Happiness Traps: How We Sabotage Ourselves at Work

by Annie McKee
LIFE IS TOO SHORT TO BE UNHAPPY AT WORK. YET MANY PROFESSIONALS WHO ARE FREE TO SHAPE THEIR CAREERS ARE JUST THAT: DISENGAGED, UNFULFILLED, AND Miserable. TAKE “SHARON,” A VICE PRESIDENT AT A GLOBAL ENERGY FIRM AND ONE OF MY CONSULTING CLIENTS. SHE’S SMART AND HARDWORKING AND HAS Risen THROUGH THE RANKS BY FOLLOWING THE RULES. SHE MAKES A LOT OF MONEY, IS MARRIED TO A MAN SHE LOVES, AND IS DEVOTED TO HER CHILDREN. SHE HAD EVERYTHING SHE THOUGHT SHE WANTED, BUT SHE WASN’T HAPPY. THINGS WERE TENSE AT HOME, AND WORK NO LONGER GRATIFIED HER. SHE WAS TIRED OF WORKPLACE POLITICS AND CYNICAL ABOUT THE NEVER-ENDING CHANGES THAT WOULD SUPPOSEDLY FIX WHATEVER WAS WRONG WITH THE COMPANY IN A GIVEN QUARTER. SHE RESENTED THE LONG HOURS SHE WAS REQUIRED TO PUT IN. THAT NEXT PROMOTION AND BONUS WEREN’T AS ENTICING AS THEY USED TO BE, BUT SHE STILL WORKED AS HARD AS EVER: STRIVING WAS A HABIT.
SHARON BLAMED OTHERS for her disenchantment. She believed that the executive team was disconnected from the day-to-day business. She complained to friends and coworkers about management’s bad decisions, the company’s strategy, and what she perceived as a lack of vision on the part of senior leadership. All the members of her team seemed to be slacking.

After coaching Sharon for several months, I grew to like her. But even I found her complaints tedious. I can only imagine what her coworkers thought. When we finally got past why everyone else was to blame for her dissatisfaction, she said, “I know I could probably make things better. I’m just so busy. Besides, it doesn’t matter whether I’m happy or not. What matters is that I hit my targets.” In her more reflective moments, Sharon admitted that her stress and unhappiness were affecting her work relationships, her family, and her health. She even noticed that she had begun to compromise her ethics in small ways. What she didn’t see was the link between her growing misery and her dwindling ability to do her job effectively.

Sharon is not alone. For years we’ve heard about dismal levels of employee engagement. Numerous studies show that close to two-thirds of employees in the United States are bored, detached, or jaded and ready to sabotage plans, projects, and other people. This makes no sense to me. Why do so many of us accept unsatisfying work, high levels of stress, looming burnout, and chronic unhappiness? Why don’t we fight back?

Multiple factors account for this contemporary malaise. The American Psychological Association found early in 2017 that Americans are reporting more stress than ever owing to politics, the speed of change, and uncertainty in the world. But it’s not always outside forces that push us over the happiness line. Sometimes we do it to ourselves. Throughout my 30-year career advising leaders of major businesses, CEOs, and academics around the globe, I’ve discovered that far too many of us fall into common “happiness traps”—destructive mindsets and ways of working that keep us stuck, unhappy, and ultimately less successful. Three of the most common happiness traps—ambition, doing what’s expected of us, and overwork—are harmful when taken to the extreme.

THE AMBITION TRAP

The drive to achieve goals and further our careers pushes us to be and do our best. But when ambition is coupled with hypercompetitiveness and a single-minded focus on winning, we get into trouble. We become blind to the impact of our actions on ourselves and others; relationships are damaged and collaboration suffers; we start chasing goals for the sake of hitting targets; and work begins to lose its meaning.

That’s exactly what happened to Sharon. Throughout her life, her parents, teachers, and coaches encouraged her striving, and she attained a lot. She got good grades, top spots on sports teams, and academic awards. When she started working, her ambition impressed her bosses: She gave them what they wanted on time and well done.

Her peers weren’t quite as enthralled, however, and some steered clear as they realized that Sharon always wanted to be number one. To her, that meant everyone else had to be number two. Team goals were not a priority unless they served her purpose, and she got a reputation for throwing people under the bus.

Nothing is inherently wrong with ambition, of course. Sometimes it leads people to hone social skills; after all, effective collaboration is a prerequisite for long-term success in complex organizations. But Sharon’s unfettered ambition was focused solely on her own goals, and peers soon stopped trusting her. They also stopped helping her.

Sharon’s workplace challenges came to a head while she was managing a highly visible project, serving as the interface between her division and a powerful internal client. The company’s strategy shifted, project goals changed, and the client’s standards were raised, although funding remained flat. Sharon repeatedly heard the client’s requests as unreasonable demands and responded as she often had—by turning the situation into a win-lose competition. She began to cut corners, demanded that her division be paid excessive amounts of money for the work it was doing, and even told a falsehood or two to get what she wanted.

Sharon’s boss, who had protected her for years, finally had to admit the obvious: She had become a liability. He removed her from the project and sidelined her. Her career stalled. Being forced off the fast track was a wake-up call, and Sharon came to see that she had been lonely and deeply unhappy at work for a very long time. Her ambition had turned into a trap instead of an asset. Her ruthless behavior was a learned behavior rather than an inherent quality: Success early on had reinforced a winner-take-all attitude that ultimately derailed her both professionally and personally.

THE PATH FORWARD

Finding happiness at work begins with honing your emotional intelligence to grasp which trap has ensnared you. Then you can foster three things that are known to increase professional satisfaction: meaningful work, enduring hope, and workplace friendships.
THE “SHOULD” TRAP

Doing what we think we should do rather than what we want to do is a trap that all of us risk falling into at some point in our work lives. True, some of the unwritten rules that shape our careers are positive, such as completing an education so that we can help our families and observing punctuality and civility at work. But too many of our workplace norms—what I call shoulds—force us to deny who we are and to make choices that hinder our potential and stifle our dreams.

To be successful in most companies, people have to obey shoulds about how to dress, how to talk, whom to associate with, and sometimes even how to have a life outside work. I’ve worked in organizations where a candidate’s scuffed shoes kill his chances of getting the job and where women must wear makeup and have certain (usually short) hairstyles. I’ve also been in companies where it’s impossible for men to rise to leadership roles unless they are married—to women. And at the Fortune 500 only 4% of senior leaders are female, and fewer than 1% are people of color. These shocking statistics tell a tale of who “should” lead and who “should” follow.

Such unspoken norms are not only unfounded (gender, race, and marital status have no correlation with leadership ability); they also take a personal toll when we feel we must hide who we are or pretend to be someone we’re not. Kenji Yoshino and Christie Smith showed in a Deloitte-sponsored study of more than 3,000 workers that 61% of people feel they have to “cover” in some way to fit in at work: They either actively hide or downplay their gender, race, sexual orientation, religion, or other aspects of their identities, personalities, or lives.

At some companies women don’t talk about their children to avoid the “motherhood penalty.” African-Americans often avoid one another so as not to be seen as part of a marginalized group. Even 45% of white men report covering things that set them apart, such as depression or a child who struggles at school. I have known many who hide anything that makes them look weak or vulnerable—difficulties at home, feeling burned out—because they feel they should be strong all the time.

Shoulds don’t just affect how we project ourselves at work. They often dictate what kind of job and career we aspire to. Take another of my coaching clients, “Marcus.” During his junior and senior years of college, Marcus was involved with a couple of start-ups, and he relished the experience. He secretly hoped to continue on the entrepreneurship track, but as graduation loomed, he found himself waveri ng. When he got an offer from a prestigious consultancy, he took the job. Six months in he realized that he hated it, but with parents still bragging about his big job and salary and envious friends asking him to get them into the company, he felt he couldn’t quit.
At 42 Marcus was made a partner in the firm. He’d followed all the rules and, on the surface, was a true winner. But that’s the problem: His career felt like a game. He saw a disconnect between the firm’s mission and what it really did, yet he went along. He recognized that how he was expected to treat people—especially junior people—was dehumanizing, yet he did it.

Marcus didn’t like consulting and had spent much of his career hiding who he really is: a gay man married to a union carpenter. He had never disclosed details about his personal life at work because it was clear that those who succeeded at his company were straight, and as far as he knew, no other spouses worked with their hands. Living in hiding makes anyone unhappy. And it drags down professional performance as commitment wanes and displeasure with work and colleagues eventually becomes obvious.

Avoiding the should trap isn’t about completely ignoring the rules, of course. Absolute nonconformity and cultural deviance would challenge even the most inclusive organization. Instead, we need to recognize which rules end up being harmful. Self-suppression and diligent conformity don’t bring out our most original, creative contributions at work; nor do they lead to workplace happiness, a key ingredient of sustained professional success. In this case the shoulds that directed his professional choices caused Marcus to take the wrong job and hide his personal life. The rules he thought he must obey became soul destroying and ultimately dragged down his career.

THE OVERWORK TRAP

Some of us react to the very real pressures of the “always on” 21st-century workplace by spending every waking moment working or thinking about work. We don’t have time for friends, exercise, healthful food, or sleep. We don’t play with our children or even listen to them. We don’t stay home when we’re sick. We don’t take the time to get to know people at work or put ourselves in their shoes before we jump to conclusions.

Overwork sucks us into a negative spiral: More work causes more stress; increased stress causes our brains to slow down and compromises our emotional intelligence; less creativity and poor people skills harm our ability to get things done. As the title of a recent Harvard Business Review article nicely summarized, “The Research Is Clear: Long Hours Backfire for People and for Companies.”

Overwork is seductive, because it is still lauded in so many workplaces. Boston University’s Erin Reid found, in fact, that some people (men in particular) lie about how many hours they work. They claim to put in 80-plus-hour weeks—presumably because

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they think excessive hours impress their bosses. What’s more, obsession with work can stem from our inner demons: It feeds on our insecurities, assuages our guilt when we see others overwork, or helps us escape personal troubles. Many overworkers believe that working more will alleviate stress: If they just finish that project, get that report done, read all that e-mail, they’ll feel less out of control. But of course the work never ends.

That happened to Marcus. He would come home in the evenings—usually later than he had promised—and spend time in the kitchen talking with his spouse and asking the kids about their day. All the while, his phone was sitting on the counter. Two minutes into the conversation he’d pick it up. He thought his family didn’t care, but naturally they were hurt. Over the years, his spouse tried to talk about Marcus’s preoccupation with work. At first Marcus would explode: “I have to do this! What do you want me to do, quit?” Eventually he’d be contrite and promise to change. But after a short remission, his addiction would return.

Marcus started sleeping less—in part because of late-night and early-morning calls, and in part from stress. He didn’t eat well, and he found himself drinking too much. At work he was a grumpy, distracted boss. He began making mistakes—missing deadlines, forgetting to respond to critical e-mails. He couldn’t live up to his own or others’ expectations, which bothered him tremendously. So he just tried harder.

Like Sharon, Marcus finally got a wake-up call. His supervisor told him that everyone in his department was worried about him—his switch was always “on,” and it was obvious that he was burning out. She’d even said the same thing his spouse did: “This has to stop.”

Marcus struggled to admit he had a problem. Overwork disguised as diligence was part of his identity—and, as is true for many of us, it seemed more important as his career progressed and the pace of change increased. Flatter, leaner companies and ultracompetitive markets force us to do more with less. As technology has advanced, we are performing tasks that others used to do—or do for us. For the many of us who work across time zones, early-morning and late-night conference calls are now routine. And that little device we carry everywhere is a demanding master. Work is literally in our pockets—or on our nightstands.

Whether you’ve fallen into the “shoulds” and the overwork traps, as Marcus did, or the ambition trap, as Sharon did, the question is, How can you get out? The good news is that some of the same leadership skills and mindsets that make you effective at work can help you escape and rediscover happiness there.

**BREAKING FREE**

The first step is to accept that you deserve happiness at work. That means giving up the misbelief that work is not meant to be a primary source of fulfillment. For centuries it was simply a means of staving off hunger. To be sure, many people still struggle with low wages and horrible working conditions, and for them, work may equal drudgery. But research has shown that even menial jobs can provide fulfillment. What’s surprising is that successful executives—today’s knowledge workers and creatives—sometimes don’t find true meaning in their work. Instead they buy into the myth that it’s a grind.

Work can be a source of real happiness, which I define as a deep and abiding enjoyment of daily activities fueled by passion for a meaningful purpose, a hopeful view of the future, and true friendships. To embrace these three components of happiness, we must first delve into the very personal drivers and habits that keep us from fostering them. Why do we work all the time? Do our ambition and desire to win serve us or hurt us? Why are we trapped by what we feel we should do and not pursuing what we want to do? To answer these questions, we need to tap into our emotional intelligence.

**MOVING FROM TRAPPED TO HAPPY**

Over the past several decades, psychologists and researchers, myself included, have come to agree that there are 12 emotional intelligence competencies (see the sidebar above), all of which can help you avoid or break free from the happiness traps. I believe that three—emotional self-awareness, emotional self-control, and organizational awareness—are particularly useful when casting off an outdated mindset.

Emotional self-awareness is the capacity to notice and understand your feelings and moods and to recognize how they affect your thoughts and actions. You might realize, for example, that the discomfort you feel when you buck a work “should”—such as replying to e-mail at 8 PM or during the weekend—signals that you’re afraid of being excluded. Going a bit deeper, you might see that this fear has little or nothing to do with your current work situation; it may simply be an old habit of mind that no longer serves you.
Awareness is a good start, but then you need to act. This is where emotional self-control comes in: It enables you to tolerate the discomfort that arises when you understand what you are doing to yourself. For instance, if you know that you check your e-mail at night out of insecurity, you’re not going to feel particularly good about yourself. But if you push that feeling aside, you will remain stuck. Self-control also enables us to take actions that may fall outside our comfort zone.

Finally, organizational awareness—an understanding of your work environment—can help you distinguish between what is coming from inside you and what’s coming from others or your company. Say, for example, that you’re aware that your colleagues are reading and sending e-mails at all hours and that your overwork comes from pressure to conform—not necessarily from insecurity. Now you see that you have a choice to make: You can bravely decide to buck the norms and quit overworking, or you can continue to behave in a way that conflicts with your values (and harms your health and family life). You might even recognize that pulling back from overworking could change the dynamics and expectations of your team, creating a virtuous microculture within the larger organization.

PURPOSE, HOPE, AND FRIENDSHIP

Using emotional intelligence to remove barriers to happiness is a first step on the journey to greater fulfillment at work. But happiness doesn’t happen magically—we must actively seek meaning and purpose in our day-to-day activities, foster hope in ourselves and others, and build friendships at work.

**Meaning and purpose.** Humans are wired to seek meaning in everything we do, whether we’re sitting in an office, hiking in the mountains, or eating dinner with the family. Passion for a cause fuels energy, intelligence, and creativity. Brain chemistry is in part responsible: Researchers have shown that the positive emotions aroused by work we see as worthwhile enable us to be smarter, more innovative, and more adaptable. For example, the Duke psychology professor Dan Ariely and colleagues conducted a study in which participants were paid to build Lego models, some of which were dismantled in front of them upon completion. People whose creations were preserved made, on average, 50% more Lego models than those whose models were destroyed, despite identical monetary incentives. We give more of ourselves when we have an impact—even if it’s a small one.

Management scholars have shown that the same holds true on the job: Purpose is a powerful driver of workplace happiness. Yet too often we fail to tap this wellspring of motivation. As was true for Sharon and Marcus, it’s easy to lose sight of what we value and ignore the aspects of work that matter to us, especially if we struggle with dysfunctional organizations, bad bosses, and stress. And if that happens, disengagement is just around the corner. In the absence of meaning, we have no reason to give our all.

Each of us finds meaning and purpose in work differently, but in my experience with people from all over the globe and in all professions, I’ve seen some similarities: We want to fight for a cause we care about. We want to create and innovate. We want to fix problems and improve our workplaces. We want to learn and grow. And, as studies have shown, meaningful work is as possible and important for a janitor or a middle manager as it is for a CEO.

As you discover which aspects of your job are truly fulfilling—and which are soul destroying—you will face choices about how to spend your time and what to pursue in your career. Marcus decided to begin seriously exploring that business he’d always dreamed of having. He looked at finances and at how to leverage his relationships at his current firm and with clients. He and his spouse considered the lifestyle changes that launching a business would require. In the end, he created a bridge: He worked as an associate at his firm part-time for two years while seeking funding and starting his new business.

**Hope.** If you’ve ever faced adversity, a crisis, or a loss, you know that hope is what got you through. It makes us want to get up every day and keep trying, even when life is tough. Hope makes it possible to navigate complexity; handle stress, fear, and frustration; and understand hectic organizations and lives. That’s in part because hope, like purpose, positively affects our brain chemistry. Research has shown that when we feel optimistic, our nervous system shifts from fight-or-flight to calm and poised to act. For example, one study demonstrated that when individuals are coached in a way that sparks positive feelings and an inspiring vision of the future, areas of the brain associated with the parasympathetic nervous system are activated: Breathing slows, blood pressure drops, and the immune system functions better. We think more clearly, are more alert, and are better able to manage our emotions. We feel energized and ready to plan for the future.

That’s how Sharon moved from awareness of why she was so focused on winning to creating a career
that she was authentically excited about. Through conversations with her husband (who had cautioned her for years about her unregulated ambition), she was able to craft a vision of what she wanted from her work—one that relied not on getting the next promotion or winning some endless game but on the kind of life she wanted to lead.

Employers often use vision statements to instill optimism and positivity in their employees, but unfortunately even the most well-crafted ones are rarely compelling enough to keep people hopeful over the long term. To be happy at work, we must feel that our responsibilities and opportunities fit a personal vision—one that speaks to our values, desires, and beliefs—and we must imagine pathways that lead to it. Hope is really about planning—it encourages us to chart a course even in the face of seemingly dire prospects; it encourages us to take concrete, practical actions that are tied to how we want our lives and careers to unfold.

I’ve met many people in my work who shy away from big dreams, fearing that they’ll only be disappointed. But I don’t believe there’s any such thing as false hope. Hope is not magical thinking or fantasy; it’s a powerful, positive emotional experience that leads to courage, thoughtful plans, and concrete actions.

**Friendship.** If you work with people you like and respect, and if they like and respect you in return, you probably enjoy going to work. But if you’re in a job where you feel constantly on guard, disdained, or excluded, you’re probably on your way to deep unhappiness—or there already. You may tell yourself that the situation is tolerable or that you don’t need friends at work. That’s not true.

In fact, good relationships are the backbone of successful organizations. People who care for one another give generously of time, talent, and resources. Gallup found that close work relationships boost employee satisfaction by 50% and that people with a best friend at work are seven times as likely as others to engage fully in their work. Mutual respect motivates us to resolve conflicts so that everyone wins. And when we believe that we will be accepted for who we are, that we have important roles to play, and that we’re part of a team, we are more committed to collective goals.

Warm, positive relationships are important at work for very human reasons. Since the beginning of time, people have organized into tribes that labor and play together. Today organizations are our tribes. We want to work in a group or a company that makes us proud and inspires us to give our best efforts.

We also want people to care about us and value us as human beings. And we need to do the same for others. We thrive physically and psychologically when we feel compassion for others and see that they are concerned for our well-being in return. In fact, the Harvard Grant Study, among others, has found that love—yes, love—is the single most important determinant of happiness in life. What’s more, people who experience love—including the love involved in friendships—are more successful, even financially. (The study notes that during peak earning years, participants who scored highest on “warm relationships” made an average of $141,000 more a year.)

But love at work? Most people shy away from the notion, leery of romance in the workplace (although we know it occurs often). What we need at work, however, is love founded on caring, concern, and camaraderie. Such relationships are full of trust and generosity, a source of delight, and make work fun.

**Too Many People** believe that if they’re successful, they’ll be happy. That’s backward. The author and psychologist Shawn Achor says it straightforwardly: “Happiness comes before success.” That’s because the positive emotions aroused by being engaged, fulfilled, and valued at work have a host of benefits: Our brains function better; we are more creative and adaptable; we have more energy, make smarter decisions, and better manage complexity. It’s simple: Happy people perform better than their unhappy peers.

It’s time to claim our right to happiness at work. To start, let’s replace outdated beliefs with a new understanding of what we can expect from work—and from one another. Let’s break free of traps that keep us from happiness. And let’s begin the journey to fulfillment by focusing on discovering and living our purpose at work, reaching for a compelling vision of the future, and turning colleagues into real friends. These things will help us create workplaces that honor our humanity and foster common decency and sustainable success, workplaces in which ideas, needs, and desires matter—as does happiness. ☛ HBR Reprint R1705D

**FURTHER READING**

*Before Happiness: The 5 Hidden Keys to Achieving Success, Spreading Happiness, and Sustaining Positive Change*  
Shawn Achor  

*The Emotional Life of Your Brain: How Its Unique Patterns Affect the Way You Think, Feel and Live—and How You Can Change Them*  
Richard J. Davidson and Sharon Begley  
Avery, 2012

*The Oxford Handbook of Happiness*  
Susan A. David, Ilona Boniwell, and Amanda Conley-Ayers  
Oxford University Press, 2014

*Positive Psychology: The Scientific and Practical Explorations of Human Strengths*  
Shane J. Lopez, Jennifer Teramoto Pedrotti, and C.R. Snyder  
Sage Publications, 2015

*Positivity: Top-Notch Research Reveals the 3 to 1 Ratio That Will Change Your Life*  
Barbara L. Fredrickson  
Harmony, 2009

*Primal Leadership: Unleashing the Power of Emotional Intelligence*  
Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee  

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