

## The power of Happiness



Everyone talks about motivation, work-life balance and developing a productive team, only a few realise the importance of 'happiness' within this equation. This article looks at a measurable change in team performance created by a change in emphasis by 'management' to bring a sense of fun back into a very seriously fought competition.

As we all know, in parts of what was once the British Empire, the game of cricket reigns supreme and one of the major contests within this sport are the series of five, 5-day Test Matches played between English and Australian teams every couple of years for 'The Ashes'<sup>1</sup>. The outcome of each series is of significant national importance – defeating the 'old enemy' makes headline news in both countries. Unusually, during 2013 there were two series played, the first in the English summer of 2013, and the second 6 months later in the Australian summer.

The result of these two 'Ashes series' being so close together provide a very interesting case study into the effect of leadership and morale on sustained team performance. England won the first series 3-0 (with two matches drawn) and was ranked #1 in the world. And, after the losses in India and England, the Australian team was written off as 'the worst ever' by our local press. Australia won the second series 5-0, a feat only accomplished twice before in Ashes history, and now they are national heroes! What caused the change and why should this be of interest to project managers?

The factors that make test cricket interesting to managers are firstly it is a team game; unlike many sports, a single 'star' cannot make a huge difference without support from his/her teammates. Secondly, with each Test Match taking up to 5 days with 6 hours playing time each day, the playing time makes the game very similar to a normal work week. Cricket is a sport that requires sustained concentration and outcomes are

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<sup>1</sup> The term originated in a satirical obituary published in a British newspaper, *The Sporting Times*, immediately after Australia's 1882 victory at The Oval, their first Test win on English soil. The obituary stated that English cricket had died, and the body will be cremated and the ashes taken to Australia. The degree of importance attached to the competition has not diminished in the intervening 130 years.

significantly influenced by the collective expectations and attitude within the team, so whilst a project may not be a 'game' everything else applies.

There are two sides in every battle – the difference between 3-0 and six months later 0-5 was not the players (there was basically the same pool of talent on both sides for both series), nor the support staff (again largely unchanged). What was different was the attitude of the respective teams and in particular the change in attitude within the Australian 'camp'.

Prior to the start of the first series, Australia was focused on 'peak performance at all costs', there were rules, curfews and strictly enforced discipline. This led to dissent, internal divisions and disenchantment, leading to inevitable failure.

The Australian Cricket Board decided a change was needed and appointment Daren ('Boof') Lehmann as the 'new coach' just 16 days before the first test in the series. The change was too late to make much difference to the results in England, but by the time the second series started in Australia his philosophy had made a fundamental difference and the Australian team culture had changed.

Most of the arbitrary rules are gone; but every team member is committed to team excellence and self-discipline is proving far more effective. A work-life balance has been restored, rather than training drills for the sake of drills to drive performance, players want to improve and develop – the drive is intrinsic, not extrinsic and importantly the most often repeated comment is '*Lehmann made it fun again!*'

The Australian team is a happy team again, taking genuine delight in each other's successes as well as providing support and encouragement when things don't go to plan. Certainly, it's easier to 'be happy' when you are on a winning streak, and this continued on into the South African series, and I suspect the team spirit will survive even after the poor showing of the Australian T20 team in the World Cup recently won by Sri Lanka in Bangladesh.

This change in the Australian team's attitude was no accident. Creating an environment where striving for excellence is 'self-motivated fun' is the key skill brought into the team by Boof Lehmann. Probably the most telling quote is from possibly the least successful of the Australian top order, Shane Watson "*It really is an absolute pleasure to be part of playing cricket for Australia...[and]... to be involved in something that is so much fun*".

This transformation will undoubtedly be the subject of research in years to come, but my initial impressions of the key skills Lehmann has used are:

- Respecting and trusting his players; by giving respect you garner responsible behaviours in return.
- Being willing to bring in high profile help in specialist areas rather than seeking to be the dominant leader. Boof's focus is the team's overall success, not his profile or ego.
- Allowing time for 'life beyond cricket' resulting in a fresh enthusiasm for both the training regime and the game.
- Allowing time for the team to have fun, happiness is a great motivator.
- Setting high expectations but using a supportive coaching style to encourage striving for excellence rather than demanding excellence.

Applying these techniques takes courage (especially under the glare of national publicity). However, the results from the Australian cricket team suggest making it fun really can make a difference when you need 'high performance' from your team, and you want your team to help you push your project through to a successful conclusion.



So how do you make your team's work fun? Simply offering 'good advice' is of little use. We are all aware of the benefits of exercise, and experts advocating ideas such as; *"Take the stairs instead of the escalator and you will feel better"* is familiar to us all! But few of us actually follow the good advice. To overcome this problem, **The Fun Theory** asked *"Can we get more people to take the stairs over the escalator by making it fun?"*<sup>2</sup>. The only problem with **The Fun Theory** ideas is they require 'engineering'; making your team's work fun usually operates at a smaller scale. This is the realm of gamification!

**Gamification** has the potential to revolutionise the way people see work by transferring the positive mechanisms present in games (such as badges, leader boards and other forms of 'instant feedback') to mundane work tasks, creating a more dynamic, fun approach to the working environment<sup>3</sup>. If you like the concept, a useful free guide is available from the Association of Project Management (UK)<sup>4</sup>, and I will come back to this theme in a future article.

In the meantime, at the personal level Jackie Ruka, Founder of the *"Get Happy Zone"* offers this list of happiness strategies:

- **Savour ordinary events.** Reflecting back on moments of your day, even those you might ordinarily hurry through, is a worthwhile effort that can significant increases happiness and reduce depression.
- **Avoid comparisons.** Focusing on your own personal achievements instead of making comparisons to others will better impact your happiness and self-esteem, leading to greater life satisfaction. It's easy to lose sight of what achievements—both personal and professional—have enriched our life, and we must remind ourselves...often.
- **Put money low on the list.** According to researchers Kasser and Ryan, those who put money high on their priority list are at greater risk for depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. "Money-seekers also score lower on tests of vitality and self-actualization," Ryan says.
- **Have meaningful goals.** As humans, we thrive on having a purpose. Strive for something significant, you will be far happier than those who don't have strong dreams or aspirations. Happiness lies at the intersection between pleasure and meaning. Whether at work or at home, the goal is to engage in activities that are both personally significant and enjoyable.
- **Take initiative at work.** Researcher Amy Wrzesniewski says that, "when we express creativity, help others, suggest improvements or do additional tasks on the job, we make our work more rewarding and feel more in control."
- **Make friends and treasure family.** This may seem like a no-brainer, but we need close, caring and understanding relationships. Sometimes we underestimate the importance of such connections and fail to invest enough time in building and maintaining them.
- **Fake it until you make it.** This actually works, according to Diener and Biswas-Diener, who assert, "Happy people see possibilities, opportunities, and success. When they think of the future, they are optimistic, and when they review the past, they tend to savour the high points." This may take some practice, so try to smile even when you don't feel like it.
- **Keep a gratitude journal.** Those who write in a journal on a weekly basis are healthier, more optimistic, and more likely to achieve personal goals. Gratitude and the human spirit together make powerful allies.

<sup>2</sup> You can see the results here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2lXh2n0aPyw>.

<sup>3</sup> For a brief overview on this see **Gamification – A new way of working:** <https://mosaicprojects.wordpress.com/2014/01/16/gamification-a-new-way-of-working/>

<sup>4</sup> Download from: <https://www.apm.org.uk/news/download-your-free-gamification-guide/>



- **Get moving.** According to a Duke University study, exercise may be as effective as drugs in treating major depression. Exercise releases endorphins, the feel-good hormone. Duke researcher Blumenthal suggested that “exercise may be beneficial because patients are actually taking an active role in trying to get better...patients who exercised may have felt a greater sense of mastery over their condition and gained a greater sense of accomplishment. They felt more self-confident and had better self-esteem...” When you feel good, you tend to continue the behaviour related to it and are motivated to adopt others.
- **Serve others.** This is often referred to as a “helper’s high.” Helping a neighbour, volunteering, or donating money, goods or services can result in more health benefits than exercising.

Building a champion team that is happy and enjoys its work is the personal challenge for every leader of every team<sup>5</sup>. And as with every successful sports team, achieving this desired outcome will require planning and focused effort but should still be fun.

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<sup>5</sup> See *Is a happy team a motivated team?*: [https://mosaicprojects.com.au/Mag\\_Articles/SA1047\\_Happiness.pdf](https://mosaicprojects.com.au/Mag_Articles/SA1047_Happiness.pdf)