THE KEY TO WORKPLACE HAPPINESS

> While speaking at a conference on “happiness at work” in Copenhagen, Denmark, I met Cathy Busani, the Managing Director of Happy, a training and consultancy business operating in the U.K. Although they employ only 30 people, Happy has won wide recognition for its innovative approach to management and to customer service. I was intrigued by her philosophy and asked her five questions about happiness at work.

Q: Why is happiness at work important? What evidence do you have that it improves business performance?
A: We believe that if your people are performing their best, then your business cannot fail to perform at its best. And people perform their best when they are happy and feel good about themselves. Therefore, ensuring this is the primary job of every manager. We feel so strongly about it, we ask our staff to complete a “happy check” every few months, which asks questions like “How do you feel walking in the door in the morning?” (from depressed and despondent to eager and excited) or “How stressed do you feel at work?” (from very stressed to never stressed). Making staff happy is a serious business!

Q: I heard you say that in happy organizations, the employees pick their boss and not the other way around. Can you say more about that?
A: We believe the people who manage staff should be in that position because they are great at it, and not just because they are great at their core job. Therefore, we believe people should have the right to choose who supports, nurtures, coaches and challenges them. If they do choose this person, they are much more likely to value that relationship and get the most from it. So throughout your career at Happy, if you want to change who manages you, you just have to ask. In most cases, we find people don’t change managers, partly because we have picked managers for their people skills. However, sometimes a change is requested. For example, one person chose a new manager because he had taken on a new role and felt the new manager would challenge him more. On another occasion, someone asked to change her manager because she had become friends with her current one and this was causing some issues between them.

Q: In your company, everyone knows what everyone makes, from the managing director down to the janitor. What are the advantages of this? And has it ever caused any problems?
A: One of the clear advantages to this is that you avoid all of the guesswork and whispering around who earns what, and who got what raise. There have been some issues, but we listened to the feedback and addressed them. For example, when people kept asking questions like, “Why did ‘x’ get such and such a raise,” we decided to extend the transparency of our information by publishing the three key reasons for each performance increase. Another benefit of doing this was that those deciding to give a raise and how much had to be really clear why it was being awarded. In the past few years we also introduced a salary panel to decide how much extra people would earn in relation to their performance. This panel is made up of Happy’s chief executive, the managing director and two people voted onto the panel by the staff.

DON’T WORRY, BE HAPPY

Some additional management moves that will make employees happier — and more productive:

- Make sure everyone’s role matches their personality style. People become dissatisfied when they are doing work they don’t like. Creative people don’t like too much structure, and planners are not huge fans of unbounded thinking.

- Get knowledge workers doing knowledge work. Often your most valuable people spend too much time doing administrative work. Outsource, eliminate, reassign, or automate less valuable tasks.

- Define the challenges where employees should focus their energies. Einstein reputedly said, “If I had an hour to save the world I would spend 59 minutes defining the problem and 1 minute finding solutions.” Unfortunately in most organizations people are running around spending 60 minutes finding solutions to problems that don’t matter.

- Tap into intrinsic forms of motivation as this increases performance levels. Recognize that extrinsic forms of motivation - money or bonuses - are significantly less effective.

- Avoid command and control structures. The most successful and innovative companies are the ones that push decision making to the lowest levels of the organization and embrace free markets. — S.S.

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