The Optimistic Workplace
Creating an Environment That Energizes Everyone

Shawn Murphy
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Take-Aways

• In today’s evolving workplace, autocratic managers and supervisors must give way to “stewards” who can create an “optimistic workplace.”

• Stewards don’t command; they listen to, guide, support and serve employees.

• Leaders should leverage human nature rather than fight it.

• Build trust and relationships with your team by “getting to know” each person professionally and personally.

• Human nature needs “purpose, meaning, autonomy” and “connectedness” at work. These factors are powerful drivers of engagement and performance.

• Discover your purpose and values; calibrate your work and life accordingly.

• Help each member of your team do the same.

• Instill meaning at work by cultivating community and a shared, higher purpose.

• Build community by engineering new connections, selecting collaborative new hires, encouraging team goals, including some fun and recognizing team achievements.

• Stay focused on performance and outcomes; hold yourself and your team accountable.
Relevance

What You Will Learn
In this summary, you will learn: 1) Why autocratic managers must give way to “stewards” who lead team members to better lives and higher performance, 2) What people need at work to feel engaged and to perform well, and 3) What positive steps you can take to build an “optimistic workplace.”

Review
This business manual by professor and leadership consultant Shawn Murphy isn’t just another text about employee engagement and new-style leadership. It’s a useful, comprehensive manual that presents its content – even some ideas that are familiar – in a fresh, compelling way. Murphy makes a solid case for replacing autocratic managers with service-oriented “stewards” who focus on connecting with employees. He urges managers to help staff members link their work and their lives to values, purpose and meaning – with an overlay of accountability. He includes great charts and worksheets throughout and in an extensive appendix called “The Optimism Planner.” Using a combination of solid research and anecdotes about successful teams, Murphy teaches junior, frontline and midlevel leaders how to create happy, balanced, effective teams and how to build an “optimistic workplace.” getAbstract believes this actionable guidebook will help managers who want to build a “pocket of excellence,” even within an ineffective or bureaucratic organization.

Summary

Don’t Manage; Instead, Support and Guide
Today’s workers no longer require a manager or supervisor who tells them what to do and how to do it. Modern employees need leaders or “stewards” who support and guide them and who create conditions in which team members can tap into their creativity and passions.

Rather than managing people, coach and inspire them instead. Remove obstacles for them. In other words, serve them. Let them set their goals and help them take responsibility for achieving their targets. Foster their natural desire to contribute, share ideas and do “meaningful work.” Above all, infuse purpose in their work by connecting it to larger, shared goals and outcomes that fulfill people’s innate need for meaning.

Frontline leaders set the tone and “climate” for their teams. Is your environment fun and productive, or fearful and unhappy? Good leaders create an “optimistic workplace” by having conversations and building relationships based on trust, caring, coaching and connections. Get to know each employee on a personal level. Don’t let some dysfunction in the broader organization discourage you or slow you down. Create a positive environment for your team despite whatever may be happening outside your control. To support large, lasting performance improvements, work with human nature not against it. In other words, go with the flow to make life easier.

Human Nature and Human Needs
With rare exceptions, people share the same drives, motivations and needs. Human beings need connection. People unravel physically and psychologically when they’re isolated and ignored. As a steward, work with the powerful human need to connect. Nurture strong relationships, especially within your team members. As people come to feel a greater sense of belonging, they will become more satisfied with their work; that, in turn, drives superior
“Knowing your purpose comes from constant reflection and exploration of your life. Purpose is not static; it’s dynamic. It evolves along with your unfolding understanding of your roles in life.”

“Care for the whole, and nurture the individual. This is what helps foster an optimistic workplace.”

“Building an organization on the fundamental belief that employees can be trusted and treated like fully functioning, mature adults is common sense. It’s also an essential input for creating a positive work environment.”

performance. You only have to establish the right conditions. Employees will network and connect naturally unless their work environment restricts them. Evolution “hardwired” people to socialize. Humans need other humans around them to perform at their best, so emphasize teamwork and collaboration.

As a steward, build and nurture close relationships with your team members. Get to know everyone professionally and personally. “Notice” who they are and what motivates them. Consider what happened at the Market Basket grocery chain in 2014 when the board fired Arthur T. Demoulas, one of the chain’s founders and leaders. He had invested time in building genuine relationships with his staffers, customers and suppliers. He was the firm’s chief steward, “beloved” by his people who knew he cared about them. Staffers went on strike and organized boycotts of the chain, demanding his reinstatement. Customers and suppliers joined the protests until the board finally capitulated and Demoulas returned.

Frequently acknowledge people for their efforts in ways that reflect your personal relationships with each of them. Encourage a sense of “joy” and purpose at work. Most people need meaningful work, so take great care to link each employee’s endeavors with a bigger vision. According to Deloitte research, 91% of organizations that have a “strong sense of purpose” satisfy their stakeholders by meeting financial goals. McKinsey research demonstrates that meaning is “five times more influential” than other drivers of workplace satisfaction.

By nature, people need to experiment, test their ideas and be able to create at work. Encourage experimentation and creativity by making it safe and recognizing achievement. Cash and bonuses don’t ignite exceptional effort. That’s forthcoming only when people believe their work makes a difference, when their job leverages their best skills and talents, and when their organization allows them to improve as they make progress toward personal, team and organizational goals.

**Bad Leaders**

Bad leaders attempt to drive results by demanding that employees sacrifice time with their families and friends to spend more time at work. They intimidate and coerce, creating pressured, stressful environments. They don’t care about relationships beyond getting the work done; they evoke mistrust, and they tend to set unclear goals and expectations. Since they show no loyalty to their teams, they generate no loyalty for the organization.

Such leaders can destroy workplace optimism by ignoring employees’ need for purposeful work, by using an outdated “command and control” approach to management, by holding too tightly to the “status quo,” by emphasizing profit above all else, by caring only about their own success and by failing to think much about anything beyond their own silo.

**Good Leaders**

Good leaders recognize people’s need for autonomy. They understand the power of “intrinsic motivation,” which originates inside people whose leaders tap their interests and inspire them. This is the opposite of “extrinsic motivators” like raises and other incentives. Although extrinsic rewards offer immediate simplicity, they have only temporary effects on motivation. Good leaders bolster the essential sense of well-being that staffers need to thrive at work and in life; intrinsic motivation nourishes that feeling of well-being.

Good leaders spread optimism by showing humility and sharing credit; by demonstrating honesty through earnestness and consistency; by taking time to think things through and
to listen to and understand others. They show resilience in the face of challenges, they’re willing to demonstrate vulnerability, and they admit their doubts and uncertainties.

Whether you inherit a mess created by a bad leader or you recognize the traits of bad leaders in yourself and want to change, start creating an optimistic workplace by rejecting the notion of management and turning instead to stewardship. Directly enlist your staffers’ support and energies. Work with your team or division; don’t wait for executives to lead the charge.

**Values and Happiness**

Seek happiness for yourself even before you try to steward other’s happiness. Consider what makes you happy. Work toward your potential as a “values-based leader.” Learn to accept and appreciate yourself. Find a harmonious balance that integrates your work and your private life, allowing you to do the things that bring you fulfillment. Your mood at work depends on discovering your values, knowing your needs and aligning them with everything you do. So, take the time to identify your values, and to understand what drives and inspires you.

Integrate your priorities and passions with your life and work. Because these pursuits focus on your most powerful, intrinsic drivers, they bring lasting, rather than “fleeting,” joy. They lead to a love of your work that will inspire those around you and help them love their work as well.

As a leader, your mood sets the tone for everyone else. “Positive emotions” spread, but so do negative ones. Discover the essence of what makes your career and your life fulfilling before you try to steward others to achieve the same. When you’re ready, begin the same process with your team. Describe your personal values, and ask your team members to develop theirs. Your goal is to help them create better, richer lives at home and work. Explain your philosophy that the two go hand in hand. Engagement at work requires engagement at home, and vice-versa.

**Driving Your Purpose, Meaning and Connectedness**

Everyone needs purpose, meaning and connection to reach their full potential. Purpose provides direction and helps you make decisions. It improves and can even lengthen your life. You can’t determine your purpose once and expect it to stay relevant forever. Purpose comes from regular introspection; it evolves as your life circumstances and values change.

Discover your purpose by thinking about and documenting what you find most “rewarding” at work and at home. Test the things you identify by asking if they invigorate you and generate consistent positive emotions. Are there broad categories of activities or goals that have inspired you throughout your life? Search for the words and phrases that express the values that mean the most to you. Think about the people they involve: Who helps you realize your most energizing moments and rewarding achievements?

Based on your personal inventory, identify your values. Consider how much time you spend on aligned activities. Going forward, connect your work and life to your values by seeking tasks and experiences that mesh with them. Prioritize activities that align with your values and purpose.

**Focus on Your Team Members’ Purpose**

DeVry University reports that 71% of millennials cite “meaningful work” as their most crucial indicator of career success. As you make your work meaningful by aligning it to
“There is happiness that generates pleasure, which is fleeting. Then there is happiness derived from meaning, self-awareness and growth in life that helps a person become fully functioning: pursuit of one’s best self.”

“Purpose lights people up. There’s aliveness within people who have purpose, who work with purpose, who align with a purpose.”

About the Author

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There is happiness that generates pleasure, which is fleeting. Then there is happiness derived from meaning, self-awareness and growth in life that helps a person become fully functioning: pursuit of one’s best self.

Clear obstacles for your team by regularly evaluating your rules, procedures and policies; eliminate or revise outdated and irrelevant strictures. Keep bureaucracy in check and remain flexible, no matter how large your organization becomes. Realize that you can’t build an optimistic workplace by merely declaring it so, or by ignoring negatives and constantly touting positives. A mismatch between reality and what you preach will breed cynicism. Avoid seeing everything only from the optimist’s perspective, for example, by encouraging your proponents and ignoring or disrespecting your skeptics.

And, don’t focus on employees’ happiness to the exclusion of their performance and results. Combine optimism and modern leadership practices with strict accountability in supporting people as they work on reaching their performance goals. Optimism will help them reach their goals, but optimism alone can’t do it all.

Taking Action

To build optimism, enlist the help of like-minded, open people. Then round out your group by recruiting a few skeptics. Canvass your team members to learn how they feel about their current job conditions. Never assume people already know the purpose and impact of their work. Repeatedly explain to your staffers exactly how their contributions affect the success of the firm. Encourage collaboration and mutual dependencies instead of individual heroics.

Nurture a sense of meaningfulness by demanding transparency, honesty and high ethical standards. Recognize people’s achievements frequently, and express your appreciation specifically to them. Reward team efforts even more than individual work. Monetary awards alone seldom provide meaning; that comes only from serving a higher, shared purpose.

In your workplace, discourage gossip, cliques and politics. “Hold yourself accountable” and promote values-based work for everyone. Give people room to do things their way, involve them in decisions and meet with your team members one-on-one on a regular basis. Consider what Zappos and other leading firms do by designing their office floor plans to promote serendipitous encounters among people who might otherwise not connect. Match new employees with experienced buddies who can show them the ropes and make introductions. Never exclude anyone. Ostracism causes even more damage than bullying.

A shared purpose leads to better performance and better outcomes, but community and trust must come first. Healthy communities at work include people who cooperate and collaborate. Encourage a strong organizational community by helping employees understand the whole operation, not just their silo. Communicate; ask people their thoughts on what’s going well and what isn’t. Hire people who have a track record of collaboration. Bring team members together regularly to celebrate and form deeper connections.