

NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

IMPROVE PRODUCTIVITY AND SUCCESS WITH 5 “POSITIVITY” HABITS

Nano Tools for Leaders® are fast, effective leadership tools that you can learn and start using in less than 15 minutes — with the potential to significantly impact your success as a leader and the engagement and productivity of the people you lead.

Contributor: Shawn Achor, expert on the connection between happiness, productivity, and success; author of the best-selling *The Happiness Advantage* and *Before Happiness*.

THE GOAL:

Improve your team’s productivity and success by retraining your brains to capitalize on positivity.

NANO TOOL:

Many people think that success leads to happiness, but actually it’s the other way around. A decade of research¹ in positive psychology and neuroscience has found that happiness is the precursor to success — not the result. Research with corporations² has also proven that happiness and optimism actually fuel performance and achievement, giving companies a competitive edge in what I call the happiness advantage.

The happiness advantage grows from the fact that “Positivity,” the cultivation of happiness or positive emotions, has a direct causal relationship with the productivity and success of individuals and teams. Positivity includes gratitude and appreciation for others as well as favorable self-regard, and can be fostered both by thoughts and by purposeful activity, such as exercise and use of signature strengths. Its benefits include:

- 3 times more creativity
- 31% higher productivity
- 23% fewer fatigue symptoms
- 37% greater sales
- 40% more likely to get a promotion
- 10 times more engaged

That helps explain why companies like Google, Yahoo!, and Virgin cultivate work environments that help their employees experience positive emotions on a regular basis. As Richard Branson said, “More than any other element, fun is the secret of Virgin’s success.” This isn’t because fun is, well, fun. It’s because fun also leads to bottom-line results.



Even short bursts of positivity have been shown to increase happiness and provide a serious competitive edge. You don't need to install a foosball table in the employee lounge or let everyone leave early on Fridays to pursue a passion (although those are very good ideas). The five positivity habits described under Action Steps below can induce the same feelings of happiness and provide the same kinds of results.

HOW COMPANIES USE IT:

- In a survey by Shawn Achor in partnership with Training Magazine, 400 HR and learning and development leaders were asked to keep a positive habit (write 3 "gratitudes" per day, write a positive 2-minute email to someone at work, or journal about a positive experience for 2 minutes). Two weeks later they were tested again. Those who successfully created the positive habit showed a 20% decrease in stress, had 12% higher energy, and were twice as likely to rate themselves as higher on the happiness measure. (*Training Magazine*, Feb 2014, in press.)
- In a study done by Shawn Achor at KPMG in 2008, right before the busiest tax season in recent history, managers in NY and NJ were invited to create a positive habit (gratitude, journaling, exercise, meditation or writing a positive email each day) and sustain it for 21 days. Four months later, in April, the group that received the positive training and did the habit showed significant increases in productivity, lower stress, and higher engagement levels. Their happiness scores moved up on average 5 points on a 25 point scale compared to the control group. ("Positive Intelligence," *HBR*, Jan/Feb 2012.)
- A team at American Express encouraged their employees to set a Microsoft Outlook alert for 11:00 a.m. every day to remind themselves to write down three things they are grateful for. At Mattress Firm, VP of Learning and Development Cory Ludens encourages his company to write their gratitudes before checking their e-mail in the morning. The COO and President of Nationwide Insurance, Mark Pizzi, often shares his gratitudes with his company on Yammer, an internal social platform. Previous research has shown 1) that writing gratitudes leads to greater levels of optimism and 2) that optimism results in greater levels of sales and productivity (see *Learned Optimism* by Martin Seligman).

ACTION STEPS:

- 1. Infuse Positivity into Your Surroundings.** Physical environment can have an enormous impact on our mindset and sense of wellbeing. Encourage people to personalize their workspaces with pictures of family, pets, favorite places, or hobbies; add plants, their children's artwork, or holiday decorations. The positive feelings they inspire will help broaden the amount of possibilities our brains can process, making us more thoughtful, creative, and open to new ideas. They also help build our capabilities, making us more productive and successful. Allow time in each day for "positivity breaks." Watching a quick YouTube video that makes you laugh or taking a short walk outside can boost positive mood, broaden thinking, and improve working memory.
- 2. Exercise.** Most people know that exercise releases pleasure-inducing chemicals called endorphins. But it also improves motivation and feelings of mastery, reduces stress and anxiety, and helps us get into the flow — the feeling of total engagement we get when we are typically at our most productive. If you have a company fitness center, give people the flexibility to shift their work hours so they can use it at the time of day that works best for them. Ask someone to take a walk with you at lunch. Organize team sports, games, or fitness challenges.

- 3. Use a Signature Strength.** Each time we use a skill we're good at, we experience a burst of positivity. Even more fulfilling is using a character strength, a trait that is deeply embedded in who we are. A team of psychologists led by University of Pennsylvania Professor Martin Seligman catalogued the 24 cross-cultural character strengths that most contribute to human flourishing, and developed a survey to identify an individual's signature strengths. Ask each person on your team to take the free survey at www.viasurvey.org. Encourage people to share their strengths profiles and to list ways they can practice their top strengths at work. Find opportunities for them to work on company projects that leverage their strengths and you'll see both positive attitudes and greater engagement.
- 4. List Three Gratuities.** More than a decade of empirical studies has proven the profound effect that gratitude has on the way our brains are wired — even if it sounds simplistic or hokey. Follow the practice used in several top companies by setting aside a specific time each day to keep a Gratitude list. By taking just 5 minutes to write or share 3 things that made you feel grateful over the last 24 hours, you're training your brain to tune into the positives and opportunities around you. This positive outlook not only helps people be more successful, it also helps them stay healthier and live longer,
- 5. Commit a Conscious Act of Kindness.** A long line of empirical research shows that altruism decreases stress and strongly contributes to enhanced mental health. Each day, send a short email to someone praising, complimenting, or thanking them for something they have done. Leave a card, a miniature chocolate bar or a flower on a colleague's desk. Assemble a group of people to help out at a local charity.

SHARE YOUR BEST PRACTICES:

Do you have a best practice for enhancing feelings of happiness? If so, please share it on our blog at Wharton's Center for Leadership and Change Management. <http://whartonleadership.wordpress.com/>

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- *Before Happiness: The Five Hidden Keys to Achieving Success, Spreading Happiness, and Sustaining Positive Change*, Shawn Achor (Crown Business, 2013). Explains how our perception of the world predicts our ability to change our success, happiness, and health, and offers five strategies for increasing the ability to create positive, successful realities.
- *¹The Happiness Advantage: The Seven Principles of Positive Psychology that Fuel Success and Performance at Work*, Shawn Achor (Crown Business, 2010). Provides seven actionable principles, as taught in Harvard's Happiness course and to companies worldwide, for improving performance and maximizing potential by becoming happier. [See Part 1, pp. 3-25 for research references.]
- ²"Positive Intelligence," Shawn Achor, *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 90, Issue 1/2, Jan-Feb 2012. Offers multiple corporate examples illustrating three ways individuals can cultivate their own sense of well-being and set themselves up to succeed at work.
- *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment*, Martin Seligman (Atria Books, 2004). Explains that trying to fix weaknesses won't help to achieve happiness; incorporating strengths such as humor, originality, and generosity into everyday interactions with people is more effective. Includes practical tools such as self-tests and exercises.

- “The Benefits of Frequent Positive Affect: Does Happiness Lead to Success?” Sonja Lyubomirsky, Laura King, Ed Diener, *Psychological Bulletin*, 131 (2005), 803-855. Argues that the happiness-success link exists not only because success makes people happy, but also because positive affect engenders success. Reveals evidence that suggests that positive affect — the hallmark of well-being — may be the cause of many of the desirable characteristics, resources, and successes correlated with happiness.
- “Building Positive Resources: Effects of Positive Events and Positive Reflection on Work Stress and Health,” Joyce Bono, Theresa Glomb, Winny Shen, Eugene Kim, Amanda Koch, *Academy of Management Journal*, 2013, Vol. 56, No. 6, 1601–1627. Shares the results of a three-week study that found that positive events, negative events, and family-to-work conflict contribute to perceived stress, blood pressure, physical symptoms, mental health, and work detachment, suggesting that organizations should focus not only on reducing negative events, but also on increasing positive events.

ABOUT NANO TOOLS:

Nano Tools for Leaders® was conceived and developed by Deb Giffen, MCC, Director of Innovative Learning Solutions at Wharton Executive Education. It is jointly sponsored by Wharton Executive Education and Wharton’s Center for Leadership and Change Management, Wharton Professor of Management Michael Useem, Director. Nano Tools’ Academic Director is John Paul MacDuffie, Wharton Associate Professor of Management, and Director of the Program on Vehicle and Mobility Innovation (PVMi) at Wharton’s Mack Institute for Innovation Management.