



**How to
Make
Your
Workplace
Happier.**

Overview

Given we spend so much of our lives at work, the importance of a happy workplace can't be underestimated – from both a personal and business perspective. Certainly it's why we have invited [Nic Marks](#), innovative wellbeing researcher, to talk on the topic at this year's [Happiness & Its Causes](#) conference.

In general, workplaces that make workers feel included, valued, cared for and competent bring out their best qualities. Happy workers stick around longer, have more energy and enthusiasm, make more effort and help boost overall office morale.

Moreover, in what are increasingly challenging economic times, happy and hence more engaged employees can give employers a competitive edge. Research continues to show that an upbeat workspace, due to increased productivity, reduced staff turnover and greater employee flexibility (cheerful workers are more likely to say yes to extra responsibility), works wonders for the bottom line.

How do you know if your workplace is a happy one? Tell tale signs are more collaboration and positive interaction e.g. colleagues are supportive of each other, and less cynicism and sarcasm. Jolly workers also smile and laugh a lot more.

Yet there are plenty of workplaces you wouldn't call chirpy. Blame it on the demands of a society that never switches off, ever-longer commutes and escalating living costs, to name just a few of daily life's typical pressures.

As a result, more and more people report feeling depressed at work. Studies show up to 15 percent of workers are clinically depressed; another 10 to 15 percent are languishers, folk who just manage to turn up to the office every day without ever really engaging or contributing.

The good news is it's not as hard as you might think to turn things around if you're the boss. And for workers, once you know what the criteria for an enjoyable office are, there's no reason you and your fellow workers can't start lobbying your superiors for change. So what are you waiting for? Here's how to make your workplace happier ...



Hire happy personalities

This is going to take a little thought and preparation. The tendency when interviewing prospective employees is to focus solely on their qualifications and past experience. And certainly if you're in the market for someone with expertise in sales and the person in front of you, despite their winning personality, has never sold anything in their life, then you're both probably wasting your time.

But this doesn't mean a candidate's character shouldn't be considered during the hiring process. They might look great on paper but be the worst person to bring into the office if their attitude is negative and gloomy.

Look for intangibles. What's your gut feeling when you're with this individual during the interview? Do they seem warm and friendly, positive and excited? This is where references can be very telling. Ideally, speak to referees in person; don't just settle for what job seekers provide you with in writing. That way you can gauge much better a candidate's personality and people skills.



Build on workers' strengths

One of the best ways to create a positive workplace is to know what your employees' strengths are and then to give them projects and tasks commensurate with these.

This requires you to trust members of your team and to empower them to think through important decisions on their own, providing any mentoring and support they need along the way. It's well known that employees who feel their role in the company is essential tend to derive much more fulfilment and happiness from the job.

Part of this is setting high expectations. Believe in your workers' potential to grow and progress and encourage them to reach for the stars. If you believe in them, they'll believe in themselves too (note folk experience their maximum motivation when they tackle tasks that are challenging but not impossible).

Research shows that those of us consciously using our strengths at work report an increase in authenticity; in other words, we're more content and feel full of energy and vitality.

Click [here](#) to learn what other effects harnessing your strengths in the workplace can have. These are described by psychologist Suzy Green, a presenter at last year's *Mind & Its Potential* conference.

Check out this [presentation](#) by positive psychologist Martin Seligman at *Happiness & Its Causes* 2012, in which he argues the case for PERMA, the five constituents of wellbeing: positive emotion, engagement, positive relationships, meaning and accomplishment/achievement. Each one, he says, can be increased and improved on; each one is measurable and all can be taught.

Take engagement, defined by Seligman as being in the flow "when our highest strengths are just matched to the challenges that come our way." If one of our goals is to increase the amount of flow in our lives, Seligman advises we first need to identify our signature strengths; then, having identified these, to notice what happens when we bring one or more of them to bear on our difficulties. Just as PERMA can be cultivated at an individual level, large organisations can also benefit. Read the blog [here](#).



EMPATHY



CREATIVITY



ENTHUSIASM



LEADING

Encourage learning

Contented workers tend to have personal career goals. When people feel they are working towards something, they're less likely to get bogged down in work politics and other stressors. Some days might be challenging but are much more manageable when seen as a means to a personal end.

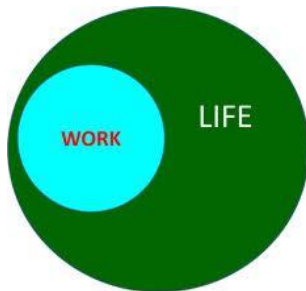
This is why it is so important bosses prioritise learning on the job. Workers find it much easier to have personal goals when they seem achievable. Leaders therefore need to take an interest in their employees' aspirations and support them in whichever way they can. Whether it's through offering suitable staffing, education and training and cross-departmental support, or updating technology, employees are happier when they're developing and learning.

Training

Knowledge, competencies
professional development
teaching of vocational or practical skills provides the basis for
• On-the-job training takes place within the workplace
• Off-the-job training takes place away from the workplace

Don't neglect work life balance

No one has ever laid on their deathbed regretting they didn't spend more time at the office, yet it's easy for our work life balance to get seriously out of whack. This is a recipe for resentment and misery. Indeed, people whose day jobs take over their home lives are three times more likely to quit. Our blog [Work to live](#) discusses what it takes to get this mix of work and play just right.



On the other hand, an employee who has time for friends, family and outside interests is more focused and dedicated when they're at work. In fact, studies show that bosses with a more easy-going approach to the traditional nine-to-five workday have more efficient and healthier staff.

Bosses can strive to be more flexible with time when possible as long as work is getting done. Similarly, plenty of folk work very effectively from home and on their own clock. There's even a view that working outside an office is actually more productive. Click [here](#) to read our blog about this very topic.



Find time for fun and friendship

When there are deadlines to meet, accounts to fill, it's easy to lose sight of the big picture. Yet all work and no play makes Jack a dull, and not very joyful boy.

The first thing is, don't get so busy you lose your sense of humour; or fail to appreciate it in your staff members. Seeing the funny side when the heat is on helps relieve the pressure.

Speaking of funny, check out Amanda Gore's hilarious presentation [Corporate joy and what really matters](#) at *Happiness & Its Causes 2012*. You can read the blog [here](#).

Secondly, create social time during the week. Workers whose colleagues are also their friends are often a lot happier. There are a variety of ways you can do this, and your workforce will love you for it: celebrate birthdays and other special occasions with cake and time out, plan occasional lunches, or even activities outside of work hours, and surprise employees for a job well done with treats such as chocolates or a free in-house massage.

Laugh
at Work
Week

Understand the role human instincts play

There are some business leaders who, as a part of a program to help them become more effective managers, now visit the zoo to observe chimpanzees whose social structures are remarkably similar to ours, in order to better appreciate the role basic animal instincts play in everyday workplace behaviour.

Someone who talks about these basic animal/human instincts and their relevance to how we are in the office is [Andrew O'Keeffe](#), the author of *Hardwired Humans* and *The Boss*. O'Keeffe's passion is building better workplaces using human instincts, which was the subject of [this presentation](#) at *Happiness & Its Causes* 2012. O'Keeffe's work in the area is also the subject of two blogs: [Human instincts at work](#) and [Monkey business](#).

O'Keeffe explains there are nine human (and chimpanzee) instincts that “give us a predictable framework of understanding and predicting ours and others' behaviour so that, most importantly, [bosses] can make informed and wise choices.”



Improve the office environment

Shhh. When noise levels rise, even if we're not all that bothered by it, our levels of epinephrine (a hormone released during our body's fight-or-flight response) go up. Overly chatty co workers, copy machines, outside disruptions such as nearby construction work and activated car alarms also have the effect of making us sit more rigidly in our chairs, causing all kinds of muscular and skeletal problems. Antidotes to cut noise include carpeting, lining walls with sound absorbent material, hanging thick curtains, even installing white noise machines.

Control the temperature. Many of us blame air conditioning when we get sick. You know the story; it's a hot day, you turn up to work without a cardigan and then end up freezing and feeling miserable until home time because of the sub arctic temperature. So keep the office climate just right – around 21 degrees Celsius is advisable. It's been said a chilly office is often perceived as one that's less friendly.

Be ergonomic. Provide staff with adjustable chairs and desks to protect against joint, muscle and other problems like RSI. And encourage everyone to get up regularly from their desks, every half hour or so, ideally standing for a cumulative two hours throughout the workday – employees who do this report having more energy.

Rethink the office layout. Where does everyone sit? Office plans that encourage face-to-face communication, for example, in the style of an open plan bullpen, boost employee satisfaction. Cubicles with high walls impact the worst on workers' smile rates because they increase isolation.



Other ways to be a better boss

Back off. Resist the temptation to micromanage your staff. When workers don't feel like they have any say in terms of what they do each day or how they allocate their time, their morale, wellbeing and motivation tend to take a nosedive. On the other hand, when employees are allowed to be responsible and make decisions, they're happier, more productive and feel more loyalty to the job.

Always works as hard as anyone working for you. Make it clear you would never ask one of your personnel to commit to a level of work you wouldn't be willing to take on yourself.

Say hi. There needs to be fewer virtual 'hellos' and more of the real thing to build a sense of workplace community. Remind staff to say hi to each other. Sounds silly but it's something busy folk often neglect. Make it an official policy if you have to, at least until people – and that means you too! - are back in the habit of greeting each other.

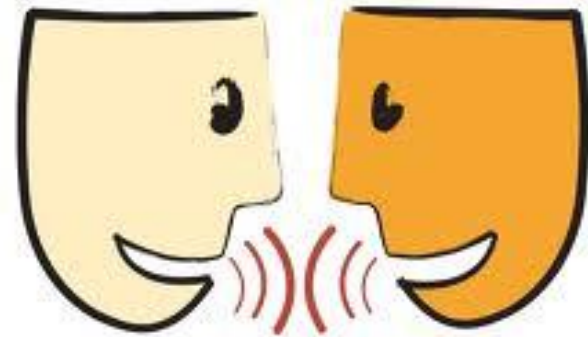
Reward exceptional performance. Recognise and reward those employees who've really applied themselves, achieved goals and significantly contributed to the betterment of the organisation. This is much appreciated by workers and goes a long way in motivating them to continue to do their best.



Other ways to be a better boss

Communicate. This is the cornerstone of a happy functional workplace. Employees feel valued when their ideas are heard and they're privy to important information. From the bottom up, encourage opinions and suggestions, give employees a say in their own goal setting, and actively seek out any hidden challenges or complaints in order to help resolve them. From the top down, communicate often and honestly about company direction, what new ideas are being considered and any restructuring that's taking place.

Bring back the nanna nap. Getting some some shut-eye is good for you and your team. Indeed just a 10 minute kip in the middle of the day, which is when the body temperature drops a tad and people start to feel drowsy, is all it takes to perk everyone up and enable them to face their in-trays and computers again. Nap advocate [Thea O'Connor](#) is all about normalising the nap in our time poor and work weary world, and will be presenting a session 'Nap before you snap' at [Happiness & Its Causes](#) in June. For more information read our two blogs: [Bring back the nanna nap](#) and [You can improve your 'nap-ability'](#).



Tips for all of us

Move it. Most of us lead incredibly sedentary work lives, which leads to weight gain, poor physical fitness and all kinds of health problems. Whenever possible in your workday, find some time for physical activity even if it's just walking up the stairs instead of taking the lift, and eating lunch in the park instead of sitting at your desk.



Practice mindfulness. At work can seem like the hardest place to practice mindfulness given the many demands and responsibilities we have to manage on a daily basis. Under such circumstances being present and focused can feel like a luxury or indulgence that's not really practical. Yet in the office is where we stand to really benefit from being mindful. **Rasmus Hougaard**, a teacher of mindfulness meditation, is a strong advocate of corporate based mindfulness training. In his [presentation](#) at *Mind & Its Potential 2011*, he outlines the reasons why. Click [here](#) to read the blog.

Learn the art of small talk. People are so much more than the work they do. Find out about colleagues' hobbies and interests, their life outside of the office. Get to know each other beyond professional qualifications. The vibe in an office is so much nicer when workmates are also just mates.

Ask what they think. We like being asked for our opinion because it shows that our thoughts and ideas have value. Surprise surprise, our associates like it too.

Compliment and give credit where it's due. It's easy to focus on what folk are doing wrong but what about what they're doing right? Congratulate colleagues on their accomplishments. And if a workmate has done something worthy of praise but no one knows except you, tell people. Also never take the credit for somebody else's work if you want others to continue liking and respecting you.



Tips for all of us

Bring a toy to work. It turns out being exposed at work to reminders of children can work wonders. Studies demonstrate that pictures of and by kids in cubicles, piped Looney Tunes songs in the elevator, even comic style fonts when sending internal emails helps promote happiness and good heartedness. Click [here](#) to read the blog.

Return calls and emails promptly. To win friends at work, practice good office etiquette. This means not ignoring a co-worker's emails and phone messages which not only makes their job harder, but gives them the distinct impression you don't give a toss.

Make a bad boss better. Three out of four people report their boss is the most stressful part of their job. Learn from workplace trainer [Michelle McQuaid](#) who will be presenting a session called 'Proven ways to make a bad boss better' at this year's *Happiness & Its Causes* conference about how to use your strengths to create a win-win outcome for you and your boss. In the meantime, check out this [article](#) McQuaid wrote about why a bad boss shouldn't be tolerated. Note McQuaid is also leading a post-conference workshop called '*How to improve your relationships at work*'.

Don't gossip. It's so easy in a workplace to succumb to the temptation to bitch about your colleagues, especially if others are already talking negatively. Never mind that in doing so you lose the trust and respect of your co-workers. It's also likely someone will backstab you. Far better to change the subject or if that fails, simply walk away.



Imagine the best. Ever noticed a tendency to think that the managers and executives whose jobs are a little fuzzy to us are the ones stuffing things up and getting things wrong? It's easy to do especially when times are tough. Yet this kind of toxic and uninformed thinking can make your working life a misery. Surely it's far healthier to assume that everyone in the organisation is giving it their all and doing their best ... just like you are.

HAPPINESS & its causes

19 – 20 June 2013
Melbourne Convention & Exhibition Centre

happinessanditscauses.com.au

mind & ITS POTENTIAL

DATES FOR THE 2013 EVENT TO BE ADVISED

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17 – 18 June 2013
Sydney Town Hall

youngminds.org.au