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**Human Resources: Effective and Happier**  
by Carin Eriksson Lindvall

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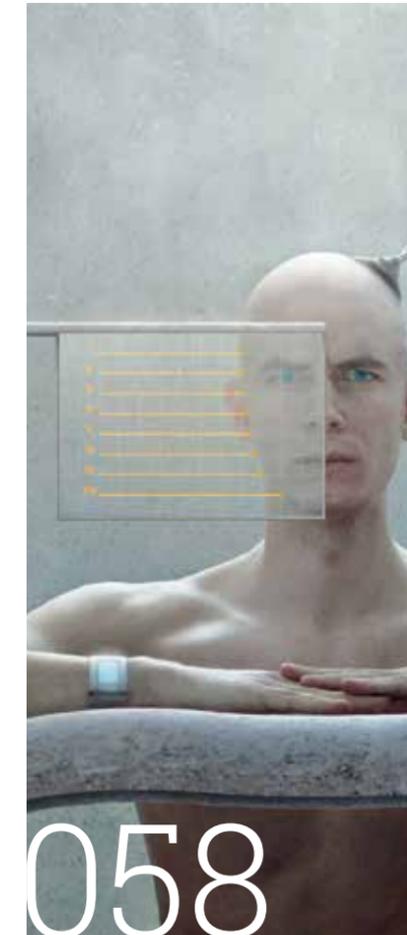
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/ When the researchers analyzed the communication patterns, they found that individuals in high-performing groups express positive comments five times more often than negative comments. The exact ratio could be discussed but the patterns are still very interesting. /

In low-performing groups, negative comments outnumber the positive by more than three to one. They are more rigid and cautious in their communication patterns. They are also more self-centered, argue their cases without listening to others, and rarely ask their colleagues questions. Low achievers have fewer open discussions and, surprisingly, fewer conflicts. However, their conflicts are likely to be protracted and more difficult to resolve - simply because they do not talk to each other.

The research also shows that disparaging and denigrating comments and sarcasm have a direct impact on relationships: when we encounter negative attitudes, we tend to withdraw. The physiological reactions may include elevated levels of stress hormones and increased blood pressure. The social consequences are also unmistakable: the conversation narrows, creativity and willingness to interact decrease. Of course, this may also have economic consequences for companies where customer relationships or a good working climate are keys to success.

This is knowledge that we can take with us all the way into the bedroom. When marriage researcher John Gottman summarizes his studies of what makes relationships succeed, he notes that it is not the absence of conflict. On the contrary, what makes a good relationship last is that the couple has learned to communicate in a revitalizing way. Stubbornness, whining, and evasive behavior are all recipes for failure. Instead, it has been shown (unsurprisingly, perhaps) that humor, kindness, and positive interpretations of the partner's behavior strengthen the relationship. Interestingly, Gottman finds the optimal ratio of positive to negative comments is 5:1. To put it another way: if you do not want to undermine your relationship, you must make five positive comments to make up for every single negative comment you utter.

This knowledge encourages us to actively contribute to good communications and good working relationships if we want to live a good life. We shape our daily lives in interaction with others, and an open and considerate approach is crucial to all successful relationships, whether brief or lifelong. And that may even give us interludes of happiness. ■



HUMAN RESOURCES

# EFFECTIVE AND HAPPIER

Carin Eriksson Lindvall explores the sense of meaning in our work



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**Happiness was the theme of the conference, where I had** the pleasure of meeting Professor Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, who has devoted most of his life to studying what makes people happy. The results of his research are sometimes surprising. Csíkszentmihályi has established that our outlook on work is one of life's great paradoxes. While we often talk about work as a constraint and a punishment, various studies have found that work can in fact, often give us a great deal of satisfaction. According to Csíkszentmihályi, we express higher satisfaction and enjoyment in relation to time spent at work than in relation to time spent with our families. Naturally, these studies are open to discussion and interpretation, but it is undeniable that we spend much of our lives working - and how we perceive work has a direct impact on our quality of life. As Csíkszentmihályi put it during a conversation at the conference, "to feel meaning at work activates the energy that allows us to live a good life."

How can we increase the sense of meaning in our work? Most of us are not heart surgeons whose work has life-or-death impact on people's lives. Nor do we dedicate our lives to purely altruistic deeds aimed at ending world hunger or reversing climate change. Most of us go to an office every day where we perform duties upon which the world or human beings are not directly dependent. And we are easily replaceable. Nevertheless, it is still possible to make our

everyday lives more meaningful. But how? Quite often, organizational experts emphasize, part of the answer lies in creating good relationships at work. Relationships are important not only because they make us (and the people we interact with) feel better, but also because they make us more effective problem solvers.

Because so much of our time at work is spent in interaction with others, the working group has tremendous influence on how we perceive our work. Relationships within the working group may be fruitful, dreadful or anywhere in between. A study by Marcial Losada and Emily Heaphy pointed out that good communication in groups contributes to greater efficiency at work. Other studies of group communication have shown that the communication patterns of high-performing teams differ from those of lower-achieving groups. High-performing teams have a more balanced communication pattern and they openly discuss the bases of their own and others' perspectives. Individuals in these groups have the courage to voice their opinions, but are also clearly and keenly interested in the opinions of their colleagues. They are also more positive and affirmative towards each other. When the researchers analyzed their communication patterns, they found that individuals in high-performing groups express positive comments five times more often than negative comments. The exact ratio could be discussed (and has been) but the patterns are still very interesting.