

training

L&D LEADS THE CHARGE TO HAPPINESS



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DESPITE PANDEMIC CHALLENGES, L&D PROFESSIONALS ARE MANAGING TO CREATE A NEW TRAJECTORY BASED UPON HELPING PEOPLE INSTITUTE POSITIVE HABITS AND LEAN INTO SOCIAL CONNECTION. **BY SHAWN ACHOR**

As a positive psychology researcher and deep believer in the power of happiness, I was heartened by the findings of the joint research study I conducted with *Training* magazine on the *Science of Happiness During Challenging Times*, which involved more than 1,000 Learning and Development (L&D) professionals from the *Training* community. These are people who have been asked to hold things together in the midst of all

the challenges we've been through—and they answered that call admirably.

Despite all the stress and anxiety caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and accompanying changes



to work and personal lives, 71 percent of respondents said they are often or very often happy. Since the pandemic began, 38 percent said their level of happiness has stayed the same and 18 percent said it increased vs. 37 percent who said it decreased somewhat and another 8 percent who said it decreased significantly. More than half of respondents reported being happy within the two weeks prior to taking the survey.

Some 41 percent of respondents said happiness has not become easier or harder to find now than 20 years ago, while 25 percent said it is slightly harder and 11 percent said it is much harder. Looking ahead to one year from now, 21 percent of respondents believe they will be much happier, 35 percent a little happier, and 43 percent relatively the same.

The pandemic did take a toll on L&D professionals, with 38 percent of respondents experiencing a month or more of depression during the last year and another 24 percent experiencing two weeks of depression during that time. But 38 percent revealed they did not

experience depression in the last year.

According to the survey findings, factors positively influencing respondents' happiness level include their connection to others, along with support from their leaders, increased career opportunities, and a decreased workload. While the emotional, spiritual, and financial toll of the last two years has been undeniably steep, L&D professionals are managing to create a different trajectory based upon helping people institute positive habits, cultivate positive moments, and lean into social connection.

DEEPEN CONNECTIONS

Underpinning their happiness mindset, 58 percent of respondents said they often or very often feel connected to others, while 43 percent said others often come to them for emotional support (and 36 percent said others sometimes turn to them for such support). While 42 percent revealed they sometimes feel worn out because of their work helping people, an equal number (44 percent) said they rarely or never feel that way.

At Farmers Insurance, employees are exploring intersectionality to create greater connection. People are building slides to tell each other *who they really are*.



THE POWER OF POSITIVE HABITS

Given that the respondent base comprised L&D professionals, it's not surprising that 37 percent of respondents believe training almost always or greatly moves the needle on engagement and performance, and 34 percent believe it can moderately do so. Some 23 percent said it can slightly move the needle, while only 6 percent said people usually don't change based on training or a book.

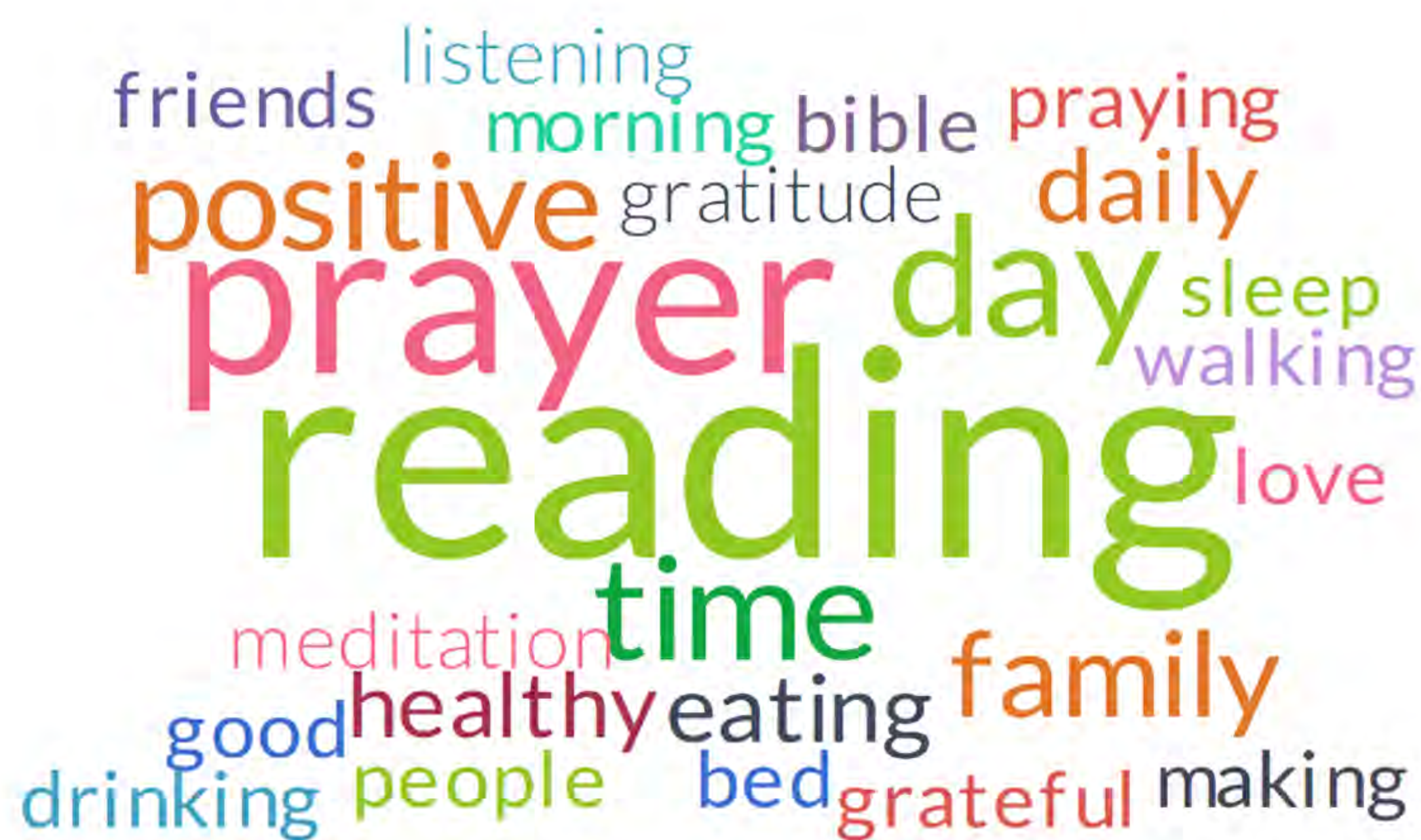
One thing that *can* have a significant effect on changing people's behavior is incorporating positive habits into their work routines. In my first joint research project with *Training* magazine in 2014, 900 professionals, mostly in the field of training and organizational development, participated in a project that consisted of a two-week assignment to incorporate a new positive habit into their daily work routine. We found that those who successfully created the positive habit for two weeks showed a 20 percent decrease in stress, had 12 percent higher energy, and were twice as likely to rate themselves as higher on the happiness measure. In addition, their belief that change was possible rose dramatically.

Our 2021 survey showed that L&D professionals are continuing to incorporate positive habits into their daily routine, with the majority exercising for more than 30 minutes a day (53 percent), while 45 percent meditated for more than two minutes a day.

Julia Lines, a County administrator at Isanti County in Cambridge, MN, sets the example by leaving the building and going for short walks or going on walking meetings with colleagues. "I also talk a lot about finding your 'thing' (mine is running); we all have to have something that helps us with stress relief," she explains.

Nearly 22 percent of respondents wrote a two-

minute e-mail praising someone every day—and more than 72 percent of respondents said they often or always are known for praising people (with 25 percent saying they sometimes are known for doing so). Sixteen percent wrote three things they were grateful for every day, while 12 percent journaled for two minutes every day. The graphic below shows what respondents believe is their most powerful positive habit (outside of exercise and brushing their teeth).



In the midst of the pandemic, many leaders at companies and schools found that the majority of e-mails they were sending their teams were about negatives or restrictions. North Country Family Health Center CEO Joey Marie Horton decided to reset that mindset. "After 63 weeks of sending a daily to weekly e-mail to staff focusing on COVID data and information, I now send a 'Three Good Things' e-mail every Wednesday to all employees with good things that are happening at our Health Center and in our employees' personal lives. I ask employees to e-mail me stories each week."

Horton says the Health Center also gave employees gratitude journals as part of their holiday gift, "as we know how beneficial it can be to write down

the positives in our lives.”

During the pandemic, Jordon Voigt, president of Genesis Medical Center in Davenport, IA, wrote personal letters to the significant others of all 75 management employees, thanking them for allowing their loved one to be away for so many hours to help the medical center deal with the pandemic. “This had a huge positive impact on our management team in that the recognition was targeted to their significant others,” Voigt notes.

These small, intentional acts can create lasting positive emotions and show the importance of valuing each other. Staff members at North Shore School District 112 in Illinois organized conscious acts of kindness for school board members in difficult times when they least expected it, according to Deputy Superintendent Monica Schroeder. As

expectations structure our moods and emotions, the generosity of others offers us a fresh way to see the world. And in times of crisis, small acts of kindness from friends and strangers can feel out-sized in their humanity.

THE “TETRIS EFFECT”

The payoff to acknowledging and nurturing our commonalities, interconnectedness, and humanity in the office and lives of employees is higher than ever.

If you see the world through the same cognitive pattern for long enough, your brain can retain the imprint of that pattern. This is why it is crucial to create a positive lens through which to see the world so you can see more aspects of reality that can move you forward. I call this the “Tetris Effect.” A positive Tetris Effect trains our brain to let in those messages that make us more adaptive, more creative, and more motivated—messages that allow us to spot and pounce on more opportunities. Start by creating building blocks of positive habits that remind us we can be better than our genes and our environment, which changes our belief that others can change. This then leads to the beginning of a positive change in a culture. 

For the full report on my joint research survey with *Training* magazine, *Science of Happiness During Challenging Times*, including many more “lead positive” examples, visit: www.orangefrogenterprise/leadpositive

TAKEAWAYS

The crux of our 2021 research was to explore and provide key insights into how our behaviors shape our beliefs, and how our beliefs shape our well-being. Based upon this and previous research, we are finding four ways in which leaders and cultures are able to break negative social scripts and find a way to lead positive change and embrace the new world of work well-being:

- Create positive habits to imprint the belief that change is possible.
- Cultivate positive moments (small, intentional acts can create lasting positive emotions).
- Train our brains to scan for positivity (and break patterns of negative thinking).
- Double down on social connection.

Considered one of the world's leading experts on the connection between happiness and success, **Shawn Achor** is *The New York Times* bestselling author of “The Happiness Advantage,” “Big Potential,” and “The Orange Frog.” He spent more than a decade living, researching, and lecturing at Harvard University and has worked with more than a third of Fortune 100 companies, as well as the NFL, the NBA, the Pentagon, and the White House.

