

# Leading With Contentment

by Timothy O’Keeffe

**Publisher’s Note:** *American Fastener Journal* is proud to bring you the second installment in a series of articles written by Timothy O’Keeffe about leadership. O’Keeffe was a subject of a popular AFJ biopic article last year entitled “A Life of Learning.” Tim is a self-described lifelong learner and practitioner of professional management. We think you will enjoy reading Tim’s articles, and we hope they will provide inspiration for your fastener industry career and beyond.

According to the Conference Board, U.S. workers’ job satisfaction improved in 2015 after many years of decline. The problem: Just 49.6 percent of surveyed workers said that they were satisfied with their jobs. That is down from 60 percent job satisfaction in the late 1980s.

With Millennials (loosely defined as people born 1983–2000, or aged 18–34) now making up a majority of the workforce, there seems to be a near obsession with making workers happy, and Millennials are top of mind for many CEOs and hiring managers.

The conventional wisdom suggests that Millennials are deemed to be near-narcissists, having been raised on seventh-place soccer trophies and orange slices, with helicopter parents doting on their every need. An April, 2016, *Harvard Business Review* article by Bruce N. Pfau, former Vice Chair of Human Resources and Communication at KPMG LLP, presents data that indicates that workers of all major generational groupings have very similar career goals. Maybe Millennials are no different than others? Why are managers failing to inspire job satisfaction?

Rather than looking at the outcomes of worker satisfaction, perhaps we should look more upstream at motivation and happiness. There is a budding field of academic study in and around human psychology and motivation and what makes people happy. Behavior psychologists are studying the concept of success orientation, which is loosely defined as the method in which humans go about achieving success. Psychologists have defined success strategies and denoted that there are performance-approach and performance-avoid strategies.

A performance-avoid strategy is a behavior pattern in which the person actually avoids performance, or engages in intentional acts of self-destruction. It may be a defense mechanism in which the reasoning falls along the lines of: “Well if I never try, I will never fail.” There can be social pressures that stimulate performance-avoid strategies, such that a group applies pressure to a person to avoid performance or engage in self-destructive behavior. Criminal gangs are noted for performance-avoid social pressures. In some work places, higher performers are chastised for “sticking out” from the group—another form of performance-avoid.

Performance-approach strategies are far more common and obviously desired. In general, two performance-approach strategies have been identified with respect to success orientation—performance orientation and mastery orientation.

People who engage a performance orientation strategy to success are seeking extrinsic rewards. They want to be number one. They are focused are differentiating themselves from others. They want to win contests, gain fame, and beat the competition. Performers value learning only as a means to an end. The college degree is a piece of paper for the wall—a product. In general, performers are less adaptive and less creative. They want to move from Point A to Point B. Because they are less adaptive,

they generally are not risk takers, though they can become careless or fearless. Performers may not always work well within a team, and if they do, they value team members as contributors to their own individual success. They are thinking: “What can you do for me?” Some describe performers as violin players.

People who use a mastery orientation to success seek intrinsic rewards. They are masters, where learning itself is an outcome, and the value of the degree is in the knowledge gained, and less the diploma earned. Masters like the experience and the journey, as opposed to the goal or the recognition. Masters tend to be more creative and adaptive than performers. They are willing to take risks and invest in ideas that may not pan out. Masters generally view teams and team members as peers and teammates, who can support the master, but the master can in turn support the teammates. Masters are thinking: “What can I do for the team?” Some suggest that masters are violinists as opposed to violin players.

Daniel H. Pink published a book in 2011 entitled *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*. Pink reviews these performance approach strategies and suggests that today’s managers need to move away from what he refers to as the “carrot and stick approach,” which is based on the old models of motivation driven by fear of punish-



Contentment Leaders can benefit from understanding motivation and happiness so as to align recruitment, performance management, talent management, and culture to creating a contented workforce. Evangelizing contentment is easier when the executive has a

corporation populated with people aligned to a vision of how people are motivated, and what can make them happy. Tables 1 and 2 illustrate leading academic themes for these topics.

### TABLE 1. MOTIVATION

People display varying characteristics of motivation. An assessment of an employee's strategy ("orientation") in engagement and completing work yields clues to motivation. People and cultures displaying "performance avoid" strategies should be exited from the firm. Among performance approach strategies, there are two main types: Mastery Orientation and Performance Orientation.

	TYPICAL AMBITIONS AND MOTIVATIONS	DESIRED GOALS / OUTCOMES	STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<b>Mastery Orientation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning new knowledge and skills.</li> <li>• Gaining new experiences.</li> <li>• "Mastering" a craft or trade.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning as a product.</li> <li>• Conquering a complicated assignment.</li> <li>• Solving a complex problem.</li> <li>• Peer appreciation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Likely a team player.</li> <li>• Willing to take risks to achieve stretch goals.</li> <li>• Innovator.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Might struggle in a pressured work environment.</li> <li>• May over-analyze matters.</li> <li>• May struggle to manage performers.</li> </ul>
<b>Performance Orientation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Achievement.</li> <li>• Gaining recognition.</li> <li>• Acquiring more pay or positional authority.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Receipt of degree or certification.</li> <li>• President's Roundtable status.</li> <li>• Receiving a pay increase or large bonus.</li> <li>• Corner office assignment.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thrives in production environments where output is numerical.</li> <li>• Can be rainmaker sales-types.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May struggle to lead people.</li> <li>• Less willing to try new approaches or to take risks.</li> <li>• Needs specific directions.</li> </ul>

The information presented here is attributed to the writings of Daniel H. Pink, author of the book, **Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us**, published by Riverhead Publishing ISB #978-1-101-52438-1.

ment and incentive systems based on money. Pink cites studies in which higher pay and bonuses work only if the job consists of basic mechanical skills with a defined set of single steps.

Pink recommends paying employees enough money to meet basic needs and as he says, "take the issue of money off the table." To motivate employees beyond basic mechanical-type tasks, the executive needs to offer three factors to increase performance and job satisfaction: autonomy, mastery, and purpose.

Pink's management concepts on motivation are reinforced by the teachings and studies of Martin Seligman, who has been an avid proponent of "positive psychology." Seligman first came to fame in 1967 with his studies and development of the concept "learned helplessness." Using a series of experiments on dogs, Seligman noted that dogs could be conditioned to not respond

to opportunities to escape from an unpleasant situation.

Seligman pioneered the concept of psychologists studying what makes people happy, versus studying what was wrong with people. Seligman noted that psychology could be useful to people invested in leading a more fulfilling life. Seligman defined three kinds of happiness. "The Pleasant Life" centers on basic short-term pleasures such as companionship, nature, and physiological needs. "The Good Life" is achieved when a person gains self-awareness of their strengths and orients their daily life to leverage those strengths in daily work and home life. "The Meaningful Life" is realized when a person is able to realize a deep sense of fulfillment by using one's strengths for a greater purpose than one's self.

These concepts set the stage for effective ways that the executive leader can manage organizations with contentment. Too many

managers focus on results or trying to make people happy. Inspiring contentment is a middle ground that can lead to the delicate balance of achieving business results, while retaining and nurturing talent.

The first step in leading with contentment is to set expectations. The executive must evangelize the concept of contentment. Contentment can be loosely defined as a "cognitive emotional state of satisfaction." To be content, one must accept the reality of their situation. Thus, the executive should set forth to communicate effectively and repeatedly reasonable expectations and to note that the business world is not heaven, utopia or nirvana, and it never will be. Short of having a trust fund, mankind has to work to put bread on the table, and OUR job is to make this workplace as stimulating and supportive as possible.

The next step is to eliminate drama from the workplace. In many organizations there

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**TABLE 2. HAPPINESS**

The behavioral psychologist Martin Seligman, also known as “the Father of Positive Psychology” has defined three types of happiness. The Contentment Leader can structure organizational design and strategy to the three types, thereby providing an enhanced environment to stimulate contentment.

	DEFINITION	ORGANIZATION SUPPORT SYSTEMS AND PROGRAMS
<b>The Pleasant Life</b>	Short term pleasures such as companionship, nature, and psychological needs.	Create warm and inviting workspaces with areas that allow for spontaneous meetings and interaction. Provide display of art, nature, or environment through decoration or the addition of outdoor break time spaces. Invest in a company gym for group physical activity. Schedule appropriate social activities such as cook-outs, or sponsor team sports for employee groups.
<b>The Good Life</b>	Individual self-awareness leading to self-directed leverage of personal strengths in daily work life and home life.	Provide resources for self-discovery such as company libraries or peer book circles and group studies. Train managers on performance assessment and in how to deliver positive messages that stimulate additional self-reflection and self-study. Encourage or require self-assessments from team members prior to performance evaluation.
<b>The Meaningful Life</b>	Achievement of a deep sense of personal fulfillment from individual’s use of personal strengths toward a greater purpose than self.	Cascade corporate goals to work teams and stimulate work teams to work toward stretch goals. Incorporate corporate contribution to society into company business plans and cascade accordingly. Include civic and charity actions in company social events. Provide grants to employee-driven projects in the community.

are individuals who trade in misery. Some people are not happy unless they are not happy. The executive should recognize that misery loves company, and seek to get misery terminated from the firm. This dynamic can be difficult in that dramatists in companies often populate positions of intelligence and tribal knowledge. Managers tolerate the drama because the dramatist has colonized a department team or knowledge base. At some point, the colony must be conquered.

The establishment of contentment-based expectations and the elimination of drama can provide a revitalized “field” from which the executive can “farm” an invigorated culture. The executive should now align recruitment and selection methods to bring mastery-oriented people to management and to most positions in the firm. Performance-oriented people might work in production positions and outside sales. The use of psychological testing and an extensive screening process will support organizational effectiveness in talent selection.

Compensation should be set so that the issue of money is off the table. Try and make compensation practices transparent, and most importantly, consistent. Regardless of policy, people will talk about pay. If you have pay disparities not grounded in contribution in your business, you will lose trust, and

contentment is not possible when there is no trust.

With the right team and a trustful organization, you can now focus executive contentment priorities on driving culture toward the three kinds of happiness authored by Martin Seligman. The Pleasant Life will be supported with a warm and welcoming physical plant. The automotive manufacturer Ferrari stimulates The Pleasant Life with trees planted inside their manufacturing facility, along with natural light and break areas. The Pleasant Life is also supported with social events such as after-work barbecues and luncheons.

The Good Life can be supported with training and seminars, along with effective feedback from managers. An effective system of performance reviews should be engaged that is consistent and driven toward positive feedback and defining expectations, as opposed to criticism and critique. The use of book circles among peers for peer review and introspection elevate participant self-awareness, which supports The Good Life.

The Meaningful Life will be driven by the masters that you recruit to your organization. Masters will drive innovation and change that will be relished by the group. The contentment executive can further drive

The Meaningful Life through support of charity and civic actions. The Meaningful Life can become a flywheel of corporate evolution.

Will these efforts lead to an improvement in worker satisfaction? Probably. Remember that contentment is accepting the reality of the situation. Contentment can turn dangerous when performance individually and corporately is poor. Thus, in addition to stimulating contentment, the executive must stimulate a vision of reality. The desired reality must align to the operating reality. In that journey there will be lapses, where the reality is not meeting expectations. The effective executive stimulates commitment and priority of action over happiness so that the team or person elevates.

Elevating performance can be most rewarding, especially when the executive can quietly and calmly watch his team relish the journey to excellence, though the path is difficult and challenging. ■

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