



Happiness, a powerful performance driver

Reinforce your personal performance and that of your teams...
by working on being happier!



Didier Avril, série Storytelling

Our sources

This synopsis is based on the publications presented below and on the back page.

The Happiness Advantage
Shawn Achor, Crown Business, 2010.

The Science Behind the Smile
an interview with Daniel Gilbert
by Gardiner Morse, Harvard Business Review, January 2012.

Promoting happiness at work – now that’s a naturally sensitive topic if there ever was one! The pursuit of happiness is an intimately personal thing. If you try to make your employees happy, aren’t you overstepping your bounds into their personal lives? More generally, how can a company legitimately force its employees to pursue such a thing? The Harvard Business Review article *The History of Happiness* recalls that the pursuit of happiness is far from being a universal value. Indeed, the notion that everyone can and should be happy has progressively risen in popularity since the eighteenth century, especially in the United States, where even today, it is a more marked social standard more than in many other parts of the world. What is more, considering happiness as a performance driver could ostensibly be construed as twisting a human value to serve pettily utilitarian purposes!

Yet, advances in neuroscience and psychological research encourage business organizations to take a closer

look at the subject of happiness. Psychology has traditionally focused on psychological disorders and how to cure them. An assessment conducted in 1998 found that there are seventeen times more studies on psychological disorders than on well-being! Not until the end of the twentieth century was any serious consideration given to “positive psychology,” the branch of research devoted to understanding and promoting what makes us happy. These studies, based on recent advances in neuroscience, among others, provide a wealth of helpful information for managers and leaders:

- **Be happy, and you will do well!**
- **Make deliberate efforts to feel happier.**
- **Cultivate positive feelings in your organization.**

In this synopsis...

- 1 **Happiness:** a safe bet!
- 2 Three key drivers to **stimulate your well-being**
- 3 Create a **stimulating environment**

1 Happiness: a safe bet!

Recent findings in the field of positive psychology have far-reaching implications for employers and employees alike; namely, that there are simple ways to for people to feel happier and that happiness is a powerful driver of performance.

Happy people are more productive

Many recent studies establish a strong correlation between the level of happiness of employees (**Figure A**) and their economic contribution to the company. These findings are supported by a compilation of more than 200 research projects involving over 250,000 participants, reported in the book *The Happiness Advantage*. This research reveals that happy employees are more productive, better salespeople and better managers. They feel more

attached to their company and quit less frequently. They take fewer sick days and are at lower risk of burnout.

Moreover, this phenomenon is contagious: the mood of leaders and managers has a direct influence on the rest of the organization. For example, the employees of companies with a happy CEO are more likely to be happy themselves, enjoy good health and feel that they work in a performance-enhancing environment. Another study showed that teams with positive and encouraging managers perform 30 percent better.

Happiness drives performance

The link between happiness and professional success is hardly surprising. After all, isn't it perfectly natural to feel happier when your work and career are going well?

Actually, research shows the reverse. It's not success that makes people

happy; it's happiness that raises their performance! For example, one study measured the initial level of positive emotions felt by 270 employees, then tracked their performance over the next 18 months. Those who were initially happiest obtained the best results. Another study noted a correlation between the level of happiness felt upon entering university and the level

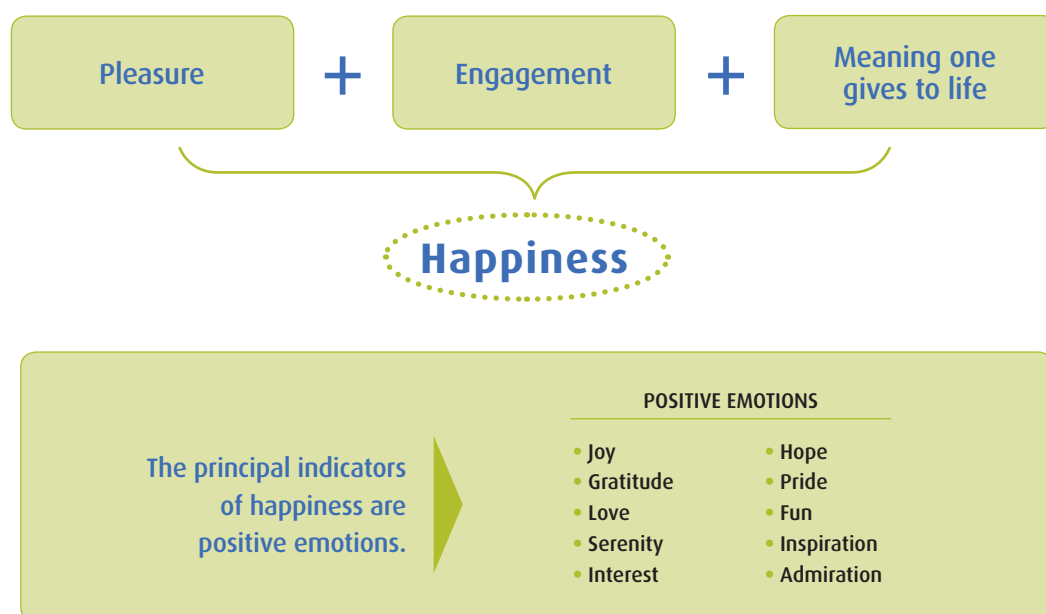
Companies have everything to gain by promoting happiness in their employees.

of income 19 years later, regardless of the initial standard of living. Feeling happy also has a positive effect on health, a net asset in the professional world. At the end of the 1930's, researchers asked 180 young Catholic nuns to note their daily thoughts in a diary. The correlation between the level of positive emotions expressed at 20 years of age and their subsequent health is

FIGURE A Happiness: what are we talking about?

For psychologists, happiness is a relatively complex concept, indicating a state of subjective well-being, based on a combination of feeling good at a given moment in time and a positive view of the future.

Martin Seligman, founder of positive psychology, breaks happiness down into three measurable dimensions:



Based on *The Happiness Advantage*, Shawn Achor, Crown Business, 2010.

striking: 90 percent of the nuns in the top quartile in terms of positive feelings were still living at age 85, compared to only 34 percent of those in the bottom quartile.

In addition to statistical studies, advances in neuroscience have highlighted more precisely the causal link between happiness and performance. Indeed, positive emotions trigger the secretion of neurotransmitters serotonin and dopamine, which stimulate the thinking part of our brain. Being in a good mood increases our ability to concentrate, as well as to structure and memorize information. This increases the duration and the number of neuronal connections, fostering creativity, speed of thought and problem-solving ability. These biological phenomena are illustrated by many experimental studies. For example, students asked to imagine the best day of their lives tend to do better on a subsequent math test. And doctors who received a pleasant surprise did much better in diagnosing cases submitted to them, that is, they fell into deliberate traps half as often and drew the right conclusion two times faster.

An asset that can be developed

In short, neuroscience seems to be saying, “be happy, and you will succeed!” However, such advice may admittedly seem absurdly simplistic or even insulting to someone facing major personal or professional issues.

Yet, another important finding has also emerged from this research, i.e., we have the ability to reinforce our sense of well-being. Scientists long thought that the level of perceived happiness depended on heredity. Every individual had a more or less predetermined average perceived happiness level. In practice, however, it turns out that one’s average level of perceived happiness can be increased through deliberate effort. Scientists have observed the brain is

incredibly plastic from a biological point of view, and we can use this plasticity to our advantage. Monks who spend considerable time meditating, for example, develop the size of their left prefrontal cortex, an area of the brain which plays an important role in the sense of well-being. Likewise, many experiments show that it is possible to influence the duration of perceived happiness as well. There is no need to become a monk to reap the benefits of meditation, for example. Five minutes a day suffice to affect the level of happiness, stress, or the immune system in a positive manner. And meditation is not the only method available. For example, 577 volunteers were asked to list things they did naturally well – humor, good judgment, creativity, etc. – and to imagine new ways of using this quality every day. As early as the following week, their perceived level of happiness had increased. What is more, six months after the end of the experiment, this effect was still perceptible!

2 Three key drivers to stimulate your well-being

Research in recent years has highlighted many techniques to help people improve their mood, and thus place themselves in a position to optimize their professional performance. Three key action items emerge from these studies:

Create small positive emotions

Happiness and performance are linked by the beneficial impact of positive feelings, that is, their immediate effect on the speed of thought, concentration, creativity and resistance to stress, as well as on the concerned individual’s long-range health and entourage.

For example, rather than simply deciding to be happier, which may seem overly ambitious, it is a better idea to aim for a concrete and immediate goal by creating opportunities to generate positive emotions. The

There are concrete ways to reinforce your sense of well-being to raise your performance.

Harvard Business Review article *The Science Behind the Smile* underlines that the objective is not to seek intense moments of joy. Instead, the best way to feel more content in the short and long run is to identify opportunities to trigger small positive emotions.

To accomplish this, various techniques can be used and are more or less well-suited to particular individuals depending on their personality (Figure B). A simple technique, for example, is to plan a pleasurable moment, then think about it from time to time. The pleasant anticipation that this technique offers is highly beneficial. For example, merely thinking about watching a favorite movie increases endorphins by 27 percent! Another simple habit to establish is taking short breaks. Taking a short ten-minute walk, taking a coffee break with friendly colleagues or watching a funny video on YouTube can be a great energy booster. Try to take such breaks deliberately, and alternate them with periods of deep concentration. Simply concentrating is demanding, but a powerful factor in feeling good! Taking exercise regularly is also a good way to trigger the secretion of endorphins, which play an important role in sustaining good mood and reducing stress and anxiety.

There are things you can do to maximize your chances of triggering positive feelings. You can make your work environment more pleasant, for example, by surrounding yourself with photos of your friends and family – a proven

pick-me-up. You can also try to organize your role or work practices to have more frequent contact with people you enjoy or to devote more time to things you really like doing. This is not just for your own pleasure and comfort, but also to raise your overall performance!

Practice identifying the positive and the possible

Feeling happy is first and foremost a question of mindset. Research has found that objective external factors have an impact of only 10 percent on our perceived happiness level. Likewise, most events we think will have a decisive effect on our level of happiness – such as winning or losing a dream job, passing or failing an exam, a marriage or a separation – have only a limited long-term impact. Indeed, regardless of the circumstances, once the event is integrated into your environment, how

you experience these circumstances is what determines how you feel.

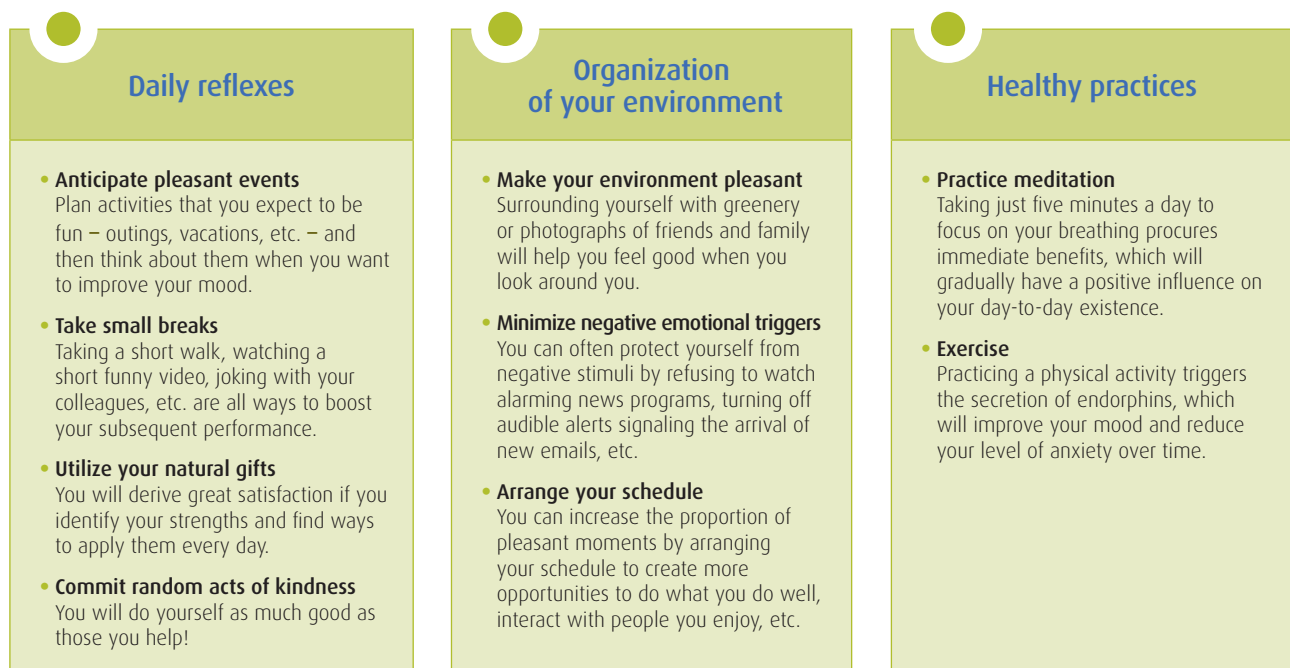
A key driver to reinforce your ability to be happy is to work on how you interpret your environment. This does not mean denying reality, but rather raising your aptitude to get the best out of a given situation. Indeed, people with similar abilities confronted with the same problem not only feel differently about it, but obtain very different results, depending on whether they perceive it as a stimulating challenge or as a threat. Research shows that optimists set more ambitious objectives than pessimists, devote more effort to attaining them, withstand adversity better and overcome obstacles more effectively (Figure C). Likewise, considering a task as an interesting challenge rather than as a chore will help you do better and derive greater satisfaction from it. Yale University psychologist Amy Wrzesniewski established that, in all professions – from physician to

manual laborer, there exist in significant proportions both people who see their work as “just a job” and those who experience it as a calling.

Concretely, we can learn to take note of reasons to adopt a positive or optimistic view of a situation, without necessarily closing our eyes to the objective risks. This works for the very practical reason that this vision makes us aware of positive factors and opportunities, which we might otherwise fail to see. Researchers asked people to count photographs in a newspaper. In the middle of this newspaper a message was printed: “Tell the experimenter you have seen this and win \$250.” Those who, prior to the experiment, had told the experimenter that they felt lucky, were much more likely to see the printed message – illustrating that being open to possible opportunities influences one’s ability to seize those that arise. Shawn Achor, the author of *The Happiness Advantage*, recommends

FIGURE B Generate positive emotions

There are many easily accessible techniques to stimulate positive feelings, with an immediate beneficial impact and reinforcement of one’s ability to feel happy over time. The benefits of the following techniques are supported by research findings:



Based on *The Happiness Advantage*, Shawn Achor, Crown Business, 2010, and *Creating Sustainable Performance*, Gretchen Spreitzer, Christine Porath, Harvard Business Review, January 2012.

a very simple daily exercise in which you deliberately identify at least three good things that happened the day before. As basic as this may seem, studies have highlighted a durable impact on the level of happiness and optimism, even after only a week of practice. The ABCDE method recommended by Martin Seligman, is also an effective way to develop a lucid and rational optimism (Figure D).

Invest in social relationships

A third driver is to cultivate a wealth of high-quality relationships. A study was launched in the late thirties to track 250 men, who were young students at the start of the study. The objective of the study was to determine the factors influencing lifetime success and happiness. In 2009, the director of the study summarized the conclusions in a single word, “love.” Similarly, a Harvard psychology professor interviewed in the article *The Science Behind the Smile*, summarized scientific literature on

happiness in a word: “social.” In other words, being surrounded by friends and family is the most discriminating factor identified by studies on happiness. This finding is corroborated by biologists, who observe that positive social interactions trigger the secretion of oxytocin, a hormone that makes us feel less anxious and more able to concentrate, and reinforces our cardiovascular, endocrine and immune systems. Feeling emotionally supported also has a major effect on our ability to cope with stress, as underlined by many studies establishing the health impact of a solid emotional support network.

These reports converge with recommendations for ambitious professionals concerning the importance of paying attention to friends and social life as well as professional goals, to keep performing well over time. These observations also have strong implications for managing day-to-day professional life. Cultivating many good relationships effectively turns out to be a major asset, above and beyond the political

benefits or access to information procured. The objective here is to cultivate the emotional side of the relationship, not necessarily to build friendships, but to instill a climate of respect and authenticity. As anecdotal as it may seem, looking others in the eye when saying hello is an important step in this direction. Neuroscience underlines the importance of visual contact to establish an emotional connection. Responding with sincere interest when someone announces personal good news also plays an important role. A simple “super!” may give a superficial connotation to the relationship, while showing interest by asking questions reinforces the link. More generally, seizing opportunities to interact informally with colleagues is generally time well spent. This maximizes opportunities for positive interactions, each being immediately beneficial, and reinforces the likelihood of receiving needed emotional support when the chips are down.

FIGURE C On what does optimism depend?

Optimism is a major performance factor. Indeed, confidence in the future increases personal drive, makes people aware of opportunities that arise and gives them the impetus to take advantage these opportunities.

Martin Seligman established that optimism depends on the way that people explain their successes or failures, and that these habits can be changed. Optimists typically take credit for their successes and attribute failures to specific causes:

Failure “We lost the bid”		Success “We won the bid”	
PESSIMISTIC EXPLANATION	OPTIMISTIC EXPLANATION	PESSIMISTIC EXPLANATION	OPTIMISTIC EXPLANATION
Permanent cause “Trying to win contracts with bids never works.”	Temporary cause “This bid was rigged from the start.”	Temporary cause “Our main competitor did a terrible presentation.”	Permanent cause “We are better at oral presentations.”
General cause “We are not as good as our competitors.”	Specific cause “This client has no appreciation for our strengths.”	Specific cause “The customer chose us for our quality of service.”	General cause “We are better than our competitors.”
Internal cause “I am not very good at negotiation.”	External cause “The competition was unbeatable.”	External cause “This negotiation was easy.”	Internal cause “I was really good.”

Based on *Learned Optimism*, Martin E. P. Seligman, Vintage Books, 2006.

3 Create an **stimulating environment**

Leaders and managers have many ways to create an environment likely to generate positive feelings and hence boost performance.

Promote encouraging managers

A number of studies show that the quality of an employee's relationship with his or her manager has a decisive impact on the workplace well-being

Many key drivers can reinforce the level of positive emotion on your teams.

and motivation of that individual, which in turn have a direct effect on performance. A Gallup poll of nearly 10 million employees across the globe

included the item: *"My supervisor, or someone else at work, seems to care about me as a person."* Those who agreed with this statement turned out to be the most productive employees, as well as the most loyal to their employer.

The key is to recruit, train and promote encouraging managers. This doesn't mean the company should deny that performance goals are important or that managers must be firm, but should recognize the decisive impact of a positive climate. The most important factor in this regard is respectful behavior. The authors of the article *Creating Sustainable Performance* cite a consulting firm that systematically verifies the past courtesy shown by candidates before hiring them, and has a 95 percent rate of retention! Positive feedback is another critical aspect, especially since about three positive remarks are needed to make up for the impact of one reproach. You

are therefore advised to make a habit of seizing every opportunity to express your appreciation sincerely. Finally, emotional intelligence plays a major role. Emotions are effectively highly contagious, and the pivotal role played by managers in a team gives them a lot of influence in this area. Indeed, learning to be more positive gives you the power to motivate others much more effectively!

Instill optimism

When we believe we can influence the future, we feel much more motivated and driven to succeed. For example, an employee who feels confident that he can handle a difficult assignment is much more likely to carry it out effectively. Harvard researchers conducted an experiment in which a math test was given to Asian women selected at random. With one group,

FIGURE D Reinforce your optimism

To develop optimism, Martin Seligman proposes a method to stop interpreting situations and events negatively.

This is a two-step process:

- A diagnostic phase, which consists of observing your thoughts and reactions when faced with adversity;
- A phase in which you deliberately challenge overly pessimistic assumptions.

Diagnostic phase:

A	ADVERSITY	Objective description of a problem.	E.g.: The director of the audit did not hand in his report on time.
B	BELIEF	Beliefs, interpretations and perceptions concerning the cause of the problem	E.g.: He thinks that my needs are less important than the General Secretary's.
C	CONSEQUENCE	Consequence of these beliefs, interpretations or perceptions.	E.g.: I will stop relying on him and entrust the job to my own team.

Questioning phase:

D	DISPUTATION	Systematic internal dialogue to challenge spontaneous interpretations.	E.g.: Maybe he ran into an unexpected problem. Maybe his teams are overloaded. Maybe he is taking the time to validate the findings. Etc.
E	ENERGIZATION	Reinforced optimism.	E.g.: I feel less angry and more inclined to engage in constructive discussion with him.

Based on **Learned Optimism**, Martin E. P. Seligman, Vintage Books, 2006.

the researchers stressed the fact that the test subjects were women, and thus supposed to be less good at math than men. With the other group, they underlined the fact that the test subjects were Asian, and thus supposed to be gifted with math. The second group did much better than the first! This does not mean that managers should pretend that anyone can overcome any challenge. On the other hand, keeping in mind that individuals all have the ability to make progress and transmitting this conviction has a decisive influence on employee development. How failures are managed also has a powerful influence on the ambient dynamism. Good reflexes to develop in the company or team culture are to highlight the specific reasons behind the failure, stress what you can learn from it to become stronger, and be on the lookout for opportunities that may emerge as a result.

Encourage people to enjoy small pleasures ... and concentrate

To maximize productivity over time, managers are ill-advised to put continuous pressure on people to be immediately productive. To enjoy small opportunities to experience positive emotions, people must be allowed to diverge from the ideal image of the diligent employee working nonstop from morning to night. Studies have shown that, on average, most employees spend about half of their time thinking about something other than the task at hand. Positive emotions and concentration are mutually reinforcing. People feel happier when they are concentrating, and they find it easier to concentrate when they feel good. In this context, the best environment to maximize performance gives people a chance to avoid ambient distractions and the opportunity to enjoy small pleasant moments, such as joking with collea-

gues, phoning a child who has just returned from school, taking a break to play an online game, etc.

Give meaning to work

The sense of accomplishment at work is a powerful factor of well-being, motivation and performance. Communicating on sources of company pride can foster this sense. Pointing out how the individuals in a business contribute to a worthwhile objective takes it one step farther. To do this, the company must be careful to keep information flowing across the organization to ensure that individual employees clearly understand the merits of the established strategy and can appreciate the impact of their initiatives. Managers are also advised to clarify the link between the activities of their subordinates and the personal aspirations of the latter. One approach is to organize assignments according to personal preferences. For example, an employee who enjoys mentoring may be placed in a position to help young colleagues with their development. Another technique is to help people see their jobs from a more stimulating perspective. A given researcher in your team doesn't like the administrative side of his role? Help him grasp the importance of this work to obtain the funds to finance his work.

Encourage interpersonal contacts

A work environment that fosters regular and pleasant interactions with colleagues boosts performance. An analysis of the performance of over sixty teams in a financial services company concluded that the degree to which a person is appreciated by his or her colleagues is an excellent predictor of performance. More generally, studies show that feeling a bond with

colleagues is a key factor in motivation and concentration – an observation consistent with neuroscience findings.

The work environment must thus facilitate opportunities for informal discussion, either by establishing pleasant spaces for breaks, or laying offices out in a way that encourages people to meet. This is why the cafeteria at Google is open for a large part of the day. UPS went as far as arranging the schedules of package delivery personnel to enable them to eat lunch together. Managers in charge of integrating new employees would thus do well to take the time to introduce them to their colleagues and help them make contact with different counterparts in the organization. Likewise, organizing team lunches or setting up times for employees to socialize are simple, but very powerful techniques.



Both the company and employees win when people feel good at work. Reaching this ideal, however, requires some unusual tactics. Work is still work, with its demands and constraints. Deriving satisfaction from work is largely an individual responsibility, and a personal asset. However, the company can help employees attain this goal, by creating an environment that helps people feel they are personally valued, supported and appreciated by others.

Our selection

To find the best ideas on this subject, we recommend the following publications:

The Happiness Advantage

Shawn Achor, Crown Business, 2010.



A great deal of behavior at work is guided by the belief that success is the root of all happiness. However, the cause-and-effect relationship is the reverse. In reality, the ability to be happy is what helps people succeed! This critical finding derived from psychological and neuroscience research serves as the foundation of this book. Six key principles are then broken down into separate chapters to clarify this phenomenon and help readers capitalize fully upon it, on a personal level, as well as in a managerial or leadership capacity. The fact that the content is supported by scientific research makes this book remarkable and particularly interesting to read. Readers who seek practical advice will not be disappointed. There are no magic solutions, of course, but the author provides many concrete suggestions with a real concern for pragmatism. One chapter is even devoted to developing the strategy to combat the inertia preventing us from making changes whose potential benefits we understand perfectly well!

The Science Behind the Smile

An Interview with Daniel Gilbert by Gardiner Morse, Harvard Business Review, 2012.

We are very bad at anticipating what will make us happy. This is one of the findings of Daniel Gilbert, the Harvard psychology professor interviewed for the article. This observation, which might appear uninteresting at first glance, is actually quite impactful. It means that human beings have the ability to regulate their own happiness level regardless of the circumstances. This is one of the conclusions underlined in this interview that offers a brief, but sweeping overview of the current advances in research on happiness.

And also...

We also relied on the following publications:

- **Learned Optimism**, Martin E. P. Seligman, Vintage Books, 2006.
How and why to cultivate optimism? This book is a classic on positive psychology research, in which the author is a recognized pioneer.
- **Creating Sustainable Performance**, Gretchen Spreitzer, Christine Porath, Harvard Business Review, January 2012.
The practical conclusions of a study about the factors that help people feel happy at work, defined by the authors as a combination of vitality and skill development.
- **The History of Happiness**, Peter N. Stearns, Harvard Business Review, January 2012.
A salutary perspective on happiness as a personal or societal ideal.

Further readings

To explore this topic further:

- **Manage your energy for long-term success** (Synopsis Manageris n° 184b)
How to preserve your well-being and optimize your performance by managing the risk of overwork?
- **Toxic work environment, a real management issue** (Synopsis Manageris n° 189a)
What key drivers can be used to combat the power games and other behaviors that deteriorate the workplace environment?
- **The "employer promise" at the heart of engagement** (Synopsis Manageris n° 166a)
Clarify the implicit contract between the company and its employees, to create the conditions for truly reciprocal engagement.

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