



Getting Ahead Of Ourselves

Seeing The Bigger Picture

To Feed Our Emotional System

By Katja Book
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It is in our bones, our DNA, our blood stream: We want to move, move forward. As human beings we want to achieve more: Jump higher, run faster and go further than the people before and around us.

And look at how far we have come! We've climbed the highest mountains with high-tech equipment, are flying not only sky-high but navigate our satellites through space. Our cities and economies are now fascinating structures with complex organisation.

As with all new inventions – some work, others don't and for some it might take a while to get noticed. Many demands in the Organisational Development (OD) space evolve around questions about how an organisation and system can grow and support the purpose of its existence. Especially when a business is experiencing a growth spurt the challenge is to grow the structure around the people in a way, that the purpose and vision is visible from all angles.

When the structure is successful, everyone in this network can contribute working towards this bigger vision or goal. Often we have a diverse mix of specialists working simultaneously on different topics or from different angles at the same topic. Most likely though, the Organisational Design is a delicate construct and only when everything goes according to plan and all parts run smoothly, we can create multiple opportunities for ourselves to specialise in areas and find new endeavours that benefit the organisation.

To build these complex organisations it takes a special kind of drive: The human motivation. Our type of motivation has been the focus of interest for decades. And even though certain stimuli can promote our drive or slow it down, our tendency to look at the opportunities for making an impact is rarely dimmed for long. There are diverse factors driving every individual, depending on the situation and more importantly on their personality. But one factor has been brought into the spotlight again and again to explain our motivation in the workplace: How happy are you at your job?

This question has become increasingly relevant for organisations and especially ever since studies found out that money isn't the primary motivator for people, they are interested in which factors other than pure economic numbers can keep their staff motivated and more importantly engaged. Employers try to raise our job satisfaction by offering all sorts of "great deals" – from a fancy workplace, to flexible working times. But has the overall satisfaction actually improved?

Many voices claim exactly the opposite: The economic situation on the job market and the instability in organisations have lowered the general feeling of satisfaction in the workplace. So how do we really feel?

Studies show that, taking certain economical phenomena and industries aside, our job satisfaction over the last three decades has been fairly stable. Some researchers explain this tendency with the concept of the hedonic adaptation or hedonic treadmill. We human-beings are not only equipped with the ability to adapt our skills and behaviours actively to situations but more importantly, we intuitively also adapt our perception of how happy we feel with our present situation. By obtaining a rather stable level of happiness, instead of experiencing ups and downs for a longer period of time, stay in the treadmill and we keep a level of motivation that carries us going on forward to achieve the next phase.

Therefore the hedonic treadmill ensures us to first not get complacent with ourselves if we have a sensation of success (e.g. pay rise or lottery win) and second, not settle on negative emotional events and reach a level of acceptance if circumstances are unchangeable and therefore are out of our control (e.g. accidents, redundancies). Both protection mechanisms have the goal to redirect our motivation towards a healthy path.

There is a constant shift in our perceived happiness; it isn't a pure linear process but our mood is changing in waves. This is a protective emotional mechanism that allows us to realise when it is wise to redirect our motivation towards more effective goals. It ensures, that we don't lose our motivation or waste time on hopeless endeavours.

What it takes to make us happy

Money?

Easterlin

The economist Richard Easterlin found a paradox: high incomes do correlate with happiness, but long term, increased income doesn't correlate with increased happiness.

Researchers examined 37 countries over the long term (measurements were made over 22 years) and found that happiness ratings within a country didn't increase with income. Easterlin said "We may need to focus policy on urgent personal concerns such as health and family life, rather than on the mere escalation of material goods."

Paradox

Income in developed nations

Happiness

1960 1970 1980 1990 2000 2010

Research: Easterlin (1974). Does Economic Growth Improve the Human Lot? Some Empirical Evidence. Easterlin (2005). "Feeding the Illusion of Growth and Happiness: A Reply to Hagerty and Veerman"

Hedonic Treadmill

good stuff happens

bad stuff happens

adjusted or happiness

Happiness

Time

WHY?

OUR EMOTIONAL SYSTEM KEEPS OUR PERCEIVED LEVEL OF HAPPINESS FAIRLY STABLE

Find the Balance:

New Complex World

VS

Ancient Emotional System

Remember We Really Need
Our's Health

Self-Actualization
We are living to our fullest potential

Esteem
You've acquired the skills that lead to honor and recognition

Love & Belonging
Achieving deeper, more meaningful relationships

SAFETY
Home, sweet home

Physiological Needs
Food, water, sleep

Connectwell
Relationships that work

This emotional system hasn't changed significantly for most part of evolution and it is fascinating considering the rapid progress that we make everywhere else. While we discover new formulas to scientific problems there is no happiness-formula that can set us in a constant euphoric state. However, in knowing that our emotional system keeps us on course we can feel reassured and that can help us to accept some failures more readily. Sometimes we have to take a step back to make two steps forward.

So why is it important to remind ourselves of our ancient emotional system and its workings? Our outer world is becoming more and more complicated yet our inner affections are still striving to keep a balance of our basic needs.

If there is an imbalance we feel frustrated and the next question that comes up is: "Why am I doing what I am doing?" This very important question needs to be raised every now and then because it forces us to take a step back and look at our impact and the basic human needs that we have. If we don't it's likely for us to start micromanaging. The more specialised our jobs become the easier it is to get entangled in our complex organisations. We concentrate on our little cosmos and hardly see what is happening at the other end of the organisation.

By doing that it is easy for us to miss opportunities. Realising the direction that everyone else is heading in can give us the mind space to set our goals in perspective and if necessary find alternative ways or renegotiate. Having had a look to the left and right we gain a broader perspective and are able to take a step back to see the bigger picture and drivers behind decisions and processes.

With that we feed our emotional system and give ourselves potentially a new view point: This conscious step back allows us to value our impact, which is a crucial driver behind our motivation. Having the data from around us, gives our inner emotional happiness compass more input to evaluate our position. After all, we want our achievements and inventions to be meaningful and our thinking and actions to influence the people around us.



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