

20

Promoting happiness in the workplace

VANESSA ROHLF

Antrozology Research Group, Monash University

Working within the field of animal management can be a complex, emotionally demanding and stressful task. Not only are animal management officers expected to be animal behaviour experts but they are also expected to be skilled negotiators and understand the human psychology underlying compliance and pet ownership practices. Identifying ways to not just cope with the demands of work but to flourish at work is therefore an important undertaking.

The aim of this presentation is to introduce delegates to the growing field of Positive Psychology and demonstrate how current knowledge within this field can be applied to increase happiness in the workplace as well other areas of your life.

What is Positive Psychology?

Positive psychology is a new and rapidly growing field of Psychology. Unlike traditional models of Psychology, Positive Psychology is concerned with the study of optimal human functioning rather than pathology. Basically positive psychologists are concerned with understanding and promoting happiness.

Exactly why happiness is important? Happiness is associated with a range of positive outcomes. In the workplace, increased happiness is associated with improved work productivity, lower staff turnover, reduced sick days and better relationships with colleagues. More importantly happiness is also associated with improved health and longevity.

Understanding Positive Psychology

According to the founder of Positive Psychology, Martin Seligman, there are three dimensions to happiness; the Pleasant Life, the Good Life, and the Meaningful Life (Seligman, 2002).

THE PLEASANT LIFE

Basically the Pleasant Life is all about collecting a whole bunch and feel-good experiences. These experiences can be based on the past, present or future. Keeping photos of your favourite holidays on

your desktop, savouring a glass of red, or looking forward to the weekend are all examples of the pleasant life. These forms of happiness, while effective, are typically short lasting (Seligman, Park & Steen, 2004). For example, the pleasure you feel when eating chocolate soon fades as you take that last bite.

THE GOOD LIFE

The Good Life is all about participating in activities that engage us. Happiness derived from this pathway tends to be longer lasting than happiness derived from pleasure. Engagement can typically be achieved by participating in activities that utilise our skills. These activities often absorb us and we tend to lose our sense of time (Seligman, Park & Steen, 2004). Psychologists call this experience 'flow'. The kind of activities likely to engage us in flow differ depending on the individual for example, some people enjoy gardening while others consider this activity a chore. The key here is to identify those activities that produce 'flow' and engage in them more often.

THE MEANINGFUL LIFE

The Meaningful life concerns the pursuit of something larger than yourself. The pursuit of meaning often gives us purpose in life (Seligman, Park & Steen, 2004). While there are many ways to increase meaning in our lives, one of the most significant ways is to use our strengths and virtues for the greater good. Basically this means we should find out what we are good at and do them more often, not just for ourselves but for others as well.

Some of these may include participating in religious activities, contributing to charities or volunteering. We don't all have to be Mother Theresa's but the research shows that when we do something for someone else we are actually happier than if we did it just for ourselves.

THE FULL LIFE

One pathway is not necessarily better than the others. To experience true happiness we need to pursue all three pathways (Peterson, Park & Seligman, 2005a).

Promoting happiness in the workplace

- Discover your strengths and virtues. Take the VIA Signature Strengths questionnaire to out what they are. This can be found at www.authentic-happiness.org.
- Build on people’s strengths within the workplace. Find out what people are good at and allocate tasks accordingly.
- Again using your strengths formulate and work towards short-term achievable goals.
- As a unit, share a common goal and vision with your co-workers.
- Engage positively with the community. If one of your strengths is love of knowledge why not impart some of that knowledge by holding responsible pet ownership stalls at community events.
- Use a Gratitude Journal. At the end of each work day, write down three things that went well and the reasons why they went well. Researchers found that people who wrote down three good things in a journal every day for one week reported higher levels of happiness than those that did not use a journal. The effect was still observed six months after the intervention (Seligman & Steen, 2005).
- Practice forgiveness. Many of us feel angry or hurt because we feel an injustice has occurred. This can especially be the case if you’re dealing with the public and monitoring compliance. Whomever or whatever the transgressor, holding on to these feelings will not change the situation that has occurred. Research suggests there is a relationship between forgiveness and happiness (Maltby, Day & Barber, 2005).

Resources

- Australian Positive Psychology Association (APPA)
 - The APPA is an online community of people with a shared interest in positive psychology.
 - www.positivepsychologyaustralia.org/
- The Authentic Happiness website.
 - This website provides you with free access to a number of questionnaires, newsletters and teaching resources.
 - [http://www.authentic-happiness.org/Default.aspx](http://www.authentic-happiness.org/)

References

Diener, E. & Seligman, M. (2004). Beyond money, towards an economy of wellbeing. *American Psychological Society*, 5 (1), 1-31.

Maltby, J., D, L., & Barber, L. (2005). Forgiveness and happiness. the differing contexts of forgiveness using the distinction between hedonic and eudaimonic happiness. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 6(1), 1-13.

Peterson, C., Park, N., & Seligman, M. (2005a). Orientations to happiness and life satisfaction: the full life versus the empty life. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 6, 25-41.

Peterson, C., Park, N., & Seligman, M. (2005b). Assessment of character strengths. In G. P. Koocher, J. C. Norcross & S. S. Hill III (Eds.), *Psychologists’ Desk Reference*. (2nd ed., pp. 93-98). New York: Oxford University Press.

Seligman, M. (2002). *Authentic Happiness*. New York: Free Press.

Seligman, M. E. P, Park, A. C., & Steen, T. (2004). A balanced psychology and a full life. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society London – Biological Sciences*, 359, 1379-1381.

About the author

A former Veterinary Nurse, Vanessa is a Monash University PhD candidate studying owner attitudes towards responsible dog ownership behaviours. She currently holds a position as Research Officer at Monash University.

CONTACT

Vanessa Rohlff

Email: vanessa.rohlf@monash.edu



A large rectangular area with a dotted pattern, intended for handwritten notes or contact information.