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Nurturing Happiness in RHY Programs

Why Nurture Happiness?

Research clearly demonstrates that happier workplaces are more stable and productive, and also have better customer engagement¹—that is, the people who they serve are more likely to stay with them and return for services in the future. Think about RHY staff you know who have a generally positive outlook, and whose overall way of being in the world is “happy.” That happiness is contagious.² Young people who are disenfranchised, cynical beyond their years, or who “know better” than to trust adults, tend to engage with happier staff in a different way.

The good news is that happiness as a state of mind—rather than a passing emotional state—can be developed with practice.³ By cultivating workplace happiness, RHY programs can both reduce employee turnover and increase client satisfaction.⁴ This tip sheet offers concrete approaches for nurturing a sense of purpose, engagement, resilience, and kindness in RHY programs, which are the four qualities that research suggests are closely connected to workplace happiness.⁵

Key Drivers of Workplace Happiness

Purpose: When you know your work matters to you, your organization, and the world.

Engagement: A positive, fulfilling work-related state of mind that reflects your genuine thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Resilience: The ability to handle adversity with grace, face challenges, recover from setbacks, be accountable for failures, and resolve conflicts at work.

Kindness: Interacting in trusting, inclusive, and cooperative behavior with colleagues.

Sources: *Greater Good Science Center; The Science of Happiness at Work.*

¹Fry, E. (Sept. 8, 2017). “Can Levi’s Make Life Better for Garment Workers?” *Fortune*. Retrieved from <http://fortune.com/2017/09/08/levis-change-the-world/>; and De Neve, J.E. & Ward, G. (2017). Happiness at Work in Helliwell, J., Layard, R., & Sachs, J. (2017). *World Happiness Report 2017*, New York: Sustainable Development Solutions Network. Retrieved from <https://s3.amazonaws.com/happiness-report/2017/HR17.pdf>

²Barsade, S.G. (2002). The ripple effect: emotional contagion and its influence on group behavior. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, v47, i4, pp. 644-675. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2F3094912>; and Kjerulf, A. (Jan. 18, 2016). “The 5 Most Important Findings from the Science of Happiness That Apply at Work” [blog post]. *The Chief Happiness Officer*. Retrieved from <https://positivesharing.com/2016/01/positive-psychology-at-work>

³Greater Good Science Center (2018). Science of Happiness at Work [course]. Retrieved from https://ggsc.berkeley.edu/what_we_do/online_courses_tools/the_science_of_happiness_at_work

⁴Lyubomirsky, S., King, L., & Diener, E. (2005). The benefits of frequent positive affect: Does happiness lead to success? *Psychological Bulletin*, v131, n6, pp. 803-855. DOI: 10.1037/0033-2909.131.6.803. Retrieved from <http://sonjalyubomirsky.com/wp-content/themes/sonjalyubomirsky/papers/LKD2005.pdf>

⁵Simon-Thomas, E. R. (Aug. 29, 2018). The four keys to happiness at work. *Greater Good Magazine*. Retrieved from https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/the_four_keys_to_happiness_at_work

What the Research Says

- Levels of staff happiness are dictated not by innate qualities that people either have or don't have, but are instead a reflection of organizational culture and the various behaviors that it encourages.⁶
- Up to 40 percent of our happiness is determined by the daily activities that we intentionally engage in, while 10 percent is situational, and the remaining 50 percent is linked to our genetic make-up.⁷
- Increasing workplace happiness can translate to a 52 percent reduction in staff turnover, as well as a 10 percent increase in customer satisfaction, even when services remain the same.⁸
- People working in RHY programs are likely to be purpose-oriented. While 40 percent of U.S. workers overall report being purpose-oriented, that figure jumps to 54 percent for those working in community and social service settings.⁹

Tips for Nurturing Happiness

Emphasize Purpose

- Talk openly and often about the RHY program's mission, as well as how staff's personal values align with it. Ask prospective volunteers and RHY staff about what gives them purpose and how RHY work will be an opportunity to fulfill that purpose.
- Whenever possible, let work assignments be based on a "good match" between expected program activities and what a staffer finds most fulfilling. For example, a staff member whose purpose is "healing families" may be excited to run a parent discussion group, while someone inspired by "making sure no teen graduates from high school without a job" may find purpose identifying community apprenticeship sites or setting up job-shadow days.
- Use data, stories, and client feedback in order to reflect back to RHY staff how they are helping young people and the community in meaningful ways. Create simple opportunities for clients to say "thank you" to staff—for example, by creating a "shout out" board or placing a basket of blank cards and pens in a place where they are easily accessible.
- Create opportunities for RHY staff to guide organizational policies and practices.
- Recognize and appreciate RHY staff on a regular basis, in particular for the ways they live out a sense of purpose that reflects the organization's mission.
- Provide paid time off for RHY staff to volunteer for a cause that's important to them.

Promote Authentic Engagement

- Allow RHY staff to have autonomy and to "be themselves" in their work. Once trained in core skills, let their personal style for engaging with young people shine through.
- Create a culture where RHY staff can intentionally focus on the young people, families, or tasks in front of them, rather than needing to multi-task all of the time. Design work areas for different tasks—for example, quiet spaces for reflection and paperwork, where staff are not also monitoring RHY safety or answering the phone.
- Encourage and model the expression of positive emotions such as curiosity, amusement, laughter, awe, and joy through casual interactions at work. Display or share light-hearted jokes, stories, or images in meetings or break room areas.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Lyubomirsky, S. (2007). *The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.

⁸Gallup (2017). State of the American Workplace. Retrieved from <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/238085/state-american-workplace-report-2017.aspx>

⁹Hurst, A., Pearce, A., Erickson, C. Parish, S., Vesty, L., Schnidman, A., Garlinghouse, M. & Pavela, A. (2016). 2016 *Workforce Purpose Index: Purpose at Work*. LinkedIn & Imperative. Retrieved from https://cdn.imperative.com/media/public/Global_Purpose_Index_2016.pdf

- Make time for reflection. In one-on-one and group supervision, draw out lessons that staff are learning from their work, and identify short- and long-term goals. Create a simple system for logging progress toward team goals, and encourage staff to keep a work journal.
- Offer opportunities for RHY staff to engage in work that is progressively more challenging, or new and interesting.
- Embrace RHY staff's authentic identity in the workplace, supporting choices in attire and appearance as much as possible. If you find yourself resistant to this, ask yourself what's underneath your attitude.¹⁰

Boost Staff Resilience

- Ensure that all RHY staff have a short break during work. Encourage them to go outside or leave the workspace and disconnect from technology.
- Organize annual retreats away from the worksite and use ice-breakers or other short activities to help staff get to know each other and build supportive relationships with one another.¹¹
- Stay strength-focused. Talk about positive outcomes of the work, and help RHY staff imagine and achieve goals for program improvement.
- Break through systemic barriers whenever possible in order to support RHY staff's work—for example, have supervisors step in to manage “red tape”; free up concrete resources that a particular young person needs to achieve a goal; and brainstorm with staff about how to overcome particularly stubborn obstacles.
- Promote staff's self-care efforts through training, paid time off, and opportunities for leisure activities outside of work. For example, organizations may broker discounts for staff to attend local gyms, yoga or Pilates classes, art workshops, or cultural events.
- Encourage a growth mindset, and discourage perfectionism. Appreciate the dedicated efforts that RHY staff put forth, rather than just rewarding end results or accomplishments.
- As part of the performance review process, allow staff to complete anonymous evaluations of their direct supervisor(s), and use the information to identify and work on areas for growth.

Practice Kindness

- Gauge the current atmosphere or “feel” in the workplace. How supportive or competitive is it? Do people take care of each other? Do conflicts result in growth? Do people thank each other?
- Treat staff with dignity, and ensure that leaders admit to their mistakes and apologize when necessary.

¹⁰Opie, T. (2017). A conversation with Tina Opie [video]. 2017 Gender & Work Symposium. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rTAJMs3Y7g>

¹¹Sippel, L.M., Pietrzak, R.H., Charney, D.S., Mayes, L.C. & Southwick, S.M. (2015). How does social support enhance resilience in the trauma-exposed individual? *Ecology and Society*, 20(4), p. 10. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5751/ES-07832-200410>

Keeping it Real with Clients

RHY staff will inevitably face difficult times with the young people in their programs. Organizations committed to authentic engagement must trust staff to choose and prioritize how they work with youth in any given moment.

For example, if negative emotions are running high in a client meeting, or if someone or some policy is preventing a young person from getting what they need, RHY staff can model healthy coping skills by spontaneously adjusting the day's plan.

They might say, “I'm really struggling with this situation right now. Let's take a break to walk outside (or get a snack, listen to music, or watch a funny video) and come back to this.”

RHY staff need to know that they won't be penalized if paperwork is occasionally delayed, or if the activities they do with youth don't always look like serious work.

Taking a few minutes to relax and enjoy the company of RHY in our programs can cause happiness to ripple out, affecting other youth and staff who might be having a tough day.

- Provide training on implicit bias—the unconsciously held beliefs that impact our interactions with people—and help staff explore how implicit bias affects their interactions with clients, coworkers, and other people in the community.
- Appreciate friendships among RHY staff, and encourage staff to get to know each other on a more personal level. Celebrate staff birthdays and other personally significant occasions.
- Acknowledge that work with RHY can be stressful, and remind staff to be kind to themselves and to others when the work is hard.
- Engage in active listening by putting aside your own thoughts (and electronic devices) and really focusing on the person who is speaking.
- Create opportunities for RHY staff to learn and practice mindfulness techniques, particularly those that incorporate loving kindness meditation.¹²

Simple Exercises and Practices

- **Acts of Kindness at Work.** Most people are familiar with the practice of committing “random acts of kindness” and the concept of “paying it forward.” For a fun variation of this in the workplace, pick one week each month when a single RHY staff member is secretly assigned to perform five random acts of kindness every day. These acts can be anything, large or small—for example, bringing someone coffee, holding open a door, cleaning a shared space, offering a genuine smile, or mentioning something specific that you appreciate about a coworker. The person offering kindnesses should write down what they’ve done each day, describing the act, how it was received, and how it made them (the “do-er”) feel. And then let that person quietly assign an RHY coworker to have the next turn. After a few months, ask the RHY team how they think these acts of kindness have shifted the tone of the workplace.
- **Funny Things at Work.** Every day, for one week, ask RHY staff to write down the two or three funniest things that happened at work that day. Give each entry a title, and describe what different players said and did during the episode. At the end of the week, ask team members to each share one of their funny stories with their coworkers. Keeping track of the moments that evoked “feel-good” emotions helps to train the brain to notice positive things in the world just as often as we notice the negatives.

Additional Resources

The Happy Secret to Better Work (2011). This 12-minute TED Talk by Shawn Achor describes what positive psychologists know about happiness and about the “happiness advantage.” https://www.ted.com/talks/shawn_achor_the_happy_secret_to_better_work/up-next

Happiness as a Workplace Strategy (2019). Recorded webinar presented by Cindy Carraway-Wilson at Youth Catalytics that focuses on do-able steps that executives, program managers, and direct-service workers can take in order to increase their own happiness as well as the happiness of others around them. <https://www.youthcatalytics.org>

RHY Staff Retention Information Sheet Series (2019). This set of five information sheets from the Family and Youth Services Bureau describes strategies for retaining quality staff in RHY programs by focusing on self-care, organizational culture, hiring, compensation, and career pathways. <https://www.rhyttac.net>

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¹²Seppala, E. (Oct. 28, 2014). “18 Science-Based Reasons to Try Loving Kindness Meditation Today” [blog post]. Retrieved from <https://emmaseppala.com/18-science-based-reasons-try-loving-kindness-meditation-today>