

Reflections on Leadership



Happy New Year

January 2019

“Happy New Year!” is the standard greeting that is exchanged in the first few days of January. We all wish the best for our friends and family in the months ahead – that they will experience happiness and good health. For some this will be a continuation of the prior year. For many, the New Year represents a fresh beginning – leaving behind a year of difficulty to embrace a more positive future.

The idea of happiness is deeply ingrained in the American point of view. When the Declaration of Independence refers to inalienable rights “endowed by our creator” there are three specific references – “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. Happiness is not guaranteed, but the right to pursue happiness is a basic right. What is happiness? There are many definitions to choose from, but a simple and straight definition by Webster captures it for me - “a state of well-being and contentment: joy.”

We all want to be happy. But for many the idea of happiness is elusive – even in among those with many of the world’s creature comforts. The concept of happiness is the subject of

John Leland’s new book – **Happiness is a Choice You Make, Lessons From a Year Among the Oldest Old**. A book based on extensive interviews from 6 persons 85 years and older would appear to be an unlikely place to look for happiness. In many respects the tone of the book was not exactly what the author expected when he began the interviews. In the face of extraordinary challenges that come with advanced age, Leland discovered that happiness was an unexpected surprise. He concludes that “*even as our various faculties decline, we still wield extraordinary influence over the quality of our lives.*”

The six persons that were interviewed were not selected as extraordinary specimens of healthy aging. In many respects their shared experiences would not point to happiness. Illness, isolation, and loss were part of the picture. One even experienced the Russian invasion of Lithuania and was put into a forced labor camp by the Nazis. But all six found a level of happiness “*not in their external circumstances, but in something they carried with them.*” This happiness was a source of wisdom:



- When you are old, you have to make yourself happy. Otherwise, you get older.
- You can go to a museum and think “I am confined to a wheelchair in a group of half deaf people. Or you can think, Matisse!”
- A mother’s perspective on aging to her daughter - “I was your age once, but you were never my age.”

The point of the book is that happiness is a frame of mind that is available to every person. “How to be happy? Here’s a start. Accept whatever kindness people offer you and repay with what you can... Don’t begrudge the people who need you; thank them for letting you help them.”

How does the idea of finding happiness connect with the subject of leadership? It is more critical to effective leadership than you might think. Unhappy people lack many of the essential qualities that leaders need. Patience, respect, genuine concern, and compassion have very shallow roots in an unhappy person’s life.



Continued >



It is possible for an unhappy person to be an effective leader in the short run. Keeping the people you work with at a distance emotionally, applying pressure, taking no excuses for less than perfect results, micromanagement, and constant criticism may produce results for a season, but not for long. There is a maxim that I believe to be true. People come to work for a good company. But, they usually stay or quit because of their immediate supervisor. No one wants to work for a humorless or an unhappy person.

Recently humor has been studied as a positive attribute in leadership when it closes the distance between team members and enhances the connectedness between the leader and followers. Other benefits like increasing resiliency, mitigating stress, and enhancing flexibility have been reported. But in my view, these positive benefits can only occur if the humor springs from a happy source. Humor that is gentle, respectful, and affirming that springs from a happy perspective can bring a team together and transform a work environment into something special. Humor that comes from unhappiness or a negative perspective is often marked by sarcasm and has a biting edge that, in its worst form, can ridicule or belittle others.

Consistently high performing teams are happy places. Not only do they

produce results, but along with the satisfaction of achievement comes a feeling that relationships matter, that those you work with care about you as a person. Happy people attract other happy people to work with them. This does not mean that a leader has to lower standards in order to be well liked. Respect and achievement are essential ingredients to every successful leader.



Some random thoughts on happiness:

- Focus on your inner life. Work on becoming a happier person and you will become a better leader. Start working on becoming a happier person now. People do not become more unhappy as they age. Unhappy young people become unhappy older people.
- Genuine happiness comes from within. Happiness cannot be borrowed from someone else or by following a magic formula.
- The pursuit of more does not always lead to a happy existence. It

has been said that happiness is not about getting what you want. It is more likely to be found in wanting what you have.

- The people you choose to spend your time with have a profound impact on your outlook. If you want to be happy – seek out other happy people. Hang out with unhappy people and the negativity will rub off on you.
- Look for the good in other people and you are likely to find it. When you find something good, don't let it go unrecognized. Unspoken compliments have very little impact.
- We are not always the best judge of our general state of happiness. Many years ago I spoke to an 80 year old person whose life was best described as a litany of complaints. When I asked him why he was so unhappy, he remarked that he did not see himself as an unhappy person. In fact he had never been happier in his life. Find someone who cares enough about you to be honest and get some objective feedback.

Finally – It is a biblical truth that our outlook on life can be altered by what we choose to think about. The apostle Paul summed it up in Philippians 4:8 - ... *“Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there is any praise, think on these things.”*

Wishing you all a happy and healthy 2019!

Blessings,