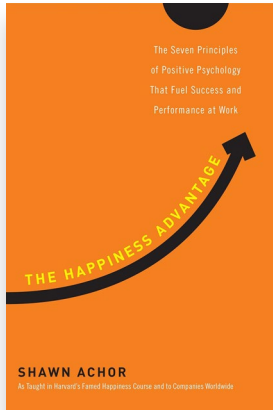


EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARIES

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The Happiness Advantage

THE NUTSHELL

Virgin Books 2011

New research in psychology and neuroscience shows a surprising fact: we become more successful when we are happier and more positive. It turns out that our brains are literally hardwired to perform at their best when they are positive.

Happiness can improve our physical health, which in turn keeps us working faster and longer and therefore makes us more likely to succeed. This revelation provides companies an additional incentive to care about employee happiness, since healthy employees will be more productive on the job. Research shows that unhappy employees take more sick days, staying home an average of 1.25 more days per month, or 15 extra sick days a year. These studies have determined that happiness functions as the cause, not just the result, of good health. What this means is that companies and leaders who take measures to cultivate a happy workplace will not only have more productive and efficient workers, they'll have less absenteeism and lower health care expenditures.

Just a short humorous video clip, a quick conversation with a friend, or even a small gift of candy can produce significant and immediate boosts in cognitive power and job performance. As Barbara Fredrickson points out, while making big changes and pursuing lasting happiness is

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certainly a worthy goal, when we “look under the hood at the dynamics of the process” we’ve found that “we should be focusing on how we feel from day to day.”

The best leaders use the Happiness Advantage as a tool to motivate their teams and maximize employee potential. We all know how this can be done on an organizational level. You don’t have to make sweeping policy changes to capitalize on the Happiness Advantage. Even the smallest moments of positivity in the workplace can enhance efficiency, motivation, creativity, and productivity.

One way to do this is simply to provide frequent recognition and encouragement. As studies have shown, managers who do so see a substantial increase in their employees’ productivity, and not just by some small amount. One study found that project teams with encouraging managers performed 31% better than teams whose managers were less positive and less open with praise. In fact, when recognition is specific and deliberately delivered, it is even more motivating than money.

How much more efficient and productive (not to mention happy) could you be if you changed the way you view the hours in your workday? The most successful people adopt a mindset that not only makes their workdays more bearable but also helps them work longer, harder and faster than their negative mindset peers. In essence, these people use their positive mindsets to gain control (relatively speaking) of time itself. For them, 24/7 is only an objective clock-calendar measurement. They take the same units of time given to everyone and use their mindset to become more efficient and productive.

Just as your mindset about work affects your performance, so too does your mindset about your own ability. This means that the more you believe in your own ability to succeed, the more likely it is that you will. Studies show that simply believing we can bring about positive change in our lives increases motivation and job performance and that success, in essence, becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy. More important, our beliefs about our abilities are not necessarily innate, but can change, as our mindset is almost always in flux. So, when faced with a difficult task or challenge give yourself an immediate competitive advantage by focusing on all the reasons you will succeed, rather than fail.

While there are always different ways to see something, not all ways of seeing are created equal. When our brains constantly scan for and focus on the positive, we profit from three of the most important tools available to us: happiness, gratitude, and optimism. The role happiness plays should be obvious in that the more you pick up on the positive around you, the better you’ll feel, and we’ve already seen the advantages to performance that brings. The second mechanism at work here is gratitude, because the more opportunities for positivity we see, the more grateful we become. The third is optimism. This instinctively makes sense. The more your brain picks up on the positive, the more you’ll expect this trend to continue and so the more optimistic you’ll be. Optimism is a

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tremendously powerful predictor of work performance. Optimists also cope better in high stress situations and are better able to maintain high levels of well-being during times of hardship. These are all skills that are crucial to high performance in a demanding work environment.

Studies show that each positive interaction employees have during the course of the work day actually helps return the cardiovascular system back to resting levels (a benefit often termed “work recovery”), and that over the long haul, employees with more of these interactions become protected from the negative effects of job strain. Each connection also lowers levels of cortisol, a hormone related to stress which helps employees recover faster from work-related stress and makes them better prepared to handle it in the future.

Furthermore, studies have found that people with strong relationships are less likely to perceive situations as stressful in the first place. So, in essence, investing in social connections means that you’ll find it easier to interpret adversity as a path to growth and opportunity. Then, when you do have to experience the stress, you’ll bounce back from it faster and better protected against its long-term negative effects.

It is important to note that building strong social capital does not require that all colleagues become best friends or even that everyone like one another all the time. What does matter is that there be mutual respect and authenticity. Coercing employees into awkward icebreakers or forced bonding activities like making everyone at a meeting share something about their private lives only breeds disconnection and mistrust. It’s that these moments happen organically, which they will if the environment is right. The best leaders give their employees the space and time to let moments of social connection develop on their own.

When you capitalize on the Happiness Advantage you are doing far more than improving your own well-being and performance. By making changes within ourselves we can actually bring the benefits of the Happiness Advantage to our teams, our organizations, and everyone around us.