

## Why a Happy Brain Performs Better

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Featured Guest: Shawn Achor, CEO of Aspirant and author of *The Happiness Advantage: The Seven Principles of Positive Psychology That Fuel Success and Performance at Work* (<http://www.amazon.com/Happiness-Advantage-Principles-Psychology-Performance/dp/0307591549>).



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### TRANSCRIPT

SARAH GREEN: Welcome to the HBR IdeaCast from Harvard Business Review. I'm Sarah Green. I'm talking today with Shawn Achor, author of *The Happiness Advantage*, and CEO of Aspirant, a research and consulting firm that uses positive psychology to improve performance at work. Shawn, thanks so much for taking the time to talk with us today.

SHAWN ACHOR: Thank you so much for having me.

SARAH GREEN: Shawn, the roots of your book go back to when you were the head teaching fellow of the landmark happiness class at Harvard College with Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar. That class was unbelievably popular at Harvard, but it does seem that now, several years later, we're in a different moment where positive psychology may be starting to experience a bit of a backlash.

There have been several major articles in major magazines, there have been several books published saying that positive psychology is undermining America, or it's not all it's cracked up to be. Why do you think that there is this impulse to defend unhappiness?

SHAWN ACHOR: I think that there's a misunderstanding of what we're talking about when we describe the type of happiness we want for companies. I research, with my institute for applied positive research, the top performers at companies, trying to find out what causes them to thrive. And even the top 10% of happiest individuals in a company are not necessarily happy all the time.

I don't get to study people that are happy all the time, that's a disorder. What we're interested in is studying people who are performing at high levels but maintain a belief that their behavior matters. And I think part of the backlash we see is that a lot of happiness seems to be putting a veneer over a lot of the troubles, the difficulties, that we're actually experiencing within the current economic landscape.

And all that's wrapped around something that I call irrational optimism. That's where you put on those rose colored glasses, that's where you have that Pollyannaish sense that there are no problems, none of my employees have any deficiencies, there's nothing but rainbows and unicorns.

What we're really interested in is something called rational optimism, which is where you start with a realistic assessment of the present. Where we are in terms of the economy, what the company's doing, what my team is like, but maintain an optimistic belief towards the future. I think what you're seeing a backlash against is that shallow sense of happiness that is mostly based upon pleasure, not one that's based upon a changing of the cognitive patterns through which we view work, which then, in turn, raise every single one of our business and educational outcomes.

SARAH GREEN: So if I am understating the central premise of your work right, it's that happiness actually proceeds

success, not the other way around, which is the way that we're used to thinking about it. When you take this thesis into companies and work with executives, do you find a lot of push back or skepticism about that?

SHAWN ACHOR: Actually, surprisingly no. And I've been doing this in the midst of the largest economic downturn we've had in our recent history. I've been working with some of the world's largest banks in the midst of not receiving their bonuses, or having to restructure multiple times. I've been working with extremely large companies where I expected there to be push back. But what we're finding is people are hungry, looking for ways that we can move forward.

I think people recognize that when their team is not positive and not engaged that they are dramatically underperforming what their capabilities are. I really believe that in the midst of this modern economy the greatest competitive advantage you could have is a positive and engaged workforce.

I was just working last week out in Silicon Valley with senior level executives at Adobe, and what we're finding is that a lot these individuals are looking for ways to motivate their team to keep forward progress going in the midst of the challenges, the stresses, the work load that many people are having to experience in the face of all the changes that have been occurring.

SARAH GREEN: Well I think that's interesting, and unexpected for me, maybe because I'm a typical grumpy New Englander. I have to admit, I was a little skeptical when I started reading your violently orange book, but actually you totally brought me around. In some ways the weight of the research that you present, it's study after study of hard data that says, no this really works. Can you give our listeners maybe just a taste of some of that research?

SHAWN ACHOR: I think you're right. When you see the book, it's bright orange and even has a hint of a smiley face on it, so it's everything that might go into that category you talked about for the backlash. But overdescribing, I think it's a revolution for what companies are doing. And we've been working with some of the world's largest companies, trying to get this research out to them.

Because what we're talking about is not a science of how do you feel a little bit happier over the course of the day. This is research about how you affect the bottom line. You were mentioning the formula needing to be changed for success. What we normally thought, until we started doing this research, was if you just work harder right now you'll be more successful. If you're more successful then you'll be happier. And we followed that formula, but research shows two things that are wrong with that.

The first is, if we follow that formula we never actually get to happiness. It's the reason why happiness seems to be so elusive in our society, because every time we have a success we merely change the goal post of what success looks like.

So what that means is you can get great grades in school, but then you have to get better grades so you can get into a better school and then get a good internship and then a good job and then go back to school. And you can't be happy yet, because then you have to rise up in the ranks and then your children have to do well. And if happiness is always on the opposite side of success then our brain is constantly changing that. What happens is we push happiness over the cognitive horizon, we'll never actually get to it.

More importantly than that is that it turns out, based upon this research we've been doing for the past decade, is that your brain works in the opposite order. That your brain, when it is positive, actually outperforms your brain significantly than when your brain is negative, neutral, or stressed in terms of several categories, intelligence, energy, resiliency, how long you can work on a project for, how many possibilities you see, how many connections you have, your health, all that's now what we're calling the happiness advantage. Which is, when your brain is positive it actually achieves more than it would have otherwise.

And there's some fantastic research about how doctors perform their diagnoses 50% faster with three times more intellectual flexibility when their brain is positive. We see that when you take intelligence tests you start to outperform your own brain when you're positive as opposed to negative. We see even children at the age of four, if you split them in the two different groups and just slightly prime one group to be positive, they'll put the blocks together, again, up to 50% faster, more accurately than the children in neutral.

All this research starts to show that when we're at work most of time we're looking at it, our brain is negative, neutral, or stressed dealing with the challenges that we have, when in reality what we're doing is we're hamstringing our

brain's real potential to be able to deal with the challenges we have when our brain is not positive.

SARAH GREEN: So in some ways that sounds really optimistic and hopeful, like, oh I could be so much smarter if I were also happier. But if I am a typical grumpy New Englander, does that mean that this happiness advantage is something that's just out of reach for me?

SHAWN ACHOR: No, and that's the real exciting part about this research, is showing how much change is actually possible, So when I go in to work with companies, what we're attempting to do is we're attempting to help the leaders, and then the teams, actually be able to make a change from where they are presently.

Now where we are presently might be because we're frustrated at the work we have, or we're anxious about changes in the economic landscape. We might have genetic set points that make it harder for some of us to be positive as opposed to other people.

This research actually shows, based upon some of the habits that we talk about in the book, and that we do in these different trainings, is you can change your brain and rewire it, actually, much faster than we thought was possible doing very simple things.

We found that managers of companies, if they just increased their praise and recognition of one employee, once a day, for 21 business days in a row, what we find is that six months later we found that those teams, as opposed to a control group, had a 31% higher level of productivity, which is extraordinary. We normally think that one compliment's not going to create that must change, but think about a team and think about what a 31% change of productivity would look like, and then determine if a small change like that would be worthwhile.

There's a whole host of these habits that you can actually change the way your brain processes the world. Everything from you starting each work day with writing down three things you're grateful for, or starting a meeting with three things you're grateful for, actually changes the way in which your brain processes the challenges your team is about to deal with. Small things like that have huge implications, and actually ripple through an entire organization, which is the research we've been looking at.

SARAH GREEN: I wonder, if there was one piece of advice or one strategy or tactic you could give to our listeners to help them be more positive, and thus more effective, what would it be?

SHAWN ACHOR: I would make it as simple as possible. One of the things I describe in the book is something called The Zorro Circle, which is where you try to fight in the smallest amount of area that you can, that you know you'll be successful in. So I would pick something you already know makes you happier. You don't even have to go into any of the research that talks about the long term changes that occur, and then attempt to create a life habit out of that.

What that means is you attempt to do it for 21 days in a row, so it becomes a routine pattern part of your day. It has to be something very short. You don't want to be spending your entire day doing these habits, hoping for more productivity. What we really want is something short you can create every day that starts to create that pattern of having that happiness booster in the mist of the day, releasing that dopamine, allowing your brain to start to achieve that happiness advantage.

So one of the ones we suggest to these companies is when you open up your inbox for the first time during the day, just writing a two sentence maximum email praising or recognizing somebody in your environment, a co-worker, family member, or friend. It's just a night email where you're thanking them or recognizing them for their work.

What happens when you do that is you just activated 21 people in your environment, if you do it for 21 days in a row, making it easier for there to be a feedback loop between you and the people in your world.

But even more importantly than that, what we found is when you do that your brain actually starts to recognize that you have a lot more social support than you expected. And when I do research on these companies, every single time I research we do up to 80 different metrics looking for predictors of what causes an employee, or what causes a Harvard student, for example, to be successful. And what we find is every time the greatest predictor of your success and happiness during a time of challenge, every single time, is your social support network.

The correlation is actually 0.7, which doesn't sound that great, but it's significantly higher than the correlation between smoking and cancer. And what we're finding is that if you develop social cohesion at work and at home, and this experiment actually helps people to do that, where they write down this two sentence email, then they

actually start finding more meaning at work, they connect more people, their job satisfaction and their life satisfaction skyrocket, which is so important, especially given the Conference Board survey that came out this year showing us that we have the highest rates of job dissatisfaction in the history of polling. That's in the midst of high unemployment.

So I think what we're seeing is these small little changes to our day can change and turn even something as soul draining as email can be into something that's life giving.

SARAH GREEN: As we're talking here, we're talking a lot about the short term and then the long term, and doing little things in the short term that will affect you in the long term, and the power of creating new patterns of behavior. How much does that filter into what you do?

SHAWN ACHOR: Well, oftentimes when people would have me come speak at companies I would come in and speak for a short period of time and then I'd leave. And people seemed to enjoy it, but we didn't know if it was going to create any long term impact. So we decided to research it.

What we did was I went into a large accounting firm, into KPMG, this was in the fall of 2008, right before the busy tax season of 2009, which was going to be the worst in recorded history. And we just took 50% of their tax audit managers and trained them on positive psychology, giving them this research, arming them with it, encouraging them to create one positive habit over a 21 day period. We then tested them, and a few days after the training they were significantly happier than the control group who had not received the training. Their job satisfaction was higher.

That's all great, but that's the honeymoon effect we were just talking about, that short term gain that you feel better after you read a book or hear a training. What we were really looking for was long term changes to their success rates and to their happiness. And what we found was all the way through the tax period, even up to four months after the training, that three hour intervention of providing that information to them, and it probably could have even been shorter, what we found is that the group that we had trained had significantly higher levels of life satisfaction, job satisfaction, lower levels of stress. That study's actually coming out in just a few weeks. We're really excited about it.

But what that starts to indicate is these small changes really do have a long term impact. And that when companies decide to invest in their employees, to make sure that they have a positive and engaged workforce, they're reaping back a long term return on their investment that's much higher than what they're putting in initially.

So I think that what we're seeing here is that brain actually can change. That you can provide information to people, and they don't have to stay where they are, they can actually start to become more optimistic. They can train their brains to start to reap that happiness advantage on a daily basis.

And the cool thing is, if you do it for a 21 to 28 day period of time, it actually starts to become habit for the brain. The neural pathways begin to change, making it easier and easier for you to maintain that optimism in the midst of the challenges that we all have.

SARAH GREEN: Shawn I wish we had more time to talk about this, but unfortunately we are all out of time. Thank you so much, again, for talking with us.

SHAWN ACHOR: It's been a pleasure, thank you very much.

SARAH GREEN: That was Shawn Achor, author of *The Happiness Advantage*. For more tips on managing stress and managing yourself please visit [hbr.org](http://hbr.org), or find us on Twitter at HarvardBiz.