



Viewpoint: Henry Stewart

Happy People, Productive Organizations



BEST PRACTICE

Introduction

Henry Stewart is founder and chief executive of Happy, a training company based in London that provides training in both desktop IT and how to create great places to work. The company is the recipient of numerous best places to work awards, and pressed to reveal the secret of its success, Stewart has been recounting the lessons of how to create happy workplace to a wider audience.

be chosen to be managers on the basis of how good they are at managing people. Now, obviously, this should be a given, but people are more often promoted to managers based on how good they are at a core task, whether they

What do you think it takes to make a great workplace?

Let me start with one key concept. One thing that happens at Happy, is that people choose their own managers. I'll come on to how you can make that happen, but think about that idea for a moment. If you want to get the most out of your people, then doesn't it make sense to have your people choosing the managers who will get the most out of them?

That is just one of many simple, common sense things which we can put into practice, that can transform organizations. Because too many companies are still run in the old-fashioned, traditional ways.

are a great computer programmer, for example, or how long they've been there.

One of the reasons this happens is because there are two roles, confusing management; on the one hand, management is about strategy and decision making, on the other it's about supporting people, challenging them, coaching them.

I believe those are two different roles. There is no particular reason why the same people should play both of those roles. Once you have separated those roles, by slightly changing the structure of your company, then all sorts of things are possible; that's when you can choose your manager.

The idea of choosing your own manager sounds quite difficult to implement, though. Isn't leadership about having the right leaders to do a job, rather than the leaders everyone likes best?

It is. But it is also about believing and trusting your people, that is at the core of what we do. I like to ask people a couple of questions. First of all, what makes great management? And then, what has enabled you, personally, to work at your best? Now, those are actually the same question really, so they should have the same answer, because what makes great management should be what enables you to work at your best.

How exactly?

If somebody comes to me and says, I love my job, I love the people I work with, I'm even happy with what I'm paid, but I can't stand my manager. Now, in most companies it would lead to one of them leaving. In Happy it takes five minutes, we say, okay, you don't like your manager then choose another one, who would you like?

Because we focus on the people management being about enabling you, supporting you, making you perform at your best. And what you find is that people choose somebody who will support them; people want to develop, people want to get better.

And do you get the same answer to those questions?

Well in response to the first question, what makes great management, people generally talk about communication, vision, consistency, listening skills, and these kinds of things. And you need all of those.

But when you ask people about the times when they have worked at their best, they talk about being challenged, they talk about being trusted, and they talk about having the freedom to do it their way.

Now, the things mentioned in response to the first question are important, you need to have them but they are not the top of the pyramid, they are not the things that enable people to work at their best. Too many companies focus on the first set, whereas the best workplaces in this country are focusing on how you give people trust, how you give them the freedom to actually fulfill their potential?

At Happy you have developed a living laboratory. What is that about?

In my early days as a trainer I was very full of myself. I thought I was the best trainer around and my biggest challenge would be how to find other trainers like me. So when we first started recruiting trainers, I would sit in on them, and make detailed notes about what they did right, and what they did wrong. Then, at the end of the day I would sit down and feed it all back to them.

You can imagine that didn't go down very well, at all. Because I was falling into a couple of common traps that managers fall into. First of all, I was trying to make the trainers do it exactly the way I did it; that is something you often find managers doing. And secondly, I was trying to create a process; you do this, this and this, and then you end up with this result.

So how can people choose their own managers?

Our most radical belief at Happy is that people should

“America is a vast conspiracy to make you happy.”

John Updike

**BEST PRACTICE****So what are the problems with falling into these traps?**

Well you can only ever have a second best clone of yourself. If you try and get them to do things the way you do them, you won't get them performing much better than you. Of course, at the same time, I didn't want to say train however you want, because at the time most of the training in IT was techies standing in front of a class telling people what to do.

So we sat down and decided together on training principles and the targets we needed to achieve. One of the key principles, for example, was don't tell when you can ask, which still guides all of our training.

Another aspect was support, which is slightly different from management. Support is what you know you need in order to meet the targets or whatever objectives you have. So you might go to a colleague, to your manager, to somebody, to find out if what you are doing is right. They might sit in on your sessions, or you might sit in on other people's sessions, or whatever other means you need to get support.

Yet another element is feedback, and that is crucial, because if you ask most people how often they get feedback on how they do their job, they will say every six months, or every year, during their appraisal. We make most of our people work without any idea of how they are doing.

So key elements of job ownership modelling, what you need to put in place to enable people to completely own their jobs and make their own improvements, include: having clear principles and targets; having support in place; and making sure that the person gets feedback without it being interpreted by the manager.

Can you give me an example of how those aspects of trusting people and providing them with the freedom to do things their way, might work in an organization?

Let me give you an example from Happy to start with. I remember when one of our trainers e-mailed me saying that they liked three changes I'd introduced, as they made life so much easier for them.

When I looked at the three, the first thing that struck me was that I didn't know they had happened. The second thing that struck me was that if they'd

come across my desk, I would have rejected two of them.

What I have realized is that given it was my company, I set it all up, I'm very committed to the way things are, as a result, like in most companies, I'm the main barrier to innovation. So the way to stop me rejecting decent innovations is to make sure they never go across my desk.

How does that happen?

We have a concept of pre-approval. Most managers have tasks, they get groups of people, or individuals, to come up with new ideas for products, fix something that's not working, and so on. So instead of reporting back to me, so I can amend or improve an idea. We say the idea is pre-approved. Whatever you come up with I won't look at, whatever you come up with is approved for immediate implementation.

That must involve a huge amount of trust?

It means you have got to trust your people. It also means you have to give them all the necessary information. So they have to know all the secret information in your head that you might forget to tell them sometimes; and they have to know which other departments it has to be cleared with. But the key is to give them ownership so that they are dedicated to making it work, and they implement it, give feedback and make further improvements.

Interestingly, when I ask whether people want more innovation in their companies; not surprisingly, most people say, yes. But then, when I ask if the levels of approval encourage more innovation, the number of people that say yes is virtually zero. So most people want to be in this tremendously dynamic innovative company, but then have a whole set of processes that get in the way of them becoming that sort of company.

FOR MORE INFORMATION**Book:**

Stewart, Henry, Cathy Busani, and James Moran. *Relax: A Happy Business Story*. London: Happy, 2009.

Web Site:

<http://happyworkplace.blogspot.com>

“Men will not be content to manufacture life: they will want to improve on it.”

J. D. Bernal