



# Whistling While We Work — Building a Happy Workplace

BY DARYL KELLEY, Ph.D.

It's not unusual in our highly stressed economy for employers to focus on the bottom line, sometimes to the extreme of regarding workers as a liability on the ledger rather than an integral dimension of a company's success.<sup>1</sup> At a Nebraska state conference, I met a Catholic health care leader who is countering that trend and, through efforts to implant principles of positive psychology in the workplace, models a commitment to the moral dimension of employer-employee relations.

That leader is Lee Elliott, vice president of human resources at Saint Francis Medical Center in Grand Island, where a program to create a more joyful workplace has reduced turnover, enhanced the organization's Catholic mission and, in the process, improved the hospital's bottom line.

Elliott, whose reputation as an advocate for a positive work environment extends beyond his hospital, gave a talk at the conference. Afterwards, we sat down to discuss what his human resources department has been doing in the last few years to create an extraordinary work environment in a workplace formerly plagued by conflicts.

They call it "the happiness program."

Through long discussions about the nature of work and the treatment of workers, I found Elliott to possess a highly developed morality and a genuine concern for employee welfare. However, as he informed me, the happiness program was not just altruism. From the very beginning, it was connected to solving business concerns.

In 2000, Saint Francis Medical Cen-

ter was facing serious problems getting enough staff to safely care for patients. The medical center was in the unenviable position of deciding each day whether to accept more patients or send them to other hospitals for care.

Attracting and retaining qualified staff is critical to any Catholic health care organization's mission, and the Saint Francis human resources department undertook an extensive effort to change the medical center's work environment. They turned to employees for input, and the replies were loud and clear — "Help us deal with conflict."

Elliott and his human resource department created in-house mediation, instituted substantial training for effective conflict resolution and worked with managers to address bullying, which was not common but caused special kinds of toxic conflict.

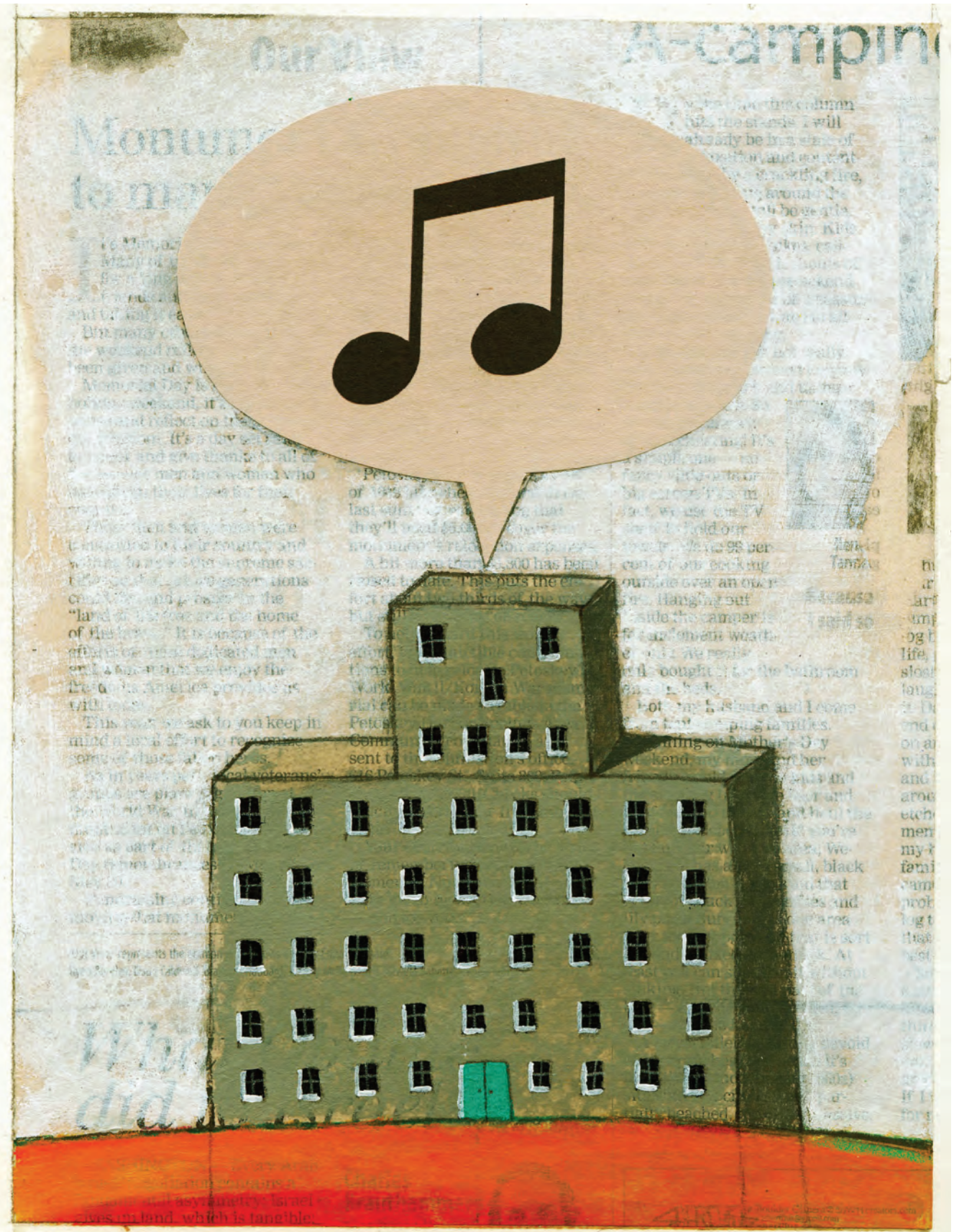
Looking back, Elliott said, the training worked — the frequency of effective conflict resolution increased and mediations were highly successful. But along the way, it became clear that nearly half of all conflicts resulted from differences between generations on the job.<sup>3</sup> For example, Baby Boom-

ers felt the younger generations were slacking, Elliott said, and younger workers were impatient with the technological incompetence of their elders. Each generation had its own vocabulary and attitudes, leading to miscommunication. (See related story on page 31.)

In response, the human resources department focused substantial training on generational differences and ways to manage them. Conflict between generations dropped to nearly zero.

Elliott said talking with employees also revealed there were some long-held animosities among medical center workers. To help address this, he developed a training program based on psychologist Fred Luskin's work on forgiveness.<sup>4</sup> He also created an extensive workshop entitled, "In Search of Joy: On Becoming Happy" using positive psychology techniques to teach employees the skills of happiness and well-being.

Psychologists Martin Seligman and Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, two of the major players in positive psychology, have said that within organizations, positive psychology is about moving "individuals toward better citizenship, responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance, and work ethic."<sup>5</sup> This certainly seems to be exactly what one would want in a Catholic health care environment.



Elliott's workshop is replete with practical exercises that teach skills in such sessions as "Increasing Happiness," "High Quality Conflict," "Life Planning" and "Grudge Busting" and help participants apply the newly gained skills to their work and personal lives.<sup>6</sup>

The workshop begins with an overview of social psychologists' research on the factors that shape happiness and debunks many of the myths that surround our common expectations. For example, Elliott notes that despite what our culture seems to encourage,

nize negative self-talk or automatic thoughts that trigger negative emotions. As they master the recognition of negative thoughts, people then learn how to reconfigure them into more productive thoughts and actions. For example, making a mistake can trigger the automatic thought, "I am a failure." If this kind of rigid, self-loathing thought is left unchecked, an employee will experience destructive emotions that are a barrier to productive work.<sup>7</sup>

■ **Reformat negative automatic thoughts.** Instead of "I am a failure," the thought could be reformatted as

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research shows happiness is not found through the accumulation of wealth, nor does health and attractiveness lead to the good life. Work that is meaningful and challenging can increase happiness, but research indicates the highest correlation comes from quality relationships with friends and family.

Because he can assure participants that psychological research and experimentally tested techniques back the "happiness program," Elliott says he has experienced less doubt and resistance than many might expect. Employees who do not feel comfortable in the workshop's group setting can have one-on-one sessions tailored to meet their needs.

### **WORKPLACE GUIDEPOSTS**

Elliott's workshop covers these points:

■ **Act happy.** Common sense, as well as research, demonstrates that happiness is contagious. When we are around happy individuals, we tend to become happier ourselves. When employees act happy the workplace is filled with happiness.

■ **Think happy.** Some useful tools can help people learn to process information differently. Keeping a "thought journal" helps an individual recog-

"Darn. I messed up. Let me step back and figure out how this happened so it doesn't happen again," or "An error. This is something I can learn a lot from. I'm grateful my boss is understanding. He knows I'll surprise him with the quality of fix I'll come up with any time I make a mistake."

This last example was taken directly from the workshop manual. Clearly, such rethinking requires substantial trust in management. With that in mind, I conducted in-depth interviews with several employees. I found that Saint Francis Medical Center middle managers and hospital employees perceive that top management want to help them do the best job possible, and they see their supervisors as supporters who truly do care for each individual. Employees said they enjoy very positive interactions throughout the chain of command, and that institutional trust existed before the "happiness program."

■ **Change your perspective.** This is related to reformatting negative thoughts. How we see the world is not immutable; we can change. In this part of the workshop, Elliott uses research to document the differences between optimists and pessimists. After listing the benefits of optimism over pes-

simism, participants are shown how to change their thought patterns to be more optimistic and, therefore, increase their happiness.

■ **Express gratitude.** Gratitude is more than just a means to make someone feel good. Through its expression, we reaffirm our place and the place of others in the workplace.

■ **Do good.** This is the most abstract and challenging dimension of the training. It is based upon the extensive cross-cultural research of psychologists Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman who found six virtues of living a good life, basic values at the core of many different societies throughout history. They are wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance and transcendence.<sup>8</sup> Elliott tells participants that doing good throughout one's life, not just at work, is a critical source of happiness.

Certainly, living a virtuous life is a daunting task, but imagine the positive social consequences if the majority of companies would challenge employees to live such a life. Moreover, doing good is clearly in alignment with the culture one would hope for in a Catholic health care organization. Though Elliott did not consciously integrate mission into the workshop, for he was focused on creating an environment to reduce turnover, as time passed the fit between virtue and Saint Francis Medical Center's mission became apparent.

Elliott's "In Search of Joy" workshop embeds some primary assumptions from the psychology of happiness research that should be made explicit. First, personal well-being at work clearly is connected to one's life away from work.

In the past, the adage was "when you come to work, you should leave your troubles at the door." We may hide or even repress our negative emotions, but negativity remains and is a potential threat to productivity. As indicated in the workshop, our thinking leads to emotions, which in turn,



shape our actions.

Employers and employees may have long held the belief that external matters are private and not the concern of the workplace, but happy workers are the ones most likely to create a strong, healthy organization, thus we cannot pretend to ignore what happens elsewhere.

A second assumption is that relationships, including the ones at work, are important. For example, an unsupportive supervisor remains one of the most common impediments to employee growth. In fact, it is a given that employee turnover is largely created by unsupportive supervision.

Positive co-worker relations also are important to creating a healthy work environment. We avoid risk taking when we perceive a hostile environment. If we cannot trust our co-workers and/or our supervisor, we certainly will avoid anything that might lead to censure. This will damp creativity at work and diminish the effectiveness of the organization. A positive environment will also improve communication, which in turn can decrease errors, including medical errors.<sup>9</sup>

The third assumption is that a positive outlook can be learned. Elliott's workshop provides workers with the tools to change the way they think about themselves and the world in which they live and work. The key here is employees must desire to learn and practice the skills in order for them to be effective. This leaves open the problem of employees who do not wish to change, and it also raises the question about whether such change should be mandated.

Finally, there is a linkage between individuals and the culture created in a workplace. In past research, workplace culture was a staple of sociological research and was seen largely as a product of worker actions.

In recent decades, workplace culture has not received the attention that

it deserves. At Saint Francis Medical Center, as is the case at most American workplaces, the culture is more of a synthesis of management goals and employee needs or desires. If funded by a company, the pursuit of a happy workplace culture cannot be devoid of the company's interests. On the other hand, the pursuit of happiness is a basic human desire. Therefore it is a pursuit that benefits all.

Clearly, the happiness program instituted at Saint Francis Medical Center is very attractive and deserves replication. There are a few words of caution for those who wish to try it. From the very start, Elliott and management at the hospital believed there would be economic benefits in creating a positive work environment; however, the profit motive was very strongly coupled with a sincere desire to help employees seek personal happiness and to improve each of their lives. Moreover, trust is likely a prerequisite to success. At this hospital, it was apparent that trust flowed from top to bottom.

It is just possible that this hospital in the middle of the U.S. might show the way to dramatically change the way we think about the world of work. Just maybe, sociologists in the future will teach about how work is wholesome and enriching. Just maybe, each of us

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could find that work is not some drudgery that we have to endure in order to afford to live, but a source of joy.

Although at first glance the seeking of happiness at work is likely to be perceived as misplaced, it is a natural progression in the humanization of work. If we accept the notion that every employee should be treated with dignity and respect and is more than a lia-

bility entry on the ledger, the question becomes — why isn't enhancing happiness a normal part of all workplaces?

**DARYL KELLEY** is professor of sociology at the University of Nebraska at Kearney.

**NOTES**

1. For a review of the degradation of professional work, see Jill Andresky Fraser, *White Collar Sweatshop: The Deterioration of Work and Its Rewards in Corporate America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001) and for a review of innovation, see Jeffrey Pfeffer, *What Were They Thinking?* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2007).
2. Martin E.P. Seligman, *Authentic Happiness* (New York: Free Press, 2002). Penn State is the center of positive psychology, and Martin Seligman is credited with being the founder of the subfield. He argued that much time and effort has been expended to address mental illness but little time spent addressing mental health.
3. Ron Zemke, Claire Raines and Bob Filipczak, *Generations at Work: Managing the Clash of Veterans, Boomers, Xers, and Nexters in Your Workplace* (New York: AMACOM, 2000).
4. Fred Luskin, *Forgive for Good* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002).
5. Martin E.P. Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "Positive Psychology: An Introduction," *American Psychologist* 55, no. 1 (2000): 5-147.
6. One exercise was taken from Tal Ben-Shahar's *Happier* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007). He recommended a daily gratitude journal. He also used Martin Seligman's suggestion that people write a letter to someone to whom they are truly grateful.
7. Kim S. Cameron, Jane E. Dutton and Robert E. Quinn (eds.), *Positive Organizational Scholarship: Foundation of a New Discipline* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2003).
8. Christopher Peterson and Martin E.P. Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (New York: Oxford University Press USA, 2004).
9. June Fabre, *Smart Nursing: How to Create a Positive Work Environment that Empowers and Retains Nurses* (New York: Springer 2005).

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