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HAPPINESS IS A SERIOUS BUSINESS

Why happy teams are more successful and how to build them

Nic Marks

Parts One and Two

Praise

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— Chris Anderson, Head of TED

'If we want a better future, we must build happier workplaces. *Happiness Is a Serious Business* offers the science – and the soul – to make it real.'

— Mo Gawdat, former Chief Business Officer at Google X and author of *Solve for Happy*

'Everyone wants greater positive performance and happiness at work. This book provides an evidence-based, practical way to accomplish that in the modern working world.'

— Shawn Achor, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Happiness Advantage*

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Rethink

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Contents

Preface: From Numbers To People And Numbers About People

I've always been a numbers person. As a child I loved maths and excelled in it without much effort. However, at university I realised I wasn't interested in abstract mathematics. Instead, I wanted to use numbers to solve real-world problems. After graduating from Cambridge, I went on to do a master's degree in operational research – a field we might today call systems thinking. It was fascinating work in queuing theory, simulation modelling and systems dynamics, among many other things. For the first time, I felt like I was using numbers to make a tangible difference.

Numbers alone weren't enough, though. From an early age I'd attended a traditional British boarding school – an environment that wasn't kind to sensitive

souls like me. That experience left me keenly aware of the impact of systems on individuals, and after a few years working in consulting, I found myself drawn to the world of self-discovery and personal growth. I started attending workshops and men's groups, and eventually trained as a therapist. That three-year journey taught me a lot about people – their vulnerabilities, their potential and their need for connection. I also learned about the therapeutic process, including how creating a safe space, where people feel able to share their inner experiences, can be powerfully healing. I found working one on one with people a bit lonely, though; I missed working in a team. I therefore decided to try and find a way to combine my love of numbers with my understanding of people, to create change at a larger, systemic level.

Initially, I wasn't sure how I would combine these two strands of my work, but an opportunity arose in 2001 that would change my career – and my life – completely. In the UK policy arena, the word *well-being* was gaining traction, and I was asked to do some work on it with a London-based think tank, the New Economics Foundation (NEF). It was the perfect opportunity to combine data and people, by creating data about people and their experience of life. I started off volunteering at the NEF for one day a week, but one thing led to another, and – somewhat accidentally, thanks to a combination of good timing and our rigorous, measurement-led approach – I set up an award-winning research centre!

Over the next decade we completed several groundbreaking projects and worked with local and national governments as well as with international organisations such as the European Statistics Agency and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. I worked on the questionnaire design team for the European Social Survey, designing their first wellbeing survey across the continent. Based on the data from that survey, we built prototype 'national accounts of wellbeing', showing how wellbeing differed across countries and generations.

In 2006 I created the Happy Planet Index (HPI) – an indicator designed to challenge the use of GDP as a measure of national success. Instead, the HPI measures progress towards a future with sustainable wellbeing where good lives don't cost the earth. For the UK Government of Science we designed the Five Ways to Wellbeing – a practical toolkit for individuals to improve their own positive mental health. That toolkit has since been adopted, and adapted, by multiple public mental health campaigns worldwide.

These were exciting times, learning so much while working with a great team and doing inspiring, impactful work. To top it all, in 2010 I was approached by TED and asked to give a talk at one of their prestigious global conferences. It was a huge privilege to be given a global stage from which to challenge policymakers, and indeed the environmental movement, to take people's wellbeing seriously. It was also a huge

pressure, as I knew that this eighteen-minute video was a one-off opportunity. Even though speaking had always been one of my strengths, I worked intensely over several months crafting the talk.

After my TED talk I started to get invites to give keynotes all around the world, and I had a busy couple of years spreading the word. However, over time I started to feel the need to work on something new. Policymaking is a slow process, especially when it comes to environmental challenges. I wanted to do something that created positive change more immediately in people's lives, not just at some point in the future. That's what led me to focusing on the workplace. Work is where we spend a significant portion of our lives. It's where relationships are built, challenges are faced and successes are shared. Unlike national progress, workplace happiness is something we can measure and improve in real time. Happy teams also don't just feel good – they perform better, collaborate more effectively and stay resilient in the face of challenges.

This book is my contribution to bringing the science of happiness to life in the workplace. It's informed by my experience over the last twenty-five years as a statistician, a therapist and a systems thinker. It's shaped by the lessons I've learned from working with thousands of teams across the globe. It's driven by a simple yet powerful belief that happiness is a serious business. That happiness doesn't only feel good but

also helps us do good, not just at work but in life as well.

Let me be clear, though: this isn't just another book about happiness. It's not about quick fixes or one-size-fits-all solutions. It's about understanding the dynamics of happiness, personally as well as in teams and organisations, then using that understanding to create lasting positive change. It's about measuring what matters, having meaningful conversations, and building systems that support both well-being and performance.

Introduction: Happiness Is A Serious Business

Happiness at work. To many it might sound like a nice-to-have – a luxury reserved for thriving companies in good times. However, a range of factors – including the pandemic, shifting employee expectations and the rise of hybrid and remote work – mean we are on the threshold of a new era in how we work. It's time to recognise that happiness at work is not just desirable; it's essential. Misunderstood by some as a superficial or even frivolous pursuit, happiness is in fact the foundation of sustainable success. The numbers speak for themselves: happy teams are successful teams, and if you invest in happiness, you invest in success.

The evidence base: Numbers about people

Numbers are important to me, and it's very important to me that numbers are used in the right way.

Happiness at work is a new, evolving field, with exciting research being published all the time. For example, in 2023 the first peer-reviewed article was published that categorically proves that positive moods lead to improved performance in a real business setting (Bellet, de Neve and Ward, 2023). I will guide you through similar fascinating findings throughout the book. I will also draw on my own data, which I have gathered over the last fifteen years. These datasets broadly take two forms:

1. **Representative samples of national working populations.** I have designed and analysed many of these types of surveys from multiple countries, including the USA, the UK, Australia and Canada as well as several other European and Latin American nations.
2. **Longitudinal data tracking the dynamics of weekly team happiness, across thousands of teams.** This data is collected from the clients of my business, Friday Pulse. In this book my analyses are based on trends from 2023 and 2024.

Both types of datasets have pros and cons. The national surveys have the advantage that they are unbiased,

but they are snapshots that don't capture the dynamics of happiness. In contrast, the client-based longitudinal data enables the ups and downs of work to be tracked, but they don't cover every sector or geography, so they can't be considered representative. Together, these two different types of datasets provide literally millions of datapoints, and just like numbers and people, they make a powerful combination.

In this book I will use this evidence base to show definitively that happier teams are more successful teams. They're more creative, more productive and more fun to be part of. Building happy teams isn't always easy, though. It requires commitment, curiosity and a willingness to experiment. That's why this isn't just a guide; it's also an invitation. It's an invitation to rethink how we approach work, to challenge old assumptions and to embrace a new way of thinking about success.

The ideas explored here are built on a simple yet transformative premise: happiness is a win-win proposition. Happier employees deliver superior outcomes, from increases in productivity and creativity to reductions in staff turnover and burnout. At the same time, happier workplaces create better experiences for individuals, enriching their lives far beyond the office walls. This dual benefit – superior business results and better lives – makes happiness at work one of the most powerful levers of organisational change.

Some scepticism remains. I've encountered seasoned business leaders who dismiss happiness as irrelevant to performance or, worse, a distraction from 'real work'. Others worry that focusing on happiness might lead to complacency, fearing that happy teams won't be as productive. These concerns highlight how easily happiness is misunderstood in the workplace, but it is not about relentless cheerfulness or constant positivity. It's about fostering environments where people can thrive, where challenges are met with energy and resilience, and where work is a source of pride and purpose.

The data makes the case

Scepticism about happiness at work often stems from outdated assumptions about what drives performance. Some leaders still operate under the belief that stress and pressure are the primary work motivators, pushing employees to perform at their peak.

While it's true that urgency can drive short-term results, the long-term costs – burnout, disengagement and staff turnover – are staggering. A relentless focus on squeezing performance out of teams is not only unsustainable but also counterproductive. Research consistently shows that when people are pushed too hard for too long, their performance suffers.

Research also consistently shows that happier employees are more engaged, more productive and more

innovative. Happy employees are 20–30% more productive, with even greater gains in roles that require collaboration, creativity or problem-solving (Whitman et al, 2010).[1] These are not marginal improvements; they are game-changing advantages in a competitive business landscape.

The link between happiness and performance is not anecdotal; it is scientifically robust. Positive emotions – the foundation of happiness – broaden our thinking, making us more creative and adaptable. They build our resilience and our capacity for collaboration, enabling us to rise to challenges with confidence. In contrast, negative emotions narrow our focus, making us less effective and more prone to errors.

The evidence is clear: happiness and performance are not just compatible; they are deeply intertwined.

One of the challenges in promoting happiness at work is its perceived intangibility. What is happiness? How do you act on it? These are questions I've grappled with over my career. The answer lies in measurement – not for the sake of numbers alone but to provide clarity, focus and direction.

In this book I'll introduce you to a systematic, measurement-led approach to building happy teams.

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1 I will explain how I estimate this figure further in Chapter 13, but it draws on data from a large meta-analysis (Whitman et al, 2010) and applies it to my client data.

This methodology combines regular measurement with team conversations and iterative actions. It's a process that empowers teams to work better together, leading to both happiness and success.

Far from being an abstract ideal, happiness is a practical tool for creating better workplaces. By measuring what matters and taking consistent action, leaders can transform happiness from a soft concept into a strategic advantage. This approach doesn't just make work better; it makes work better in measurable, impactful ways.

I've structured the book as a guide to understanding and applying the science of happiness at work. It's designed to provide both insights and practical tools for anyone passionate about creating a better world of work. Here's what you can expect from the six parts of the book:

1. **Understanding happiness:** We'll explore what happiness is (and isn't), busting myths and uncovering its role as a functional signal that helps us navigate what is and isn't working.
2. **Happiness at work:** We'll look at how happiness manifests in the workplace, not as a vague possibility but in tangible ways, from day-to-day moods to the systemic factors that shape it.
3. **The value of happiness:** You'll discover why happiness isn't a distraction from success

but a driver of it, boosting performance and strengthening relationships.

4. **Happiness is a team sport:** I'll delve into why teams matter more than we realise and how to lead them in ways that support wellbeing and success.
5. **The bad and the ugly:** We'll examine the mistakes organisations sometimes make when addressing happiness and wellbeing, and how to avoid them.
6. **Building happy teams:** I'll outline practical ways to foster team happiness, drawing on the Five Ways to Happiness at Work and my measure-meet-repeat methodology.

If you're reading this, it's because you care about making work better. Whether you're a senior manager or a team leader, an HR professional or a consultant, or if you're simply interested in creating a better world of work, this book is for you. It's a roadmap for applying the science of happiness to the workplace – not as an abstract ideal but as a practical tool for building better teams, organisations and outcomes.

I'm not here to offer you all the answers. All teams and organisations are different, and the right approach will depend on your unique context. What I do offer is a framework, grounded in evidence and experience, that you can adapt to suit your needs. I'll share the tools, stories and insights that have helped thousands

of teams improve their happiness and performance. I'll also show you how to measure what matters, so you can track your progress and make informed decisions.

This is my invitation to you: to take what you learn in this book and make it your own. Happiness is serious business, and it's also deeply rewarding. It's about creating workplaces where people can thrive, where challenges are met with energy and creativity, and where success is shared.

By the end of this book, you'll not only understand why happiness matters; you'll also have the tools to make it a reality in your teams and organisations.

PART ONE
UNDERSTANDING HAPPINESS

1

The Inevitable (And Measurable) Ups And Downs Of Happiness

There are many misunderstandings about what happiness is and, in my opinion, at least part of the blame lies with the American Declaration of Independence. It is a hugely inspiring and revolutionary document, but when it declares that we have the 'unalienable right' to 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness', it frames happiness as a goal to be pursued and a stable state to be achieved. That sounds great, almost like looking for a beach where you can go and relax, leaving all your unhappiness behind you.

It is true that pursuing a better life, for yourself and your family, is a noble pursuit and even that there is happiness in the pursuit. This doesn't mean you'll be happy all the time, though. It's inevitable that life

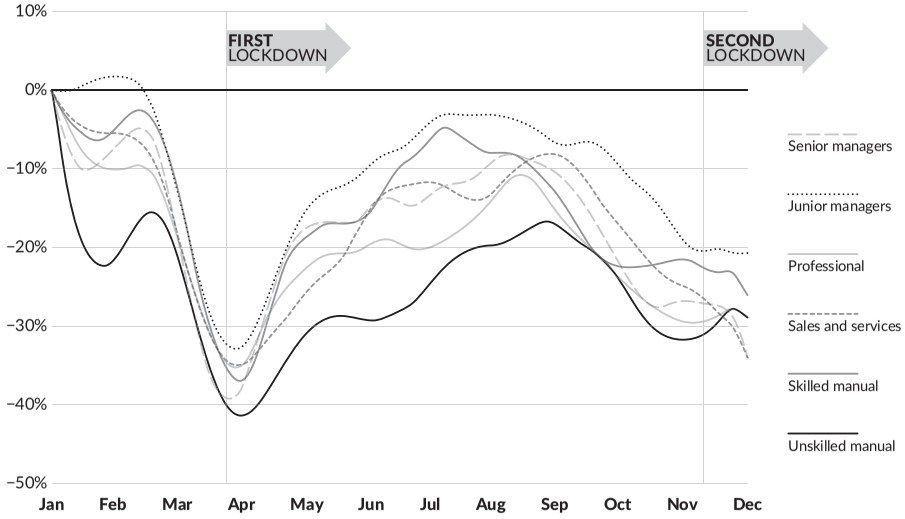
will have ups and downs; and when things aren't going well, it is appropriate to feel unhappy.

This is an important insight into the biological function of happiness. Feeling happy is a sign that we are a good fit for the environment we find ourselves in – that our inner and outer worlds are aligned. In contrast, unhappiness is a signal that we need to change something. The dynamic between the two acts as a guide, helping us navigate away from environments that aren't good for us. Obviously, we prefer the ups, but this shouldn't come at the cost of ignoring the signals that things aren't going well. Our downs are often where our learnings are.

Happiness during Covid: The rollercoaster first year

Think back to a challenge we all faced not long ago: the pandemic. That whole first year felt a bit of a rollercoaster, didn't it? In the UK we even have a graph that captures this.

The data in that graph, from the British polling agency YouGov, immediately picked up on the impact of the pandemic on how people were feeling. It shows there was a huge drop in happiness in March 2020, as the virus started to spread and its deadly seriousness became apparent. It was a scary time.



Changes in weekly happiness levels during 2020: UK workers (Source: World Happiness Report 2021, Chapter 7; Data source: YouGov Weekly Mood of the Nation UK)[2]

2 The original version of this graph was from Helliwell et al (2021). Professor Jan-Emmanuel de Neve, one of three authors of the *World Happiness Report*, shared this more detailed version with me.

In April and May the graph started to climb back up – a display of resilience as people adjusted to the new restrictions. It most certainly helped that the UK was enjoying a glorious spring, as the mood of us Brits is heavily influenced by the vagaries of our weather! I'll explain this further in Chapter 13, where I share data on how the weather influences our happiness.

In the summer things settled down, but note that levels were still lower than in January and February, which are typically the least happy months due to shorter and colder days. Then a second wave of Covid started to spread, restrictions were reintroduced, and the curve drops again.

Different experiences

You might be wondering why the graph has six flowing lines, which to me are reminiscent of rolling ocean waves. In fact, they are trendlines for six different groups of UK workers, from unskilled manual workers to senior managers. All six lines follow a similar trajectory, with peaks and troughs, but they are not identical – a reminder of what we statisticians call *variation around the mean*. In this instance the variance recognises that the pandemic impacted different people in different ways. Some were stuck in small apartments; others had to try to work from home while homeschooling young children; some people lost loved ones to the virus.

Whenever I share this graph with other people, they respond, *That's how it felt for me*. Strictly, though, it is mapping the weekly average of everyone's experiences throughout the year rather than that of any individual. It is unusual to see such clear patterns like this at a national level, as people's natural ups and downs normally cancel each other out – some will be having a bad week while others are having a good one. During Covid, more people experienced unhappiness at the same time.

The reason we can see the shape of the curve so clearly is because of the frequency of the measurement. If YouGov had decided to measure the mood of the nation only once a year, they would have almost completely missed the impact of Covid. This is one of the major reasons why annual staff surveys aren't the best option. The world of work is fast moving, and annual surveys don't capture the changes.

When you have dynamic data, you can act on it. This became very apparent during the pandemic, with a CEO I work with writing at the time:

> 'Other CEOs can only guess at how lockdown has impacted their employees. I know because we track employee experience every week. At ProSearch we have been able to act on this weekly data, and it has helped us navigate our way through this Covid-19 crisis.'
>
> – Julia Hasenzahl, CEO ProSearch

Measuring regularly helped Hasenzahl understand what was happening in her teams. She and her senior team were better able to respond to the rapid changes that were needed.

For the UK graph to make sense, it was also critical that YouGov started measuring weekly happiness nearly a year before the pandemic struck, as it was the changes in happiness levels that told the story. This is why I always recommend that teams and organisations measure team happiness regularly on a monthly or weekly basis. Changes in the data can then act as an early warning system, highlighting that something is amiss and needs attention.

The ups and downs of daily life

The data behind the graph above uses perhaps the simplest happiness measure possible: the percentage of people who reported feeling happy in the previous week. When asked *How did you feel this week?*, people could tick several boxes, including one labelled *happy*. Other options included *scared*, *sad*, *energetic*, *frustrated*, *stressed* and *bored*.

In ongoing surveys, *happy* is ticked most often and is the category that best captures the ups and downs.[3] Interestingly, when I looked more closely at the

3 YouGov publishes weekly updates to the data at https://yougov.co.uk/topics/science/trackers/britains-mood-measured-weekly.

YouGov data, it was possible to see that the first dip in the graph above was driven by fear, the second more by boredom. The weekly framing of the question neatly captured the ups and downs of people's lives, but of course these dynamics don't only happen on a weekly basis. It's quite possible to have many different moods in one day.

One recent study set out to explore people's everyday lives by tracking more than 30,000 people's daily experience for over a month (Quoidbach et al, 2019). This wasn't during a global event like the pandemic; instead, the researchers zoomed in to how people's moods and behaviours fluctuated during their everyday lives. One of their general findings was, perhaps unsurprisingly, that people tended to be least happy on the way to work in the morning and most happy when home in the evening.

Much more interesting stories emerged from tracking how individuals' experience changed throughout the day. For example, here are three particularly relevant findings:

1. **Being with other people boosts our happiness.** The data shows happy people typically spent twice as much time in the company of others.
2. **Feeling unhappy motivates us to make changes.** When people were feeling low, they were twice as likely to call a friend within the next couple of hours.

3. **Feeling happy enables us to rise to challenges.** When people felt good, they were more likely to engage in a challenging task.

The first point above confirms what lots of other studies show, which I will return to repeatedly throughout this book: that relationships are critical to our happiness. This is as true at work as it is in our lives in general.

The second reminds us that we are not passive in our moods – they don't just happen to us. When we feel unhappy, we can take action and improve our mood. In this study it was found that calling a friend was a happiness booster. At work a booster might be taking a break, perhaps having a water-cooler chat with a colleague. Psychologists call this process *self-regulation*, where we are active agents in controlling our moods.

The third is a critical insight, especially for a work context: that when we feel good, we are better able to rise to challenges. Effectively, it is evidence that happiness is more than a good/bad signal. Happiness is also highly functional and gives us energy to work towards achieving challenging goals. I'll return to this topic in the next chapter.

As the pandemic showed, life has its inevitable ups and downs. The graph above shows that these effects are not only inevitable but also measurable. The shape of the curve also captures our natural resilience, that

after setbacks we can bounce back. No doubt many of us were employing strategies, such as contacting friends, that helped us cope with the challenges posed by the pandemic.

In our working lives we all have bad weeks. If we quickly bounce back, that is a sign of resilience. If we stay feeling down for long periods, it's a signal that we need to make some changes.

Summary

- **Happiness is a signal, not a goal.** It reflects how well our inner and outer worlds align – when we are a good-fit with our environment, we feel good; when we aren't, unhappiness signals the need for change.
- **Tracking happiness reveals patterns.** Weekly data – like the happiness graph from the first year of Covid – shows how moods shift in response to events. Frequent measurement helps identify misalignments early.
- **Ups and downs can both be functional.** Positive moods energise us to take on challenges; negative moods prompt us to adapt. Recognising this dynamic helps teams navigate uncertainty with greater clarity and resilience.

2
Happiness: More Than A Yellow Emoji

The American Declaration of Independence, issued in 1776, is one source of confusion about happiness. Let's fast-forward a few centuries, and I think we're falling into a different trap of thinking that it's somehow stupid to be happy. That annoying, slightly inane, yellow smiley emoji doesn't help.

I once heard a story about Picasso. He was travelling in a train compartment with another man. The man recognised the artist, and they struck up a conversation. Perplexed by Picasso's paintings, the man asked why he didn't paint people 'as they were'. Picasso, confused, asked the man what he meant. The man took a photograph of his wife out of his wallet and said, 'More like this.' After taking his time to look closely at the photograph, Picasso eventually turned

to the man and said, 'Isn't she rather flat and very small?' I feel the same way about the yellow emoji. While it does capture something of feeling positive, it's rather flat and very yellow.

Note: The provenance of this story is at best murky. Perhaps it wasn't Picasso. Perhaps it never took place. No matter – I still like it.

There is a simplicity to happiness, in that it is a sign things are going well. It is also dynamic, highly functional and multifaceted, though, so it's not at all flat. Despite Coldplay's best efforts to elevate the colour, their song 'Yellow' associating it with the highest form of love, happiness is also definitely not always yellow.

What Pixar and Darwin can teach us about emotions

A more nuanced functional popular take on happiness can be found in the first Pixar movie, *Inside Out* (Pixar, 2015). The premise is that an eleven-year-old girl, Riley, has to navigate the emotional challenges of moving to a new city and adjusting to a new life. The way Pixar brings this to life is for her to have characters inside her head: Anger, Fear, Sadness, Disgust and Joy. The film rather delightfully highlights the complexity of emotions and that we need to embrace all feelings, not just the positive ones.

The idea that our emotions are functional has long been recognised by psychologists, with even the great Charles Darwin writing a book on the subject, titled *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (Darwin, 1872). He identified a core set of emotions, noting that some were 'low spirit' and others 'high spirit' – a categorisation that remains to this day, though those emotions are now referred to as *negative* and *positive*. This idea was popularised by Paul Ekman, an adviser to Pixar, who in the 1960s and 1970s completed a series of groundbreaking studies. Recent advances in neuroscience suggest that, while emotions may not be as discrete or universal as once thought, the positive/negative distinction remains a powerful and practical one, helping people navigate their emotional lives and make sense of their experiences. For further insight, I recommend Lisa Feldman Barrett's book *How Emotions Are Made* (Feldman Barrett, 2017).

Even *negative* and *positive* labels can lead to confusion, as many people assume that negative emotions are bad for us and must be avoided. While those emotions are more uncomfortable to experience, though, they are highly functional. For example, emotions such as anger and fear form part of our fight-or-flight mechanism, readying us to act in the face of threats. Sadness – another 'negative' emotion – helps us deal with loss and disappointment. It slows us down and helps us reflect on our experience. In *Inside Out* Sadness is really the hero as she teaches Joy, and by

extension Riley, that it's OK to feel genuine emotions, even if they are not always positive.

However, just because Riley needed to recognise the value of other emotions doesn't mean that Joy's positivity isn't also highly functional. Her optimism and resilience generate an infectious energy that motivates Riley to engage with the world around her, creatively solving problems and rising to the challenges she faces.

The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions

The understanding that positive emotions are highly functional had been overlooked by psychologists for a long time, but in the 1990s a young psychologist called Barbara Fredrickson started challenging this omission. She ran a series of innovative, lab-based experiments where she would stimulate the experiencing of positive emotions in a group of people and compare their reactions with those in another group who were in a neutral mood (Fredrickson, 1998). She would set tasks like word association, where participants needed to find one word that linked three other words (for example, the word *power* linking the words *tool*, *atomic* and *foreign*). Other experiments involved scary challenges such as giving an impromptu speech, or more playful ones like building a bridge out of drinking straws and marshmallows.

She concluded that positive emotions were highly functional – that when people felt good, they were more creative and better able to link things together. In another experiment she showed that happier people were also more collaborative, open and flexible. In addition, exposure to positive experiences over time helped build people's confidence, self-esteem and resilience.

Fredrickson proposed that positive emotions had two main functions:

1. They broaden our repertoire of responses to situations.
2. They build our personal resources.

Her findings became known as the *broaden-and-build theory*, which highlighted how – just like their negative counterparts, the fight-or-flight responses – positive emotions have evolved to help us survive and thrive through the millennia (Fredrickson, 2001).

While most of Fredrickson's research was lab-based, her insights are highly relevant to the real world of work. The research highlights that when we feel good, we do good work. This is because we are:

- **More creative** – we are better at generating fresh ideas and solving problems

- **Better decision makers** – we are more open-minded and take a broader perspective
- **More flexible** – we are better able to adapt to changes and recover from setbacks
- **Better colleagues** – we collaborate and support others more
- **More motivated** – we want to reach for more ambitious goals

These are all important reasons for why happiness leads to success, a theme I will keep returning to.

The myth of toxic positivity

Happiness is highly functional, but it is worth remembering that unhappiness is as well. If someone is always too positive, they run the risk of overriding important signals that something is amiss and needs addressing. To others over-positive people can feel inauthentic, ungrounded and not in tune with what is really going on. However, to me this doesn't warrant the use of the term *toxic positivity*. Toxic behaviour is harmful, often involving blame, control and blatant disrespect. Someone being a bit too positive might be annoying, but, unless that is accompanied by other toxic behaviour, it doesn't make others feel unsafe.

In the next chapter I'll outline why it is useful to think of there being two types of happiness: one that helps

us maintain stability and one that helps us to embrace change. There is an inherent tension between these two types; however, understanding them can help us create a dynamic balance in our work and lives.

Summary

- **Happiness isn't one-dimensional.** The flat yellow emoji doesn't do justice to the richness and functionality of happiness, which is complex, dynamic and grounded in emotional depth – more Picasso than clipart.
- **Emotions are signals, not noise.** Both positive and negative emotions play vital roles: alerting us to what matters, helping us face challenges and deepening our relationships. They're not distractions; they're data for wiser decisions.
- **Positive emotions broaden and build.** Barbara Fredrickson's research shows that happiness expands our thinking and strengthens our personal resources, boosting creativity, collaboration, flexibility and long-term motivation at work.

3
The Dynamics Of Happiness

Stability and change. We need both in our lives, but too much of either can be a problem. If everything is always change, change, change, we become unsettled and exhausted. If nothing ever changes, things stagnate and we get bored. There is a tension between the two states.

This tension has deep evolutionary roots. All living beings must maintain internal stability to stay alive. They also must interact with an ever-changing external environment. Our feelings and emotions have, at least partially, evolved to help us navigate this tension, with that self-regulation often referred to by biologists as *homeostasis*. Keeping our body temperature, blood pressure and heart rates within certain ranges are all

examples of this process. For a wonderful exploration of the evolution of emotions, see Antonio Damasio's book *The Strange Order of Things* (Damasio, 2018).

In the previous chapters I explained that happiness is a sign that we are a good fit with our environment and that happiness and other associated positive emotions are highly functional. In this chapter I will explore the fact that it is helpful to think about there being two different kinds of happiness, and that together they help us create a dynamic balance between our competing needs for stability and change.

Two types of positive emotions

Over the years, more and more research attention has been focused on the power of positive emotions. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the complexity of emotions, some caveats started to emerge especially to the broaden element of the theory. For example, a positive emotion such as interest explicitly narrows our attention so that we can focus on details. Enthusiasm drives us towards pursuing a goal, but in this mood we are less likely to be open to new ideas. Courage demands that we close ourselves off to hazards and ignore risks.

The idea that some positive emotions broaden our attention and others narrow it might at first appear to be a trivial spat over words. However, the Norwegian

psychologist Professor Joar Vittersø, who I have collaborated with on several projects over the decades, proposes that this difference is due to positive emotions activating two different motivation systems: one that maintains stability and one that drives change (Vittersø, 2025). This makes it clear why we have an array of positive emotions and it is useful to differentiate between these two underlying types, which I call *sustaining* and *striving*.

Sustaining

Sustaining emotions such as contentment, tranquillity, safety, caring, lovingness and pleasure help us relax and connect with other people. They are restorative when we are depleted, raising our spirits when we feel low. When we are feeling good in this way, we are more open, which helps us see the bigger picture, enhancing our creativity and making us more flexible. These emotions help us maintain the stability we need, both internally and relationally.

Sustaining emotions are related to what some people call our *rest-and-digest system* (Gilbert, 2009). They are associated with oxytocin, the so-called love hormone that helps us build relationships; and with endorphins, which can make us feel calm. The opposite of feeling sustained is to feel stressed, depleted or isolated.

Striving

Striving emotions help us accomplish tasks and achieve goals. They are sometimes called our drive system. Enthusiasm, excitement and interest all help us mobilise our own energy and that of others. Striving emotions are, to varying degrees, characterised by a narrowing down of attention, which naturally helps us focus on the tasks at hand and to create change.

The hormone most closely associated with these striving emotions is dopamine – sometimes called the *molecule of more*, as it drives our desires (Lieberman and Long, 2019). The opposite of experiencing striving emotions is to feel directionless, disengaged or bored.

Sustaining and striving at work

Striving emotions have a clear link to productivity – they help us focus and achieve goals. It's not surprising that they are much valued in the business world. The quieter, sustaining emotions are just as important, though, as they are related to creativity, resilience and, ultimately, staff retention. They also critically help teams create the psychological safety needed to work well together.[4]

4 Amy Edmondson is recognised as a pioneer of psychological safety (Edmondson, 2018).

Our need for both stability and change means building happy, successful teams is a very dynamic process. Things are always in flux, which can be fun and exciting as well as sometimes quite challenging.

Summary

- **Happiness balances stability and change.** Our emotional lives navigate a fundamental tension between needing consistency and embracing growth. Happiness plays a key role in managing this dynamic.
- **There are two types of positive emotions.** Sustaining emotions (like calmness and connection) restore us and promote flexibility, while striving emotions (like enthusiasm and drive) focus our attention and push us towards goals.
- **Great teams need both types.** While striving fuels productivity and ambition, sustaining emotions support creativity, resilience and psychological safety. Both are essential for long-term success.

4
Boredom Is A Joy Killer

One thing that annoys me as a statistician is that findings are often overstated or overinterpreted, especially by the media. For example, it has been found that people in middle age are less happy than those younger and older than them (Blanchflower and Oswald, 2019). This is often called the U-shaped curve of happiness and is much loved by journalists, as it seems to provide evidence of people having mid-life crises. The figures for the UK show that about 76% of middle-aged people have reasonably good levels of happiness, compared with 79% of those older or younger than them (Office for National

Statistics, 2024).[5] However, while this impact is statistically significant, it is not a large effect. No need to panic if you're middle-aged – it is not compulsory to have a mid-life crisis.

Several statistical methodologies can be used to estimate effect sizes, and in this chapter I am going to use one of these to justify why boredom is more of a joy killer than stress at work. This isn't to say stress is OK – just that boredom is worse.

A good job is interesting but not too stressful

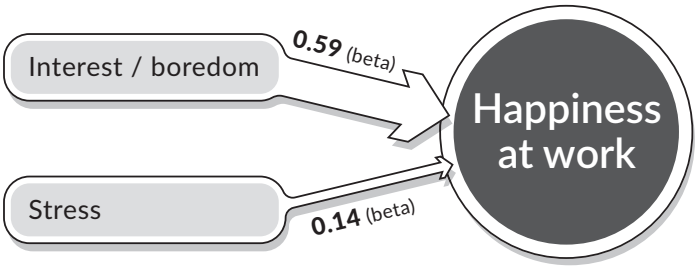
I noticed this effect in the very first dataset I ever analysed on people's experience at work. It was back in 2005, when my work on wellbeing in public policy was starting to gain traction. I was invited by a well-respected UK management group, the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD), to contribute to a report they were writing about wellbeing at work. They had commissioned a survey of more than 1,000 employees and kindly gave me access to the raw data.

5 This data comes from the UK Labour Force Survey. It is my own analysis, I used data from 2023 and defined a reasonably good level of happiness as those scoring 7 or above on a 0–10 measure of life satisfaction. The Labour Force Survey is conducted every quarter by the Office for National Statistics (ONS).

Excitingly, the survey designers had not only asked about respondents' job satisfaction; they'd also included a set of questions about the respondents' feelings at work, including how exciting, boring, frustrating and stressful they found their jobs (Guest and Conway, 2004). By looking at how these variables interacted with a whole host of other measures such as job satisfaction, work–life balance, and intention to quit, I concluded: A good job is interesting but not too stressful. Effectively, the data showed that only high levels of stress undermined people's experiences at work; moderate levels didn't.

Boredom is four times worse than stress

Over the intervening years, I've often included measures of stress and boredom (or its polar opposite: interest) in my surveys, the most recent one being the 2023 survey I conducted of the UK's working population. The figure below shows the results of a simple linear regression.



Relative impact of stress and interest on happiness at work

I have shown the beta coefficients from the regression analysis, which indicate the strength of the relationship. The beta coefficient is the value of 'b' in this equation, which you might remember from school: $X = a + bY$

For interest/boredom the beta coefficient is 0.59, which means that for every 1 pt increase in interest, the regression model predicts happiness at work will increase by 0.59 pts (with the opposite effect for any increase in boredom). In contrast, for stress the value is only 0.14. We can conclude that being bored (uninterested) is four times worse for happiness at work than stress.

Of course, this doesn't mean that stress is totally unimportant, and stress at work needs to be actively managed. In the next chapter I will give some tips about dealing with short-term stress, which I learned from an unlikely source: smokers.

Meanwhile, remember that boredom is more of a joy killer than stress.

Summary

- **Boredom is more damaging than stress.** Statistical analysis shows that boredom has a four-times stronger negative impact on workplace happiness than stress, making it a bigger joy killer than many people realise.
- **Moderate stress isn't always harmful.** While high stress needs managing, low to moderate levels don't significantly reduce happiness and may even indicate engagement or challenge.
- **The best jobs are stimulating without being overwhelming.** Data consistently shows that feeling interested and engaged at work is a key driver of happiness – even more so than avoiding stress.

5
A Lesson From Smokers

I want to give you a tip for when you feel stressed, especially when you experience the short-term stress that comes from an everyday frustration or from working too intensely for a few hours.

When you find yourself in this situation, think what a smoker would do! (I am not suggesting that smoking is healthy, but some of the behaviours of smokers are great stress-busting strategies.)

Regular breaks

Smokers are good at taking regular breaks. They get up from their desks, move their bodies and go outside into the daylight, all of which is great for relieving the

tension that has been building up. Taking a five-minute break every hour is good for us.

On each break, smokers chat with their fellow smokers, which lifts their mood. As someone who has always been a non-smoker, I used to be jealous of how smokers would go up to a stranger and ask for a light. I'm sure they often had matches in their pocket but had a great excuse to kickstart a conversation.

Mindful breathing

It's always struck me how 'blissed out' smokers look as they intensely inhale and exhale. Basically, they are practising mindful breathing, albeit with lots of carcinogens thrown in.

The trick with mindful breathing is to slow down your breathing and exhale for a little longer than you inhale, for example:

- Inhale for four seconds
- Exhale for six to eight seconds

Some people suggest that the benefit comes less from breathing out for longer and more from pausing between the in and out breaths. Either way, your mind automatically calms, and you relax. You have activated the parasympathetic nervous system, which promotes relaxation. In our evolutionary past, this probably

happened after we had escaped danger and were catching our breath. It is a signal that all is safe now.

Putting this advice together into an easy-to-remember mnemonic gives us:

- **S** – Stop what you're doing
- **M** – Move your body, and go …
- **O** – Outside
- **K** – Kickstart conversations
- **E** – Exhale longer than you inhale
- **R** – Relax

Summary

- **Smokers instinctively manage stress well.** They take regular short breaks, move their bodies, get fresh air and connect with others – healthy habits disguised by an unhealthy one.
- **Mindful breathing really works.** Slowing the breath, especially extending the exhale, activates the body's natural relaxation response and helps regulate stress.
- **The SMOKER mnemonic helps.** Stop, Move, go Outside, Kickstart conversations, Exhale longer, and Relax – a memorable way to de-stress without picking up a cigarette.

6
Happiness Is Deeply Relational

'Happiness is almost a social emotion' is a quote I attribute to the late – and most certainly great – Daniel Kahneman. Best known for winning the Nobel Prize for Economics in 2002, Kahneman was one of the world's most influential thinkers. He had an extraordinary ability to fully commit to ideas, while remaining open to changing his mind when evidence demanded it. That rare combination – of conviction and curiosity – meant he never stopped wrestling with complex questions. His observation about happiness being 'almost a social emotion' captures a subtle but powerful truth: that our happiness is deeply shaped by our relationships with others.

In his best-selling book *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (Kahneman, 2012), he differentiated between two modes of human thinking:

1. **System one** – fast and instinctive, more unconscious, emotionally based
2. **System two** – slower and deliberative, more reflective and cognitive

This powerful insight is genuinely useful when it comes to thinking about the role of happiness in our lives. When we feel happy or unhappy, we are drawing predominantly on our system-one thinking. While system one is prone to some biases, it provides an exceptionally useful first approximation of what is happening. In contrast, system-two thinking is more effortful. It is when we step back and analyse the situation more thoroughly. This reminds us that it is important to not slavishly follow our feelings, but to consider them as useful information to reflect on.

Happiness is social

While happiness is often viewed as a personal or internal experience, it is also profoundly social. It arises in relationships – with others, and with the systems we are embedded in. Our moods ripple outward, shaping those around us, just as their moods shape us in return.

Psychologists typically classify emotions like empathy, jealousy, gratitude, shame and love as 'social emotions' – those that help us build and maintain relationships. Happiness isn't usually included in this list, yet it behaves in a similar way. It thrives on connection, is reinforced by reciprocity, and deepens through shared experience. In this sense, happiness may not be a classic social emotion, but it is certainly a relational one. That makes it central not just to life but to work too.

Friend or foe? A revealing instant judgement

Our ability to quickly judge whether a stranger is friend or foe is a classic example of Kahneman's system-one thinking – fast, intuitive, and automatic. After just a couple of seconds, we have a 'good' or 'bad' feeling about the other person. This assessment is surprisingly accurate, with one study showing that from just three two-second video clips of teachers at work, strangers accurately predicted how they were rated by their supervisors and students (Ambady and Rosenthal, 1993).

These rapid social assessments are based predominantly on two factors: warmth and competence. In other words: does the unknown person intend us good or ill, and then can they act on their intentions? The scariest combination has to be that they intend to

harm us and are competent (Fiske, Cuddy and Glick, 2007).[6] We assess people in this order, with the warmth signal picked up first, closely followed by the competence signal. I'll return to this combination when I explore the qualities needed for people to be good leaders; for now it is a reminder that people skills are essential, and they are as important as technical skills when it comes to leading teams.

Our ability to make an instinctive and almost instant friend/foe judgement has deep evolutionary roots. Making friends, collaborating and building allegiances have been a critical element in our evolutionary success as a species. In fact, it wouldn't be too much of a stretch to say that building relationships is our superpower. The British psychologist Robin Dunbar puts this down to what he calls our *social brain* (Dunbar, 1992). He proposes that the reason we developed complex brains, particularly our super-sized neocortices, was due to the demands of living in social groups. We have used our ingenuity and collaborative skills to solve complex problems together and thrive as a species.[7]

This is as true today at work as it has been in our evolutionary past, and collaboration is fundamental to building happy and successful teams.

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6 For an excellent summary, see page 23 of Joar Vittersø's book *Humanistic Wellbeing* (Vittersø, 2024).

7 See also *The Social Brain* (Camilleri, Rockey and Dunbar, 2024).

Summary

- **Happiness is deeply relational.** While often seen as an individual feeling, happiness is profoundly influenced by our social interactions, both shaping and being shaped by the people around us.
- **Our social instincts run deep.** From split-second friend-or-foe judgements to our desire for warm, competent connections, our brains are wired to assess and prioritise relationships.
- **Collaboration is our superpower.** Evolved for group living, humans thrive – at work and in life – through connection. Investing in relationships is essential for building happy, successful teams.

PART TWO
HAPPINESS AT WORK

7
Everyday Work Happiness

What's a great day at work for you? If you're like most people, a great day is when there are challenges, but you can rise to them. Sometimes we get so absorbed in a task that we almost lose track of time; it's a wonderful feeling. Psychologists call this sensation *flow*. Tennis players get into the zone. Musicians get lost in the music. For statisticians like me, it's Excel spreadsheets that we get immersed in!

The famous Hungarian-American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (pronounced *Chick-sent-me-high-ly*) first coined this idea of flow in the 1970s, which he later wrote about in his seminal book *Flow* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). His research has shown that we experience flow when the challenges we face are well matched to our skill levels. This highlights that

there is a point when challenges can become overwhelming, resulting in us becoming highly stressed. At the other end of the scale, where things are too easy, we are at risk of getting bored.

Happiness and success go hand in hand when we're in flow, but it is important to seek the sweet spot. Finding flow is about optimisation, not maximisation. When things get too much, both our happiness and performance will drop. In fact, it will be our feelings that first bring our attention to the fact that we are getting out of balance. This is why listening to our feelings can be helpful. They act like an early warning system, providing us with information about whether we are a good fit in the environment we are in, and helping us respond to the ups and downs we face.

Not all downs are inevitable

While it is inevitable that life will have ups and downs, not all downs are inevitable. In our work lives there are often frustrations, many of which are avoidable. One person who has studied their impact is the renowned psychologist Professor Teresa Amabile from Harvard Business School. In a frankly heroic study she, together with colleagues, collected daily diaries from 238 participants from seven different organisations over a six-month period. In their diaries respondents recorded notes at the end of each day about their daily experience of work. They also

answered questions about what Amabile called their *inner work life* – effectively, their daily mood at work. Amabile and her colleagues tenaciously managed to achieve a 75% response rate across the whole study, collecting a total of more than 12,000 daily reports for their analysis. It is an impressive and insightful study.

The findings were published in a series of papers as well as a book called *The Progress Principle* (Amabile and Kramer, 2011). The book's title makes the main finding clear: people felt happiest when they were progressing their work, what she called *small wins*, and least happy when they suffered setbacks or frustrations.

To use an analogy from engineering: setbacks are like friction, whereas progress is like flow. Whether at an individual or organisational level, work runs more smoothly and more successfully when friction is reduced and flow increases. My own research, though, shows there is a lot of friction in people's working weeks.

Daily frustrations hold us back

In early 2023 I carried out a representative survey of the UK working population, which included some questions about people's weekly experience. One of those questions was: What was the most frustrating thing about your work this week?

Most people reported experiencing frustrations, with the five most cited ones being:

1. Interpersonal conflicts with manager or colleagues (23%)
2. Poor systems, especially IT and admin systems (23%)
3. Overload – either personal workload or staffing issues (19%)
4. Physical or mental health issues – fatigue, stress, etc (19%)
5. Customer and client interactions (15%)

There are always going to be challenges at work, but there is clearly a lot of room for removing many of these sources of friction. They hold people back from doing their best work and from feeling happier at work.

Professor Amabile's work got into the detail of people's working lives and shows comprehensively that people enjoy progressing their work and hate getting held back. Her in-depth study was of just seven organisations, and my own research, which tracks happiness in thousands of teams across hundreds of organisations, confirms how prevalent frustrations are for people on a weekly basis.

Understanding people's everyday experience of work reveals perhaps one of the most unrecognised ways of becoming happier at work, which is simply by reducing daily frustrations. Less friction, more flow.

Summary

- **Flow fuels happiness and performance.** When challenges match our skill level, we enter a state of flow, where we feel both engaged and successful. Finding this sweet spot is key to everyday satisfaction at work.
- **Not all downs are inevitable.** While life has natural ups and downs, many daily frustrations at work are avoidable. Research shows that setbacks (friction) undermine happiness, while progress (flow) boosts it.
- **Less friction leads to better flow.** From clunky systems to poor communication, everyday frustrations hold people back. Removing these barriers is a practical and often overlooked way to improve happiness at work.

8

Developing A Culture Of Happiness

'Culture eats strategy for breakfast' is a quote widely attributed to Peter Drucker, the renowned management consultant. Whether or not he said it in those precise words, it's a great turn of phrase. It neatly encapsulates the fact that the success or failure of an organisation's strategies are often down to the way people work together. Happiness is more about *we* than *me*.

However, the definition of culture is a bit of a mystery. Some people use other words like *atmosphere*, *climate*, *environment*, *mindset* or *values*. Those terms have slightly different emphases, but all boil down to how people work together. What I like about *culture* is that it is neutral – you can have good and bad cultures, and everything in between. Drucker himself never provided a definition, while the UK's CIPD says:

> 'Despite its dominance, the language of culture is often unclear and difficult to define, meaning it is also hard to measure. Consequently, real culture change is near-impossible if we can't actually pin down what we're looking to change.' (CIPD, no date)

Typically, most definitions of culture are wordy and emphasise things like shared values, beliefs and norms. I like the simplicity of one popular definition: *The way we do things around here*. It's a reminder that work cultures are revealed in how teams and organisations actually behave.

My simple definition is therefore: A great culture enables people and teams to be happy and successful.

I like this definition as it is tangible and has a clear goal – to be happy and successful. A culture with clear, measurable outcomes also has the advantage that its drivers can be identified statistically, which was key to me creating what I call the Five Ways to Happiness at Work – five positive actions that help people thrive at work.

The Five Ways to Happiness at Work

The Five Ways to Happiness at Work is a model that promotes good work. Over the years, many academics and thinkers have proposed theories, conducted

experiments and analysed data about good work. Perhaps most famously, Abraham Maslow proposed his hierarchy of needs, from physical needs at the base of the pyramid to self-actualisation at the top (Maslow, 1943). Other models and theories use different words or place different emphases, but they all cover similar ground.[8]

My Five Ways model clearly overlaps with many of these ideas – inevitably so, since we're all circling the same aim: how to make work truly work for people. In my opinion, you should be suspicious if someone says they have a completely new theory, as we are all addressing the same goal: good work.

The key difference with the Five Ways is how they are framed, with the main aim being to make the model easier to relate to and put into action.[9] Instead of using dry, academic terms like *relatedness*, *justice*, *autonomy*, *development* or *purpose*, I have 'messaged' the Five Ways as positive actions, as illustrated below.

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8 The hierarchical nature of Maslow's theory is widely challenged nowadays, but it remains a classic touchstone. Ed Deci and Rich Ryan's self-determination theory proposed three needs: relatedness, autonomy and competence (Deci and Ryan, 1980). Daniel Pink's book *Drive* (Pink, 2011) was probably partially inspired by them – his three factors were autonomy, mastery and purpose. Martin Seligman, the founder of the positive psychology movement, proposed a five factor model called PERMA: Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Accomplishment (Seligman, 2011). Less well known is the thorough work of British psychologist Peter Warr (Warr, 2011) and more recently Professor Jan-Emmanuel de Neve of Oxford University (De Neve and Ward, 2025).

9 My colleagues and I first used these ideas when writing 'The Five Ways to Wellbeing' (Aked et al, 2008).

Five Ways to Happiness at Work

These link back to the two types of positive emotions: sustaining and striving. The first two of the Five Ways, *connect* and *be fair*, are more about sustaining; the other three about striving. Underneath these headline words are a whole myriad of possibilities, as there are many ways to fulfil the Five Ways.

The Five Ways are invitations to try out new ways of working rather than as commands to be put into action. In my experience, happiness and wellbeing are best promoted by coaching and facilitation as opposed to a more prescriptive approach.

Let's look in more detail at each of the Five Ways:

1. **Connect – friendships, laughter, a sense of belonging.** It is much easier to do great work when we are happy in the company of others. Teams who encourage, support and appreciate each other make problem-solving, innovation and success possible.

2. **Be fair – flexibility, appreciation, space for people's life outside work.** Being treated with fairness and respect is fundamental to happier work. People flourish when organisations are responsive to their needs and value the energy they put in. Teams flourish when colleagues appreciate one another.

3. **Empower – trust, delegation, the opportunity to self-organise.** Sharing responsibility and playing to people's strengths can unleash amazing potential in the workplace. When people are able to be themselves and use their judgement, they do great work.

4. **Challenge – stretch, learning, realistic expectations.** People are happy in their jobs when they are absorbed and progressing in their work. By making jobs interesting, organisations pull people into a space where they learn and achieve great things.

5. **Inspire – pride, purpose, being part of a bigger picture.** Doing a job that we feel is genuinely worthwhile is a great source of motivation in our lives, and it can sustain us through challenging times. Work becomes more meaningful when we can see beyond narrow business goals to how we help other people.

The Five Ways are all interconnected and often impact each other. If you have good connections with your colleagues, you will find it easier to rise to challenges and learn new things. When we are treated fairly, we feel empowered to do our best work. Clearly the opposites can also be true. When our work is uninspiring, we don't feel like rising to challenges. There can be occasions when a deficit in one area is offset by another; for example, when we feel we are being treated unfairly, we might build stronger relationships at work to cope.

The Five Ways to Happiness at Work model helps us understand the key drivers of happiness at work. The Five Ways demystify what a good workplace culture is – if people have opportunities to experience them, those people will not only feel good, but they will also do good work.

A Five Ways lens on classic business ideas

The Five Ways to Happiness at Work model offers a holistic approach, allowing for the use of many additional approaches. Over the years, many classic business books have been written in this area, and in the list below I have chosen the fifteen I have found most helpful. You'll find three for each of the Five Ways, listed alphabetically rather than in order of preference:

- **Connect:**
  - *Give and Take* (Grant, 2014)
  - *The Social Brain* (Camilleri, Rockey and Dunbar, 2024)
  - *The Song of Significance* (Godin, 2023)

- **Be fair:**
  - *Appreciative Inquiry* (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005)
  - *The Fearless Organization* (Edmondson, 2018)
  - *It Doesn't Have to Be Crazy at Work* (Fried and Hansson, 2018)

- **Empower:**
  - *Delivering Happiness* (Hsieh, 2010)
  - *Drive* (Pink, 2011)
  - *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (Covey and Covey, 2020)

- **Challenge:**
  - *Radical Candor* (Scott, 2017)
  - *The Fifth Discipline* (Senge, 2006)
  - *The Progress Principle* (Amabile, 2011)

- **Inspire:**
  - *Conscious Capitalism* (Mackey and Sisodia, 2013)
  - *Let My People Go Surfing* (Chouinard, 2006)
  - *Start With Why* (Sinek, 2011)

That was a hard list to choose, and I expect you have some different ones. Regardless, the Five Ways show that there are many potentially good starting points for promoting happiness at work.

The Five Ways framework highlights the approaches that drive both happier and more successful work. In the next chapters I'll illustrate how the Five Ways methodology can be used to address complex challenges. I'll focus first, in Chapter 9, on one of the biggest conundrums in the modern workplace: working from home and the increased demand for flexibility.

Summary

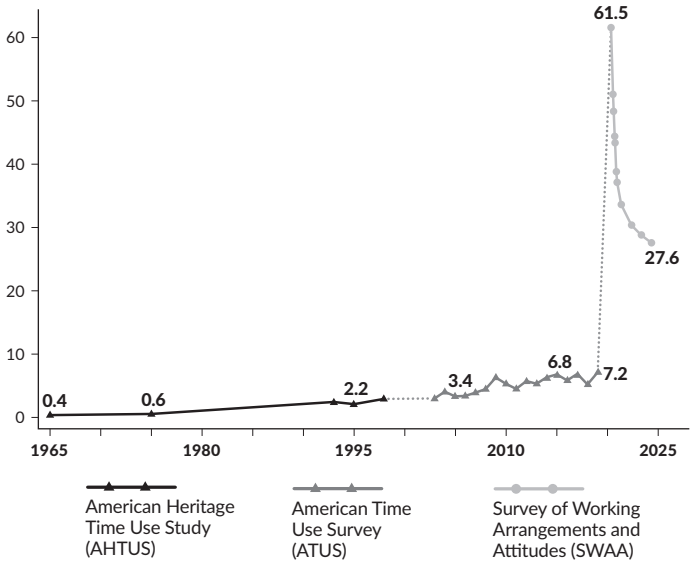
- **Culture is how people work together.** A great culture isn't about slogans or perks; it's about shared behaviours that enable teams to be both happy and successful. It's measurable and manageable, and it shapes outcomes at least as much as strategy.
- **The Five Ways will help you find new ways of working.** Connect, Be fair, Empower, Challenge and Inspire offer a clear, actionable framework for promoting happiness through everyday team practices, grounded in robust psychological and organisational theory.
- **Abstract ideals can be transformed into practical action.** The Five Ways translate broad values into specific behaviours and choices, helping organisations build cultures where people feel good and do great work, not just in theory, but in daily reality.

9
The Flexibility Conundrum

Flexible working is one of the hottest topics in organisations today, sparking heated debates in offices, on Zoom calls and during dinner table conversations. On the surface, the point seems simple: people want autonomy over where and how they work. Who wouldn't? If you look beyond the immediate, though, the issue is far more complex.

The Five Ways can provide a useful framework for thinking through the full implications of complex challenges such as the increasing demand for working from home. Let's look first, though, at some figures on the scale of the changes that have happened since the pandemic. They are quite dramatic.

The graph below shows data from the US that illustrates the working-from-home trend from 1965 to 2025. The vertical axis shows the percentage of all paid workdays that were worked at home.



Figures for the number of full days worked at home (USA, 1965–2025) (Source: SWAA March 2025, Updates Barrero et al, 2025)

The UK shows a similar pattern, with 28% of people working in a hybrid way as of October 2024 (Office for National Statistics, 2024). While there's no exact pre-pandemic comparator for hybrid work, the same survey found that an additional 12% of people were working fully from home – more than double the 5% who did so before the pandemic.

What is clear is that the world of work has changed. The pandemic greatly accelerated a rising trend in working from home. However, that doesn't mean there aren't complex trade-offs for individuals, teams and organisations. Here's where a Five Ways perspective can help:

1. **Connect:** We often underestimate the importance of everyday social moments – shared experiences, informal chats and spontaneous laughter – until they vanish. Remote work can lead to disconnection and loneliness. When designing flexible working policies, it's essential to consider how they affect trust, relationships and team cohesion.
2. **Be fair:** Flexibility can help people feel respected and supported, especially when they are balancing complex lives. It's not available to everyone, though – some roles require physical presence. If not handled with care, flexible work can create inequalities and resentment. Even the flexibility itself can backfire if boundaries blur and people feel they're 'always on'.
3. **Empower:** The ability to choose when and where to work can be deeply empowering. It gives people a sense of control over their time and energy, yet autonomy must come with visibility. Remote workers risk being overlooked for opportunities, recognition and development

unless systems are in place to ensure they're not out of mind when out of sight.

4. **Challenge:** Working from home can be great for deep focus, but it also limits access to informal learning – those unplanned conversations that spark insight or help someone grow. Junior staff, in particular, benefit from proximity to mentors and real-time feedback. The challenge is to ensure that flexibility doesn't come at the cost of development.
5. **Inspire:** Fulfilment at work isn't just about what we do – it's about meaning, shared purpose and celebrating success together. Flexible working should support these goals, not undermine them. The best approaches help people stay connected to the bigger picture and to one another, no matter where they're working.

As illustrated here, the Five Ways to Happiness at Work model provides a fresh perspective and encourages us to look beyond the obvious. The rising demand for flexibility is understandable, but the resulting complexities often aren't fully appreciated. Flexible working isn't just about *where* we work; it also impacts *how* we work. By using the Five Ways as a framework, these deeper dynamics can be more fully understood.

There's no one-size-fits-all answer to the flexibility challenge. Every workplace is different – shaped by

what kind of work it does, where it's based, and the lives and needs of the people who work there.

In the next chapter I am going to turn the spotlight onto you and your current happiness at work. I will also introduce you to the Five Ways survey, which I use with teams and organisations.

Summary

- **Flexible working has transformed expectations.** The post-pandemic shift towards hybrid and remote work is here to stay, but it introduces complex trade-offs that go far beyond location.
- **The Five Ways reveal hidden tensions.** Flexibility can empower individuals and support wellbeing, but if not designed carefully, it can also erode connection, fairness, visibility and learning.
- **There's no single answer.** Every team must navigate its own balance, one that supports both happiness and performance. The Five Ways provide a framework to achieve it.

10
How Happy Are You At Work?

In this chapter I will give you an experience of reflecting on your own happiness at work, using the Five Ways as a framework, which is useful for two reasons:

1. It will hopefully help you relate better to the Five Ways.
2. As the airlines always say, you should apply your own oxygen mask before helping others. If you aren't happy at work, it will be harder for you to help others.

I could get very technical on how to create measures of the Five Ways, but I'll stick with a brief overview

for now. The Five Ways were identified by narrowing the drivers, using a combination of regressions, correlations and factor-structure analysis. Early questionnaires had more than 100 questions, which were slowly narrowed down to the current fifteen. There are five subscales, each with three questions. A three-item scale is considered the shortest possible scale you can achieve and test for internal consistency.

The good news is that there are only fifteen questions to answer – three for each of the Five Ways. I have learned, the hard way, that keeping questionnaires short is the best for collecting robust data, as nobody likes wading through hundreds of questions.[10]

You can either answer the questions below or scan the QR code or visit https://nicmarks.org/whq to complete the online version, which will generate a personalised report for you.

10 To my shame, the first wellbeing questionnaire I designed, in 2002, had over 150 questions, and I was asking those of school kids. I can only apologise to them! I simply didn't know what I was doing, but I learned a lot. That questionnaire became the basis of my first wellbeing report (Marks, 2004).

The Five Ways questionnaire

Connect	How well do you get along with people in your team?	1	2	3	4	5
		< Not at all			Very much so >	
	Do you feel that teams within your organisation generally work well together?	1	2	3	4	5
		< Not at all			Very much so >	
	Do you feel that you have good friends at work?	1	2	3	4	5
		< Not at all			Very much so >	
Be fair	Do you feel satisfied with the balance between your work and the other aspects of your life?*	1	2	3	4	5
		< Not at all			Very much so >	
	Do you feel that you are treated with fairness and respect at work?	1	2	3	4	5
		< Not at all			Very much so >	
	How appreciated do you feel for your efforts at work?*	1	2	3	4	5
		< Not at all			Very much so >	

The Five Ways questionnaire (continued)

Empower	Do you feel free to be yourself at work?	1	2	3	4	5
		< Not at all				Very much so >
	How often do you get to use your strengths in your job?	1	2	3	4	5
		< Not at all				Very much so >
	Do you feel you can influence important decisions in your work?	1	2	3	4	5
		< Not at all				Very much so >
Challenge	How often do you receive helpful feedback on your performance?	1	2	3	4	5
		< Not at all				Very much so >
	How often do you get the chance to be creative in your job?	1	2	3	4	5
		< Not at all				Very much so >
	Do you feel that you are learning new things at work?	1	2	3	4	5
		< Not at all				Very much so >
Inspire	Do you feel a sense of accomplishment from your work?	1	2	3	4	5
		< Not at all				Very much so >
	Do you feel the work you do is worthwhile?	1	2	3	4	5
		< Not at all				Very much so >
	Do you feel proud to work for your organisation?	1	2	3	4	5
		< Not at all				Very much so >

Your score

If you use the online version, you'll receive more detailed analysis, but I'll keep things simple here:

Simply add up how many of the fifteen questions you answered positively, ie with a score of 4 or 5. This will give you a score of between 0 and 15.

- If you answered positively to thirteen or more questions, you are among the happiest 20% of the working population.
- If you answered 9–12 questions positively, you are reasonably happy at work, though there is room for improvement in some specific areas.
- If you answered 4–8 questions positively, you are probably just OK at work. It would be good to look at your lower scores and seek to address them.
- If you answered 3 or fewer positively, you are probably struggling with your current role. You are in the lowest 20%, and there is a lot to address.

Whatever your scores, it is good to take some time to reflect on your results. Here are some questions you can ask yourself:

- What pleases me most about my highest scores?

- How might I positively influence my lower scores?
- Who can support me in improving my experience of work?

You might also have wondered what the asterisks next to work–life balance and appreciation mean. If you have scored a 1 or 2 on either of these, or a 3 on both, take care – these are the two biggest predictors of burnout. If you are working long hours and don't feel appreciated for your efforts, over time your work is likely to grind you down. My recommendation would be to actively seek to get back into a healthier balance as soon as possible.

The Five Ways as a measure of team culture

When I work with teams and organisations, I get everyone to complete the Five Ways questionnaire at the same time. The collated results help them identify areas of strengths and opportunities for improvement in their workplace.

The Five Ways provide an easy-to-understand framework and a shared language for teams to reflect on how they work together. Crucially, they point towards a goal that everyone can embrace: to be both happier and more successful at work. This is the power of a happiness-led approach – it aligns

what individuals genuinely value with what organisations need. Rather than treating happiness as a side issue or a nice-to-have, the Five Ways show that when people thrive, performance improves too. It's a win-win, and a compelling reason to take happiness at work seriously.

Summary

- **The Five Ways questionnaire helps improve happiness at work.** This is a quick, fifteen-question tool to reflect on your own experience of work, using the Five Ways framework.
- **The questionnaire highlights strengths and opportunities.** Your score highlights where you're thriving and where you might need support, especially in areas linked to burnout.
- **The questionnaire measures team culture.** When used across a team, the Five Ways provide shared language and data to understand and improve how people work together.

11
The Danger Of Getting Stuck In OK

When we are happy, we feel positively energised and ready to create and seize opportunities – to broaden and build, as Barbara Fredrickson called it.

When we are unhappy, we can also feel energised, but our energy is then demanding that we take action to avoid threats. This is our fight-or-flight response mechanism, which can be destructive at work.

What about the times when we are neither happy nor unhappy, when we just feel OK? These can be the times we feel the lowest amount of energy. Things are passable, but we lack vibrancy and motivation. This middle ground can be deceptive: nothing feels wrong enough to require immediate action, but nothing feels truly right either.

Stuck in OK

It is all too easy to get stuck in OK, which can be dangerous. We can get stuck in OK relationships in life, which aren't fulfilling but also aren't terrible. When it comes to our physical health, we can get stuck in OK too – perhaps our lifestyles aren't healthy, but things aren't bad enough to force us into making changes.

It's the same at work, where we can easily get stuck in OK jobs. They aren't bad enough that we have to change, yet they aren't great either, which can gradually wear us down. This isn't only a personal issue; it's an organisational risk. Teams that are mostly OK report lower collaboration, creativity and productivity.

In my data I can see evidence of individuals and teams getting stuck in OK. For example, only 20% of teams that are OK in one quarter rate themselves as happy in the next. This matters, as OK teams are more likely to miss their targets and also have significantly higher staff turnover rates. I'll delve deeper into these figures later, but in short: teams that are OK are at about twice as much risk of underperformance as happy teams and have about a 50% higher staff turnover rate.

What causes people and teams to get stuck in OK? Typically, the answer isn't a single issue but a lack of positives. When people feel OK, they often report neutral responses across several areas rather than having specific negatives. They're not actively unhappy but

feel that few things are working well. This 'neutral zone' can be flat but persistent, with people surviving but not thriving.

How to get unstuck

If you or your team feels stuck in OK, the best way to escape is by understanding the drivers of happiness at work. The Five Ways questionnaire can help by identifying specific areas for improvement. Any poor scores clearly need to be addressed. However, being stuck in OK is often characterised by lots of neutral scores, so my advice to you and your team is to:

- **Consider neutral zones.** Identify the neutral aspects of work. Perhaps collaboration is fine but not energising, or feedback is helpful but not inspiring. These areas are often ripe for improvement, and enhancing them can have an outsized impact on overall happiness.
- **Identify potential small wins.** In the transition from OK to happy, small positive shifts often make a big difference. Focusing on improving a few key areas will allow you to move out of OK more reliably. Simple practices like setting small, achievable goals can create momentum for change.
- **Appreciate progress.** Recognising accomplishments, even small ones, helps us see

that we are moving forward. Acknowledging progress not only boosts happiness but also motivates further improvement, creating a positive feedback loop.

We need to be aware that OK isn't really OK. If we ignore the risks of OK, then mediocrity becomes the norm, which at work risks considerable underperformance.

While it requires effort to shift from only being OK, the benefits are clear: we are not only happier; we are also more likely to be successful too.

Summary

- **OK is a risky middle ground.** When we're not happy or unhappy but just fine, we often lack the energy or urgency to make changes, yet this state can quietly erode motivation and performance.
- **OK teams underperform.** Data shows that OK teams are significantly more likely to miss targets and face higher staff turnover. Stuckness isn't always caused by problems; it's often due to a lack of positives.
- **Getting unstuck means taking action.** Use the Five Ways to identify areas of neutral experience, focus on small wins, and celebrate progress to shift from surviving to thriving.

Get your copy of the full book

You've now read Parts 1 and 2 of *Happiness is a Serious Business*, where we explored what happiness really is and how it shows up at work.

In the chapters ahead, the focus turns from understanding to action.

In **Part 3**, I show why happiness isn't a distraction from success but a driver of it — improving performance, relationships, and retention.

Part 4 reveals why happiness is a *team sport* and how the best leaders create the conditions where people truly thrive together.

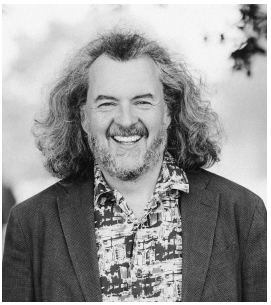
Part 5 looks honestly at what goes wrong - the policies, assumptions, and quick fixes that can quietly erode wellbeing - and how to avoid them.

Part 6 brings everything together with practical tools for building happier teams, including the Five Ways to Happiness at Work and my simple *measure–meet–repeat* rhythm.

If you've enjoyed this preview and want to learn how to apply these ideas in your own organisation, you can get the full book — *Happiness is a Serious Business: why happy teams are successful and how to build them* — on Amazon.

Buy on Amazon

The Author



Nic Marks is a pioneering figure in the field of workplace well-being, often described as The Happiness Statistician for his unique combination of analytical insight and human understanding. Originally trained as a mathematician and statistician, Nic has spent the past 25 years at the forefront of measuring what matters – people's experience of life and work.

After graduating from Cambridge, he studied operational research and organisational change, while also training as a therapist – an unusual mix that has come to define his work. Nic founded the Centre

for Wellbeing at the New Economics Foundation (NEF), where he and his team developed influential frameworks such as the Happy Planet Index and the Five Ways to Wellbeing. His TED talk on happiness has been viewed millions of times, and he was the author of one of the first TEDbooks, *A Happiness Manifesto*.

In 2012, Nic founded Friday Pulse, a London-based tech company helping organisations measure and improve team happiness through a science-led weekly pulse. His clients include large corporates, public sector organisations and fast-growth scale-ups – teams of every shape and size.

Nic's work sits at the intersection of statistics, psychology and systems thinking. He brings evidence, empathy and optimism to his mission: to make happiness at work something we take seriously. He's an engaging public speaker, whether at boardroom briefings, international summits or music festivals.

Nic lives near Stonehenge in Wiltshire with his wife. He's happiest when walking the ancient chalk paths of southern England, listening to music, or enjoying time with his family, as well as occasionally getting immersed in datasets.

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About Friday Pulse

Friday Pulse helps organisations understand, track and build team happiness. Their science-led platform gives teams a voice and leaders the insights they need to create happier, more successful workplaces. Based on years of wellbeing research and practical experience, Friday Pulse measures key drivers of team happiness; provides real-time data; and supports regular, meaningful conversations. By combining weekly pulse checks with quarterly deep dives, the platform creates a rhythm of feedback, reflection and improvement. Trusted by companies around the world, Friday Pulse turns wellbeing from a vague ideal into a clear, actionable priority, because happiness at work is a serious business.

https://fridaypulse.com