

Theo Theobald & Cary Cooper



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Wellbeing in the Workplace

Doing the Right Thing

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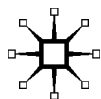
Doing the Right Thing

The Importance of Wellbeing in the Workplace

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PREFACE

What would Mum do?

For openers, it's the kind of question we would probably prefer not to ask ourselves in the workplace too often.

Not when she brought us up to be compassionate and caring, to think about others, to help out and be modest about it, to not tell lies or cheat or be unkind. Put simply, she encouraged us 'to do the right thing'.

But Mum, for all her virtues, wouldn't really understand the stresses of today's workplace, the demands upon us, the expectation we'll perform for longer hours each passing year. Mum wouldn't know the feeling of being passed over for promotion, discriminated against because we stood for what we believed in or challenged for speaking our minds.

This is part of the dichotomy of modern working life. We know what is 'right', but we need to survive, maybe even to thrive if we are to be recognised as a success by our partners, our peers, perhaps even the neighbours.

If you've cracked it, if you're already doing the right thing in the workplace, you should be congratulated, it's difficult. If not, which is most of us, you may not like everything you read here. But this book is not your conscience, it's just a reminder that you may have once had better intentions, that some of your idealism has been eroded over time and it's not too late to reclaim some of that ground.

The reality of the modern world of work includes some unpalatable facts about the way we operate, some bullying regimes, some lazy colleagues, some malpractice which, if not actually criminal, may still be immoral. And it is these home truths which might be tough to face up to.

Recent commercial history is littered with tales of badly run organisations, sometimes where the entire enterprise has been

built on sand, only shored up by the duplicity of its senior managers. Finance houses across the globe have been culpable in trading practice that many of us question the ethics of. Fair trade is still a marginal activity, with exploitation happening in one part of the world, so consumers can benefit from lower prices in another.

But hold on, it's not all doom and gloom, there are many examples of good practice, of ethical trading from organisations which clearly value their people and the wider world they operate within. Far from being pessimistic over the future of the workplace, we believe in the essential goodness of most people. The difficulty is in remembering how to behave in a way which we know is right, in order to keep ourselves on the straight and narrow, and foster a working environment where staff are less stressed and more prepared to give of their best. This is not at odds with a profit ethic, as we shall go on to discuss in detail later.

We haven't set out to be deliberately provocative, but while researching and writing this book we came across people who told us stories about the places they worked, and how 'the right thing' was a rarity, a thing of the past. These candid confessions are not likely to endear them to others in their profession, so we have promised confidentiality. Otherwise, how would we ever get to the truth, how would we know what was wrong, how would we be able to implement 'the right thing'?

Equally, we are aware there is much discussion and debate about this topic at present. Some have dismissed the 'happiness agenda' as 'fluffy', an attempt to make us feel good in bad times. But the weight of evidence is too strong to deny the tangible benefits for organisations and individuals.

Our take on the subject is an attempt to present and examine the evidence, to find practical ways of implementing the recommendations and to make wellbeing a significant consideration in our everyday lives. We all owe it to ourselves.

And if the popular drive for happiness is replaced by a new fad next year, we hope to prove personal wellbeing is here to stay for anyone who desires a 'life well lived'.

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In addition, we recognise the excellent work of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development and many other agencies who actively promote good wellbeing in the workplace.

And finally we applaud the efforts of the many thousands of managers who approach their roles with compassion, empathy and understanding. Managers who strive to do ‘the right thing’ every day of their working lives.

INTRODUCTION

We recognise wellbeing is a hot topic in the workplace right now, which is why the timing of this book is important. Equally, we all know trends in business come and go, and so need to ensure this does not become simply another ‘flavour of the month’ The wellbeing of our staff and ourselves is too important for that.

If we had not already begun to embrace the causes, benefits and constructs of wellbeing, global economic conditions in recent times would inevitably have forced it upon us. Organisations are shrinking, competition is increasing, the need to do more, with less resource, is commonplace, and the continual threat of redundancy for many ratchets up the pressure.

Large organisations have appointed a ‘head of wellbeing’ to make everything better, many SME’s meanwhile cross their fingers and hope individuals will be sensible about their health. Indeed, an entire industry of ‘wellness’ has emerged from nowhere, including companies offering online diagnostics, the appearance of ‘well-being coaches and consultants’ and a plethora of articles, books and studies on the subject.

And it is because of all the ‘noise’ surrounding the topic, we have attempted to take a more measured view of what is happening. The Foresight project (Cooper et al 2009) is a major, government sponsored study into the subject of the wellbeing of a nation. One of most significant sections of the study covered the world of work, and the effects of many factors on the mental capital within our organisations. The significant conclusions from this study form the foundations of this book, but there is more as well. You will find a section dedicated to behavioural changes each of us can make, to increase the chances of staying mentally fit. However, we have also tried to set this in the context of the modern workplace, offering some interpretation of these behaviours and looking at their role as part of a complete package, which also contains some thoughts on the work environment,

the harmonisation of sometimes disparate parts of our lives and practical strategies to incorporate some different ways of working.

Throughout the text you will find many real life examples, taken from interviews with workers and managers at different stages in their careers. Although not formal case studies, these real people illustrate a wide range of the problems and solutions many of us face in the workplace. There are working parents, desperately attempting to balance the significant roles they play; stressed and stuck middle managers caught between unfulfilling work and the threat of redundancy; and weary workaholics who have no idea how to switch off the treadmill. These ‘types’ are not uncommon in today’s world of work, in fact we may see some of ourselves in them, but help is at hand.

We begin with an examination of happiness and wellbeing. Logic dictates that as individuals we want to live the ‘best’ life we can, though we could argue about that word for another thousand pages! If we agree wellbeing and happiness are a major part of this ambition, a good starting point is the consideration of each of these terms, and the relationship we have with them in the world of work.

It is a short leap from the workplace to home life (all too short for some!), so we will inevitably talk about the effects of increased wellbeing in our personal lives too. However, our main ambition is to set the subject in a work context for a couple of reasons. Firstly, work now forms such a large part of many of our lives, we cannot hope to ‘live better’ if we don’t get things right from 9 to 5, (substitute your own ridiculous working hours here if you wish). Secondly, for many of us, we have a sphere of influence in the workplace. This might be a formalised structure where we are managing other people, or we may simply have relationships with peers. Either way, we have the ability to affect their wellbeing. There is a strong moral case for wanting to do this, some might think of it as ‘societal duty’, we simply call it ‘the right thing’.

An inevitable and well documented malaise of the modern workplace is stress, so we will move on to outline why this is happening and increasing year on year. In many senses this is at the core of

the issue we seek to solve, as stress reduction has a direct correlation with better wellbeing.

A greater understanding of how we got to where we are, will help us to consider some antidotes, so today's major workplace issues are identified and examined in detail. From here we have a platform of knowledge to begin building strategies into our everyday lives, which will attempt to overcome some of the toxicity of the modern workplace.

We think it is likely that some of our recommendations will already be part of your everyday routine, but it is the combination of all of them, on a regular basis, which will begin to make a difference. This rationale is important in giving us both justification and incentive to change the way we work. The actions we outline are also underpinned, in many cases, by scientific evidence.

Finally, this is not some hare-brained, self-help programme with promises to bring you success beyond compare, rather it is a considered, realistic and sustainable set of behavioural changes, which you have the option of adopting if you so choose. The benefits will be realised in the longer term, if the recommendations are exercised consistently, and their efficacy is backed by some of the most up to date and rigorous research into work-based issues which is currently available.

Setting the context of wellbeing at work

Defining the right thing

It is difficult to argue in favour of the right thing, without coming across as prissy and moralising, but that is not the intention. Instead what we are trying to do is prove a case for managing ourselves, our operations and our people, in a way which has the best outcome for all concerned.

The tricky part comes when you attempt to unpick this and establish exactly what ‘best’ means to all the parties involved. In global terms, ‘best’ might mean eradicating poverty and stopping all wars; that would surely be the right thing. But we don’t seem to have proven ourselves very good at this. As comedian Marcus Brigstocke says, ‘if everyone who claimed they wanted world peace really meant it, then we’d have it’.

In a commercial environment, ‘best’ might mean greatest profit, most sustainable trading, happiest workforce or any number of other objectives. This is where the essential conundrum of ‘the right thing’ first emerges. One of the main barriers to achieving it, is that on first examination, pursuing a course of action which is beneficial in one regard (say profit), might be directly at odds with what is ‘right’ in another area (say employee wellbeing). Is child labour justifiable so we can buy cheaper clothes? The moral answer must be ‘no’, yet it still happens.

Our assertion is that ‘best’ can only be delivered across the board if a long term view is taken of ‘the right thing’ making the outputs deliverable and sustainable over time, with profits gained against a backdrop of sound moral principles. All this might sound a bit high and mighty, but by using reasoned argument to support our case and practical work-based experience to keep the theories well grounded, we hope very much to avoid any accusation of sanctimony.

For many years, economists and psychologists have been fascinated by the relationship between output, or productivity and happiness or wellbeing in the workplace. Organisations as diverse as the University of Warwick (Oswald 1997), and the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development have published papers on the topic. There is growing weight of evidence of a direct linkage, so if it appears at first sight that working the staff harder, and ignoring their environmental and social needs will result in low costs and higher profits, both the science and common sense increasingly suggest this state of affairs is not sustainable.

So let us balance the altruism we might feel with the plain reality that what is good for it’s own sake, the behaviours that Mum taught us, is also the right thing for organisations committed to long term success.

Our current happiness

We seem to be surrounded by self-help advice. There are masses of column inches on happiness and wellbeing, but are we really in such a poor state, do we actually need ‘fixing’ at all?

When we consider the work done by Abraham Maslow, on his hierarchy of needs, we are already sated in many of the areas which form the foundations of our existence. In developed countries, lack of food and shelter has all but been eradicated, our financial wealth has never been greater, and with this comes choice and freedom, important elements in the building of self-worth. What can possibly be wrong with us?

In spite of all the material things we are now able to buy, there is a paradox. What most of us claim to want is a return to

simpler times. We may not have been so cash rich back then, but we had meaningful relationships, knew there were people looking out for us. We had time, time to appreciate the wonders of the world around us.

It felt like people were more giving, more sharing; didn't our parents' generation simply worry less? Even without the rose-tinted spectacles, the past looked brighter than the present.

It's certainly true, that in our lifetime we have pursued and in the main won a higher standard of living, but though we thought this would make us more complete, it's done anything but. The words of Oscar Wilde were never truer than applied to today's society, for it seems we know the price of everything and the value of nothing.

Only now, after decades of relentless growth, do we seem ready and anxious, (perhaps because of the more austere times we now live in) to reclaim the 'happiness' which was once within our grasp.

The politics of happiness

It seems even politicians have grasped the most important measurement should be more of an index of life satisfaction, rather than a hard metric of cash-at-bank.

As far back as 1968, Robert Kennedy displayed his visionary genius when he echoed Oscar Wilde's wisdom and declared, 'Gross National Product measures everything except that which makes life worthwhile'. What he realised is the conventional measures we had put in place, might give us a relative view of prosperity year on year, but they signally failed to capture how fulfilled we were.

He summarised it in this way, '...it does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials'.

Similarly in Britain, Winston Churchill understood the necessity for a broad view of the nation's worth. An early manifestation of the Arts Council had been set up during the Second World War, so performers and artists could continue their craft, with the intention of keeping spirits and morale high in dark times. When urged to divert funding from these activities into the war effort, Churchill replied, 'Then what are we fighting for?'

A measure for wellbeing

When it comes to measuring wellbeing, a much broader approach is needed and this role has been taken on by, amongst others, a U.K. based organisation called the Legatum Institute (www.prosperity.com), which produces an annual survey and report on a global basis. Much of the output of their study is freely available online. In seeking to uncover some of the qualitative elements which Robert Kennedy spoke of, the Institute goes beyond simply totting up the prosperity of nations in economic terms, it also looks at levels of health and education plus the safety, security and personal freedom which people feel they have.

In full the elements of the Legatum Prosperity Index are listed below:

- Economy
- Entrepreneurship and opportunity
- Governance
- Education
- Health
- Safety and security
- Personal freedom
- Social capital

At the top of the rankings in 2010 were the Scandinavian countries of Norway, Denmark and Finland, the United States came in at number 10, with the U.K. a few places behind at 13. Some of the poorest African nations are at the foot of the table, which shows us that there *can* be a correlation between financial wealth and many of the other measure which might make us

happy. It is not the money itself which increases satisfaction, but rather that, at the extremes, the lack of it may lead to higher crime, poorer health care, less developed education systems and reduced personal freedom. It is, in effect, deprivation which can contribute actively and in the longer term to unhappiness.

Some interesting results occur mid-table, where China for example sits at number 58. It's position is bolstered by a strong economy, but the overall score is damaged by low marks for safety, security and personal freedom.

Perhaps the most interesting measure for us to look at is that of social capital, especially with regard to the effect this has on success levels in business. The way social capital is explained, is via a range of measures like 'how charitable people are', 'what level of volunteering goes on', 'the strength of family', 'community ties' and 'the amount of joining in with social, leisure based and civic groups'.

As an employer, we might be forgiven for thinking that this is a 'nice to have', but the effects of social capital go beyond our behaviour in the community, they extend further into the workplace, the Legatum report states, '...societies with lower levels of social capital have been shown to experience lower levels of economic growth'. When people's wellbeing is improved, so their efficiency, productivity or quality of output gets better in line'. The report goes on to state, 'The use of the term "capital" reflects an important reality: social networks are an asset that produces economic and wellbeing returns'.

We continually return to the theme of wellbeing and output, stating that in spite of what many business owners and leaders believe, these two elements are not mutually exclusive. Treating workers better will not damage the bottom line, by contrast, they will contribute more. The work done by Legatum helps to bear this out. Many of us have personal experience of this. Our output increases when we are well looked after.

Measures of happiness (Dolan et al 2011) have certainly become more sophisticated, especially in the U.S., where researchers have attempted to go a step beyond the universally recognised

categories used by Legatum and the like. Here, the seemingly simple process of asking people if they're happy has been employed. There is a difficulty to overcome, as often the reply is hard to validate, according to when people are being asked and by whom.

An employee survey may lead staff to declare less happiness than they really feel, in the belief it will keep management on it's toes. However, admitting a lack of happiness to a social peer group (or indeed ourselves) can be seen as an admission of failure, a 'loser' mentality. How then can we make the data more robust?

One way would be to ask what it is that makes people happy; let's say a respondent has said, 'spending time with the family'. It is then possible to measure over a set period of days, how many minutes are spent in this 'activity' and to track this as a measure of happiness.

On days where more time has been spent with the family, the survey subject should, in theory, give a more positive response to the question 'are you happy?'

Paradoxically, it seems that people can be perfectly happy with their lives until you ask them if they are!

Whatever difficulties we might face, we can see that over time the empirical measures are getting more accurate, by employing a range of different tools and techniques, we get to the point where we can start to cross check the story being told (about how happy an individual *says* they are), with what we know to be a suite of objective measures. Taken together the combined data will give a robust result on a 'happiness index'.

In comparison to measures employed in other social sciences, these techniques may still be in their infancy, but the prognosis is good for much more accurate measurement of this 'subjective emotion' in the future. An uplift in the accuracy of data can lead to better happiness tracking, which in turn should help to validate the strategies which work and increase our wellbeing.