

The Power of Positive Tinkering

A look inside author Shawn Achor's mission to win over skeptics and turn workplace happiness into a credible management tool.

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Happiness guru Shawn Achor is past preaching to the choir. Now he's going after the skeptics.

Achor's first book, "The Happiness Advantage," published in 2010, marshaled the latest evidence that positive thinking produces better business results. And his tool kit of happiness habits — such as naming three "gratitudes" a day — has made him a darling on the speaker circuit the past couple of years.

Achor, 35, has come to realize that his motivational message doesn't always move people to make lasting changes. So his upcoming book tackles cynicism at its roots. "Before Happiness," due out this month, calls on individuals to recognize that their underlying attitudes matter and gives organizations a guide for turning visions of a healthier culture into reality.

The power of positive thinking — in one guise or another — has been around for centuries. And Achor's language, such as asking people to find their "positive genius," can seem over-the-top New Age. What's more, there are nagging questions about whether motivational speakers and their feel-good initiatives ever sustainably move the needle at organizations.

But the fresh-faced Achor — with a master's degree from Harvard Divinity School — has seen his sermon stick at organizations in the health care, professional services and insurance industries. His fable of the "orange frog" that persists with positivity in the face of pessimistic peers and scary predators has had insurance professionals at Nationwide Mutual Insurance Co. redecorating drab cubicles, listing gratitudes on white boards and circulating a daily inspirational message.

POSITIVE RESULTS

Shawn Achor cites some surprising findings about the advantages of happiness. Among them:

- **The nun study.** A group of 180 Catholic nuns born before 1917 were asked to document their thoughts in diaries. The nuns whose journal entries had more overtly joyful content lived nearly 10 years longer than those whose entries were more negative or neutral. Achor's conclusion: "Happiness can improve our physical health, which in turn keeps us working faster and longer and therefore makes us more likely to succeed."
- **Positive performance at MetLife.** University of Pennsylvania professor Martin Seligman — considered the father of positive psychology — discovered that the top 10 percent of optimists at MetLife Inc. outsold the other 90 percent by 90 percent. MetLife then hired for a positive mental mindset. The new agents outsold their more pessimistic counterparts by 21 percent the next year and by 57 percent the following year.
- **Positive tax pros.** Just before tax season several years ago, Achor did a three-hour intervention with tax managers at accounting and professional services firm KPMG. Half of the managers in the study in New York and New Jersey heard Achor's presentation on changing your lens to a more positive one. Four months later, their optimism, life satisfaction and job satisfaction were significantly higher than peers who hadn't received the training. The tax pros hearing Achor's message reported a 24 percent improvement in job and life satisfaction.

—Ed Frauenheim

Given that worker satisfaction overall is low amid heightened job duties, it might seem like an unlikely time for Achor's happy talk to woo converts. But he argues that stressful times are exactly when a message of hope can stir souls and improve organizations.

"Happiness is not the belief that we don't need to change," he said. "Happiness is the belief that we can change."

Achor has transformed himself in the past several years. He went from a highly regarded Harvard lecturer to a top-selling business author, popular public speaker and well-traveled consultant. He's visited 51 countries while taking his happiness message to giant corporations, African villages and

the famed St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. His TED talk on "The Happy Secret to Better Work" is among the most watched of the presentations with 4.7 million views and counting. Flashing an infectious smile and speaking in rapid-fire sentences at his public appearances, Achor combines striking statistics with compelling anecdotes.

His message is a simple one: We can choose a positive interpretation of our experience.

"The human brain is like a single processor in a computer," he said. "We have a limited amount of resources, so what we attend to first in our world becomes our reality."

Achor has popularized research and evidence that support the idea that seeing the sunny side pays off. His own findings and other studies indicate that our commonly held formula for fulfillment — that success makes us happy — is exactly backward. Our all-consuming quest for success in fact may be leading us down the path to unhappiness, he argues, while a focus on happiness first tends to lead to better outcomes in life and business.

As an example, Achor points to a hospital where employees were trained to make eye contact with patients and visitors within 10 feet and say hello at 5 feet. Six months later, the hospital reported increased patient visits and a 5 percent rise in "likelihood to refer" — a key predictor of customer satisfaction. In effect, Achor wrote, the hospital changed from what is normally perceived as "a place of sickness" into "a positive environment."

Achor also provides practical advice. He has devised a method for building happiness habits that centers on doing one of five things for 21 straight days. The five are simple enough: exercising for 15 minutes; performing a random act of kindness, such as an unprompted thank-you letter; meditating; writing in a journal; or scanning the past day for three moments for which you are grateful — what Achor and others call "gratitudes."

He promotes these practices with the promise that doing them for just three weeks generally creates lasting changes in happiness levels. And his feel-better formula seems to strike a chord with people, who often bring it into their personal lives.

"A lot of the companies we work with, they start importing these ideas home to their families," Achor said. "They start doing gratitudes around the dinner table."

Evangelist of Positive Psychology

Achor stands on the shoulders of scholars and clinicians who have argued in recent decades that psychology should go beyond Sigmund Freud's quest to turn "hysterical misery into common unhappiness." The University of Pennsylvania's Martin Seligman and others have explored ways to raise levels of well-being, and started observing connections between optimism and business outcomes.

Today, positive psychology is finding a receptive audience in companies. Consider bosses like Zappos.com chief executive Tony Hsieh, who made a happy culture central to the online retailer and then wrote a popular book about it. Meditation and mindfulness — close cousins to positive psychology — are becoming mainstream. And consumers increasingly look for companies that demonstrate kindness in their operations.

Positive psychology is "on the right side of history in the business world," said Dan Bowling, who teaches positive psychology at the University of Pennsylvania and blogs on the subject for Workforce sister publication Talent Management. He says Achor's greatest contribution to the field isn't so much his academic work on positive psychology, but his role as an effective teacher and evangelist of the message. "He's a great communicator — a great popularizer," Bowling said.

But Achor isn't satisfied. Despite his achievements, he has noticed positive psychology initiatives don't always take root. The lesson for him is that people need a deeper willingness to believe their mindsets and actions make a difference. "If a person doesn't believe that change is possible, then they won't make any of these changes at all," he said.

Achor tackled this question of underlying beliefs in his new book and has come up with a set of terms and tactics designed to lighten up even die-hard pessimists.

"What we're looking at now is not just happiness. What we're looking at is 'positive genius,'" Achor said. "It's the ability to continually construct positive and successful realities within whatever environment you're in, based upon true facts."

Achor's recommendation that most applies to management is "positive inception." This concept, he said, is similar to the movie "Inception," where Leonardo DiCaprio and others generate dream worlds that are in some ways quite real.

"The final step is actually sharing that positive reality with other people to sustain it," Achor said.

"They create what we call a success franchise. They create a pattern that can, when shared, cause others to shift their reality."

These latest arguments and tactics are not as intuitive as the daily gratitudes and other happiness habits spelled out in Achor's first book. But he has tried to make them more concrete with a 66-page parable. "The Orange Frog: Sparking a Culture of Positivity, Happiness and Success" is the story of Spark, a frog living in a community of green frogs beaten down by storms and hunted by herons. Spark is initially outcast because he has a bit of orange coloring, which increases as he does things like appreciate the beauty of a pond and enjoy a swim. But he chooses to embrace the orange. And his positivity proves contagious to all the frogs around him, improving their fly hunting as well as their ability to weather storms and avoid heron attacks.

Just Mumbo Jumbo?



But Achor's metaphor and approach can raise eyebrows. Does positivity in the real world always ward off danger and translate effortlessly into success? In addition, Achor's talk of positive geniuses, positive inceptions and success franchises can sound like self-help mumbo jumbo.

Indeed, not everyone is convinced Achor and positive psychology are the answer for individuals or organizations. Among the critics is Michael Shermer, publisher of Sceptic magazine and a columnist for Scientific American. Motivational speakers and programs can raise people's enthusiasm and performance over short periods, but the evidence on sustained progress is thin, he said. "There's very little data on how effective it really is for corporations," he said.

To Shermer, prescriptions to construct a positive reality sound a lot like the "reality distortion field" that

Steve Jobs famously cloaked himself in. While it may have helped Jobs press forward with breakthrough products, it also seemed to blind him to the best way to treat his cancer, Shermer said.

Achor, though, denies he's calling for any distortion of the facts: "Positive inception is about how you get others to believe in a positive reality — just another term for positive leadership."

Portraying orange as adaptive for his frogs was anything but fiction, Achor said: “In the real world of business, the greatest competitive advantage is a positive and engaged brain.”

Achor is winning converts to his conclusion and his color, judging by the orange-adorned cubicles at Insurance Intermediaries Inc., a Columbus, Ohio-based unit of Nationwide Insurance. Triple-I, as the unit is known, is made up of about 250 employees who focus on insurance products in specialized areas including workers’ compensation. Gary Baker, president of the unit, said some 85 percent of his staff have gone through a two-day training centered on “The Orange Frog” this year as part of an effort to revitalize the team.

Achor’s ideas resonated with Baker, a former soccer coach. And he estimates that 40 to 50 percent of his employees are now enthusiastic about the happiness advantage message. The proof? Some 40 percent of the gray cubicles have been decorated in “Orange Frog” themes. People are jotting down gratitudes for public display. Groups of co-workers have sprung up to do things such as run in the Columbus marathon, discuss TED talks and welcome new employees.

Baker conceded it is hard to draw a direct line between the positivity campaign and profits, but said revenue is running 5 percent ahead of the plan so far this year. And he argued that has something to do with the cheerfulness that’s spreading to ever-larger numbers of his team. “More people start coming over, and there becomes a tipping point,” he said. “That just becomes the culture.”

That culture is converting the skeptical as well as the already-optimistic. Karen Slater-Jones, who is in her 50s and has worked at the company for seven years, admits she had her doubts about Achor and “The Orange Frog.” “I’ve taken several motivation-type classes in the past,” she said. “If you don’t have it in your face all the time, you forget about it.”

But the logic that positivity lifts sales performance rang true with Slater-Jones. And through small steps she helped keep the concepts front and center. Not only did she decorate her cube as a lily pad, but she started sending the team an email with a positive thought of the day. She later morphed the email into a tool for employees to share interesting facts about themselves. Achor’s parable about Spark the frog has pushed the team in the right direction, she said. “This puts a little spark under our chairs and helps us to do a better job.”

Sunshine in the Darkness

Is it really possible, though, for Achor’s gospel of sunniness to connect on a massive scale with a U.S. workforce that is largely gloomy? Less than half of U.S. workers are satisfied with their jobs, according to 2013 research from the Conference Board. Recent Gallup research found that baby

boomers and Gen X employees are “distinctly less engaged than others” — yet they make up nearly 90 percent of the U.S. workforce. Part of the problem has to do with the intensification of jobs during the tepid recovery — many employees are working longer hours with fewer resources.

But stressful work situations play right into a primary point made by Achor and positive psychologists: It’s possible to approach harrowing circumstances with a happiness lens. After all, Achor points out, stress can improve memory and intelligence, create deeper relationships and lead to a heightened sense of meaning. What’s more, reframing stress seems to work. Achor, along with another researcher, used a three-minute video to teach managers at financial services firm UBS how to view stress as enhancing rather than debilitating. Six weeks later, that group had better productivity as well as a 23 percent drop in fatigue-related health problems compared with a group that saw a video portraying stress as traumatic.

To Achor, the precepts of positive psychology apply even in dire situations. Think of Martin Luther King Jr. eloquently battling segregation with his letter from the Birmingham jail or Mahatma Gandhi peacefully protesting for Indian independence under the threat of British military suppression. King, along with Catholic charity worker Mother Teresa, was not known for smiling, Achor said. But he argues they were happy just the same, and in a way he hopes to see legions more.

“Happiness is the joy one feels striving after their potential.”

So says the high priest of positivity. Even the skeptics are listening.

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