

Shawn Achor: The happy secret to better work



1. When I was seven years old and my sister was just five years old, we were playing on top of a bunk bed. I was two years older than my sister at the time -- I mean, I'm two years older than her now -- but at the time it meant she had to do everything that I wanted to do, and I wanted to play war. So we were up on top of our bunk beds. And on one side of the bunk bed, I had put out all of my G.I. Joe soldiers and weaponry. And on the other side were all my sister's My Little Ponies ready for a cavalry charge. There are differing accounts of what actually happened that afternoon, but since my sister is not here with us today, let me tell you the true story -- (Laughter) -- which is my sister's a little bit on the clumsy side. Somehow, without any help or push from her older brother at all, suddenly Amy disappeared off of the top of the bunk bed and landed with this crash on the floor. Now I nervously peered over the side of the bed to see what had befallen my fallen sister and saw that she had landed painfully on her hands and knees on all fours on the ground.
2. I was nervous because my parents had charged me with making sure that my sister and I played as safely and as quietly as possible. And seeing as how I had accidentally broken Amy's arm just one week before ... (Laughter) ... heroically pushing her out of the way of an oncoming imaginary sniper bullet, (Laughter) for which I have yet to be thanked, I was trying as hard as I could -- she didn't even see it coming -- I was trying as hard as I could to be on my best behavior.

And I saw my sister's face, this wail of pain and suffering and surprise threatening to erupt from her mouth and threatening to wake my parents from the long winter's nap for which they had settled. So I did the only thing my little frantic seven year-old brain could think to do to avert this tragedy. And if you have children, you've seen this hundreds of times before. I said, "Amy, Amy, wait. Don't cry. Don't cry. Did you see how you landed? No human lands on all fours like that. Amy, I think this means you're a unicorn."(Laughter)
3. Now that was cheating, because there was nothing in the world my sister would want more than but Amy the special unicorn. Of course, this was an option that was open to her brain at no point in the past. And you could see how my poor, manipulated sister faced conflict, as her little brain attempted to devote resources to feeling the pain and suffering and surprise she just experienced, or contemplating her new-found identity as a unicorn. And the latter won out. Instead of crying, instead of ceasing our play, instead of waking my parents, with all the negative consequences that would have ensued for me, instead a smile spread across her face and she scrambled right back up onto the bunk bed with all the grace of a baby unicorn ...(Laughter) ... with one broken leg.

What we stumbled across at this tender age of just five and seven -- we had no idea at the time -- was something that was going to be at the vanguard of a scientific revolution occurring two decades later in

the way that we look at the human brain. What we had stumbled across is something called positive psychology, which is the reason that I'm here today and the reason that I wake up every morning.

4. When I first started talking about this research outside of academia, out with companies and schools, the very first thing they said to never do is to start your talk with a graph. The very first thing I want to do is start my talk with a graph. This graph looks boring, but this graph is the reason I get excited and wake up every morning. And this graph doesn't even mean anything; it's fake data. What we found is --(Laughter)

If I got this data back studying you here in the room, I would be thrilled, because there's very clearly a trend that's going on there, and that means that I can get published, which is all that really matters. The fact that there's one weird red dot that's up above the curve, there's one weirdo in the room -- I know who you are, I saw you earlier -- that's no problem. That's no problem, as most of you know, because I can just delete that dot. I can delete that dot because that's clearly a measurement error. And we know that's a measurement error because it's messing up my data.

So one of the very first things we teach people in economics and statistics and business and psychology courses is how, in a statistically valid way, do we eliminate the weirdos. How do we eliminate the outliers so we can find the line of best fit? Which is fantastic if I'm trying to find out how many Advil the average person should be taking -- two. But if I'm interested in potential, if I'm interested in your potential, or for happiness or productivity or energy or creativity, what we're doing is we're creating the cult of the average with science.

5. If I asked a question like, "How fast can a child learn how to read in a classroom?" scientists change the answer to "How fast does the average child learn how to read in that classroom?" and then we tailor the class right towards the average. Now if you fall below the average on this curve, then psychologists get thrilled, because that means you're either depressed or you have a disorder, or hopefully both. We're hoping for both because our business model is, if you come into a therapy session with one problem, we want to make sure you leave knowing you have 10, so you keep coming back over and over again. We'll go back into your childhood if necessary, but eventually what we want to do is make you normal again. But normal is merely average.

And what I posit and what positive psychology posits is that if we study what is merely average, we will remain merely average. Then instead of deleting those positive outliers, what I intentionally do is come into a population like this one and say, why? Why is it that some of you are so high above the curve in terms of your intellectual ability, athletic ability, musical ability, creativity, energy levels, your resiliency in the face of challenge, your sense of humor? Whatever it is, instead of deleting you, what I want to do is study you. Because maybe we can glean information -- not just how to move people up to the average, but how we can move the entire average up in our companies and schools worldwide.

6. The reason this graph is important to me is, when I turn on the news, it seems like the majority of the information is not positive, in fact it's negative. Most of it's about murder, corruption, diseases, natural disasters. And very quickly, my brain starts to think that's the accurate ratio of negative to positive in

the world. What that's doing is creating something called the medical school syndrome -- which, if you know people who've been to medical school, during the first year of medical training, as you read through a list of all the symptoms and diseases that could happen, suddenly you realize you have all of them.

I have a brother in-law named Bobo -- which is a whole other story. Bobo married Amy the unicorn. Bobo called me on the phone from Yale Medical School, and Bobo said, "Shawn, I have leprosy." (Laughter) Which, even at Yale, is extraordinarily rare. But I had no idea how to console poor Bobo because he had just gotten over an entire week of menopause. (Laughter)

See what we're finding is it's not necessarily the reality that shapes us, but the lens through which your brain views the world that shapes your reality. And if we can change the lens, not only can we change your happiness, we can change every single educational and business outcome at the same time.

7. When I applied to Harvard, I applied on a dare. I didn't expect to get in, and my family had no money for college. When I got a military scholarship two weeks later, they allowed me to go. Suddenly, something that wasn't even a possibility became a reality. When I went there, I assumed everyone else would see it as a privilege as well, that they'd be excited to be there. Even if you're in a classroom full of people smarter than you, you'd be happy just to be in that classroom, which is what I felt. But what I found there is, while some people experience that, when I graduated after my four years and then spent the next eight years living in the dorms with the students -- Harvard asked me to; I wasn't that guy. (Laughter) I was an officer of Harvard to counsel students through the difficult four years. And what I found in my research and my teaching is that these students, no matter how happy they were with their original success of getting into the school, two weeks later their brains were focused, not on the privilege of being there, nor on their philosophy or their physics. Their brain was focused on the competition, the workload, the hassles, the stresses, the complaints.

8. When I first went in there, I walked into the freshmen dining hall, which is where my friends from Waco, Texas, which is where I grew up -- I know some of you have heard of it. When they'd come to visit me, they'd look around, they'd say, "This freshman dining hall looks like something out of Hogwarts from the movie "Harry Potter," which it does. This is Hogwarts from the movie "Harry Potter" and that's Harvard. And when they see this, they say, "Shawn, why do you waste your time studying happiness at Harvard? Seriously, what does a Harvard student possibly have to be unhappy about?"

Embedded within that question is the key to understanding the science of happiness. Because what that question assumes is that our external world is predictive of our happiness levels, when in reality, if I know everything about your external world, I can only predict 10 percent of your long-term happiness. 90 percent of your long-term happiness is predicted not by the external world, but by the way your brain processes the world. And if we change it, if we change our formula for happiness and success, what we can do is change the way that we can then affect reality. What we found is that only 25 percent of job successes are predicted by I.Q. 75 percent of job successes are predicted by your optimism levels, your social support and your ability to see stress as a challenge instead of as a threat.

9. I talked to a boarding school up in New England, probably the most prestigious boarding school, and they said, "We already know that. So every year, instead of just teaching our students, we also have a wellness week. And we're so excited. Monday night we have the world's leading expert coming in to speak about adolescent depression. Tuesday night it's school violence and bullying. Wednesday night is eating disorders. Thursday night is illicit drug use. And Friday night we're trying to decide between risky sex or happiness." (Laughter) I said, "That's most people's Friday nights." (Laughter) (Applause) Which I'm glad you liked, but they did not like that at all. Silence on the phone. And into the silence, I said, "I'd be happy to speak at your school, but just so you know, that's not a wellness week, that's a sickness week. What you've done is you've outlined all the negative things that can happen, but not talked about the positive."

10. The absence of disease is not health. Here's how we get to health: We need to reverse the formula for happiness and success. In the last three years, I've traveled to 45 different countries, working with schools and companies in the midst of an economic downturn. And what I found is that most companies and schools follow a formula for success, which is this: If I work harder, I'll be more successful. And if I'm more successful, then I'll be happier. That undergirds most of our parenting styles, our managing styles, the way that we motivate our behavior. And the problem is it's scientifically broken and backwards for two reasons. First, every time your brain has a success, you just changed the goalpost of what success looked like. You got good grades, now you have to get better grades, you got into a good school and after you get into a better school, you got a good job, now you have to get a better job, you hit your sales target, we're going to change your sales target. And if happiness is on the opposite side of success, your brain never gets there. What we've done is we've pushed happiness over the cognitive horizon as a society. And that's because we think we have to be successful, then we'll be happier.

11. But the real problem is our brains work in the opposite order. If you can raise somebody's level of positivity in the present, then their brain experiences what we now call a happiness advantage, which is your brain at positive performs significantly better than it does at negative, neutral or stressed. Your intelligence rises, your creativity rises, your energy levels rise. In fact, what we've found is that every single business outcome improves. Your brain at positive is 31 percent more productive than your brain at negative, neutral or stressed. You're 37 percent better at sales. Doctors are 19 percent faster, more accurate at coming up with the correct diagnosis when positive instead of negative, neutral or stressed. Which means we can reverse the formula. If we can find a way of becoming positive in the present, then our brains work even more successfully as we're able to work harder, faster and more intelligently. What we need to be able to do is to reverse this formula so we can start to see what our brains are actually capable of. Because dopamine, which floods into your system when you're positive, has two

functions. Not only does it make you happier, it turns on all of the learning centers in your brain allowing you to adapt to the world in a different way.

12. We've found that there are ways that you can train your brain to be able to become more positive. In just a two-minute span of time done for 21 days in a row, we can actually rewire your brain, allowing your brain to actually work more optimistically and more successfully. We've done these things in research now in every single company that I've worked with, getting them to write down three new things that they're grateful for for 21 days in a row, three new things each day. And at the end of that, their brain starts to retain a pattern of scanning the world, not for the negative, but for the positive first.

Journaling about one positive experience you've had over the past 24 hours allows your brain to relive it. Exercise teaches your brain that your behavior matters. We find that meditation allows your brain to get over the cultural ADHD that we've been creating by trying to do multiple tasks at once and allows our brains to focus on the task at hand. And finally, random acts of kindness are conscious acts of kindness. We get people, when they open up their inbox, to write one positive email praising or thanking somebody in their social support network.

And by doing these activities and by training your brain just like we train our bodies, what we've found is we can reverse the formula for happiness and success, and in doing so, not only create ripples of positivity, but create a real revolution. Thank you very much. (Applause)