I teach in a classroom that is down a long hallway next to an open cube environment. The people sitting there are working on special effects for the movies. When you walk along the hallway towards the classroom, you pass what look like coloring book pages, not unlike those on your table. Thick black outline drawings.

Those coloring book pages are actually snapshots, black outline snapshots, of scenes of the movie. They are colored in according to the percentage complete that the special effects are for that scene. As you walk down the hallway, you get 100% colored in, 70% colored in, 100% colored in, 50% colored in, 30% colored in, 80% colored in, 100% colored in. You can't go to the bathroom without getting a palpable sense of the progress the team is making.

How can you visualize you progress, celebrate your progress, get progress up on the walls, in peoples monitors and screen savers? Because progress towards clear and meaningful goals fuels happiness. Remember the part about it's better to get happiness from lots of little things then one big thing? You'll complete a big project once. One moment where you can really savor that big completion of the project, but you'll make progress towards that goal lots and lots of times.

Celebrate those bits of progress, and you're fueling more happiness and therefore better performance at work.

As you make progress towards these clear and meaningful goals, you want to get into a state of mind that psychologists call flow. If you could not explain flow to the rest of the room, please stand up. If you think you could explain flow to the rest of the room, please stay seated. Those sitting down may be asked to explain flow to the rest of the room.

Do we have any contenders? We have a contender, Mike what is flow?

Mike: Flow is when you're so engaged into your task or whatever you're working on that you kind of lose track of time and you may forget to do things like eat lunch or something because you're so engaged and it's just flowing.

Right on the money. How do you get into flow, Matt?

Matt: How do I get into flow?

Scott Crabtree: Or how do we get into flow?

Matt: You know, it's being engaged in what you're doing. You really are passionate about what you're working on, and you see the value in it. It really consumes you and you're really driven to what you're trying to achieve.

Excellent, thank you. You can all sit down. Great job, you two, explaining flow. Flow is that zone you can get it where everything is clicking for you. Everything is clicking for you because you're working on something that is quite challenging. We think we might get in the zone when things are easy; no we don't. We get into the zone when things are quite hard but we also have a high level of skill to get that work done. Marketing the new chair that comes out next year: let's see, we've got international customers, various cultures, various languages, we're going to have three variations on the model.

20 minutes later you're loaded up on a challenge that is right at the edge of your ability, and because it's right at the edge of your ability, you need 100% of your brain power to get the job done. Not 50 or 80%, but 100%. When you're 100% focused on something very challenging, you don't have spare cycles to space out with.

Spacing out, according to the data, is something that we do very roughly about half the time we are awake. When scientists do what's called experience sampling, that is: Bing! It's a random time of day, what are you doing and how do you feel? About half the time we say: "I was just thinking about some stuff."

Those thoughts tend not to be super happy thoughts. Those thoughts tend not to be how awesome is it to work for ADEC, a company that gives us a leadership expo, teaches us happiness, buys us books, sets up a photo booth. We tend not to space out on thoughts like that. We tend to space out on thoughts like: "Is Scott still mad at me? Am I doing this right? Do I need to get milk on the way home?" We space out on thoughts that tend to be not as happy.

When you are completely focused on something challenging but possible, you have not spare cycles to think: "I bet I really irritated Kirsten when I made that bad joke earlier." You don't have the cycles.

You are in the work. As you wisely described, you lose your sense of time. If you've ever looked at the time and said: "Woah, that time already? I got to go." You've been in flow.

Flow is a super pleasant very productive state of mind. A psychologist named Csikszentmihalyi and his colleagues discovered and documented flow because they were after optimal experience in life.

What's the very peak of life for you? What some of us imagine, initially, is total relaxation. Please, let me lie on a beach for months on end and that would be the peak of my life. Let me kick back and watch TV, that'll be relaxing. But that's not what we find in the data. What we find is intense challenge and the skill to meet the challenge and getting so absorbed in the work you're doing, that it's all that's going on for you. Flow is a wonderful experience during it and afterwards we tend to savor those flow experiences. Happy, productive, states of mind.

You get into flow especially when you're using your strengths, the things that you're good at and that energize you. When you're getting lots of feedback so that you know you're making progress, there it is again, progress helps you get and stay into flow.