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# DOSSIER



## Why work sucks and how to fix it

A new breed of 'happiness coaches' are combining ancient wisdom and contemporary research to help execs discover contentment in their day to day work. **By Jaideep Dave**



**A**SK ANY EMPLOYEE what he/she thinks of workplace happiness and the person will, if he/she is a wise soul, probably utter two words: misery delayed. And then, there are organisations where stress is the only eternal truth, where employees have got used to surviving on toxins. In short, happiness at the workplace is almost always an ideal. But over the last couple of years corporations have been mustering the support of happiness coaches, also known as behavioural trainers and mind-management experts, to help employees cope with — and excel — at their jobs. “A lot of research over the years has shown that there is a causal connection between happiness and employee productivity, which in HR lingo is called employee engagement,” says Avinash Ananda, co-founder of Pune-based MetaMind Management.

Conducting workshops — from half a day sessions, to engaging with a certain set of employees for longer periods — these men claim to help employees discover the formula, correction formulae, of sustainable happiness. “If you do not derive a deep sense of purpose from your job and are not starting your workday alive, radiating energy, you are wasting your time,” says Srikumar Rao, author of *Happiness at Work*, who also runs the five-month ‘Creativity and Personal Mastery’ course for business executives. New York-based Rao, who conducted a workshop for AT&T in Bangalore recently, claims happiness is a skill, a habit, which an employee with enough drive can cultivate.

### THE PERCEPTION OF TIME

Rao, Ananda and co. put their faith in sage advice such as ‘Live in the moment’, a precept which goes against

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Srikumar Rao, author of *Happiness at Work*, with the students of Columbia Business School

how humans, instinctively, perceive time. Our understanding of the present is always tainted by the baggage we carry and our anticipation of the future. Plus, surely, given the grand importance that companies assign to objectives, targets, etc, doesn't 'living in the now' sound a tad too impractical? This is the question often raised before Nithya Shanti, whose workshops are called Joyshops. "I tell them a simple thing: when you are driving to reach somewhere, are you continuously thinking about your destination, or are you focused on the road? You see, the problem really happens when you are so fixated on the destination that you become paralysed and stop driving or you start driving too fast," says Nithya Shanti, who has done his MBA in Human Resources from XLRI, Jamshedpur and has worked for Arthur Andersen and HCL Technologies.

Rao has taught his course at Columbia University and London Business School. And he has synthesised the works of "great masters who understood the human condition" — such as Henry Thoreau, Kahlil Gibran and a few others — to arrive at his own philosophy.

He quotes Gibran to illustrate one of his happiness sutras:

"And I say that life is indeed darkness save when there is urge.

And all urge is blind save when there is knowledge.

And all knowledge is vain save when there is work.

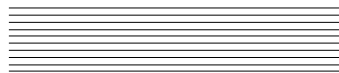
And all work is empty save when there is love.

And when you work with love you bind yourself to yourself, and to one another, and to God."



Avinash Ananda asks employees to avoid personalising random events

**"Positive thinking alone is like putting a newspaper over a toilet and expecting it to flush. It's not going to work," says Nithya Shanti**



Happiness coach Nithya Shanti trained as a Buddhist monk for six years

### THE THING ABOUT STRESS

Ananda, 39, draws from fields like positive psychology (which looks at how to make life more meaningful, as opposed to psychology of earlier years, which is focused on therapy), behavioural economics, eudemonics (the art or theory of happiness), amongst others, for his workshops. Pune-based Nithya Shanti, 32, draws from Buddhist philosophy to share, what he calls, 'bald' truths — he lived as a monk in Thailand and Sri Lanka for six years before coming back to *samsara* (society). It has been his endeavour, he says, to bust the commonly-held notion that a moderate

amount of stress is good. "This idea comes from a study done some 75 years ago on rats by Hans Selye." The nostrum, he says, has been debunked by a lot of subsequent studies. "Take a runner. Is he stressed when he is running? No, he is in the zone. Take, for that matter, anyone who pursues a hobby. Does he enjoy it because he's under stress or because he is happy doing it?" The view that there can be too much of happiness, he says, is a misconception.

Plus, he says that there is nothing like a stressful situation — only something that is seen or felt as a stressful situation. "No event is stressful in itself, our thoughts about the event make it stressful," says Nithya Shanti. Ananda says there will be jolts in organisations, so his workshops are focused on helping people bounce back. "There will be ripples, there might even be huge waves, but can you be like an ocean, calm under the surface?" asks Ananda. He says employees have a habit of personalising random events ('why me?') and over-generalising ('my boss sucks' to 'bosses suck'). The workshops strive to make them aware of the fallacies that plague not just humans in the workplace but also humans in general. "For events outside your control, ask 'what can I learn from it?'" says Ananda.

### THE NEGATIVES OF POSITIVE THINKING

Apart from stressing an internal locus of control, all three happiness coaches emphasise the value of gratitude. Nithya Shanti often asks attendees to write 100 things that they are grateful about. "Initially, they can't think of anything. But once they start, the list goes on." Rao calls for a shift from me-centred thinking to other-centred thinking. "When you are self-centred, you are living a mediocre existence, when you are other-centred, the company goal or the purpose is more important than self-aggrandisement."

Rao says that we are obsessed with straitjacketing, and are always compressing messy realities into elegant categories. "Give up the idea that there is anything good or bad, positive or negative. A lot of what you think is bad will turn out to be good, so why bother labelling."

Nithya Shanti is not a fan of positive thinking. "Positive thinking alone is like putting a newspaper over a toilet and expecting it to flush. It's not going to work." He says what he teaches is possibility thinking. He starts his Joyshops with a disclaimer that it is possible you might not learn anything new and — because we live in a world of over-information — whatever he says may have already been said before. "So, it's a nice surprise when people I meet months or years after a session tell me how deeply some of my teachings have touched their lives."