



# ORGANIZATIONAL HAPPINESS

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THE IMPERATIVE THAT KEEPS US FROM WHAT WE SEEK

**DR. MARCELLO DE SOUZA**

# ORGANIZATIONAL HAPPINESS

The imperative that keeps us  
from what we seek

A philosophical, neuroscientific and behavioural investigation  
into what actually sustains human well-being in organisations

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"The happiness that the market sells  
to organizations is not happiness.  
It is the performance of happiness —  
and that performance comes at a cost  
that only appears in the human  
being's account."

Dr. Marcello de Souza

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# FOREWORD



There is a cult that no one questions. It has an English name, a corporate title, courses at Harvard, and a billion-dollar market behind it. It is called organizational happiness — and the promise it carries is seductive: happy employees produce more, get sick less, stay longer, and show greater commitment.

The problem is that this promise does not withstand contact with data, with clinical practice, with philosophy — nor with the real experience of those who work within the organizations that have adopted it.

In this e-book, Marcello de Souza explores a territory that few dare to cross with honesty in the corporate world.

Drawing from Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Frankl, Kahneman, Dejours, Damásio, Edmondson, and decades of clinical practice and organizational consulting, this book demonstrates that imposed happiness is not well-being — it is control with declared good intentions. That the imperative to be happy at work can, paradoxically, become one of the most efficient causes of illness. And that what organizations truly need is not a Chief Happiness Officer — but the courage to stop preventing people from being human.

A philosophical, neuroscientific, and behavioral investigation into what truly sustains human flourishing within organizations. Dense, provocative, and unwilling to concede to a market that prefers easy answers over real questions.



**“Man is guided in his pursuit of happiness not by reason but by illusion. Instead of seeing reality, he prefers to embrace fantasy; rather than face the truth, he prefers a comforting lie. Deluded, he wanders through life, always seeking something that will bring him lasting satisfaction, without realising that true happiness lies in the acceptance of the present and the understanding of oneself.”**

**– Arthur Schopenhauer**

# INTRODUCTION

## THE CULT NO ONE QUESTIONED

There is a scene I have never been able to forget. After running a workshop on organisational climate for a mid-sized company, I was invited to stay for a motivational talk aimed at all staff. What I found was not a talk. It was something oscillating between a political rally and a religious ceremony — a cult to the gospel of happiness, where the volume of voices seemed directly proportional to the conviction that shouting louder would produce more well-being. Have you ever attended one of those gatherings where people seem to believe that God is deaf? That afternoon, they were probably testing their colleagues' hearing capacity instead.

The phrase that echoed through the room — and lodged itself in me with the precision of an involuntary diagnosis of our times — was this: happiness gives us power, makes us feel good, improves our relationships and even increases our chances of promotion. Delivered with the certainty of someone announcing a law of physics. No hesitation, no qualification, no awareness of how much that sentence compressed decades of behavioural science simplified into a product.

That phrase was not naive. It was symptomatic of something that has installed itself in the corporate world as if it were scientific axiom: the belief that happiness is a manageable, measurable, deployable resource — that companies must produce it, leaders must cultivate it, employees must demonstrate it, and the market must sell it. A profitable arrangement. For everyone except the human being who, at some point, notices that what they feel does not match what they are expected to feel — and begins to wonder, quietly, whether something is wrong with them.

This e-book was born from the opposite suspicion. Not from a denial of happiness as a legitimate and profound human phenomenon — that would be absurd. It was born from a refusal to accept that happiness can be reduced to a corporate programme, a job title in English, a satisfaction survey administered at the end of the quarter, or a games room installed on the office floor. Happiness, as I intend to demonstrate throughout these pages, is one of the most singular, most subjective and most resistant-to-capture experiences that human beings know. And precisely because of that, the more one tries to manufacture it, the more it escapes. The more we pursue it directly, the more it retreats. The more we turn it into an obligation, the more it becomes anxiety.

Throughout the following pages, we will traverse territory that is rarely crossed with honesty in the organisational world. We will examine where the corporate obsession with happiness came from — and who profits from it. We will confront what neuroscience actually knows about the subject, and what it admits it does not know. We will investigate the silent paradox between happiness and productivity, which the data reveals and motivational speakers ignore. We will explore the hidden weight of being required to be happy, and the damage that obligation produces in human relationships. And we will, finally, propose something more honest than happiness as a goal: presence as practice, meaning as compass, flourishing as process.

What you will find here is not a manual on how to be happy at work. It is an investigation that provokes more than it comforts. Because, in the end, only the thought that destabilises us has the real capacity to transform us.

# CHAPTER 1

## THE FACTORY OF ILLUSION: FROM HAWTHORNE TO CHIEF HAPPINESS OFFICERS

There is a curious — and deeply revealing — linearity connecting the experiments conducted at the Western Electric factory in Hawthorne, Illinois, in the 1920s, to the emergence of the Chief Happiness Officer role in the 2000s. It is not a linearity of scientific progress. It is a linearity of repetition disguised as innovation — the same impulse to control human experience at work, repackaged in the language of each era.

### **Hawthorne: when the human entered the equation**

The Hawthorne factory entered the history of organisational development for reasons that the researchers themselves had not expected to find. George Elton Mayo and his team were hired to investigate how environmental factors — lighting, temperature, workstation layout — affected productivity. What they discovered subverted the original hypothesis: it was not the lighting that changed the workers' behaviour. It was the fact of being observed.

This phenomenon — which became known as the Hawthorne Effect — revealed something that Taylorism had systematically ignored: the worker is not a machine. Workers have emotions, relationships, expectations, a need for recognition. And those dimensions affect performance in ways that no mechanical engineering can control.

That recognition was genuinely important. But it carried within it, from the very beginning, an ambiguity that was never fully resolved — and that is the embryo of everything discussed in this e-book. Human relations began to be studied not because people mattered in themselves, as subjects with intrinsic dignity. They mattered as a production variable. Human suffering entered the equation not to be relieved, but to be managed. The well-being of workers became a resource to be optimised — and that logic, despite all the evolution of organisational thinking, was never completely abandoned.

Mayo, moreover, faced severe criticism during his own lifetime. Accused of manipulating data, of forcing conclusions that confirmed his hypotheses, and of producing science in the service of industrial capital, he represented, from the outset, the unresolved tension between genuine understanding of the human and its instrumentalisation. That tension is precisely what runs through the figure of the Chief Happiness Officer decades later.

### **The ready-made answer industry**

From the Hawthorne legacy emerged five major theoretical traditions that shaped twentieth-century management: Behavioural Theory, Bureaucratic Theory, Contingency Theory, Systems Theory, and Structural Theory. Each attempted, in its own way, to account for the human within organisational logic. And each contributed, with greater or lesser rigour, to understanding what enables people to work well, with health, with commitment.

The problem was not in the theories themselves. It was in how they were popularised — and in the voracious market that formed around that popularisation. Over the following decades, the consulting industry and the publishing world produced a simplified, sanitised and highly profitable version of behavioural science. The complexity of human behaviour was distilled into formulas, numbered habits, promises of rapid and painless transformation.

Who does not remember? *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, by Dale Carnegie — a manual for social manipulation disguised as interpersonal wisdom. *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, by Stephen Covey — and then, inevitably, the Eighth Habit, because seven were never enough. Re-engineering, which promised to reinvent organisations and delivered waves of redundancies wrapped in the language of innovation. The list has no end. There is no shortage of gurus to tell us what to do. No shortage of reheated pseudo-theories sold as discoveries. No shortage of a market willing to purchase certainties about something that, by its very nature, admits none.

It is within this cultural context that the Chief Happiness Officer role emerged in the 2000s — not as a scientific development, but as a market product. A ready-made solution to a complex problem. A title that sounds good in corporate presentations. An answer before the right question had even been asked.

### **Harvard, Ben-Shahar and what got lost in translation**

The concept gained significant traction following the creation of a course at Harvard University, led by Professor Tal Ben-Shahar, an American-Israeli researcher in the areas of positive psychology and leadership. In 2007, Ben-Shahar launched the course that would become the formal reference for the function in the corporate world — and which, in its original context, was considerably more rigorous than the product that reached the market.

It is worth recovering what Ben-Shahar actually proposed. In his opening sessions, he would say something that rarely appears in the corporate versions of his work: if you have not been disappointed, you probably cannot be happy. Disappoint yourself once, twice, ten times — as many times as necessary for happiness to become possible. In other words, the researcher was pointing to the fact that the capacity to experience happiness is directly linked to the capacity to traverse disappointments. Not to avoid them. To traverse them.

This nuance — fundamental to any serious understanding of the subject — was largely discarded by companies that adopted the CHO role. What arrived in the organisational world was an amputated version: happiness without the suffering that makes it possible. Joy without the grief that gives it depth. The smile without the conflict that makes it genuine.

**When happiness becomes a cultural mandate, what is produced is not happiness. It is the performance of happiness – and that performance, over time, costs twice what it would have cost to simply allow people to be human.**

## **Will Davies and the happiness industry**

Will Davies, in his book *The Happiness Industry*, offers one of the most precise and uncomfortable analyses of this phenomenon. He demonstrates how happiness was gradually transformed, across the twentieth century, into an instrument of governance — a metric that, in attempting to capture the internal state of workers, ends up colonising it. Positive psychology, which in its academic foundations is a legitimate and rigorous field, was seized by a market that needed scientific justification to sell well-being as a product.

Davies raises questions that rarely appear in HR meetings: who measures the happiness of employees? With what instruments? Based on what assumptions? And, fundamentally: whom does the result of that measurement serve? When a happiness index falls, who is held accountable — the organisation, which created the conditions for it, or the employee, who failed to be sufficiently positive?

The answer, in most cases, is disturbing. Corporate happiness metrics tend to be constructed in ways that protect the company's narrative rather than the genuine well-being of its people. They measure what is easy to measure — satisfaction with benefits, perception of immediate leadership, declared engagement levels — and systematically ignore what matters: how much each person is able to be themselves at work, how much what they do has meaning for them, how much the relationships they are embedded in sustain their dignity.

This is not a flaw of implementation. It is a structural feature of any system that attempts to capture human subjectivity in numbers — and then uses those numbers to manage the very experience it tried to capture.

# CHAPTER 2

## **What neuroscience knows — and what it admits it does not**

Contemporary neuroscience has advanced extraordinarily. We are now capable of observing a neuron form and establish connections with others in real time. We have mapped networks of brain activation associated with specific emotional states. We have identified the influence of neurotransmitters — dopamine, serotonin, oxytocin, cortisol — on how we feel, how we decide, how we relate. All of this is real, rigorous and has significant practical implications for any field concerned with human behaviour.

And yet — and here lies one of the most revealing ironies of the field — when the subject is happiness, neuroscience encounters a limit that its own tools cannot cross. It is not a technological limit. It is a limit of nature. Happiness, in its most essential dimension, is not located in the brain. It resides in the experience that the brain makes possible. And experience, by definition, is irreducible to any mapping.

## **What the scans actually show**

Through functional magnetic resonance imaging — fMRI — and electroencephalography — EEG — researchers have identified patterns of brain activity that correlate with experiences that subjects describe as positive. The prefrontal cortex, the limbic system, the nucleus accumbens — associated with the reward circuit — appear consistently activated in states that people name as pleasure, satisfaction, contentment. Neurotransmitters such as dopamine and serotonin have been studied extensively. The connectivity between different brain regions has been mapped in search of patterns associated with lasting well-being.

The problem is not with the quality of those investigations. It is rigorous. The problem lies in the question they consistently cannot answer: why does the same pattern of brain activation correspond to radically different experiences in different people? Why does achieving a goal produce flourishing in one person and emptiness in another? Why does losing a job destroy one person and liberate another? Why does the same stimulus that activates the reward circuit in one context produce revulsion in another?

Neuroscience maps the how — the neurological substrate through which experience occurs. Happiness, in its deepest dimension, resists the mapping of why. And it is precisely the why that matters to anyone genuinely trying to understand it, rather than merely administer it.

### **Antonio Damasio and the body that thinks**

The Portuguese neuroscientist Antonio Damasio contributed something that complicates the question further still. In his seminal work *Descartes' Error* — and in subsequent books such as *The Feeling of What Happens* and *Looking for Spinoza* — Damasio demonstrated that emotions are not noise interfering with rationality. They are the foundation upon which rationality operates. Without the emotional signal, the decision-making process collapses.

This means that attempting to separate happiness from suffering — creating environments where only positive emotions are welcome — is not merely naive. It is neurologically counterproductive. The brain that processes only positive signals loses the ability to calibrate. It loses the discrimination necessary to distinguish what truly matters from what merely appears to matter. It loses, ultimately, the capacity to decide well.

A leader who receives only positive feedback because the environment punishes disagreement is not being protected from negativity. They are being deprived of the information they need to lead competently. And the same applies to any employee who gradually learns that expressing doubt or dissatisfaction is a risk not worth taking.

### **The seductive trap of scales and tests**

Whatever the context, attempts to measure happiness produce instruments that reveal more about the assumptions of those who created them than about the experience of those who respond to them. The Satisfaction with Life Scale evaluates how much people agree with statements about their lives — but agreeing with a statement on a questionnaire and actually feeling what that statement describes are entirely distinct phenomena. The Gross National Happiness Index of Bhutan is an admirable attempt to broaden the criteria of well-being beyond GDP, but produces a national average that says nothing about John, about Maria, about the singular human being working in your organisation.



The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule measures emotional states at a given moment — but the next moment may be radically different. The Oxford Happiness Questionnaire evaluates psychological well-being across dimensions including affect, satisfaction and eudaimonia — but eudaimonia, the Aristotelian concept of flourishing, is precisely what resists being captured by a scale of agreement. And Martin Seligman's Authentic Happiness Inventory measures authentic happiness based on engagement, achievement and meaningful relationships. All sound. Except for the fact that authenticity, by definition, cannot be measured by self-report.

Some years ago, while waiting for a dental appointment, I came across one of those magazines that turn happiness into a consumer spectacle. On the cover, in large letters: Happiness — Take the test and measure yours. Out of curiosity, I took it. The result placed me somewhere between profound depression and an imminent candidate for self-harm. I was genuinely surprised — not by my supposed unhappiness, but by the criteria that had produced it. The magazine had asked me whether I had the house I dreamed of, the car I dreamed of, the partner with the aesthetic qualities I dreamed of, the holidays I dreamed of. Not one question about what I valued. Not one about what moved me. Not one about what gave meaning to my time. Being was completely absent. Only Having mattered.

**Happiness cannot be measured because it is not an object. It is a state that emerges from the relationship between who we are, what we do, with whom we do it, and why. No spreadsheet reaches that equation.**

### **Nietzsche and the scandal of happiness as a goal**

Friedrich Nietzsche was perhaps the thinker who most radically confronted happiness as an existential objective — and his critiques are more relevant today than they were in the nineteenth century, precisely because the corporate market has turned into a mandate what he was already denouncing as illusion.

For Nietzsche, the pursuit of happiness as a primary life goal was the expression of a weakness disguised as aspiration. He associated it with what he called the herd morality — the tendency to smooth over existence, to avoid conflict, to seek comfort as a substitute for potency. In his critique of Judaeo-Christian morality, he saw the promise of happiness in the afterlife as the most sophisticated of traps: it taught people to deny the present in the name of a future reward that never arrives — and, in doing so, produced resentment, that silent corrosion born from envy of those who seem happier.

Amor fati — the love of fate — was not, for Nietzsche, conformism. It was the most demanding form of affirmation of life: the unconditional acceptance of everything that life brings, including and especially suffering, failure, loss. Not because they are good in themselves, but because they are constitutive of human experience — and denying that constitution is denying life itself. The happiness Nietzsche valued was not the absence of tension. It was, in his words, the feeling that power is growing, that an obstacle has been overcome. It resided in the traversal, not the avoidance.

Bringing this to the organisational world: an environment that systematically eliminates conflict, that smooths over every disagreement, that treats discomfort as a management problem to be resolved, is not promoting human flourishing. It is producing exactly the kind of weakening Nietzsche described — and preparing the ground for what organisations fear most: the silent mediocrity that no one admits and everyone perceives.



# CHAPTER 3

## **HAPPINESS AND PRODUCTIVITY: THE PARADOX THE DATA REVEALS**

The premise sustaining most corporate happiness programmes is seductive in its simplicity: happy employees produce more. It circulates in executive presentations, HR reports and leadership speeches with the authority of established scientific fact. The problem is that it is not. It is a well-intentioned belief that found some favourable studies and decided to stop searching.

When the literature is examined seriously — without the convenient selection that the motivational market practises — the picture that emerges is radically more complex, and in some points directly contrary to what is claimed on corporate stages.

### **What Dejours found in the depths of work**

Christophe Dejours, a French psychiatrist and researcher, devoted decades to studying the psychodynamics of work — the relationship between working conditions, psychological suffering and the mechanisms of production. What he and his colleagues Elisabeth Abdoucheli and Christian Jayet documented, from the 1980s onwards, was disturbing in its clarity and even more disturbing in its historical consistency: in certain doses and for controlled periods, suffering increases individual production exponentially.

The mechanism is simple and brutal. Faced with the immediacy of contemporary capitalism — with its constant accumulation of responsibilities, deadlines and demands — suffering generates an unconscious blocking of reflective consciousness. The individual enters a compulsive cycle of need, action and temporary relief. To avoid contact with their own suffering, they occupy themselves. They work more. They do not think — they act. The reflective system, which Daniel Kahneman would call System 2, is progressively deactivated in favour of the automatic. As Camus described in the myth of Sisyphus, repetition becomes the mode of existence: the boulder rises, falls, rises again — and the one who carries it gradually loses the capacity to ask why they continue carrying it.

The post-second industrial revolution corporate world did not create this mechanism. It merely recognised it — and, in many cases, began to administer it with increasing sophistication. The novelty of the twenty-first century is not suffering as a tool of production. It is the smile as its packaging.

### **The correlation no one wants to cite**

There are lines of research establishing a negative correlation between declared professional satisfaction and measurable productivity. These are not marginal studies — they appear in peer-reviewed journals, conducted by serious researchers with significant samples. Employees in states of moderate dissatisfaction — not in collapse, not in acute crisis, but in functional discomfort — tend, in certain contexts, to deliver superior quantitative results to teams in states of excessive comfort.

This is not a defence of organisational suffering. It is data that needs to be understood, not ignored — because ignoring it is precisely what allows the motivational market to keep selling solutions that do not solve the real problem. What is at stake is the crucial distinction between effort motivated by meaning and effort motivated by fear. The first is sustainable, creative, committed. The second is efficient in the short term and devastating in the long term. Imposed happiness does not produce the first. It produces a simulation of the second with the packaging of the first — and that simulation has an expiry date.

### **The company that installed happiness — and what happened next**

Some years ago, I participated in a meeting with the directors of a mid-sized technology company that had decided to create, with all available resources, an environment that prioritised joy and informality. Colourful rooms, regular motivational events, recreational spaces during working hours, a table-tennis table in the corridor — the complete repertoire of what the market sells as a well-being culture. Leaders had been instructed to always maintain a positive tone, never enter meetings feeling weighed down, to model the happiness they expected to see in their teams. The goal was to make this part of the company's culture. A CHO had been hired to lead the process.

Eight months after the implementation, projects were beginning to fail in a systematic and silent way. There were no explosions, no open conflicts — what existed was a slow and inexplicable deterioration, at least for those who still believed the environment was working.

A confidential internal survey — which I conducted jointly with leaders and employees — revealed the mechanism. Employees had stopped reporting risks. Not because they did not perceive them. Because they had learned, through systematic observation of the environment, that raising concerns was perceived as incompatible with the culture that had been created. Whoever expressed doubt seemed pessimistic. Whoever pointed out a problem seemed unmotivated. Whoever disagreed seemed not to have bought in. The fear of appearing negative had become greater than the commitment to the reality of the projects.

The result: critical problems that could have been resolved in their early stages grew unchallenged, protected by the mandatory positivity that prevented them from being named. The company had built, with the best resources and the best intentions, a well-being echo chamber — where what circulated was not the truth, but the version of the truth that did not disturb anyone.

### **Positive mood and analytical acuity**

This is not an isolated anecdote. Behavioural studies consistently document that positive mood reduces analytical acuity in scenarios demanding critical vigilance. People in a good mood have greater difficulty identifying inconsistencies, detecting lies, and evaluating risks with precision. Good disposition reduces attention to negative signals — which are precisely the signals that matter most in high-complexity, high-risk environments.

In leadership and management contexts, where that vigilance is essential, forcing states of happiness can literally compromise the quality of decisions. A CEO who maintains artificial positivity is not leading with courage. They are protecting themselves from the discomfort of reality — and dragging their team into the same refuge.

Additional research in social psychology reveals other side effects of positive mood that rarely appear in motivational talks: people in a good mood tend to be less generous in certain situations — they keep more reward tickets when given the option to share. They are less inclined to help others in moments of need. In some contexts, they negotiate worse — accepting disadvantageous agreements because the state of good disposition reduces the willingness for necessary conflict.

**Constant happiness is not an organisational virtue. It is an anaesthetic. And no organisation that anaesthetises its critical perception can remain competitive, ethical, or healthy for long.**

There is also a finding that deserves particular attention: in research where psychologists asked participants to keep a detailed diary for two weeks, those who most valued happiness as a primary objective also reported the highest levels of loneliness. The explanatory hypothesis is consistent with the logic we have been building: when happiness becomes an individual and performative pursuit, the other loses centrality in the equation. And without the other — without genuine alterity, the real risk of encounter with someone who thinks differently — happiness loses the ground in which it might, paradoxically, take root.

# CHAPTER 4

## THE HIDDEN WEIGHT OF BEING REQUIRED TO BE HAPPY

“Among the complexities of the world is the insatiable desire to discover how to be happy – a vertiginous race in which only the lucid, after some time, perceive its futility. This incessant pursuit keeps us distant from our own essence, busy and exhausted, while the emptiness persists. And yet the real question may be simpler than we imagine: all we truly need to do is stop, breathe and appreciate each present moment in its fullness – and then ask ourselves: why?”

– Marcello de Souza

### From aspiration to duty: a historical inversion

In the eighteenth century, Enlightenment thinkers proclaimed the pursuit of happiness as an inalienable right — a call to individual freedom, to the autonomy of the person in the face of constraining structures. John Locke, Thomas Jefferson, Jeremy Bentham: each, in their own way, affirmed that human flourishing was the legitimate objective of social life, and that institutions existed to protect it, not to deny it. It was a genuinely liberating idea, born from the impulse to emancipate the human from the weight of traditions that imposed suffering as virtue.

Two centuries later, that same concept was inverted in its meaning. Happiness ceased to be a possibility that opens when conditions are just — and became a demand made regardless of conditions. The right to the pursuit of happiness transformed into the duty to be happy. And that duty — silent, diffuse, omnipresent — is one of the most corrosive phenomena of contemporary life, especially in the world of work.

Social media completed and accelerated this conversion. Today, demonstrating happiness is a form of social capital accumulated publicly. Those who do not display it are perceived as people who have failed — in their relationships, their careers, their personal development.



The pressure to be happy all the time is not merely emotionally stressful. It is structurally incoherent with human nature, which is constitutively ambivalent, traversed by contradictions, by shadows, by forms of sadness that do not disappear because someone decided they should.

### **The experiment no one cites in motivational talks**

A classic behavioural psychology experiment captured this paradox with a precision that should be mandatory in any leadership training. Participants were invited to watch an emotionally intense video — footage of athletic achievements, victories earned after genuine suffering. Half the group, before watching, had read a statement emphasising the importance of happiness in their lives. The other half had read nothing.

The result was counterintuitive and revealing: those who had read the statement about the importance of happiness experienced less happiness while watching the video than the control group. The elevated expectation created a gap between what they should feel and what they actually felt. Happiness made into an imperative becomes a standard of emotional performance — and when that standard is not met, what follows is not merely the absence of expected happiness. It is guilt for not having found it. And guilt contaminates precisely the state that was being sought.

This mechanism operates in organisations in an analogous and systematic way. By creating cultures where positivity is mandatory and the expression of difficult emotions is socially penalised — implicitly or explicitly — companies are not promoting happiness. They are producing the performance of happiness. And the performance of happiness is, by definition, the opposite of genuine happiness: it is a dissociation between what people feel and what they show that, over time, erodes authenticity, trust, mental health and, ultimately, the organisation itself.

### **The happiness spectacle and its silent victims**

Barbara Ehrenreich, in her book *Bright-sided*, documents with rigour how the culture of compulsory positivism has caused real and measurable damage in contexts ranging from chemotherapy rooms to corporate boardrooms. She describes how, especially during periods of economic crisis and mass redundancies, the language of positivity was mobilised by companies not as genuine care for their employees, but as a strategy for containing conflict. Keeping people believing that things could improve if they thought more positively was, in many cases, a way of avoiding difficult conversations about responsibilities, injustices and organisational choices that harmed the majority to benefit a minority.

Happiness as a facade. Positivity as a social anaesthetic. The smile as image management. This is not theory — it is what I observe, year after year, in the organisational development processes I conduct. Companies that invest heavily in well-being programmes while maintaining cultures that systematically make their people ill. Leaders who preach balance and burn their teams with impossible demands. CHOs who organise integration events while the real working conditions quietly deteriorate.

### **The clinic as mirror**

Over years of clinical work, I have encountered countless concrete manifestations of this paradox. One remains particularly vivid. I worked with a flight attendant employed by an airline with a strongly positivity-oriented organisational culture — someone who had so deeply internalised the imperative of happiness that she began applying it to her personal life with the same rigorous consistency.

Any difficult conversation at home was avoided: it might seem like negativity. Any expression of dissatisfaction was suppressed: it did not fit who she had learned to be.

Two years into our work together, the marriage ended. Not through explosion, not through betrayal, not through open conflict. Through progressive shrinkage. Superficiality had replaced intimacy — and intimacy, as any therapist knows, is built precisely in the moments when we are able to show the other what is not working in us. When someone learns that this is unacceptable at work, they learn to suppress it at home as well. And the systematic suppression of what is real is the surest path to isolation — even within a relationship.

Eva Illouz, in her study of the affective transformations of contemporary capitalism, captured this phenomenon with sociological precision. She observed that the incorporation of emotional practices into the corporate environment produced a paradoxical effect: people began to treat their personal lives with the same instrumental logic they had learned to apply at work. Relationships became managed. Spontaneity yielded to emotional protocol. The home became increasingly cold and calculated — and, not by coincidence, many people began to prefer the workplace to home, because at least at work the loneliness was wrapped in movement, in tasks, in the sensation that something was being produced.

**Unhappiness transcends its own meaning when we make it forbidden.  
It does not disappear. It moves downward, inward, to where it can no longer  
be named – and from there, it operates with redoubled force.**

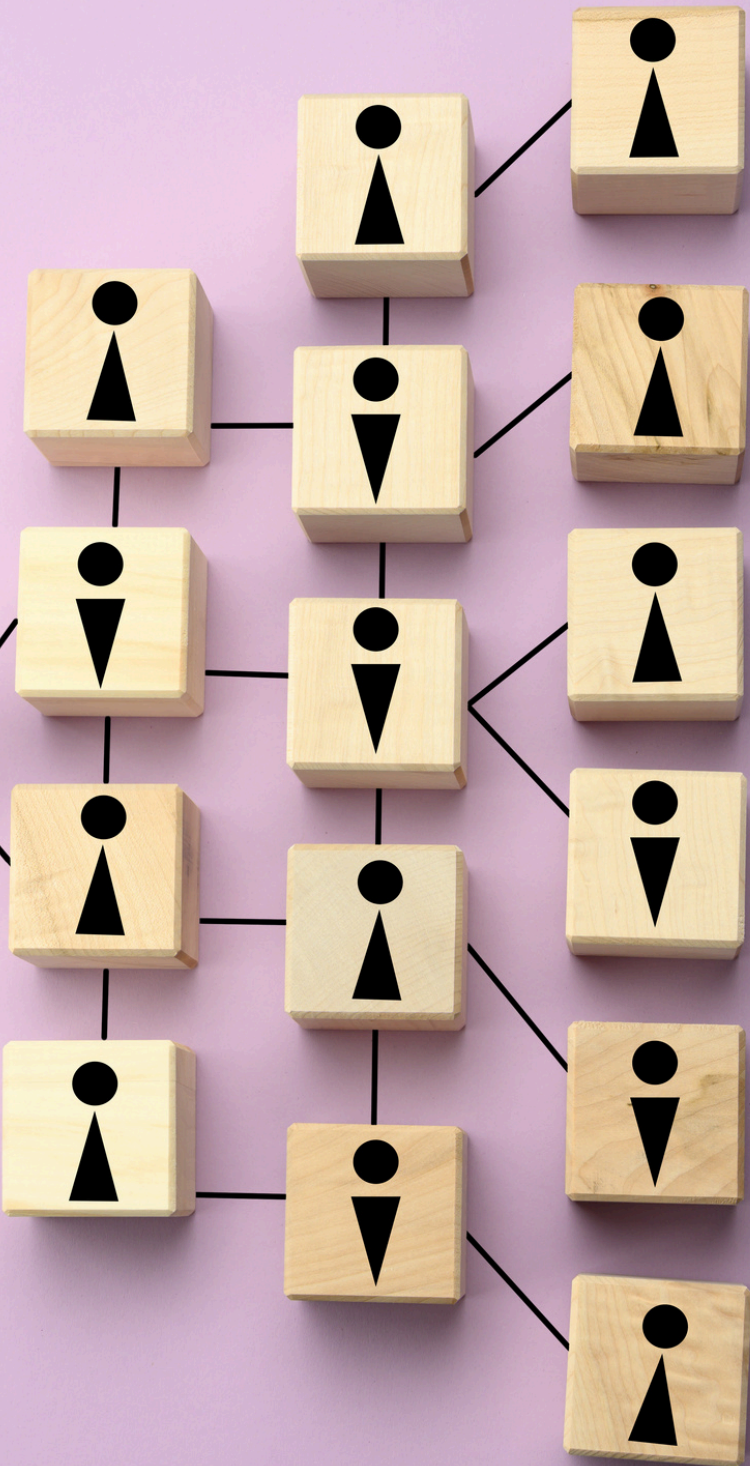
### **The Being that Having cannot reach**

There is a distinction that runs through this entire discussion and that is rarely named clearly in the corporate world: the difference between Having and Being. The happiness that contemporary culture sells us is almost exclusively a happiness of Having.

Having the role, the salary, the benefits, the recognition, the promotion, the corner office. Corporate happiness tests measure, in most cases, the level of satisfaction with what one has.

But Being does not appear in those metrics. Being is who you are when no one is watching. It is the quality of your relationship with your own work. It is how much what you do resonates with what you value. It is how much you are able to be yourself — contradictory, imperfect, genuine — in the environment where you spend most of your waking hours. And Being, by its nature irreducible to metrics, is systematically absent from climate surveys, engagement indices and happiness reports that companies produce quarterly.

This is not a detail. It is the core of the problem. Because you can have everything an organisation is capable of offering and still feel that something essential is absent. And when that feeling of absence cannot be named — because the environment teaches that naming the void is a sign of weakness or ingratitude — it transforms into precisely the kind of illness that happiness programmes claimed to prevent.



# CHAPTER 5

## **HAPPY IN YOUR LIFE OR HAPPY ABOUT YOUR LIFE**

Daniel Kahneman — Nobel laureate in Economics, one of the most rigorous thinkers about the mechanisms of the human mind — proposed a distinction that, when taken seriously, completely transforms the way we understand happiness at work and in life. The difference between being happy in your life and being happy about your life.

Being happy in your life is experienced happiness — the hedonic quality of the moments we traverse. It is the pleasure of a meaningful conversation, the satisfaction of solving a difficult problem, the ease of an afternoon without urgency. It is what the experiencing self registers in the moment of living. This is the self that feels — and its unit of measurement is the instant.

Being happy about your life is remembered happiness — the retrospective evaluation that the remembering self constructs about what has been lived. It is the answer to the question we ask when we step back from the current of daily life and look at the whole: was it worth it? Did I build something I recognise as mine? Did I commit to something that matters? This is the self that narrates — and its unit of measurement is the trajectory.

These two types of happiness not only differ in nature. They frequently conflict — and it is precisely in that conflict that many of the deepest contradictions of human behaviour at work reside.

### **What the research revealed — and what it means**

Studies conducted with professionals across different cultures, hierarchies and age groups revealed something consistent and, in many ways, surprising. When asked about the kind of happiness they wanted for their entire life — the longest horizon they could imagine — the majority chose experienced happiness: I want to live good moments. Approximately 82 per cent of American respondents and 69 per cent of Europeans made that choice.

But when the same question was reformulated with a time horizon of hours — what do you want for the next hour? — something curious happened. Half of the people changed their answer. They chose remembered happiness. They opted to do something that, in the future, would allow them to look back with pride — even if that meant giving up immediate pleasure.

The most revealing data lies in that shift. People make decisions hour by hour that, accumulated over months and years, construct a life different from the one they say they want. They declare that they value lived experience — and in practice sacrifice the present in the name of a future that, when it arrives, has already been filled with another set of sacrifices. This dissociation is not hypocrisy. It is one of the most precise expressions of what Kahneman called the focusing illusion: the tendency to overestimate the impact of a single factor on our happiness while ignoring all the others that, in the present moment, are being neglected.

### **The ethical weight of work**

There is a finding in this research that deserves particular attention, because it reveals something about the deep relationship between work and identity that is rarely articulated clearly. When people were invited to think about what they wanted for the next hour, many reported that a kind of ethics took hold of them. They felt they should pay more attention to the work in progress — not out of external obligation, but from an internal sense that their trajectory would be assessed, that in the future they would look back at that moment and would need to recognise themselves in it.

This is remarkable. It means that many workers carry, even without explicit vocabulary for it, the distinction that Kahneman articulated: they know that the self that will remember is different from the self that is currently living — and in certain moments, they choose to sacrifice the second to honour the first. The problem is when that choice ceases to be conscious and becomes a compulsive pattern — when postponing present happiness becomes the only available strategy, and the future where that happiness would be permitted never arrives because it has once again been deferred.

### **The impossible — and necessary — convergence**

When the research was extended to Eastern cultures — with nearly 500 participants in Japan and China — the results showed a different and revealing consistency. Japanese and Chinese workers tended to choose experienced happiness both for life and for the following hour, with significantly higher percentages than Western participants — around 89% for life and 80% for the next hour.

The researchers attributed this consistency to the influence of philosophical and spiritual traditions that, for centuries, have taught the value of attention to the present moment. Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism — from distinct perspectives — share the idea that reality resides in the present instant, and that suffering arises from escaping that instant, whether toward the past of guilt or the future of anxiety. In these contexts, meditation is not a well-being technique imported by the corporate market. It is an epistemology — a way of knowing and inhabiting time.

This has direct implications for global organizations attempting to apply universal models of corporate happiness. What functions as a sense of belonging in one culture may be perceived as intrusion in another. What generates motivation here may produce discomfort there. The universalization of organizational happiness is not merely simplistic — it is ethnocentrically flawed. And a Chief Happiness Officer who does not understand this is, at best, being well-intentioned in an ineffective way.

### **The impossible — and necessary — convergence**

What Kahneman's research ultimately points to is that happiness at work cannot be conceived from a single perspective. It requires the integration of two orders of experience that often contradict each other: the pleasure of the present and the pride of the future. The lived moment and the narrated trajectory. The self that feels and the self that remembers.

A Chief Happiness Officer who does not make this distinction is bound to produce programs that respond to one dimension while ignoring the other — and, in doing so, amplifies exactly the dissatisfaction it sought to resolve. Because you can create all the conditions for people to feel good now and still leave them without the sense of trajectory that transforms moments into a life. And you can create all the conditions for people to build something they will be proud of in the future and still deprive them of the present pleasure that would make that future bearable.

The question rarely asked of employees — with the depth it deserves — is: what kind of happiness are you seeking at this moment in your professional trajectory? What is the relationship between what you do today and what, ten years from now, you will be proud to have done? And what do you need from your work now — not as a benefit, not as compensation, but as an experience — so that those ten years are not merely a cost to be paid?

When this question is asked seriously — not as an integration exercise, but as a genuine inquiry by someone truly interested in the answer — it reveals something no engagement survey can capture: the quality of each person's relationship with their own time, their own work, and their own future. And this quality is the terrain where real well-being begins — or, when absent, where illness takes root.



# CHAPTER 6

## WHAT ACTUALLY SUSTAINS WELL-BEING IN ORGANISATIONS

**True happiness is that which depends on nothing that lies outside the intimacy of ourselves.”**

**– Antoine de Saint-Exupéry**

If happiness cannot be imposed, manufactured or managed as a product — and I hope to have demonstrated, throughout the preceding pages, that it cannot — what remains for the organisational field? That is the question the critics of what I have argued will ask. It is a good question. The answer is not the abandonment of the subject. It is its radicalisation.

Instead of asking how to make people happy — a question that invariably leads to simplifications that do not work or that work at the cost of human authenticity — organisations need to ask a more difficult and more honest question: what conditions allow people to flourish?

That distinction is not semantic. It is structural. To flourish — what Aristotle called *eudaimonia*, and what we might translate as living in accordance with the best of oneself — is an active process, not a passive state. It does not happen when someone provides us with happiness from the outside. It happens when we find conditions to exercise our capacities in ways that resonate with what we value, within relationships that recognise us as subjects, and in an environment that sustains rather than stifles our singularity. This is where I want to dwell — not in theory, but in what I have learned in the field, in the living body of the organisations I have accompanied over decades.

## **What the real culture says — before anyone opens their mouth**

Some years ago, I was called to accompany a restructuring process at a mid-sized family business going through a leadership crisis. At the first meeting with the board, I received an elegantly designed document: the company values. Respect. Transparency. People first. The HR director presented them with the genuine conviction of someone who believes what they are saying.

Over the following days, I began to circulate through the floors. I observed. I listened. And what I found was a different company — the one that existed beneath the printed values. A company where middle managers would not hold a single meeting without first establishing what the owner wanted to hear. A company where mistakes were punished not with feedback, but with silence — the most effective form of exclusion because it leaves no visible marks. A company where excellent people had developed, over years, the ability to disappear in meetings: to say a great deal without communicating anything, to agree without committing, to smile without being present.

When I shared these observations with senior leadership, the reaction was defensive — as it always is when the truth contradicts the narrative. The company owner asked me, with contained irritation: but what does any of this have to do with happiness? I replied: everything. Because what people feel at work is not determined by the values the company declares. It is determined by what happens when someone makes a mistake, when someone disagrees, when someone needs help. And in that company, what happened in those moments was invisibility. And invisibility, in the field of human experience, is a silent and efficient form of suffering.

Edgar Schein, one of the greatest students of organisational culture in the twentieth century, spent decades demonstrating that the real culture of an organisation does not reside in visible artefacts — logos, printed values, award ceremonies — nor even in the declared beliefs and values. It resides in the basic assumptions: those convictions so deeply internalised that they have ceased to be conscious. What the organisation assumes to be true without ever questioning, because to question would mean shaking the foundation upon which everything else was built.

The basic assumption of that company was simple and devastating: disagreement is disloyalty. No document stated it. No manager said it aloud. But every behaviour confirmed it — and every employee had learned it, not through explicit instruction, but through the systematic observation of the consequences faced by those who had dared to think differently.

Any well-being initiative planted in that soil would produce, at best, a facade of flourishing. And that is exactly what the company had attempted in the years before I arrived: a recognition programme, a well-being day, a climate survey whose results were never shared with those who had produced them. Initiatives that did not merely fail — they made things worse, because they signalled to employees that the organisation knew something was wrong and had chosen cosmetics over surgery.

### **Climate: the thermometer no one wants to read**

Organisational climate is the situational and dynamic manifestation of culture — what people feel when they arrive at work, when they interact with their peers and leaders, when they receive or fail to receive recognition. It is highly sensitive to specific events: a poorly communicated redundancy can devastate the climate of a team for months. A genuine act of generosity from a leader can restore it in days. It is not the cause — it is the symptom. And treating the symptom without investigating the cause is the most expensive mistake an organisation can make.

In that family company, the climate was measured annually by an external consultancy that delivered a forty-page report, full of graphs, with numbered recommendations. The report would sit in the HR director's drawer until the following year, when it was replaced by the next one. Not because leadership was malicious. Because the report said things that leadership was not ready to hear — and no space had been created for that readiness to develop. The climate survey had become a ritual of organisational innocence: we do the survey, therefore we are committed to well-being. The commitment was to the appearance of commitment.

When a climate survey reveals dissatisfaction and the organisational response is an integration event, it confirms precisely the problem the survey signalled: the organisation is not listening. It is performing listening. And people notice. They always notice. And when they notice, they learn that responding honestly to the next survey is a risk not worth taking — so the next survey will be even less honest, and the cycle closes in on itself.

### **Psychological safety: what Edmondson found that the market distorted**

Amy Edmondson, professor at Harvard Business School, conducted over two decades one of the most robust and counterintuitive pieces of research on team performance. She began by investigating medical teams — and found something that disturbed her sufficiently to dedicate the rest of her career to understanding it: the teams that reported the most errors were not the worst teams. They were the best. Not because they made more mistakes — but because they felt they could speak about mistakes without being punished for doing so.

The concept that emerged from that work — psychological safety — was rapidly adopted by the corporate market and, as happens with everything the market adopts, rapidly simplified until it lost what was most important about it. Psychological safety became synonymous with a pleasant environment, empathetic leadership, judgement-free meetings. It became a product. It became a two-day training programme.

What Edmondson actually discovered is more demanding and more uncomfortable than any simplified version can accommodate. Psychological safety is not the absence of pressure. It is not an environment where everything is permitted. It is not systematised kindness. It is the shared belief — built over time through consistent behaviour, and destroyed by a single serious inconsistency — that the interpersonal environment is safe for intellectual and relational risk-taking. For asking the question nobody wants to ask. For saying the project has a problem when everyone seems to believe things are fine. For admitting not knowing — in a world where admitting not knowing is frequently read as incompetence.

This is radically different from happiness. A psychologically safe team can traverse moments of great tension, pressure and suffering — and still maintain its cohesion, its capacity for learning and its quality of delivery. Because tension and conflict are processed openly, as information, not suppressed in the name of a positivity that does not correspond to what people are actually experiencing. Psychological safety does not remove the weight of work. It creates the conditions for that weight to be distributed — and transformed.

### **Frankl in organisations: what survives when everything else gives way**

Viktor Frankl survived Auschwitz, Dachau and three other Nazi concentration camps between 1942 and 1945. A psychiatrist before the war, he arrived in the camps with a theoretical hypothesis about the centrality of meaning in human experience. He left with something heavier and more unbreakable than any hypothesis: lived evidence, forged in the most extreme conditions human existence has known.

What he observed — and documented in *Man's Search for Meaning*, perhaps the most honest book ever written about the human condition — was that psychological survival in the camps did not depend on physical strength, previous social status or any material resource. It depended on the capacity to find meaning. Those who had a why — a mission awaiting them on the other side, a loved person to whom they needed to return, a work that needed completing — these people could endure any how. Those who lost their why lost, little by little, the capacity to resist. Not because they were weaker. Because they had lost the axis around which all experience organised itself.

I bring Frankl to this chapter not as philosophical ornament — but as the most solid argument I know against the corporate happiness agenda. Because what he demonstrated, in the most adverse conditions imaginable, is that human beings do not need happiness to remain whole. They need meaning. And meaning is something no company can offer as a benefit. It can only create the conditions for each person to find it — or systematically prevent that from happening.

In the development processes I conduct, one of the questions that most frequently provokes silence — the kind of silence that precedes real change — is this: what would you do in this work even if no one were watching? Not out of discipline, not out of fear of consequences, but because something in you recognises it as yours? When the answer is nothing or I do not know, we are faced with something that no well-being programme resolves. We are facing a crisis of meaning — and crises of meaning do not respond to relaxation rooms.

### **Leadership: the variable the market underestimates and people never forget**

There is a fundamental asymmetry in the relationship between leaders and the people they lead — and it is rarely named with the honesty it deserves. Leaders forget faster than the people they lead. A decision made on a Thursday afternoon, under pressure, without all the necessary information, and forgotten by Friday — that decision can live in an employee's memory for years. It can define the quality of someone's sleep. It can reconfigure the relationship that person has with their own work, their own career, their own capacity to trust.

Leaders do not produce happiness. That is genuinely beyond any human competence. But leaders create — or destroy — the conditions in which flourishing can occur. And they destroy with far greater ease than they create. Because destroying trust is instantaneous. Building it requires consistency over time — and consistency is precisely what the pressure for immediate results tends to sacrifice first.

The leader who demonstrates genuine vulnerability — not the performative vulnerability that became a management technique, but the real vulnerability of someone who admits not knowing, who asks for help, who acknowledges a mistake without immediately reframing it as a learning opportunity — that leader does something no training can replicate: they normalise humanity within the working environment. And when humanity is normalised, people stop spending energy hiding who they are — and can finally direct that energy towards the work.

There is an abyssal difference between you were incredible today and I noticed that you found a solution to that problem three weeks ago that seemed impossible — that no one else had thought to try by that route. The first sentence is a gesture. The second is an act of genuine recognition — a signal that someone paid enough attention to see. And being seen, in the most fundamental sense of the word, is one of the most primitive and most systematically ignored human needs in the corporate world.

**Organisational well-being does not begin with programmes. It begins in the moment a leader decides to be honest about what is happening – even when honesty is inconvenient. Everything that comes before that is decoration.**

### **Trust: the only foundation with no substitute**

Over decades accompanying organisations through processes of transformation, I have arrived at a conviction that no theory contradicts and that practice confirms without exception: the only foundation upon which any truly excellent organisation has been built is trust. Not individual talent — talent without trust produces destructive competition. Not strategy — strategy without trust produces sabotaged execution. Not technology, not capital, not brand. Trust.

Trust between peers who know they can count on each other when pressure increases. Trust between leaders and teams who know that information circulates honestly — not filtered to protect convenient narratives. Trust between the organisation and each person who works within it: the belief that the implicit contract between them — not only the formal employment contract, but the contract of meaning, of respect and of reciprocity — will be honoured even when circumstances become difficult.

When that trust exists, people do not merely work better — they work differently. With more presence, with more intellectual risk, with more willingness to say what they think and to hear what they do not want to hear. Because they know the environment will sustain that honesty rather than punish it.

And when that trust is absent — when the environment has taught, through systematic repetition, that being honest is dangerous — there is no well-being programme in the world that can recover what was lost. Because what was lost is not happiness. It is the willingness to be truly present. And real presence — not the physical presence of bodies sitting in chairs, but the human presence of minds and hearts genuinely engaged — is the only resource that no automation substitutes and no salary buys.

ners

Be

HAPPY



Peace

# CONCLUSION

## WHAT REMAINS WHEN HAPPINESS PASSES

We have reached the end of a journey that deliberately offered no simple answers. Because simple answers to complex human questions are, almost always, part of the problem — not the solution. And the market that manufactures and sells simple answers to organisational happiness already has sufficient, eloquent and well-remunerated representatives. This e-book was not written to be one more of them.

We have traversed territory that is rarely crossed with honesty in the world of work. We examined where the corporate obsession with happiness comes from — and who profits from it. We confronted what neuroscience actually knows about the subject, and what it admits it does not know. We investigated the silent paradox between happiness and productivity. We plunged into the hidden weight of being required to be happy, into the damage that weight inflicts on human relationships, into the distinction between Being and Having that most organisational metrics systematically ignore. We explored the difference between the happiness that is lived and the happiness that is remembered. We entered the depths of organisational culture — into the third level where Schein located the basic assumptions that no one questions. And we arrived, finally, at the only foundation that has no substitute: the trust born when people believe they can be human without paying a price for it.

Schopenhauer warned us about illusion — and the illusion he described in the nineteenth century has never been so well-funded as it is today. Nietzsche challenged us with amor fati — the radical acceptance of everything we are, including what is difficult, contradictory, shadowed — and showed us that the happiness worth something is the one born of overcoming, not avoidance. Frankl showed us that meaning is more robust and more fundamental than happiness, and that those who have a why can endure any how. Kahneman revealed that the self that feels and the self that remembers are different, and that ignoring that difference is building any well-being programme on sand.

Dejours reminded us that suffering has an economic logic that organisations know well, even when they pretend not to. Damasio demonstrated that emotions are not noise disturbing reason — they are the foundation upon which reason operates. Edmondson proved that psychological safety, not happiness, is what produces teams capable of learning. And Illouz warned us about the precise danger of treating affect as a management technique — because when affect becomes instrumental, it ceases to be affect and becomes control with good intentions declared.

What all these thinkers have in common — in radically distinct perspectives, in different languages, in different centuries, in disciplines that frequently do not speak to one another — is the refusal to accept superficial versions of human experience. It is the insistence that the human is irreducible to the models that attempt to capture it. It is the conviction that the truth about what we are is always more complex, more contradictory and richer than any HR framework can accommodate.

### **Three questions that no programme answers for you**

Rather than concluding with a five-step model for implementing happiness in your organisation — which would be a complete betrayal of everything built here — I propose three questions. Not as technique. As mirror.

The first: what kind of presence are you asking of people? Are you creating conditions for each employee to show up with authenticity — with their doubts, their complex emotions, their disagreements, their imperfect singularity — or are you asking for a performance of engagement that leaves no space for the real human being? An honest answer to that question will reveal more about the genuine health of your culture than any climate survey. And if the answer is uncomfortable — it is because it is correct.

The second: does the work you offer connect people to something they consider genuinely meaningful? Not necessarily grand — meaning can reside in precise care for a client, in the quality of a process, in how a team treats one another daily. But it must be real, perceived, verifiable through the experience of those who live it. Not manufactured by internal marketing.

Not declared in the values printed on the wall that no one practises. If the people who work with you cannot answer, without hesitation, what makes their work important — you have a problem of meaning that no benefits programme resolves.

The third: do your leadership relationships have sufficient human quality to sustain people not only when things are going well, but when they are traversing difficulties? The true culture of an organisation does not appear at integration events, at end-of-year parties, at testimonials on the website. It appears when someone makes a mistake. When someone falls ill. When someone publicly disagrees with a decision. What happens in those moments — what actually happens, not what the conduct manual prescribes — is the culture. And if what happens in those moments teaches people that it is better to be silent, to conform, to hide, you do not have a happiness problem. You have a humanity problem.

### **What this e-book is not**

This e-book is not a critique of the human desire to be happy. That desire is legitimate, profound and constitutive of what we are. It is a critique of the instrumentalisation of that desire — of its capture by the market, its transformation into a manageable product, its reduction to a metric that serves the organisation's narrative more than the real flourishing of the people who inhabit it. It is a critique of the intellectual opportunism that takes serious concepts — positive psychology, neuroscience, logotherapy, the philosophy of well-being — and dehydrates them until all that remains are palatable, sellable, harmless slogans.

Because harmless is precisely what knowledge cannot be, when what is at stake is the quality of the life that people build within the organisations where they spend the majority of their waking hours. Harmless knowledge is knowledge that has been domesticated. And domesticated knowledge transforms nothing — it merely justifies what already exists.

Genuine happiness, when it occurs at work, is always a by-product. It cannot be the objective — because, as we have demonstrated, the more directly we pursue it, the more it retreats. It emerges, unexpectedly, from the side, when we are committed to something greater than ourselves.

. When work has meaning and relationships have depth sufficient to sustain the truth. When it is possible to be human — contradictory, uncertain, imperfect — without apologising for it.


**The happiness worth something is not the one that was delivered to us. It is the one we find on the path of becoming who we are capable of being.**

Creating the conditions for that to happen is more difficult than hiring a CHO. It is more demanding than installing a ping-pong table or conducting a climate survey that will sit in a drawer. It requires institutional courage — that rare kind of courage that accepts hearing what it does not want to hear and changing what is structurally inconvenient to change, not only what is visually easy to change and photograph for the sustainability report.

But it is the only path that leads somewhere real. Everything else is the management of appearances — and appearances, however well managed, have an expiry date. What has no expiry date is the memory each person carries of how much they were treated as a human being or as a resource. That memory does not appear in climate surveys. It appears in how people speak about the organisation after they leave it. In the silence with which they enter meetings. In the way they look at the clock at 5:59 pm.

Schopenhauer said that man wanders through life seeking something that will bring him lasting satisfaction, without realising that true happiness lies in the acceptance of the present and the understanding of oneself. After everything we have traversed together in this e-book, I allow myself to propose an addition: the understanding of oneself only happens in an environment that allows you to be yourself. And creating that environment — within organisations, within teams, within leadership relationships — is the most serious, most urgent and most neglected task of our time.

Not the task of making people happy. The task of stopping preventing them from being so.

A black and white photograph of a wooden sign mounted on a brick wall. The sign is rectangular and made of three vertical wooden planks. It has a thick black border. The text 'WORK HARD DREAM BIG' is written in a bold, black, sans-serif font, centered on the sign. The words are arranged in four lines: 'WORK' on the first line, 'HARD' on the second, 'DREAM' on the third, and 'BIG' on the fourth. The background is a rough, textured brick wall.

**WORK  
HARD  
DREAM  
BIG**

## EPILOGUE

### **What I did not know when I began**

When I began writing about organisational happiness, I believed that the central problem was superficiality. That it would be enough to deepen the debate, bring in the right authors, dismantle the myths with data and philosophy — and organisations would begin asking the right questions.

I was wrong.

Not in direction. In magnitude. The problem is not superficiality. It is interest. Organisational happiness, the way it is sold and purchased, serves those who sell it and those who buy it — and rarely serves the human being who should be its beneficiary. That is not an accusation of bad faith. It is an observation about how systems function: they tend to perpetuate what sustains them, even when they claim to be serving something else.

The CHO who installs a well-being programme in a toxic culture is not being naive. They are being functional to the system that hired them. The climate survey that measures satisfaction with benefits and ignores the quality of power relations is not an imperfect instrument. It is a precise instrument — for what is actually being measured: the surface, not the structure.

It took me time to understand this. And I understood it not in theory — I understood it in a corridor, on a Tuesday afternoon, when an HR manager told me, with disarming candour: you know, Marcello, I know it is not working. But if I say that to the board, I will lose the project. So we carry on.

“So we carry on.”

Two words. The epilogue of every illusion this e-book attempted to dismantle. We carry on not because we believe. We carry on because stopping costs more than pretending.

This is where the turn happens — and this is where I need to be honest about what this book can and cannot do.

This e-book will not change organisations. Organisations do not change because they read a book. They change when the cost of not changing becomes greater than the cost of changing — and that calculation is rarely made on the basis of philosophical or neuroscientific evidence. It is made on the basis of money lost, talent that leaves, employment disputes, reputational crises, leadership collapses.

What this book can do — the only thing it can do, honestly — is change the quality of the questions a person asks. And a person with better questions, in a position of decision, is worth more than any happiness programme the market has to offer.

### **The turn I did not expect to find**

Throughout the research and writing, I found something I was not looking for. I discovered that the organisations most genuinely concerned with the well-being of their people were not those that talked most about happiness. They were the ones that talked most about responsibility.

Responsibility for the quality of relationships. For the honesty of difficult conversations. For the coherence between what is declared and what is practised. For the willingness to hear what is uncomfortable and to change what is inconvenient to change.

I did not see meditation rooms in those organisations. I saw leaders who knew the names of their employees' children — and the names of the projects that were destroying them. I saw teams that disagreed aloud and left meetings more aligned than they had entered. I saw people who made mistakes without hiding them, who asked for help without shame, who said I do not know and were met with let us find out together.

I did not see happiness as a programme. I saw happiness as a consequence. As an unplanned by-product of an environment where being human was not a risk.

**The organisation that comes closest to human flourishing is not the one that promises happiness. It is the one that has the courage to be real.**

### **The invitation — and what it asks of you**

If you have reached this point, there is something I want to ask of you. I do not ask that you agree with everything that has been written here — productive disagreement is, as I have tried to demonstrate, a sign of health, not a problem. I ask for something more difficult.

I ask you to look at the environment in which you work — or which you lead, or which you build — and ask a question that most people avoid: what happens here when someone is genuinely human? When they make a real mistake, when they genuinely disagree, when they are genuinely not well?

Not what the manual says happens. What actually happens.

If the answer is recognition, support, space — you are in a rare place. Protect it as the scarce good it is.

If the answer is silence, veiled punishment, progressive isolation — you have a decision to make. Not about happiness. About the kind of environment you are willing to inhabit, to perpetuate, to lead. About what you want the people who work with you to carry when they walk out the door at the end of the day.

That is the question this book leaves behind. It has no right answer. It has the answer that you, honestly, are able to give yourself.

And perhaps that is it, in the end — that willingness to ask the question without knowing the answer, to look at what is real rather than what is comfortable — perhaps that is precisely what separates those who transform environments from those who merely manage them.

**“Not the task of making people happy. The task of stopping preventing them from being so. And now, this: the task of having the courage to begin.”**  
— Marcello de Souza

Marcello de Souza | Coaching & Você  
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## RECOMMENDED READING

The texts below are not a formal bibliography. They are works that, in different ways and for different reasons, sustain, provoke or deepen what has been discussed throughout this e-book. Some are academic. Others are philosophical. Others still are documents of lived experience. All of them, without exception, refuse the simplified version of the human. That is why they are here.

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### PHILOSOPHY AND EXISTENCE

#### **Man's Search for Meaning —Viktor Frankl**

The most honest book ever written about the human condition. Frankl demonstrated, through experience in the Nazi concentration camps, that human beings do not need happiness to survive — they need meaning. Essential reading for anyone who works with human development. There is no shortcut.

#### **The World as Will and Representation— Arthur Schopenhauer**

For those who want to understand the origin of the critique of the illusion guiding the human pursuit of happiness. Schopenhauer is difficult, dense and disturbing — and therefore indispensable. Even those who disagree emerge changed.

#### **Thus Spoke Zarathustra —Friedrich Nietzsche**

The central text of Nietzschean thought on potency, overcoming and amor fati. Not a book about how to be happy — a book about how to stop fleeing from your own life. To be read slowly, more than once.

### **The Burnout Society —Byung-Chul Han**

Han diagnoses with surgical precision the contemporary exhaustion that results not from repression but from excessive positivity. The performance society that demands we be the best version of ourselves at all times is the invisible backdrop to everything this e-book discusses. Short, dense, inescapable.

## **NEUROSCIENCE AND PSYCHOLOGY**

### **Descartes' Error —Antonio Damasio**

The most elegant scientific demonstration that emotion and reason are not opposed — emotion is the substrate upon which reason operates. Essential for anyone who wants to understand why eliminating negative emotions from the working environment is neurologically counterproductive.

### **Thinking, Fast and Slow —Daniel Kahneman**

Kahneman explores with rigour and accessibility the two cognitive systems that determine our decisions — including the distinction between the experiencing self and the remembering self that lies at the core of Chapter 5. One of the most important works in twenty-first-century cognitive psychology.

### **Bright-Sided —Barbara Ehrenreich**

A rigorous and uncomfortable investigation into how the culture of positive thinking causes real and measurable damage — from chemotherapy rooms to corporate boardrooms. Ehrenreich writes with the precision of a researcher and the courage of someone who has nothing to prove.

## **ORGANISATIONS AND BEHAVIOUR**

### **The Fearless Organization — Amy Edmondson**

The definitive book on psychological safety — the concept this e-book proposes as a more honest and more effective alternative to the happiness imperative. Edmondson presents decades of research with clarity and real cases that make the argument irrefutable.

### **Organizational Culture and Leadership — Edgar Schein**

The most serious work ever written on how organisational cultures actually function — including the three-level model that underpins Chapter 6. Schein offers no quick solutions. He offers something rarer: genuine understanding.

### **The Happiness Industry — Will Davies**

Davies traces the history of how happiness was transformed into an instrument of control and management — and who profited from that transformation. Essential for any HR professional, leader or consultant who wants to understand the terrain they are standing on.

### **The Psychodynamics of Work — Christophe Dejours, Elisabeth Abdoucheli and Christian Jayet**

The book that documents, with scientific rigour, the relationship between suffering and production in the contemporary world — and that directly confronts the narrative that happiness and productivity always go together. Uncomfortable, necessary, transformative.

## **SOCIETY AND HUMAN RELATIONS**

### **Cold Intimacies — Eva Illouz**

Illouz examines how contemporary capitalism has reconfigured emotional life — and how corporate world practices have migrated into personal relationships, making them progressively more instrumental. Essential for understanding the side effects discussed in Chapter 4.

### **The Map Is Not the Territory, the Territory Is You— Marcello de Souza**

The author's own work, deepening the DCC methodology and exploring how the mental maps we construct about ourselves and the world determine our choices, our relationships and our capacity to flourish. The natural starting point for those who want to continue this conversation.

The reading that transforms is not the one that confirms what we already know.  
It is the one that leaves us without ground for long enough  
for something new to grow.  
– Marcello de Souza



## About the Author

Marcello de Souza began his professional career in 1997 as a leader and manager in the technology and telecommunications sector. Over nearly three decades, he led major projects in the structuring, implementation and optimisation of networks across Brazil — accumulating a singular perspective on human behaviour in environments of high complexity, high pressure and constant transformation. That field experience has never left him. It anchors, to this day, every analysis he makes, every process he conducts, every text he writes.

Passionate about behavioural psychology from the earliest years of his career, he deepened his studies from 2008 onwards, earning a doctorate in Social Psychology.

He is today recognised as one of the most respected Brazilian specialists in Human and Organisational Cognitive Behavioural Development — and his approach, deliberately integrative and interdisciplinary, refuses the simplifications of the self-help market as firmly as it refuses the abstractions that lose sight of the human being.

He works as a Senior Master Coach and Trainer, Psychoanalyst, Cognitive Behavioural Therapist, Organisational Consultant, Speaker, Professor, Writer and Researcher. He is the creator of the DCC and DCCO methodologies — Cognitive Behavioural Development and Organisational Cognitive Behavioural Development — which integrate neuroscience, social and behavioural psychology, philosophy and psychoanalysis in a structured approach to real and lasting transformation in individuals and organisations.

He is the author of *The Map Is Not the Territory*, *the Territory Is You* and, soon, *The Diet Society*, and co-author of *The Secret of Coaching*. He publishes regularly on his blog, with more than 1,000 articles and reflections — and over 100,000 monthly visits, reaching 300,000 at peak times — as well as on LinkedIn, where he has more than 40,000 followers. He works with global companies and professionals worldwide, with an approach that rejects ready-made answers and relies on honest intellectual provocation as the only driver of genuine change.

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