

# HEALTHY, WEALTHY

## TIPS FOR BUILDING YOUR EMOTIONAL WEALTH IN 2010

Yes, these are uncertain times. Some of the old economic certainties have given way and we've needed to rethink and recalibrate what really matters. We don't know what the future holds, but we do know that in addition to financial security, our most enduring wealth is still to be found in our emotional and spiritual health. Last year in an article *'Why happiness is good for business'* I wrote about the impact that a happy workplace culture can have on the bottomline in business. This year I would like to continue that theme and provide seven key strategies for helping employees sustain greater health, wealth and wisdom at work.

### 1. Relationships – Get Connected

One of strongest predictors of health and well-being turns out to be the quality of our social connections. Yet, have you ever turned up for a doctors appointment, had your blood pressure taken and then been asked some rather direct questions about your social life: Do you often get together with family and friends? Do you enjoy the company of colleagues at work? No? Well, according to studies reported in the Scientific American Mind, it turns out that belonging to social groups and networks appears to be just as an important predictor of health as diet and exercise.

Studies at Mellon University showed that a diverse social network made people less susceptible to the common cold compared to less sociable people who, it appears, are twice as likely to get colds as those that are very sociable. Of even more concern was a study at Columbia University that demonstrated that people who were socially isolated were at much greater risk of stroke than those with meaningful social relationships. According to the researchers, "there is now compelling evidence that the health risk of social isolation is comparable to the risks of smoking, high blood pressure and obesity, even after controlling of other variables known to affect health."

Of course, happy people tend to have better relationships than their less happy colleagues, but the door swings both ways. If you begin today to work on

improving your relationships in your personal and professional life you will enjoy more positive emotions and happiness.

Three tips to building high quality relationships: First, treat the people you work with as your equals and look for the common ground you share as human beings; second, look for ways you can help others achieve wins at work; third, make sure you give others the opportunity to make decisions and contribute to the relationship in some way. This in turn will make you more attractive to others and lead to greater opportunities, personal productivity and increased happiness.

### 2. Compassion - Try A Little Kindness

One of the most effective ways to build high-quality connections is to practice empathy with others. Well-developed empathy skills enable you to read the emotions in each interpersonal exchange and allow you to build strong mutually beneficial connections with others. I like to think of empathy as really compassion in working clothes. According to the Dalai Lama, "if you want to be happy, practice compassion." In other words, true happiness exists in making other people happy.

One of the first studies to show that kindness leads to happiness was conducted by Sonja Lyubomirsky and her colleagues at the University of California, Riverside. They recruited groups of people and asked them to perform five acts of kindness per week over the course of six weeks. It turned out that being generous and considerate made people happy.

**Of all the skills that contribute to your health, wealth and wisdom at work your capacity for empathy is one of the most fundamental.**

Empathy involves: first, communicate that you understand the tasks that people are trying to perform, second, listen well to others and be curious about their experience; third, ask strategic questions about their plans, hopes and dreams and see if you can recognise the emotions that direct the behaviour of people. If you get it right, you will greatly enhance your capacity to make emotional connections with others and attract other people to you.

### 3. Go With The 'Flow'

If you've ever been totally absorbed in what you're doing, then you will have experienced losing track of time or forgetting temporarily about your worries. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (pronounced 'Me-hi Chicksent-me-hee') is a psychologist who interviewed thousands of people of all ages and asked them to describe their highest moments of satisfaction — an idea he describes as 'flow'. According to Mihaly, when people experience their highest satisfactions, and are experiencing flow they describe the experience as: 'the task is challenging and requires skill,' 'we concentrate,' 'there are clear goals,' 'we get immediate feedback,' 'we have deep, effortless involvement,' 'there is a sense of control,' 'our sense of self vanishes,' and 'time stops.' If ever there was a key to job satisfaction and productivity, then being in 'flow' sounds pretty close to it to me.

Being absorbed in the flow experience is about total engagement and a loss of self-consciousness. This means that at work you should aim to: ensure that the challenge of your job matches your skills and provides you with the opportunity to stretch your abilities; establish clear goals of what you're trying to achieve; focus your attention regularly on expressing your creativity; establish a sense of control and take charge of developing your talent; create your future by developing an attitude of positive self-expectancy; learn something valuable from each experience; minimize your need to be admired by others and, instead, cultivate a genuine self-awareness that is open to receiving feedback. Work can be enjoyable, rewarding and satisfying if we choose to make it that way. Deciding to love what you do, or at least the people you do it with, is a necessary condition to maintaining your emotional well-being.

### 4. Cultivate Optimism - Look On The Bright Side

Choosing to look on the brighter side of life and sense opportunities even in the face of adversity rather than focusing on what's wrong; treating yourself kindly, or simply trusting that you can eventually

# & WISE AT WORK

by Martyn Newman

achieve your goals are all optimism strategies. These strategies not only lead to positive feelings, but do more to predict successful outcomes in life than just about anything else you do.

A study at the University of Missouri-Columbia found that people who wrote about their visions for twenty minutes per day over several days, compared to those who wrote about other topics, experienced happier moods, were happier for several weeks after, and experienced better health for several months following the exercise. According to Sonja Lyubomirsky at the University of California, if you're optimistic then you'll be more confident about achieving your goals, will persevere longer and will invest effort in reaching those goals. An optimistic approach promotes positive moods, a sense of mastery and high self-confidence that in many ways inoculates us against depression and anxiety.

Four strategies for becoming more optimistic include: first, when faced with a challenging situation, look for the benefit. Step back from the perceived crisis and recast it not as a catastrophe and a threat but as a challenge and an opportunity. For example, if it is a brief that you're worrying about, you might focus on the fact that you've written dozens of them before and that struggling was a necessary part of the process of getting it right.

Second, seek the valuable lesson in every problem or difficulty. Remind yourself that by recasting mistakes as lessons, you move from the paralysis of being preoccupied with the past, to a proactive focus on how to integrate the learning into constructive future action.

Third, let go of the negative emotion that events cause and, instead, focus on the task to be accomplished. In order to feel more secure, you may decide to ask yourself the question: *"What is the worst-case scenario here? If everything that could go wrong did go wrong, could I live with the consequences?"* In most cases you'll discover that you can. You can then concentrate on preparing an escape hatch or plan to minimize the consequences if such an event did occur.

Finally, pay more attention to those aspects of your life for which you feel thankful and appreciative - the fact that

you may have your health, reasonable financial security, or your family, or even a job that provides you with the opportunity to exercise your talent and signature strengths.

## 5. Smile And The World Smiles With You

The Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle viewed laughter as "a bodily exercise precious to health." Well, it turns out he was right. Recent research has documented that humour is not only psychologically beneficial, but that it can have significant effects on overall wellness, including lowering our risk of disease.

According to psychologist Stee Ayan, laughter relaxes us and improves our mood, and hearing jokes appears to ease anxiety. Cheerfulness is linked to emotional resilience - the ability to keep a level head in difficult circumstances - and to close relationships.

