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Why we hate happy colleagues

Can there be anything more calculated to ruin your Monday mornings than a chirpy colleague who is full of the joys of spring, particularly in the autumn when those dark nights are just around the corner?

As a semi-professional Yorkshireman, genetically programmed to spot the cloud that smothers every silver lining, I was unsettled last week at a London-based seminar to find an expert in happiness sending ripples across my personal pool of gloom.

I enjoy my misery, founded, as it is, on a deep distrust of happiness. So it was reassuring to be told by Robert Holden, a psychologist who specialises in happiness, that I am not alone. In fact it is probably true that most of us seek some comfort in negativity and misfortune. It explains why we laugh at people who slip on banana skins.

There is a sense of relief in witnessing the misfortune of others. A colleague makes a mistake and we commiserate, consoling ourselves inwardly with the thought: "I'm glad it wasn't me."

Mr Holden, director and founder of something he calls the Happiness Project, told human resources managers at the seminar held by Xancam Consulting, a business psychology company, that his years studying psychology had been almost wholly focused on problems, conflicts and disorders.

"For six years I studied the psychology of how to screw up," he says. "I studied every line of misery, low self-esteem, boredom, suffering and psychosis.

"The theory seemed to be that if somebody is happy they are probably in denial and that deep down there is probably some pain and suffering to work on." Even our language reflects a sense of caution, he notes. "We say: 'How's things?' In reply we hear: 'Not so bad, mustn't grumble, could be better, can't complain, soldiering on'."

Mr Holden has identified more than a theory. His observations could be applied across a broad spectrum of the workforce. Doctors don't spend their time looking for evidence of rude and sparkling health. They look for furry tongues, rashes and swollen joints.

Police officers look for crimes, insurance assessors seek out disasters and journalists wallow in bad news. Happy events, good deeds and heart-warming stories attract no more than a passing interest while acts of philanthropy, largesse and benevolence are viewed with a certain cynicism in the belief that no one does anything for nothing any more.

None of this, however, alters Mr Holden's conviction that identifying the things that bring us success is a better approach to life and work than focusing on problems. This is easier said than done because most of us tend to be diffident about our successes. We are reared as children to recognise that pride comes before a fall. The same lesson reminds us that happiness is no more than a side-step away from smugness and that both these qualities can be related to complacency.

But the instilled caution that informs our perceptions, warns Mr Holden, can prove, self-fulfilling. "Be careful what you look for because you just might find it," he says. "If you look for problems you will find them." Conversely, he argues, a focus on success is more likely to generate positive results.

Studies in the US tend to support this conclusion. A 30-year study by the Mayo Clinic there found that optimistic people had a much lower risk of premature death than those who were pessimistic.

We might therefore conclude that pessimism is a workplace liability. But there is at least one exception for such a conclusion - the legal profession. A recent study by Françoise Moscovici and Averil Leimon, directors of White Water Strategies, a London-based consultancy, argues that a "structural pessimism" among lawyers lends a professional advantage. A deeply cynical eye cast over a legal document is best equipped to find any hidden catches. Unfortunately the same quality that breeds cynicism also breeds neurosis and anxiety about long-term success.

"The strengths that allow you to foresee and manage every possible snare in a contract also make you doubt about your abilities outside your immediate area of expertise," they say. No wonder that the Law Society and the Bar Council, uniquely among the professions, funds a charity, LawCare - dedicated to helping lawyers overcome stress, depression, alcoholism and drug abuse.

The study calls for a transformation of attitudes and management approaches in law firms. Individually, it says, it is possible with time and practice to turn pessimism into a cautious optimism. But do people want to change?

Even if we recognise our pessimism for what it is, it is unlikely that we can shed our ingrained jaundice with the ease of a chameleon. Nor can we deal easily with the symptoms of this workplace malaise. Part of our problem, says, Mr Holden, is that we spend too much of our time rushing about in a manic society that confuses what he calls "hurry sickness" with genuine achievement.

Why do we have to do everything at breakneck speed? Even careers have accelerated to such a degree that it is possible to be propelled from trainee to boss in a few short years before the system ejects us in our mid-forties, discarded in our prime.

Among Mr Holden's pet hates are "to-do lists", particularly those that are packed with trivial items. An alternative, he suggests, is to ask the question: "Am I adding value? Am I the sort of person who lights up a room when I walk in or when I walk out?"

He quotes Peter Drucker, the management writer, who said: "There is nothing so useless as doing efficiently that which should not be done at all." The problem with these observations is that they have been made so many times in the past. People were talking about the "rat race" a generation ago and, as Lily Tomlin, the US comedian and actress, once pointed out: "The trouble with the rat race is that even if you win, you're still a rat."

In spite of such comments, the pressures on billable hours in law firms remain. Doctors maintain their emphasis on cures more than prevention and the newspapers continue to give us bad news because they know how much we want to read it.

Perhaps it is time, as Mr Holden suggests, to start a conversation about just what we, as a society, should equate with success and happiness at work.

Is success a 70 hour-week? Is it your salary? Is it the number of people you manage? Has it something to do with your daily e-mail count? Is it the size of your departmental budget? Is it a long marriage, a clean driving licence or a knighthood? Or could it be something as simple as a state of mind, accessible to all?

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