



## The Happiness Advantage

The Seven Principles of Positive Psychology  
that Fuel Success and Performance at Work

Shawn Achor | Crown, 2010

Curious about *The Happiness Advantage*? Read our review below. While we're awaiting the copyright holder's go-ahead to summarize this book in our usual summary format, we hope you'll find our review just as helpful.

### Review

Shawn Achor, a lecturer on happiness and the best-selling author of *Before Happiness*, provides effective tactics for increasing your happiness. He offers clear principles for improving your state of mind, career path, health, and relationships with the world and other people. His clean prose and commonsense advice explain why, almost 10 years after its publication, his book remains a bestseller, noted for its straightforward tips and pragmatic, accessible program. Achor cites extensive research to back his claim that managerial and executive success derives from positivity and personal happiness.

### **Using seven tenets of positive psychology can improve your happiness, success and performance.**

Achor urges you to become more positive and consciously grateful for good moments. Notice when you default to a negative view, and turn to these seven principles to lift your spirits and restore your optimism. "When our brains constantly scan for and focus on the positive," the author writes, "we profit from three of the most important tools available to us: happiness, gratitude and optimism."

## 1. “The Happiness Advantage” – Happiness begets success.

Achor explains that psychologists traditionally concluded that successful people were happy because of their success. In fact, he stresses, happiness is the precursor to success. Having a positive mind-set brings you substantial benefits as compared to having a negative attitude.

Workers who are happy excel in productivity, leadership skills and performance ratings. They are less likely to use sick days, burn out or leave the company. Happiness, Achor reports with conviction, increases your physical health and boosts your immune system. Volunteers identified as happy before an injection of a cold virus had fewer symptoms than unhappy volunteers.

If you are a developing leader, you may want to heed Achor’s advice that a manager can buoy or deflate a team with comments or nonverbal communication. A positive comment from your boss before you make an important presentation can counteract your stress. But your boss’s mention of the presentation’s importance could increase your stress and have a negative effect on the outcome. Positive, supportive comments prepare people to excel.

A manager who believes that monitoring his or her staff members is necessary to ensure that they do their work creates a group with little job satisfaction. A manager who believes her or his employees are self-motivated, the author insists, can build a team that works with passion. In the effort to create a successful team, Achor suggests that managers should make three positive statements to counteract each negative one. To help your staff members work at their highest level, the author prescribes a ratio of six positive statements to one negative statement.

## 2. “The Fulcrum and the Lever” – A positive mind-set is a powerful tool.

Achor concedes that levels of happiness vary for each person, but he assures you that you can improve yours. Your mind-set is the fulcrum of your attitude and worldview. The author recommends changing your outlook to shift your emotional pivot point and boost your strength. To increase your happiness, he asks you to consider these points:

- Consistently spending five minutes a day focusing on your breath can positively affect your health and outlook.
- To increase your happiness, make a point one day a week of doing five kind things for other people.
- Looking at photos of loved ones in your office can give you a jolt of happiness. So can going outdoors for 20 minutes.
- Exercising has a lasting beneficial impact on your mood.
- Spending money on experiences like concerts or on other people – such as hosting a group dinner – provides lasting positive feelings.
- Using your best skills or a “signature strength” buoys your mood. If you enjoy learning, visit a museum or take in some new information each day.

Achor cites the Greek scientist Archimedes, who believed that, given the right lever and fulcrum, he could move the world. Your lever is your belief in your own abilities, and the fulcrum is your belief in your ability to change. Whether your goal is to climb up in the corporate ranks or in academic ones, shifting your fulcrum or your mind-set in a positive direction and expanding your “lever of possibility” will help you succeed.

Your “relative perception” forms your reality at work and during your leisure time. If you view such time as unproductive, Achor warns, you won’t generate the energy that you’ll get if you bring a positive mind-set to having dinner with your friends or family. Viewing your time off as a way to connect with people will improve your productivity.

The author is far from the first person to note that believing in your own abilities helps you succeed. But he adds that knowing this makes it particularly important to understand that your mind-set determines how your work day feels to you. “Simply believing we can bring about positive change in our lives,” the author writes, “increases motivation and job performance.”

Yale psychologist Amy Wrzesniewski says that people view their work in one of three categories: “as a job, a career or a calling.” Perspectives can vary, as Achor says. Some doctors view their work as a job, while some custodians see their work as a calling. How you view your work springs from your viewpoint, your job satisfaction and how well you perform. If you don’t feel that your work is meaningful, even a great job will weary your soul.

### **3. “The Tetris Effect” – What you concentrate on is what you will see.**

Achor recognizes that getting stuck on certain ideas or emotions is easy, but staying aware of your obsessions can help you get unstuck. If you play Tetris for hours, when you look up from the screen, your brain will still fit shapes into spaces.

Lawyers can find the flaw in an argument just as easily as auditors can find tax mistakes. But they are targeting errors, which, as Achor explains, can cause “inattention blindness” and make you less able to see the positive. This happens when you focus so much on one aspect of a situation that your brain doesn’t pay attention to anything else. For example, when you buy a blue Prius, you start seeing blue Priuses everywhere. It’s not that there has been an upswing in blue Prius sales – it’s that your brain gives priority to your focus.

That is why it’s important, the author instructs, to teach your brain to focus on the positive. The more that you can do this, Achor writes, the more positivity and gratitude you will feel – and that will benefit your work and productivity. The happiness you feel will create more optimism and higher expectations of similar future outcomes.

To focus on the positive, Achor proposes that you can take five minutes each day to write a list of three good things that happened that day. You could include something simple, like an interaction with a friend or colleague. Carrying out this exercise teaches your brain to focus on gratitude

and moments of happiness. “Brain change, once thought impossible, is now a well-known fact,” the author writes, “...supported by some of the most rigorous and cutting-edge research in neuroscience.”

Consistency is important in establishing a positive frame of mind. Sharing your three good things with your spouse or family leads to seeing more positive elements in those relationships. This doesn't mean blocking out major problems – rather, it calls for prioritizing the positives.

#### **4. “Falling Up” – Reinterpreting your initial reaction to a crisis can help you surmount it.**

Don't let setbacks stall you, Achor counsels. When something devastating like the 2008 financial crisis occurs, people go in one of three mental directions. You might, the author notes, remain stuck in the negative present, or you might exacerbate the situation by envisioning worse future consequences. Or you can use the crisis to catapult yourself into a better place. If you can see the opportunities that problems create, you'll be able to make those opportunities a reality and use the issue to help you move forward. In a truly bad situation, you may be able to use this model to reduce the calamity's impact by recognizing that you will get through it.

If you find that moving beyond troubled times is difficult, Achor recommends following the “ABCD model. “Adversity” represents what happened; it's unchangeable. “Belief” is how you react to the event and how you see its impact on your future. “Consequence” results from whether you see the event as a one-off or as a continual circumstance. “Disputation” comes into play when you choose to view your negative belief as simply a belief and are willing to question it. Disputation requires you to role-play and examine objectively why you hold a pessimistic belief. Achor wants you to ask if there's another way to explain what happened?

#### **5. “The Zorro Circle” – When life overwhelms you, start with manageable tasks.**

Achor cites Zorro, the famed swordsman, of all people. In his narrative, Zorro had a mentor who trained him in one new skill at a time, until Zorro mastered each one. When you seek to change your life, the author recommends taking small steps. If the amount of work facing you is overwhelming, he advises you to identify small tasks that you can control and expand from there.

For example, Achor cites a senior executive who returned from working on a big project to find 1,400 emails in his inbox. A consultant recommended dealing with only the newest emails for several days. This gave the executive a sense of control over his environment, and he was able to clear out the remainder of his backlog within a reasonable amount of time.

Returning to his main theme, Achor asserts that your mind-set and beliefs determine the level of control you feel you have. An “internal locus of control” means that you connect your actions with your results and that you take responsibility for your mistakes and credit for your

successes. People with this sense of control are more likely to be successful, are more motivated and usually have better relationships. Those with an “external locus” who distance themselves from their successes and failures derive the opposite results. As an example, Achor offers a woman who won awards for her work but believed that she was merely lucky, thereby dismissing the opportunity to feel true satisfaction about her work.

Achor understands that everyone can fall prey to having an external locus in stressful situations. If you find yourself overwhelmed, first express your feelings by writing them down or talking with someone. Being self-aware, you can then determine what is in your control and what isn't. The way to move forward, the author says, is to release the issues you don't control and look for areas you can change.

Defining a smaller even still somewhat challenging place to begin gives you confidence in yourself to expand your efforts. Setting realistic goals is important. “The most successful people,” the author writes, “are the ones who capitalize on the positive and reap the rewards at every turn.”

## **6. “The 20-Second Rule” – Willpower alone is insufficient to change a habit.**

Achor advocates rationing your energy so you can stay inspired. Increase your success by limiting your options and defining what you plan to do the night before you want to do it. The less energy you expend to make a change, the more successful you will be. Eating well, exercising and getting a good night's sleep also are beneficial. Knowing this doesn't make those things easier to do, the author understands. Good habits are difficult to establish and maintain, but you can develop them the same way you learn skills. Creating a habit requires giving the brain time to encode it.

Surprisingly, Achor instructs readers that willpower isn't the main element that you need to make a change. Creating new habits requires more than resolve. It requires overcoming passivity, which is difficult. That's why marketing campaigns capitalize on it. Marketing strategies that require consumers to opt out of a mailing list, fill out a form to get a rebate or actively cancel a free subscription depend on that inertia.

If you want to play guitar instead of watch TV, Achor directs you to put the remote control batteries in another room and keep the guitar handy. Ice cream sales drop when people must actively open a cooler door. People purchase less candy when they have to stand in a separate line to buy it.

## **7. “Social Investment” – When in crisis, move toward people, not away from them.**

In the best and worst of times, nurture and maintain a circle of supportive friends. When a crisis occurs, people need to pull together. Achor reports that successful people embrace their social networks during times of difficulty. Studies found that the happiest 10% of people worldwide have strong social networks. Having a strong or weak social network can affect your lifespan as much as smoking, high blood pressure or exercise.

Short interactions with other people while passing in the office hallway reduce stress levels. When staff members feel connected to each other, their productivity increases along with their protection against stress. A strong, positive relationship between you and your boss, Achor underscores, is more beneficial for your company and healthier for both of you.

Looking someone in the eye, he advises, engages the empathy and rapport areas of the brain. Speaking face-to-face with your employees or providing them with positive feedback strengthens your bonds. Adding a positive person to a team spreads that mood throughout the group and increases individual and group productivity. Positive influence multiplies. Since most people connect with 1,000 other people within three degrees of separation, one person can increase the happiness of an estimated 1,000 other people.

While independently effective, each happiness-building process is stronger when you embrace two or more processes together, Achor says. Solid social networks can even help you overcome inertia when you're starting a new habit. "Happiness is not the belief that we don't need to change," the author writes, "it is the realization that we can."

## Happiness is at hand

Shawn Achor, author of the bestsellers *Before Happiness* and *Big Potential*, is in the happiness business. In this 2010 presentation of effective tactics for increasing your happiness, he created a canon of foundational ideas. Authors often cite his principles for improving your mind-set, relationships, career and health. Since Achor's gig is teaching you how to be happy, you may find his relentlessly encouraging counsel irritating or commercialized. Surprisingly, it is neither. He supports his happiness exercises and practices with sound science and social science. Though he writes with a certain gee-whiz quality, he cites extensive research to back his claim that success derives from personal happiness. He has researched his topics deeply and writes with intelligence and welcome directness. He encourages you to be more aware of your processes and how your emotional, psychological and work habits might limit your ability to be happy and enjoy your life. He offers sensible instructions on overcoming negativity, and leaves readers confident that his optimism is authentic as he reinforces theirs – or inspires them to reach for it.

## About the Author

**Shawn Achor** founded his consulting firm GoodThink in 2007. His TED Talk on happiness has drawn more than 20 million views, and millions have seen his PBS lecture. He also wrote the *New York Times* best-sellers *Before Happiness* and *Big Potential*.

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