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Book Review: The Happiness Track

by Laura Ferber

Introduction

What is the secret to success? Most people would say hard work, ambition, focus, and perhaps a willingness to make sacrifices. In our society, stress is often seen as a necessary stop on the path to success. Happiness is viewed as the reward for reaching our goals, something that will happen to us in the future. We value dedication and drive and often view leaders as those who are the most productive, constantly planning and working towards their goals. In her book, *The Happiness Track: How to Apply the Science of Happiness to Accelerate Your Success* (2016), Emma Seppala works to dispel these myths and argues instead that happiness is the key to leading a successful life. Through psychological research, compelling examples, and personal anecdotes, Seppala outlines how we can achieve happiness through living in the present, making time to rest, and practicing kindness in order to achieve our goals. Seppala successfully proves that happiness does not have to be viewed as the end result of hard work, but rather as the tool and mindset that will help us reach our goals and be the most successful we can be.

Summary

Seppala (2016) believes there are six major false theories about success: never stop accomplishing, you can't have success without stress, persevere at all costs, focus on your niche, play to your strengths, and look out for number one. Seppala asserts that while these theories can lead people to short-term outward success, they are unsustainable and can lead to burnout and unhappiness. Seppala holds a Ph.D. in psychology

and is the director of the Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education at Stanford University. Her research shows that, "...happiness is not the outcome of success but rather its precursor" (p. 7).

Evaluation/Analysis

If happiness is the key to success, one must start by being happy. Surprisingly, however, Seppala explains that what we think makes us happy and what scientific research proves makes us happy are not always equivalent. She outlines the different types of emotions in a grid. On the x-axis, emotions run from negative to positive. On the y-axis, emotions run from low intensity to high intensity. In the upper right quadrant are high-intensity positive emotions like excited, elated, and ecstatic. In the upper left quadrant are high-intensity negative emotions like angry, anxious, and scared. Seppala explains that we equate happiness with high-intensity positive emotions, but that these emotions can have a draining effect if experienced too often. She explains that low-intensity positive emotions, like calm, serene, and content are more helpful in leading to happiness and success. These emotions make us more resilient to problems and stress, making us better able to problem solve in the face of adversity. Seppala offers many ways to achieve these emotions, including meditation and cardiovascular exercise. While the success of these tactics may vary for individuals, at the heart of Seppala's advice is energy management and living in the present. She posits that by practicing energy management in order to remain calm, we can better focus on the task at hand in order to achieve our goals. A calm demeanor

also has a positive effect on others, and can help managers be perceived as more effective and spark creativity and collaboration within a team. Seppala writes, "...managers who express negative emotions like anger are seen as less effective... Research also shows that workplace stress can lead to high turnover, as employees look for new jobs, decline promotions, or even quit" (p. 146). By maintaining an even temper and not stirring excitement among employees, managers can foster better results and workplace satisfaction.

Seppala also emphasizes the importance of resting and taking breaks from work. She advocates for breaks and vacations away from electronics, free of the temptation to check our in-boxes for work-related communications. If we allow ourselves to fully refresh while away from work, we can return with renewed enthusiasm, better ideas, and restored concentration. Seppala convincingly dispels the image of a successful manager coming into the office early, leaving late, and working themselves to the bone. What some people may view as dedication and going the extra mile, Seppala argues does not maximize success and can breed anxiety and stress in an organization. She recommends taking breaks and exploring topics unrelated to your field of work. By taking physical and mental breaks from work, individuals are more focused when they return to work. She advocates for leaders and companies to instill this mindset in their teams for greater success.

In addition to living in the present and making time to rest, Seppala offers convincing evidence that kindness is vital to happiness and success. She provides scientific evidence that, contrary to the common idea that the most successful people *look out for number one*, we are hardwired to be empathetic and social creatures. If the fact that kindness leads to happiness is not compelling enough, Seppala also asserts that self-focus harms

our relationships and makes us less effective leaders. Seppala writes, "...narcissists always want to be leaders, but once in place, they are disliked by their teams and remain ineffective. We generally prefer leaders who are humble, agreeable, and compassionate" (p. 145). It was intriguing to learn that Seppala's findings about compassion also extend to self-kindness. It is no surprise that research shows that we are often our own harshest critics. A common misconception is that this attitude forces us to achieve more and be better, but it is actually harmful to our success. Seppala recommends treating ourselves like we treat our friends, with leniency and sympathy. Seppala concludes that compassion is ultimately good for the bottom line. In a study on the effects of compassionate practices in the workplace, the *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* found that "...leaders achieve significantly higher levels of organizational effectiveness – including financial performance, customer satisfaction, and productivity" when they promote compassion in the workplace (p. 155).

Conclusion

Seppala acknowledges the viewpoint that her philosophy is "soft" since it advocates for happiness and rest, which are not aligned with many people's view of success. Without an open mind, some individuals may be inclined to dismiss her findings; however, this attitude could be detrimental to their well-being as well as their organizations and those who work for them. By living in the present, making time for restorative breaks, and practicing kindness towards ourselves and others, we can maximize our happiness to be more successful individuals and leaders.

References

Seppala, E. (2016). *The happiness track: How to apply the science of happiness to accelerate your success*. New York, NY: Harper One.