

Servant Leadership Focus is a monthly newsletter to promote and stimulate servant leadership ideas and tools into the Viox culture.



ISSUE HIGHLIGHTS:

- ❖ **Change or Die**
by Alan Deustchman
- ❖ **Wellbeing: The Five Essential Elements**
by Tom Rath & Jim Harter
- ❖ **Topic:**
Change and Wellbeing

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TRANSFORMATIONAL STORIES

Tom Rath & Jim Harter

We know that physical activity will improve our health, yet we skip exercising. Missing one workout won't give us a heart attack or cause a stroke—so we let ourselves off the hook for the day. We know that too much sugar and fried foods are bad for our health. But we grab a handful of candy or chips without thinking. One french fry can't cause diabetes or obesity, right?

Similarly, we know it's important to spend quality time with our friends and family, but when work is pressing, we don't stop and ask a friend how he is doing.

When we think about personal finances, we often spend instead of saving. Putting money into a retirement plan would yield several times its original value later on, but spending it on an indulgent purchase is so much more appealing right now.

With so many options to satisfy ourselves in the

moment, it can be difficult to make the right long-term decisions. It is, after all, in our nature to do things that will provide the most immediate reward. This is wired into our DNA for basic survival. For decades, psychologists (*and most recently neuroscientists*) have described increases in the ability to delay gratification as a cornerstone of human development. *The ability to self-regulate and use self-control is key to change, growth, and maturity.*

However, the single biggest threat to our own wellbeing tends to be ourselves. *We have the ability to change, improve, and even thrive in our career, socially, financially, physically, and in our communities. But without even giving much thought, we allow our short-term decisions to override what's best for our long-term wellbeing.*

THE BRAIN IS PLASTIC

ALAN DEUSTCHMAN

Scientists used to believe that our brains became “hardwired” early in life—the circuitry is finished and can't be rewired. Then researchers began performing “brain scans” using functional Magnetic Resonance Imagery (fMRI) machines, which produced vividly detailed pictures that enabled them to actually see how particular sections of the brain had expanded or contracted over time. *They realized that the brain's ability to change—its so-called plasticity—is lifelong. We can learn complex things in our thirties or even our eighties. So why don't we?*

That's the question I discussed with Michael Merzenich, a professor of neuroscience at the University of California at San Francisco. He was a pioneer in the study of brain plasticity and remains one of its leading figures. Merzenich explains that people have thousands of habits—such as *how to use a pen—that we perform automatically because we've created lasting changes in our brains through repetition.* For highly trained specialists, such as professional musicians, the changes show up conspicuously on brain scans. If you practiced an instrument several hours a day for a couple of decades, it makes a big difference. Flute players, for instance, have especially large physical representations in their brains in the areas that control the fingers, tongue, and lips. “They've distorted their brains”, Merzenich explains.

Business people are also highly trained specialists and they've distorted their brains as well. An older executive “has powers that a younger person walking in the door doesn't have,” Merzenich says. He has a great number of specialized skills and abilities. *A specialist is a difficult thing to create and is valuable for a corporation but specialization also instills an inherent “rigidity.” The cumulative weight of experience makes it more difficult to change.*

How can people overcome these factors? Merzenich says the key is keeping up the brain's machinery for learning. “When you're young, almost everything you do is behavior-based learning—it's an incredibly powerful,

plastic period,” he says. *“What happens that becomes stultifying is you stop learning and you stop using the machinery, so it starts dying.”* Unless you work on it, brain fitness begins to decline at around age thirty for men and a little later for women. *“People mistake ‘being active’ for continuous learning,”* Merzenich says. “The machinery is only activated by learning. People think they're leading an interesting life when they have learned a thing in twenty or thirty years.” Comfortable with our successes, we are averse to the arduous practice and relentless repetition that drives changes in our brains.

If you're the senior tax partner at a large corporate law firm, then reading the latest journal articles about the tax code isn't what Merzenich means by “learning.” The law partner is already an expert at that kind of precise verbal reasoning. In that case, real learning might mean taking beginner's lessons in downhill skiing or ballroom dancing. The idea is to escape from your expertise and become a novice in an entirely different pursuit. It's about taking on challenges that you'll be bad at for quite a while rather than always returning to pursuits you've been good at for many years. And it's about using different kinds of intelligence—verbal, mechanical, physical, mathematical, and such. That's why learning a foreign language or a musical instrument is a particularly valuable exercise for brain fitness. “My suggestion is Spanish or the oboe,” Merzenich says.

You'll know that you're learning something truly new and different if it's really hard for a long time and you're constantly making mistakes and struggling and feeling like an idiot until you get better at it and the habits and skill become automatic. Complex new learning is difficult and discouraging. Think of trying for the first time driving a stick shift, playing golf, or dancing the tango. That's why it is good to have a good teacher or coach. The best teachers do more than demonstrate technique or correct errors. They inspire and sustain hope by communicating their belief in you and pointing out the small improvements you are making.

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DID YOU KNOW?

- A comprehensive analysis of more than 70 trials found that exercising is much more effective at eliminating fatigue than prescription drugs used for this purpose.
- A recent experiment revealed that just 20 minutes of exercise could improve our mood for several hours after we finish working out.
- Adding even 30 minutes or an hour of sleep could help us stay healthy, including warding off the common cold.
- 75% of medical costs is due to largely preventable conditions (stress, tobacco use, physical inactivity, and poor food choices).
- People with high career wellbeing are more than twice as likely to be thriving in their lives overall.

Coaching reminders:

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Over the past decade, Gallup has worked with hundreds of organizations to help their managers create and **boast the wellbeing** of their employees. One of the best questions we have asked more than **15 million** workers is **whether their supervisor (or someone at work) seems to care about them as a person.** *Implicit in this question is the notion that an employee's manager or supervisor cares about him as a whole person, not merely as an employee or as a means to an end.* This

question serves as a barometer of whether an employee feels as if his manager truly cares about his wellbeing.

What we have discovered is that the **world's best managers see the growth of each employee as an end in itself, instead of an end.** They realize that each worker's wellbeing, and in many cases the wellbeing of his or her entire family, is largely dependent on their ability to lead and manage.

IS A GOOD BOSS AS IMPORTANT AS A GOOD DOCTOR? Tom Rath & Jim Harter

Behavioral scientists and economists have become increasingly interested in how people spend their time. Time-use studies provide important data about what people do with their time, who they spend it with, and how they feel at various points throughout the day. *One of the major findings from this research is that the person we least enjoy being around is our boss.*

Of all the categories people ranked, from friends to relatives to coworkers to children, **they rated the time they spent with a manager as being the worst time of the day.** Even when compared to a list of specific daily activities, time spent with one's boss was actually rated lower than time spent doing chores and cleaning the house. This helps explain why a study of more than 3,000 workers in Sweden found that those who deemed their managers to be least competent has a 24% higher risk of a serious heart problem. For those who had for a

manager for more than four years, the risk was 39% higher.

The most disengaged group of workers we have ever studied are those who have a manager who is simply not paying attention. If your manager ignores you, there is 40% chance that you will be actively disengaged or filled with hostility about your job. If your manager is at least paying attention, the chances of your being actively disengaged go down to 22%. But if your manager is primarily focusing on your strengths, the chance of your being actively disengaged is just 1%, or 1 in 100.

While most of us do not have the liberty to choose our boss, we often overlook the profound impact this relationship has on our engagement at work, our physical health, and our overall wellbeing.

ARE BAD WORKPLACES KILLING PEOPLE? Tom Rath & Jim Harter

The extreme variation between a good weekend and a bad weekday might explain **why heart attacks are more likely to occur on Mondays.** This suggests a rough transition from Sunday to Monday takes a physical toll. In one of our studies (Gallup Organization) we were able to examine how physiological stress (based on cortisol levels in the saliva samples we collected) fluctuates from workdays to weekends.

Cortisol is a stress hormone that boosts blood pressure and blood sugar levels while suppressing the immune system. It is essential for normal functioning, and some spikes in cortisol levels are necessary to trigger our fight-or-flight response when we are in danger, but often, we perceive situations to be more serious than they really are.

For example, if your boss criticizes your work, or if

you are performing a task that is frustrating, your cortisol levels spike rapidly. When a burst of cortisol flushes through your system, blood starts to rush through your veins. Your heart rate goes up as you start to breathe faster. What you can feel on the inside, others may see on the outside as your pupils dilate or as sweat begins to bead on your forehead.

While activation of this fight-or-flight response serves us well in a real emergency, it is not as helpful in a traffic jam or a heated meeting at work. These are not life-or-death situations, but our brain doesn't know the difference. So when we transition from a leisurely Sunday, the least stressful day of the week, to Monday morning in a workplace where we are not engaged, it might damage our bodies in the process.

WORK ALTERS THE BRAIN AND BLOODSTREAM Tom Rath & Jim Harter

Boosting Career Wellbeing might also reduce the risk of anxiety and depression. In 2008, we studied a large panel of randomly selected workers who agreed to be contacted regularly. We measured their engagement levels and asked them if they had ever been diagnosed with depression. We excluded those who reported that they had been diagnosed with depression from our analysis. When we contacted the remaining panel members in 2009, we again asked them if they had been diagnosed with depression in the last year.

It turned out that 5% of our panel members (who had no diagnosis of depression as of 2008) had been newly diagnosed with depression. *Further, those who were actively disengaged in their careers in 2008 were nearly twice as likely to be diagnosed with depression over the next year.* While there are many factors that contribute to depression, being disengaged at work appears to be a leading indicator of subsequent clinical diagnosis of depression.

On a more encouraging note, as workers become more engaged, their physical health can improve in parallel. In another study, we tracked employees for two years to examine the relationship between changes in engagement at work and changes in cholesterol and triglyceride levels. We surveyed these workers about their engagement at work every six months, and we collected blood samples to measure their cholesterol and triglycerides each year.

As employees' levels of engagement at work increased, their total cholesterol and triglyceride levels significantly decreased. And those with decreasing levels of engagement at work had an increase in total cholesterol and triglycerides. These results suggest one possible mechanism through which our workplace experiences directly influence our physical health. Boosting your Career Wellbeing might be one of the most important priorities to consider for maintaining good health over the years.