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Don't Worry, Be Happy and Prosper

Skills and Professional Development





Over 2,000 years ago, Aristotle observed that “happiness” is the only end that is desirable in itself and never for the sake of something else. In other words, drinking a cold beer on a hot day, working hard to advance your career, helping a neighbor move into a new house, and engaging in the myriad activities that fill your life are not ends in themselves. They are, instead, the means to achieve an ultimate end — happiness.

The paramount importance of happiness as an end in itself is enshrined in the most famous sentence in the US Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” But, according to Father Robert Spitzer, PhD, SJ (no relation to New York state’s former governor, Elliot Spitzer), the quality of happiness we achieve and the degree to which organizations succeed over the long term depends on the “level” of happiness we choose to pursue.

After Spitzer retired as president of Gonzaga University in 2009, he founded the Spitzer Center for Visionary Leadership, where he is currently the president.

According to Spitzer, there are four distinct levels of happiness that both individuals and organizations must understand to assist them in pursuing excellence. The Spitzer Center describes these levels as follows:

Level 1

Happiness derived from material objects and the pleasures they can provide. This is the most basic level of happiness, and it can come from eating fine chocolate, driving a sports car, swimming on a hot day, or other forms of physical gratification. Level 1 happiness is good but limited. The pleasure it provides is immediate but short-lived and intermittent. It is also shallow; it requires no reflection, and it doesn’t extend beyond the self in any meaningful way.

Level 2

Happiness derived from personal achievement and ego gratification. You feel Level 2 happiness when people praise you; when they acknowledge your popularity and authority; when you win in sports or advance in your career. Level 2 happiness is usually comparative because the ego measures success in terms of advantage over others. You're happy when you're seen as smarter, more attractive, or more important than others, and you're unhappy when you lose the comparison game. Level 2 happiness is short-term and tenuous. You can be happy that you won today, and then anxious you might lose tomorrow. Level 2 happiness is not inherently bad because we all need success, self-esteem, and respect to accomplish good things in life. But when Level 2 happiness — self-promotion — becomes your only goal, it leads to self-absorption, jealousy, fear of failure, contempt, isolation, and cynicism.

Level 3

Happiness derived from doing good for others and making the world a better place. Level 3 happiness is more enduring because it is directed toward the human desire for love, truth, goodness, beauty, and unity. It is capable of inspiring great achievements because it unites people in pursuit of the common good, whereas Level 2 happiness divides people. Level 3 happiness is empathetic, not self-absorbed. It looks for the good in others, not their flaws. It sees life as an opportunity and an adventure, not an endless series of problems to overcome. Because people have limits, Level 3 happiness also has its limits. None of us are perfect, so we can't find perfect fulfillment in other people.

Level 4

Ultimate, perfect happiness. When others fall short of our ideals, or we fall short ourselves, we're disappointed. This disappointment points to a universal human longing for transcendence and perfection. We don't merely desire love, truth, goodness, beauty, and unity; we want all of these things in their ultimate, perfect, never-ending form. All people have this desire for ultimacy, which psychologists call a desire for transcendence — a sense of connection to the larger universe. Some express this desire through spirituality and religious faith. Others express the same longing through philosophy, art, or scientific efforts to solve the mysteries of life and the universe.

Spitzer observes that levels 1 and 2 are the default happiness levels for most people and organizations. This observation is validated by countless corporate pronouncements generally focused exclusively on “beating the competition,” “making your number,” and “meeting Wall Street expectations.” As Spitzer explains, there is nothing inherently wrong with pursuing or achieving level 1 and 2 happiness. However, he asserts that a shift of orientation to those actions and objectives that lead to higher levels of happiness is essential to building and sustaining high performance teams and a successful business. Because we tend to gravitate toward levels 1 and 2, the higher levels must be deliberately chosen over and over again.

There is a significant body of research supporting Spitzer's thesis that leaders and organizations that focus on achieving noble ends in an ethical manner can, and often do, achieve a competitive advantage. But, Spitzer's observations go beyond answering the question of whether principle yields profits by providing a definitive methodology for making it happen. According to Spitzer, building high performing teams has less to do with well designed organization charts than it does with the frequency with which team members habitually choose to help others. In so doing Spitzer strikes gold

by making powerful observations about the cornerstone of all productive human relationships.

No one wants to work for or with people who are just in it for themselves. Conversely, most will exert their best efforts and go above and beyond the call of duty for those who exhibit a greatness of spirit by acting for the benefit of others and the common good. As an added bonus, Spitzer asserts that those who habitually take such actions will achieve a greater degree of personal satisfaction and fulfillment in their lives.

Spitzer's insights into human nature and what really makes people and teams tick provide a blueprint for corporate leaders interested in raising the level of their game. By helping managers and line workers understand the fundamental importance of empathy, seeing the good in others, and pursuing goals greater than themselves, business leaders optimize their chances of being both happy and prosperous.

More information about the Spitzer Center for Visionary Leadership and the programs and services they offer to help corporations perform better can be found at www.spitzercenter.org.

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