

# Harvard Business Review

Motivating People

## Why You Should Stop Trying to Be Happy at Work

by Susan Peppercorn

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So much is written about happiness at work — yet judging from Gallup statistics that show 85% of employees aren't engaged, few know how to attain it. Given that the average person spends 90,000 hours at work in a lifetime, it's important to figure out

how to feel better about the time you spend earning a living. Here's the catch, though: If you set happiness as your primary goal, you can end up feeling the opposite. This is because happiness (like all emotions) is a fleeting state, not a permanent one. An alternative solution is to make meaning your vocational goal.

As author Emily Esfahani Smith has outlined, people who focus on meaning in their personal and professional lives are more likely to feel an enduring sense of well-being. Research shows that making work more meaningful is one of the most powerful and underutilized ways to increase productivity, engagement, and performance. In one survey of 12,000 employees, 50% said they didn't get a feeling of meaning and significance from their work, but those who did reported 1.7 times greater job satisfaction, were 1.4 times more engaged, and were more than three times as likely to remain with their current employer.

As a coach to executives considering their next career move, I often hear clients express their desire to find greater meaning at work. Take Jon (not his real name), for example. He started a biotech company, which he successfully grew to over \$2 billion in revenue. Investors were champing at the bit for him to take the helm of another organization as CEO. However, when presented with these outwardly impressive opportunities, Jon confessed that he wanted to solve what felt to him like more significant health care problems — ones that no one had been able to solve. Although he was flattered to be courted for this top role, he was searching for more from his work, including long-term career satisfaction and engagement.

## **The Difference Between Meaning and Happiness**

In a recent study, Shawn Achor and his research team found that nine in 10 people would be willing to swap a percentage of their lifetime earnings for more meaningful work. That's a lot of employees who would take a pay cut to have their work matter. But

what are we really searching for when we say we want more “meaning,” and how does it differ from happiness?

Philosophers, scholars, artists, and social psychologists have struggled to come up with an answer to that question for years. According to research on happiness and meaning conducted by psychologist Roy Baumeister and colleagues, five factors differentiate meaning and happiness:

- **Getting what you want or need.** While happiness was found to correlate with having your desires satisfied, meaning was not. In fact, as Baumeister wrote: “[T]he frequency of good and bad feelings turns out to be irrelevant to meaning, which can flourish even in very forbidding conditions.” For example, Jon might have enjoyed the prestige of a CEO title, but his quest to do something that mattered — even if it meant not getting that benefit — overrode this want.
- **Time frame.** Baumeister found that while happiness relates directly to the here and now, meaning “seems to come from assembling past, present, and future into some kind of coherent story.” In Jon’s case, although becoming a chief executive may have brought immediate happiness, he was willing to forgo that quick hit of endorphins in order to seek something that reflected his bigger-picture and long-term values.
- **Social life.** Connections to others is important for both happiness and meaning, but the character of those connections informs the type of fulfillment they give you. Baumeister found that helping to other people leads to meaning, while having others help you leads to happiness. Jon’s desire to use his skills to help others predisposed him seek that type of role.
- **Challenges.** Stress, strife, and struggles reduce happiness, “but they seem to be part and parcel of a highly meaningful life,” according to Baumeister. Jon was willing to take the more difficult route of figuring out an alternative to the CEO job in order to increase his chances of finding meaning at work.

- **Personal identity.** An important source of meaning is actions or activities that “express the self.” But they are “mostly irrelevant” where happiness is concerned. Jon’s pull toward a different type of job was an expression of what had become most important to him.

## How to Prioritize Meaning

The distinctions above provide guideposts on steering your professional life toward meaning, which, as research by psychologist Pninit Russo-Netzer found, can ultimately lead to happiness as well. Here are four practical steps you can take to bring more meaning into your work:

- **Keep a journal of activities.** Identify the projects and tasks you find deeply satisfying (as opposed to ones that gratify you in the short term). Do you feel fulfilled when making presentations to your clients, for example? Are you energized when mentoring and coaching junior employees, thinking about how your present efforts contribute positively to their future?
- **Align your values and actions when choosing what to prioritize.** If mentoring is linked with your personal identity and self-expression, make coaching part of your weekly activities. If self-development is a core value, incorporate daily rituals such as listening to podcasts, taking a course, or joining a mastermind group.
- **Focus on relationships, not just deliverables.** But as you do so, be intentional about how you go about it, remembering Baumeister’s finding that contributing to others’ well-being is strongly tied to experiencing meaning.
- **Share “best-self” narratives with coworkers.** In the spirit of helping others, assist people in identifying what types of activities lead them to authentic self-expression and meaning. In the book *Alive at Work*, author Daniel Cable suggests having colleagues share stories of seeing one another at their best. You can do this for peers and ask them to return the favor.

Living with meaning and purpose may not make you happy — at least in the short term. It requires self-reflection, effort, and wrestling with issues that initially can be frustrating. But when you approach work situations mindfully, with an eye toward contributing to others while honoring your personal identity, you'll find opportunities to practice the skills that help you find the intrinsic value in your work.

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