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Career Compass No. 103: Avoid Seeking Happiness at Work

Seeking happiness at work is not the end-goal. Rather, happiness will emerge if you seek a work life that is engaging and energizing.

By Dr. Frank Benest | Aug 29, 2023 | ARTICLE

I have served as an environmental programs specialist for a municipal public works department for six years. I report to the environmental services manager who directs my work and has confidence in me to carry out program assignments. It takes a long time with many steps to get something done in our city organization, especially since stakeholder groups get involved and advocate their own solutions to environmental challenges. It is difficult work; however, I am results-oriented and have more or less mastered the job. I get along with our team members who support my work. I am respected by my boss and colleagues and continue to get merit increases.



In order to better attract and retain talent, top management has made it a priority to retool our stodgy work environment and create a more vital and supportive organizational culture. However, I know this effort won't happen overnight. In the meantime, I am not particularly happy at work. It is not that I'm unhappy, I'm just not happy.

How do I become happier at work?

Like many of us, you spend most of your waking hours working. Therefore, you should seek to feel engaged and energized by your work.

I'm pleased that your top management in the city is seeking to build a more vital organizational culture. It is certainly a key leadership responsibility and is critical in attracting and retaining talent. (See [Career Compass No. 51 "Building a World-Class Culture"](#) and [Career Compass No. 85 "To Thrive in Post-Pandemic, Enhance Your Employee Experience."](#)) However, you, too, have responsibility in making your own work life more invigorating.

Rethink Happiness

The problem with happiness is that it means constantly feeling good or content, or being in a continual state of enjoyment or pleasure. Happiness tends to be temporary or even fleeting and it may be superficial. (See [Larae Quy, "3 Scientific Reasons Why Well-Being Equals Success," SmartBrief, March 15, 2023.](#))

Some of us seek happiness in money, influence, fame, pleasure, or comfort. While attaining some of these rewards might provide temporary satisfaction, we don't get all the value that we anticipate. We then seek more of the same thing or the next thing to bring us happiness. We are on what is called a "hedonic treadmill." A better approach is what the Greeks called "eudaimonia," which means "flourishing" or "seeking a life well-lived." "Happiness is not a destination; it is something that finds you along the way." (See [Emily Smurthwaite Edmonds, "Let Joy Find You," BYU Alumni Magazine, Winter 2023.](#))

Happiness emerges as a result of living a good life, including a good working life.

So, the question for you is: "How do I ensure that my work life is experienced in such a way that I find some measure of happiness and joy as a result of my efforts?"

This is the simple answer: If you are engaged and energized by the work and your work life, you will tend to be happier and more satisfied.

Here are some suggestions on how to find that elusive sense of happiness along the journey.

Start with the Why

We tend to focus on "what" we are going to do and "how" we are going to do it. However, to find meaning (which is key to engagement), we must start with the "why." (See [Simon Sinek, Start with Why, 2009.](#))

In my case, I could see my "why" as a trainer in leadership development programs as a way to earn income in my retirement. Or I can see my work as helping create the next generation of local government leaders serving their communities. Which is more energizing?

In terms of your work, you must ask yourself, why is this project important to me? Why is it important to the people I serve? As an environmental programs specialist, you can easily view your work as helping save the planet.

Some teams make it a habit of periodically inviting internal customers (such as staff from other departments) or external customers or stakeholders (such as neighborhood or business group representatives) to their team meetings and asking them to share how the team's efforts serve them and make a positive difference to them.

Invest in Building Relationships

The Gallup Organization's research on employee engagement identifies 12 critical factors (called the Q12) that lead to higher levels of engagement. One of those factors is strong social relationships. (See [Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman, First Break All the Rules, 1999.](#))

It is not the quantity of relationships but the quality of the relationships that make us happier.

The Harvard Study of Adult Development concludes that life satisfaction is not based on money or achievement but "warm connections with other people." These social bonds with family, friends, and colleagues not only make us happier but also healthier. It is not the quantity of relationships but the quality of the relationships that make us happier. (See [Robert Waldinger, TED Talk, "What Makes a Good Life? Lessons from the Longest Study on Happiness."](#))

There is much research suggesting that social support received from others is a strong predictor of happiness during periods of high stress. Even more important to sustained engagement and happiness is the social support provided to others. In other words, the more support you give, the more engaged and happier you are. (See [Shawn Archer, "Positive Intelligence," Harvard Business Review, Jan-Feb 2012.](#))

Some of us develop work relationships for transactional purposes. In other words, we understand that we need the cooperation of others to effectively do our work. While transactional support is necessary, we need to focus on a relational approach and connect with others for our own sake. Connection is all about accepting other people, showing genuine interest in them, and wanting what is best for them. You can connect with someone even if you don't agree with their perspectives and ideas. (See [Career Compass No, 79 "Leading by Connecting."](#))

A mutual, personal relationship involves:

- Knowing about the other person, including their interests (at work and away from work), history, hopes, values and concerns.
- Sharing yourself.
- Understanding their priorities and commitments.

- Engaging in a regular cadence of communication, even if there is nothing urgent to discuss.
- Showing a sincere curiosity and interest in the other person.
- Trusting their good intentions.
- Exhibiting a desire to support the other person.

(See [Leigh Bailey, “The Risks of Having Transactional Relationships with Your Peers,” bailygroup.com blog, March 10, 2021.](#))

Creating social bonds is the key driver of happiness.

There are many ways to connect with colleagues:

- Greet everyone when you arrive at work and say goodbye when you leave.
- Arrive at an in-person or virtual meeting five minutes early so you can chit-chat about family, hobbies, sports, or other activities.
- Ask a colleague to have coffee with you outside the workplace and inquire about their non-work life.
- Invite a colleague for a walk at lunch time and talk along the way.
- Bring coffee and bagels to an occasional team meeting to enhance socializing.

Rituals can also help foster connection. For instance, some groups have a “take 5” or “take 10” ritual at the beginning of their team meetings so people can share non-work information. To start meetings, another ritual is to share “one joy” and “one challenge.” Other teams may bring their favorite coffee or tea mug and share why the cup is important to them.

Building relationships requires intention and the will to do it. Bonding with others takes time and self-regulation. It requires that you be fully present with the other person and not distracted. It may mean substituting people time for screen time. For example, you might want to leave your phone in the car when meeting a friend for lunch.

Again, as the Harvard Study on Adult Development indicates, creating social bonds is the key driver of happiness.

Seek More Autonomy

Daniel Pink in his book *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us* (2009) identifies three self-motivators and engagement drivers:

1. Meaning (knowing “why” you are doing something).
2. Autonomy (the opportunity to be self-directed).
3. Mastery (getting better and better at things that matter).

In local government, we deal with many challenging adaptive problems such as environmental sustainability and climate protection. There is often no right or wrong technical solution, and every stakeholder group has its own values and preferred solution. Since you have demonstrated much mastery in achieving program results, you

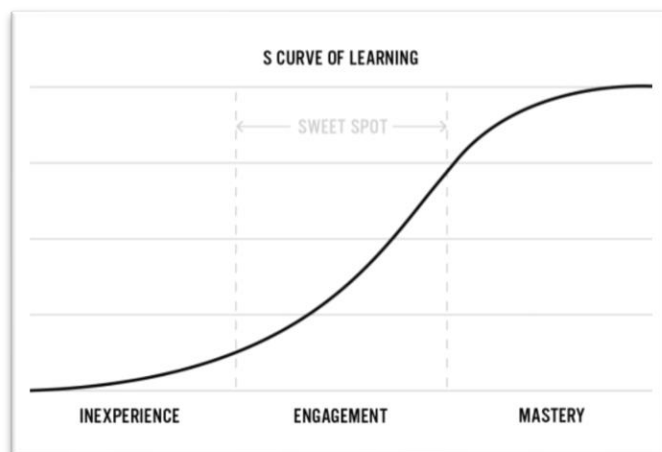
should seek more autonomy (within certain guiderails) in how you do your work. Given the adaptive nature of your work, you should seek more freedom to “figure it out.”

In turbulent times, you need to take a few steps forward, see what works and what does not, pivot, fix it up along the way, and learn as you go. (See [Career Compass No. 94 “Ten Principles for Leading in Turbulence.”](#))

You have earned a measure of trust and confidence with your manager. Therefore, the way to get more autonomy is to have a development conversation with your boss and ask for some latitude in planning, organizing, and implementing the next environmental project. Simply state “I can figure this out. I’ll let you know how I’m proceeding.”

Find a New S Curve of Learning

If we are not being challenged, learning, and growing, we tend to get stagnant, lose interest, and become unengaged. Again, the Gallup Organization has identified that learning and development are key determinants of engagement.



We all find ourselves on an S curve of learning and growth.

At the far left of the S curve chart, you are at the “launch point.” You are inexperienced and feel uncomfortable because you are being fully challenged. As you learn, you arrive at the “sweet spot” of learning and growth and progress is rapid. In the sweet spot, you are fully

engaged. Eventually, you arrive at the “peak” and achieve mastery. (See [Whitney Johnson, “Manage Your Organization as a Portfolio of Learning Curves,” Harvard Business Review, Jan-Feb 2022.](#))

Many talented professionals leave an organization if they cannot move onto a new S curve of learning.

The problem with this mastery phase (at the far right of the S curve) is that you get bored and restless and need new challenges. Many talented professionals leave an organization if they cannot move onto a new S curve of learning.

You are at the peak in the S curve. You have some choices to re-energize yourself:

1. Have a development conversation with your manager and agree to secure a new meaningful and challenging project or team leadership assignment that will energize you.

2. Seek a new position with your organization or another agency that puts you on another S curve of learning and development.
3. Get involved with your professional organization or volunteer with a nonprofit so that you are promoting new learning for yourself.
4. Continue to feel stagnant.

Appreciating the Beauty Around Us

In his book, *The Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankel found that one's underlying motivator in life is a "will to meaning," even in the most difficult of circumstances. (Frankl survived a Nazi concentration camp.) Sources of meaning include purposeful work, love, and appreciation of beauty. In fact, Frankel is remembered for his suggestion that the ultimate freedom is the freedom to decide on your attitude regardless of the circumstances and the adversity that you face. (Good advice for local government leaders.)

Therefore, one source of well-being is to seek out and appreciate beauty, whether that be natural beauty or artistic beauty. In my home state of California, we are blessed with the ocean, mountains, and deserts. While I do not participate in active water sports, I find it immensely soothing to look at the ocean and listen to the waves. Recently, I was in Palm Springs and appreciated the late afternoon light on the desert mountains.

Again, there are many ways to savor the beauty around us and find meaning in it. Eat lunch outside. Take a walk on the beach or along a trail at an open space preserve. Enjoy looking at the vineyards or orchards or mountains. Plant a garden or buy an indoor plant.

An appreciation of beauty (or the creative arts) can fill us with awe.

Practice Gratitude

According to the Gallup Organization, one of the 12 factors promoting employee engagement is being recognized by your boss, top management, peers or customers. The Q12 factor is "In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work."

Rituals can help promote the practice of gratitude.

While showing appreciation for good work is certainly a responsibility of organizational leaders, you should take charge of your own well-being and practice gratitude. In my case, I am grateful for:

- My health.
- The family and friends who love me.
- The growth and development of my now adult children.

- My meaningful work.
- Colleagues who appreciate my contributions.
- Financial resources.
- The diverse beauty, culture, and opportunities that I have available living in California.
- The opportunity to travel and appreciate different cultures.

I am a lucky guy.

Rituals can help promote the practice of gratitude. During my daily walks, my ritual is to think of one or two things for which I am grateful. Some people write in a gratitude journal in the morning as they rise or at night before they go to bed. Others start family or holiday meals or team meetings by having everyone share one thing for which they are thankful. I often write short notes to friends and colleagues expressing my appreciation for all kinds of things. (See [Career Compass No. 99 “Harness the Hidden Power of Rituals.”](#))

Finding Happiness Along the Way

You need to take charge of your life, including your work life, so you experience meaning and well-being. In doing so, beware of the “paradox of happiness.” “The more you chase it, the more elusive it becomes.” (See [Lorenzo Buscicchi and Dan Weijers](#)).

To create well-being, you can do a number of things:

- Search for meaning and purpose.
- Focus on developing social bonds and human connections.
- Seek autonomy and the opportunity to “figure it out.”
- Ensure that you are being challenged and continue to learn and grow.
- Appreciate the beauty that surrounds you.
- Practice gratitude.

You may not be happy all the time, but you will be engaged and energized and will find happiness along the way.



Sponsored by the ICMA Coaching Program, [ICMA Career Compass](#) is a monthly column from ICMA focused on career issues for local government professional staff. Dr. Frank Benest is ICMA's liaison for Next Generation Initiatives and resides in Palo Alto, California. [Read past columns](#) at icma.org/careercompass.

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