Leading a Happy Organization

It's tough out there! Read on for strategies to boost happiness in the workplace.

FEBRUARY 2025

Last year, Elmo (yes, from Sesame Street) posted on X "Elmo is just checking in! How is everybody doing?" Woah, did he get some responses; tens of thousands of people shared that they were having a tough time. The viral post sparked a social discourse on collective wellbeing. We know today that our workforce is similarly struggling. Disengagement and loneliness remain alarmingly high. A 2023 study from Gallup found 50% of the workforce is quiet quitting, and 18% is loud quitting. The recent NCI workforce stability report showed that turnover rates in our field average 40%. And 2024 data from the Department of Labor indicated that employment rates for healthcare workers in facilities where many DSPs work* had not yet returned to pre pandemic rates.

Of course, there are exceptions to this trend. For example, experts and researchers have found when leaders foster happiness in the workplace, for themselves, their coworkers, and their organizations, they contribute to better employee health and wellbeing, resilience, productivity, commitment, and tenure. Although happiness at work may feel like an elusive concept, it's hard to measure, it feels different for everyone, and it's not a feeling people necessarily expect to feel when they clock in each day, cultivating joy is well worth the effort and something that leaders can directly influence. This leadership brief offers a few strategies for increasing happiness in your organization.

*Because we do not yet have an SOC for DSPs, we are doing a bit of speculation here. What we know is that there were fewer healthcare workers in elderly care and nursing home facilities than before the Pandemic. It's likely that is true for DSPs working in residential and employment facilities as well.

By Caitlin Bailey
Co-Director

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Teach Resilience Resilience has multi-directional relationship in workplace happiness; happy employees are more resilient, and resilient employees are happier. Fortunately, resilience can be developed, meaning leaders can help their colleagues become more resilient. One factor consistently associated with resilience is a growth mindset. Coined by Carol Dweck, researchers have consistently found that when leaders foster a growth mindset, employees are more likely to see challenges and adversity as temporary and as opportunities for learning. Instead of focusing on blame, they externalize failure as something that is inevitable and overcome-able. When employees can avoid blame and reduce failure-related anxiety and fear, they are happier at work. Leaders can model a growth mindset to teach others to move through setbacks with more ease.

Expect the Unexpected Unforeseen challenges in the workplace are inevitable; at some point, you're not going to get along with a coworker, it is almost guaranteed that you'll make an embarrassing mistake at least a few times, and if you work in this field for more than a few years, there will be a funding, regulation, or rule change that will make your work more difficult. Ragan Chatterjee, author of Make Change that Lasts, suggests that when people learn to expect the unexpected, they become less mired in the frustration, fear, or negative emotions that come with any set back. Like resilience, expecting the unexpected makes more room for positive emotions, making more room for happiness at work. Leaders can help coworkers by reminding them that setbacks happen. Angry customer? It happens. Workplace stress increasing during a time of transformation? That's normal!

Adopt a Good Enough For Now Mentality Maybe you are feeling disengaged or angsty at work because your role feels stagnant or you're ready for the next career move. [Dan Burnett and Dave Evans, authors of Designing Your Work Life](#) recommend reminding yourself that where you are now in your career is temporary. They argue that if you can adopt a *good enough for now* attitude, you can more effectively work toward that next promotion because you'll feel less stuck in what is. Practicing a *good enough for now* mentality is also an effective way to build [emotional muscle memory, a skill that psychologist Lisa Feldman Barrett suggests can help us get better at feeling happier](#). This approach can also help you lead others more effectively. When colleagues are dissatisfied with some part of their role, responsibilities, or organization, aiding them to adopt this way of thinking can help them feel less stuck in their dissatisfaction.

Make Belonging a Priority For quite awhile now, our field has been exploring the benefits of belonging for people with disabilities. Dr. Erik Carter's widely circulated research outlines [10 factors](#) that are present when people with disabilities belong in their faith communities, Leadership Institute graduate Shelly Christensen wrote the book on belonging ([From Longing to Belonging](#)), which outlines practical strategies to ensure people with disabilities belong in their faith communities. We know that all these principles and practices apply as much in secular communities too. It's also highly likely they could help us build belonging in our places of work. Like resilience, belonging and happiness are bidirectionally impactful. When employees feel like they belong to each other and a greater purpose within their organization, they are more likely to be happy. Happier employees are also more likely to feel like they belong. Expert, Jennifer Moss recommends fostering belonging by incorporating opportunities for [fun and social connection](#) that bring people together for the sole purpose of enjoying time with one another. Richard Sheridan, a tech executive, also suggests that [leaders can create joy in the workplace](#) by connecting employees both to each other and the purpose of their work. He has found that creating cultures where people lean on each other and struggle together doesn't always feel satisfying in the moment, but it creates belonging and long term happiness.

Address Challenging Relationships at Work One of the toughest parts of doing our jobs well is that we, imperfect humans, must work constantly with other imperfect humans. Often, we avoid confrontation or fail to acknowledge or apologize for our own gaffs because it's uncomfortable or we don't want to seem weak. However, expert Amy Gallow, ([Getting Along: How to Work With Anyone](#)) recommends addressing challenges head on as a [strategy to build trust and quality interactions](#) (two factors that promote happiness). Similarly, researchers at UC Berkely's Greater Good Science Center have also found [kindness is critical to happiness at work](#). Moreover, being kind means engaging in conflict in healthy and human-centered ways. You can lead this strategy by having open and honest conversations with your coworkers, particularly when relationships feel strained or sticky. You can encourage coworkers who complain to you about another colleague to share their frustrations (kindly) directly with that person. You can also help teams better [understand their individual conflict styles](#) and facilitate conversations about how those conflict styles show up when challenges arise.

Include the PERMA Model into Your Organization's Strategic Plan The [PERMA model](#), or Martin Seligman's five essential components for happiness includes Positive Emotions, Engagement, Positive Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. Through years of research, Seligman has repeatedly found that when these five components are present, people tend to be more fulfilled and content. Leaders can use this model to frame strategic goals. What would it look like to build a culture that focuses on positive emotions and creating meaning in the workplace? How could the leaders ensure that celebrating the accomplishments of employees is embedded into the norms of an organization in ways that are meaningful? If we know that [workplaces that focus on happiness keep employees](#), the PERMA model seems like a perfect framework to guide strategy.