Happiness in the Catbird Seat: Conversations With CEOs

by

Margot Murphy Moore

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ABSTRACT

Accomplished individuals should, by all modern definitions, be happy. They have achieved the power, authority, influence, and wealth that many in the American capitalist society aspire towards. But what defines happiness once you are there? When you are sitting in Thurber’s proverbial “catbird seat,” what is happiness?

In conversations with 18 senior leaders of Fortune 1000 companies, guided by scripted questions posed by the author, the leaders responded to inquiries about their understanding of happiness, the influencers of happiness, the role of personal happiness in success, and their personal definition of happiness.

The conversations, complemented by two standardized questionnaires, developed three thematic components of happiness. Social relationships, personal focus, and a sense of thresholds were revealed as the most consistent dimensions of personal happiness. These themes synthesize much of the existing literature on happiness where happiness is often divided into two definitions: eudonic: happiness derived from virtuosity, and hedonic: happiness derived from pleasure and the avoidance of pain. The conversations combined these theories and integrated life lessons from leadership to produce a theorem of sorts: Happiness exists in the enjoyment of virtuosity. Virtuous pain exists in vain.

Thesis Supervisor: John E. Van Maanen
Title: Erwin H. Schell Professor of Organization Studies
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First, xoxo to Charlie and Grace, of course.

Then…

Special thanks to my family, friends, and colleagues for their unflagging support and encouragement, which kept this project going.

Thank you to all the leaders who gave of their time so generously, and for the thoughts they shared with me during our conversations. Thank you to all the administrative players who made the meetings possible.

Thank you to the Sloan Fellows, the faculty, and the staff at MIT who expressed confidence in me and supported the pursuit of what I think some saw as an indulgence.

Hopefully, one day, each of us will reach a point in our lives where our definition of happiness and our life become one and the same.

Margot Murphy Moore
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The American Heritage Dictionary offers one definition of “catbird seat” as: a position of power or prominence. It may have derived from the fact that catbirds sit on the highest branch in their territory and mimic other birds while singing their many songs, and both their high position and the mimicry give them great advantages over other birds. Exactly how, when, or where the phrase “in the catbird seat” entered the American lexicon is uncertain. But in James Thurber’s short story The Catbird Seat, written in 1942, credit is given to sports broadcaster ‘Red’ Barber.

Born in 1894, Thurber lived in New York City from 1925 until his death in 1961. By 1927, he was an editor writing for New Yorker Magazine. He was considered part of the New York writers’ crowd, frequenting the famous Algonquin Hotel for daily lunches with the likes of Dorothy Parker, E. B. White, Franklin Pierce Adams, George S. Kaufman, Harpo Marx, and Harold Ross. Thurber is best known for his sardonic stories and wonderfully cynical cartoons.

The Catbird Seat is the story of a compliant, efficient, filing department manager, Erwin Martin, who never smoked or drank anything stronger than milk. He finds his predictable life disrupted by Miss Ulgine Barrows, whose disruptive restructuring threatens the comfortable routine Martin has maintained for 22 years. Martin finds himself possessed by a need to eliminate Miss Barrows in a desperate act to preserve his department’s and his own status quo. The situation puts him at the threshold of a dilemma:
... Picking up the knife, he tried its point against his left wrist. It was blunt. It wouldn’t do.

When Mrs. Barrows reappeared, carrying two highballs, Mr. Martin, standing there with his gloves on, became acutely conscious of the fantasy he had wrought. Cigarettes in his pocket, a drink prepared for him—it was all too grossly improbable. It was more than that; it was impossible. Somewhere in the back of his mind a vague idea stirred, sprouted... The idea began to bloom, strange and wonderful....

Mr. Martin puffed, not too awkwardly, and took a gulp of the highball. “I drink and smoke all the time,” he said. He clinked his glass against hers. “Here’s nuts to that old windbag, Fitweiler,” he said, and gulped again. The stuff tasted awful, but he made no grimace. “Really, Mr. Martin,” she said, her voice and posture changing, “you are insulting our employer.” Mrs. Barrows was now all special adviser to the president. “I am preparing a bomb,” said Mr. Martin, “which will blow the old goat higher than hell.” ... “Not a word about this,” he said, and laid an index finger against his lips. All Mrs. Barrows could bring out was “Really!” Mr. Martin put his hand on the doorknob. “I’m sitting in the catbird seat,” he said. He stuck his tongue out at her and left. Nobody saw him go.

Thus, rather than making a mess of things, he rises to the occasion. In the end, the consistency of his life serves him well as an alibi for his bizarre behavior, resulting in a call to his boss’s office where he was told:

“Mrs. Barrows has worked hard, Martin, very hard. It grieves me to report that she has suffered a severe breakdown. It has taken the form of a persecution complex accompanied by distressing hallucinations.” ... “It is the nature of these psychological diseases,” Mr. Fitweiler said, “to fix upon the least likely and most innocent party as the--uh--source of persecution.”

Thus, Miss Barrows departed, leaving Martin his much-desired status quo.

He went out and shut the door, and his step was light and quick in the hall. When he entered his department, he slowed down to his customary gait, and he walked quietly across the room to the W20 file, wearing a look of studious concentration. (Thurber, 1942.)

In the story, Miss Barrows often uses unusual colloquialisms, many of which Martin finds inscrutable and irrelevant to a conversation. One such phrase is “the catbird seat.” One of Martin’s assistants explains that the phase is used by baseball announcer Red Barber: “Sitting in the catbird seat” means sitting pretty, like a batter with three balls and no strikes on him” (Thurber, 1942). At the time Thurber wrote his short story, Red Barber was announcing for the
Brooklyn Dodgers and then the New York Yankees. Barber was famous for using homespun colloquialisms, making phrases like “catbird seat” common in the American vernacular. While there is some discussion about whether the phrase originated with Barber or Thurber, there is no question that it was popularized by Red Barber.

This phrase, “sitting in the catbird seat,” also seems apropos when one considers the leaders of America’s large corporations. While Martin was only the head of the filing department, his quest for preservation (rather than aspiration) put him at a threshold not unlike what business leaders seem to thrive on. And not unlike these leaders, Martin manages to keep his wits, seize the opportunity, and hit the proverbial home run. The leaders I talked with, and whose comments and thoughts underpin this thesis, consistently revealed that they have achieved the power, authority, influence, and wealth to which many in business aspire.

My question, though, goes somewhat further: what defines happiness once you are there? Once you are sitting in the “catbird seat,” what does happiness mean to CEOs and board chairpersons?
In July 2005, I was sitting at a table in my initial meeting with a man I had just met—a professional coach and university professor at Pepperdine. In advance of our meeting, his office had sent me a stack of documents with a battery of tests that would provide him with data he needed to better understand my concerns. We hit it off instantly. Within moments, he asked me, “Why do you think we are meeting?”

I answered, something like, “I wasn’t happy in my job and it was causing problems for my company and me.”

He asked, “Do you think you should be happy?”

I thought that was the strangest question I had ever heard. It gave me pause, and then I said, “Well, yes.”

He said, “Well, you know, only 8% of high achievers are actually happy.”

I thought, “No way—but wait, what did he mean by high achievers?” He described famous athletes, politicians, and CEOs. No way! That can’t be true; where was he getting this information?

It turned out this is his area of expertise. He had conducted studies and published a co-authored book, *The High Achiever's Guide to Happiness* (Caesar and Caesar, 2005). Notwithstanding all his research, I still had problems accepting that unhappiness was the prevailing norm among high achievers.
Opportunity Knocks

After 16 years with the same company, my employer generously encouraged me to take a year’s sabbatical to go to the Sloan Fellows Program at MIT. Men and women from more than 27 countries and 18 industries are thrown together into a ‘boot camp’ of sorts. The first (summer) term in the program is the closest thing business people can come to an intern hazing. Time expectations are unrealistic; support systems are solely self-constructed. Only with some perspective did I realize it is the preposterousness of it all that makes it enjoyable. It was during the summer, at a point when I was probably thinking of Charles Dickens’ famous phrase, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times”—that the concept of “happy leaders” came to mind. My fellow students were selected as future leaders. So why were all these people enduring this? What is it we are seeking in life?

The Sloan Fellows program describes writing a thesis as “an opportunity to learn more about a subject in which you might have interest.” While there was some administrative resistance because researching happiness in leaders is “squishy science” at best (not appreciated at MIT), I decided to pursue the idea. Given the short amount of time and rigid deadlines, I am hopeful that this thesis can serve as a beginning rather than an end.

During the year, top leaders from varied industries and fields come and participate in open, ‘no-attribution’ sessions with the Sloan Fellows. The visiting leaders give a personal perspective on their leadership experiences and lessons learned. The Fellows can ask further questions in a group session, followed by cocktails and dinner where the leaders and Sloan Fellows can engage in further personal conversations in a more casual setting.

The visiting leaders are among the best and the brightest CEOs, with impact across industries and continents. In this environment I approached several CEOs to ask if I could make an appointment to talk with them about their definition of happiness, as part of my thesis.
research. A few expectedly said no, but seven said yes. So I set off to research the definition of happiness.

**Surging Interest**

Certainly the interest in understanding happiness pervades society. In the media, the incidence of articles relating to the topic of happiness has increased considerably over the last decade. In a search through a database of 8,000 news and business publications, I found:

- Forty major English news and business publications (see Appendix A for the list) in which increased public interest in happiness is highlighted.
- Articles in which the word ‘happiness’ appeared in the headline and/or in the first 5 words of an article, in the headline and/or the first 10 words, and in the headline and/or the first 15 words of the article (Factiva website).

The results of this search showed that the appearance of the word “happiness” is trending upward on a notable slope (see Figure 1.1). This data does not reflect the tsunami of advertising that overwhelms our daily lives with messages promising happiness to be derived from various products and services.
Fig. 1.1 Trends in articles mentioning “happiness” in 40 major news publications (1996-2006)

Source: Factiva database, 2007. Adapted by the author.

To better understand this upward trend, it is helpful to understand the positive psychology movement. In 1996, Martin E. Seligman was elected President of the American Psychological Association. According to his biography, “His major initiatives concerned the prevention of ethnopolitical warfare and the study of Positive Psychology. Since 2000, his main mission has been the promotion of the field of Positive Psychology. This discipline includes the study of positive emotion, positive character traits, and positive institutions” (Seligman, 2007). Seligman’s initiative leads a collaborative effort of great minds.

It is relatively clear that even with a precise definition of happiness, we cannot be assured that two individuals who claim happiness are having the same experience or even that their
perceptions of happiness are equivalent. However, certain factors believed to contribute to happiness appear consistently in the literature (Seligman, 2002):

1) strong social relationships
2) physical health and fitness
3) feelings of competence and control
4) progress on meaningful goals
5) marriage/committed partner relationship
6) positive self-esteem and optimism
7) a clear sense of life’s purpose.

A question comes to mind with this list: Do these factors contribute to happiness, or does happiness contribute to these factors?

Other modern researchers preceded Seligman in conducting research in this area, calling their topics positive affect, subjective well being, or life satisfaction (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, 1990; Diener, 1985). Clearly, throughout history many philosophers, researchers, and scientists have pursued the topic of happiness.
Defining Happiness: What Does the Literature Say?

Although achieving a virtuous life serves as a daily impetus and motivation for many, there is often an unrequited longing for a life with power and access—the life many imagine is enjoyed by “big-time” American CEOs. But what is happiness?

The Oxford English Dictionary defines happiness this way:

1. Good fortune or luck in life or in a particular affair; success, prosperity. 2. The state of pleasurable content of mind, which results from success or the attainment of what is considered good. 3. Successful or felicitous aptitude, fitness, suitability, or appropriateness; felicity.

The English language also infuses cultural meaning into the word “happiness,” defining and redefining it over many years and various populations. In the literature, other phrases are given equal purpose—"subjective well being," "flow," "affective style," "emotional disposition," and "positive affect" are among the most common. Less common is the Greek word eudaemonia, taken from Aristotle’s works, and defined as “well-being, flourishing, or living a good life” and “the state of having a good indwelling spirit, a good genius.” This word has been translated to ‘happiness’.

Defining happiness involves history and perspective. While probably not a common topic among business executives, the effort to define what happiness is, how to measure it, and where to find it has stimulated considerable discussion through the ages among philosophers, economists, psychologists, and medical practitioners.
The Philosophical Approach

In Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, written in 350 BCE, happiness is defined as the whole aim and end of human existence. Aristotle wrestles with the pursuit of what he believes is the highest human purpose—happiness—and dedicates his writings to the discovery and definition of virtues essential to the achievement of happiness. Aristotle also defined happiness as an activity of the rational soul in accordance with virtue (Aristotle, 1962).

Aristotle believed that happiness emerged from a synergy of a positive external environment and moral virtues. The evolution of virtues understood in ages past, is not greatly different from what one could accept in current times as ‘moral virtues’. The list provided in Table 2.1, inspired by Aristotle’s *Ethics*, includes moderation (choice determined by reason), courage, liberality, magnificence, pride, good temper, friendliness, truthfulness, wittiness, shame, righteous indignation, and justice.

These Aristotelian views on the virtues that are fundamental to an individual’s happiness, offer a eudaemonic definition of happiness. A eudaemonist’s perspective on happiness (generally accepted by Socrates, Plato, and Cicero) defines one’s life purpose as pursuing these virtues and, through their achievement, enjoying personal happiness. This definition contrasts with the hedonistic definition that emphasizes the purpose of life and the source of happiness come in the pursuit of pleasures and the avoidance of pain. From a hedonistic perspective, pure happiness is life without tribulation, suffering, anxiety, or pain. That conflict between the two lies at the heart of my inquiry about the definition of happiness.
Table 2.1 A List of Virtues

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<th>Virtues</th>
<th>Moderation</th>
<th>Courage</th>
<th>Rashness</th>
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<tr>
<td>Cowardice</td>
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<td>Wastefulness</td>
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<td>Vulgarity</td>
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<td>Magnificence</td>
<td>Miserliness</td>
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<td>Humility</td>
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<td>Pride</td>
<td>Vanity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Irascibility</td>
<td></td>
<td>Good temper</td>
<td>Too easy going</td>
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<tr>
<td>Obsequiousness</td>
<td></td>
<td>Friendliness</td>
<td>Churlishness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lying</td>
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<td>Truthfulness</td>
<td>Boasting</td>
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<td>Buffoonery</td>
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<td>Wittiness</td>
<td>Boorishness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shamelessness</td>
<td></td>
<td>Shame</td>
<td>Excessive guilt</td>
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<tr>
<td>Envy</td>
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<td>Righteous Indignation</td>
<td>Malevolence</td>
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<td>Justice</td>
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Others, regarding happiness as a state of mind, tried to distinguish it from pleasure on the grounds that it is of the mind and not the body; enduring, not transitory; and rational, not emotional. All these definitions and assumptions are subjective. Temporality was added to the definition by Solon, the ancient Greek who said, “Call no man happy till he is dead,” insisting that the pursuit of happiness was a lifelong quest (Gilbert, 2006).

**The Economists’ Approach**

Alongside the humanities literature, there is a wealth of economic literature that considers the concepts of happiness and life satisfaction. In economics, utility is a measure of the happiness or satisfaction one derives from the consumption of a good or service. As an aspect of economic theory, this definition presents the corresponding challenge of measuring happiness.

In 1776, Adam Smith wrote *The Wealth of Nations*, a seminal work in the field of economics, and one of the earliest attempts to examine the rise of industry and commercial development in Europe. Smith identified free trade and capitalism as factors in the quest for happiness. In the American paradigm, the interdependence between capitalism and happiness is nearly impossible to disentangle. The United States, with its free market economy, is accepted as an execution of Adam Smith’s ‘invisible hand’ theory. Each individual, in principle, has fundamental opportunities to pursue what they wish.

John Stuart Mill, one of the great thinkers in early economic theory, defined happiness as pleasure and the absence of pain, and he gave great consideration to its pursuit:

But I now thought that this end [one’s happiness] was only to be attained by not making it the direct end. Those only are happy (I thought) who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness ... Aiming thus at something else, they find happiness along the way ... Ask yourself whether you are happy, and you cease to be so. (Mill, 1960)
Both of these writings helped inspire Thomas Jefferson to write the words in the Declaration of Independence that have become widely accepted as pillars in the American value system: “...life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” While the definitions of “life” and “liberty” are accepted and general, “happiness” is more muddled and is often a matter of individual perception.

Andrew Oswald, a Scottish professor of economics at University of Warwick, who taught in the US at Dartmouth, Harvard, and Princeton and in the UK at LSE and Oxford, predicted in a 1999 article about Britain:

In a nation as wealthy as ours, a focus on GDP (gross domestic product) will in the future probably not be seen as very sensible. Do we need to go up to four cars each? Broader measures of wellbeing will likely assume greater importance as the decades pass – and the rise of the Green movement is one indicator. Before I retire, I expect happiness surveys and job-satisfaction surveys to have become a central part of British life. The News at Seven in the year 2020 will perhaps feature the country’s monthly wellbeing score. The acronym GDP may have gone. Perhaps it will have become GHL (gross happiness level). The Office of National Statistics will perhaps employ a team of statisticians constantly working on new forms of subjective wellbeing data. (Oswald, 1999)

Oswald may or may not have known that in 1972, the King of Bhutan, His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, proclaimed that the Bhutanese would measure their level of Gross National Happiness (GNH) and implement this metric as a guiding philosophy of Bhutan’s development process. GNH is a holistic approach to development based on the Buddhists’ belief that every man has the search for happiness as part of his innermost nature, that it is the single greatest desire of man, and that its satisfaction serves society as a whole. In the spring of 1999, the United Nations Development Program met to determine whether an analogy exists between a country’s GNH and its Human Development Index (Bhutan Studies website, 1999).

This concept of the diminishing value of existing economic metrics in current society has gained popular interest: “There are efforts to devise a new economic index that would measure
well-being gauged by things like satisfaction with personal relationships, employment, and meaning and purpose in life, as well as, for example, the extent new drugs and technology improve standards of living” (Mustafa, 2005). Richard Easterlin, professor of economics at University of Southern California said, “There is a growing interest in some policymaking circles in looking at these measures” (Mustafa, 2005).

**The Psychological Approach**

Economists have filled many papers with theories correlating money and happiness. But just as many psychologists have come along and found that once one’s basic needs are met, the excess yields no greater satisfaction. Psychologists measure happiness through batteries of tests. Developed by a cadre of psychologists and researchers who attempt to deduce through inquiry, ratings, and comparative study, their research aims to establish who among us is blessed with a detectable level of subjective well being.

One error that solicits argument is the concept of conditioned perspective. If you know no other reality and your needs are met, then although your situation may be highly constrained by average social standards, you in fact could report yourself as happy. Daniel Gilbert, a Harvard professor of psychology, argues that one’s happiness is a matter of perception. It is not something we can objectively and externally quantify. In spite of the multitude of scientific methods that have been implemented in an attempt to measure individual happiness, all approaches are filled with discrepancies. In the end, all are tactics that have been introduced to corroborate subjective evidence gathered through self-reporting.

Measuring happiness relies upon self-reported data—evaluations that statistically measure one’s perspective on individual, subjective well being. Interestingly, the data reported seems to illustrate that happiness generally holds at a constant level throughout one’s life
Happy individuals report several consistent life qualities as essential elements in their lives: Love, Optimism, Courage, Freedom, Pro-activity, Security, Health, Spirituality, Altruism, Perspective, Humor, and Purpose (Baker, 2004). Testing and comparative retesting have attempted to reconcile biases and circumstances in the reported responses. Many researchers debate the quality of self-reported responses in the fields of positive psychology and subjective well being. After many studies by research leaders like Easterlin (2001), Diener (1985, 2000, 2004), and Seligman (2002), there seems to be agreement that the flaws in the data are small compared to the aggregate value of the data. Neurological testing has been used to corroborate self-reported data, but as all the corollaries are established upon self-reported data, questions continue.

The Medical Approach

What makes happiness? Studies have shown that happiness may be as much as 50% a heritable genetic predisposition. A strong corollary was revealed when comparing the reported happiness of identical twins reared in separate homes; this finding was distinct in comparison with the reported happiness of fraternal twins reared in the same home.

Other scientific studies explain how our brains capture happiness. The emotional center of the brain exists in the limbic system, but is the range of one’s emotions held in the same place in the brain? Are emotions truly neurologically distinct? Seeking to understand this motivates research by scientists such as Eric Reiman at the University of Arizona’s Good Samaritan Medical Center. He collaborates with other U.S. neuroscience researchers to map emotions using Positron Emission Tomography (PET) scans. Stimulus was used to solicit happy emotions in a study of individuals while they were imaged using PET (see Figure 2.1). Additional images of the comparatives can be found in Appendix B.
All of the emotions they researched were located in the frontal cortex of the brain. The PET scans showed increased activity with stimulus in the medial prefrontal cortex and the thalamus. In their research on happiness, medical researchers found that "happiness was distinguished from sadness by greater activity in the ventral mesial frontal cortex" (Lane, 1997). This study is at the frontier of neuroscience, leading researchers toward an understanding of where and how the human brain actually experiences happiness.

Brain research also has proven that humans possess neuroplasticity—the brain’s capacity to rewire itself. This capability is the premise for rehabilitative treatments in brain injuries. Cognitively humans often follow mental models, and their brains have an area designed for
experiencing new things—primarily in the frontal cortex, parietal cortex, and anterior cingulate. Once things become familiar, the brain relies on the basal ganglia, which is more energy-efficient than the cortex regions of the brain. Once a pattern is established, subsequent executions can happen without conscious thought. This is the basic neurology of mental models. The corollary to this is that anything can become routine if we focus on, master, and practice it. This natural design allows us to maintain available resources for new experiences in the high-energy-consuming, learning part of our brains (Rock and Schwartz, 2005).

This construct of the brain’s learning process has evolved with what System Dynamics calls a reinforcing loop. For those not aware of system dynamics theory, suffice to say it is possible to diagram virtually anything, in this case the brain’s learning processes, into their own virtuous cycles. For a system dynamics diagram of this reinforcing loop, see Appendix C. As we develop a skill or approach and practice it, it becomes natural. This concept coordinates the perspectives of the historical, economic, psychological and neuroscientific literature on happiness. Happiness is what individuals seek with the goal of enhancing their experiences; positive emotions create positive experiences which create positive emotions.

Leadership and Happiness

Nothing in the literature explicit correlates leadership and happiness, but there are many implicit corollaries. In Barbara Fredrickson’s *Broaden and Build* (2003), she theorizes that experiencing positive emotions contributes to a state of mind and behaviors that prepare an individual for challenging future experiences. Negative emotions focus on immediate survival whereas positive emotions seem to focus more on problems of personal growth and development.
Other research illustrates that an enduring positive personal affect broadens an individual’s mindset and makes one more open to understanding and experiencing new things. This leads to accumulated resources that can be of future utility. Daniel Goleman pioneered the concept of ‘emotional intelligence’ and developed research that highlights the significance of positive affect in leaders:

... an inspirational, inclusive leader spawns acolytes for whom any challenge is surmountable.... High levels of emotional intelligence ... create climates in which information sharing, trust, healthy risk-taking and learning flourish.... The leader’s mood is quite literally contagious, spreading quickly and inexorably throughout the business. (Goleman, 2002)

Barsade (2002) found this effect of mood contagion more contagious with positive moods. A happy leader can make a difference in the achievements of those they lead. Other researchers have demonstrated that happy people think differently: they are more open, creative, and flexible, which increases their ability to process and integrate new experiences (Frederickson, 2003).

In Summary

With the cumulative understanding garnered from a limited survey of the literature, the virtuous cycles that happiness can sustain become apparent. Happiness encourages effort and energy, which contribute to accomplishments, which in turn increase happiness. Each individual has experiences and perspectives from which to define happiness.

The elements most people consider as contributors to their personal happiness are similar. Is that because in the end most people want to be happy? Or is it because most individuals, when grouped with others similar to themselves, could find that their lives are lived in parallel patterns? It does not seem possible to accurately compare the happiness of individuals. "But if one is concerned with comparing the subjective well-being of sizable groups of people,
such as social classes, this similarity in feelings about the sources of happiness gives credence to such comparison” (Easterlin, 2001). What are these sources of happiness? Through research we can understand approximately half of what defines happiness for an individual; the other half that contributes to one’s happiness is left for the curious to discover.

When the leaders of large American corporations have achieved great success and enviable amounts of wealth and power, do they understand happiness differently? How do they define happiness? That is the core of this thesis.
My desire was to sit down with some of the leaders of America’s most recognized, publicly traded corporations and understand how they defined happiness. I saw this as a first step to understanding what role personal happiness might have in successful leadership.

The interview process seems a rather simple concept on the whole—until one actually moves to design and execute a plan. There may be resources to help one design a plan and craft a strategy for achieving it, but they did not manifest themselves at the point when I needed them. So these presidents, chief executive officers, chairmen, and their administrators were patient supporters and subjects as I conducted my research in an iterative learning manner.

I began by establishing a plan and setting out my expectations:

**Step 1:** Set up interviews with leaders from America’s most recognized, publicly traded corporations and ask them to define happiness.

**Step 2:** Prepare materials and consent forms for them to read and fill out in advance.

**Step 3:** Navigate the conversations with a scripted introduction and a list of questions.

**Step 4:** Collect and chart the self-reported data.

**Step 5:** Write up my findings and conclusions.
Demographic Profile

Many of the leaders with whom I held conversations were accessed through their relationship with the Sloan Fellows Program; others through the generosity of family and friends; a few through persistence and pure luck. A few “cold calls” resulted in interviews, but for the most part they only served to highlight the advantages granted through existing relationships. The advantages of the MIT imprimatur cannot be understated in my endeavors to recruit participants, for without it I would still be knocking on doors.

The leaders I approached (or attempted to approach) are among the most insulated individuals I have ever encountered. The gatekeepers to these leaders are their administrators—individuals who are responsible for all contact with the outside world, even down to what lunch menus are presented. The administrators I spoke to were consistently polite. Some had been advised that the interview request was coming; others were the recipients of my cold calls. All of the administrators were generally kind as they advised me about the general impossibilities of the leaders’ tightly booked schedules.

In the end, I was able to negotiate interviews with 18 leaders. In each case, the hour I was given was invaluable, as experience and knowledge are impossible to value. However, by taking the published 2005 salaries of these executives (independent of stock options and bonuses) based on a 65-hour workweek, the time given was worth more than $1,000/hour.

The eighteen leaders share similar educational backgrounds. All had completed college. Most have at least one advanced degree, the majority of which are in business. The American undergraduate degrees are from Boston College, Lake Forest, Tufts, Williams, Princeton, McGill, Duke, and some public universities. The graduate business degrees are predominantly from Harvard, with a few from Wharton, MIT, Columbia, and other top-tier schools. Other advanced degrees come from universities around the world. Two-thirds of the participants were born and
raised in the United States. The other third are from English-speaking countries, including:
Canada, Ireland, South Africa, and the UK. All have English as their first language. Their ages
range from 48 to 64. Three are female. All are Caucasian. They are all in their first marriage and
have at least one child. Their corporations reported gross revenues for 2006 ranging from nearly
US$1 billion to over $200 billion. All the leaders who participated are important, influential
people who play public roles and hold senior positions in their organization. All but one lead
publicly traded companies. The single exception leads a large non-profit.

And from a completely subjective perspective, they all seemed happy to me.

Preparations

After successfully scheduling interviews, I developed a routine to prepare for them.

Being a complete research novice with very little exposure to or insight into qualitative research,
I tried to create consistent conditions across all interviews. Two business days in advance of
each interview, I sent an e-mail to the administrator confirming the time and date. In that e-mail
I attached several documents:

1. an interview consent form, an overview of the study, and a request for permission to
   record the session;
2. a copy of The Satisfaction with Life Scale by Ed Diener;
3. a copy of the Subjective Happiness Scale by Sonja Lyubomirsky (see Appendix D for copies
   of these documents).

I also brought copies of these documents with me, as well as my digital audio recorder when I
met with each leader.

Starting the conversation was often a bit awkward. To avoid biases, I needed to
minimize the pre-chatter. Some of the subjects were listeners, others were talkers. All were aware
of the documents I had sent ahead, but only two had reviewed them before our meeting. I always began by asking if I could audio record the interview to avoid frantic note taking and enable me to listen more effectively. I committed to no attribution and total anonymity. The majority accepted this without hesitation. For unrecorded interviews, I took time immediately after the meeting to make notes about the conversation. These notes proved to be more thematic and enhanced the transcripts of the recorded interviews.

I began with an overview of some of the published research on the topic of happiness. I consistently introduced three definitions. Appendix D contains a script of my guide for establishing the beginning of the dialogue. I did not adhere to this verbatim, but utilized it to ensure consistency across the interviews.

At this point, about three or four minutes had passed, and the leaders were listening with great intent but consistently showed signs of restlessness. When I moved to the next section in the interview, they were ready to speak.

I asked each leader to rank the influence certain conditions had on happiness using a five-point Lykert scale. The questions covered the influence of:

- money and income on happiness,
- aspirations on happiness,
- productivity on happiness,
- social relationships on happiness,
- social capital on happiness, and
- political and personal freedoms on happiness.

Most of the leaders explained their rankings without any solicitation on my part. A few answered with quick numerical responses. There were not enough numerical responses to draw
any statistical patterns. I have included a few of the more interesting characteristic responses in
the Response section of this paper.

By this point, a level of functioning level of rapport had been established. I tried to
include most of the following questions in the flow of the conversation, looking for appropriate
segues and opportunities to build on earlier statements:

- Some people say happiness is living in the present without planning or looking
  backward. In contrast, CEOs/Presidents/Chairmen spend most of their time
  anticipating the future. How do you reconcile this gap?

- As a CEO/President/Chairman, many of your missions are related to maximization
  (ROA, ROE, profits). Do you conscientiously strategize the maximization of your
  own happiness? What about your family?

- How has promotion from your previous high-level position to your current
  CEO/President/Chairman position affected your happiness? How has it affected the
  happiness of your family?

- If you were to identify the fundamental components of happiness, what would they
  be?

- How do you perceive the relationship between responsibility and happiness?

- With the conveniences of transportation and communication, there is increased
  geographic mobility in society. How do you think this new “small-world” perspective
  influences happiness?

- Studies show married people, or those in committed relationships, on average are
  happier. How do you think a committed relationship influences one's happiness?

- What influence do you believe happiness might have on an individual's general
  health?

- What relationship do others play in personal happiness?

- Leadership requires adaptability, but with that comes an ever-increasing goal.
  Researchers have identified what they call the ‘hedonic treadmill’, characterizing the
  regeneration of avarice and ambition that often accompany accomplishments. How
  do you see happiness and this quest for satisfaction relating?

- How do you think happiness affects a worker's productivity? Why?

- Do you think happiness played a role in your success?

- And finally: what is your definition of happiness?
After these questions, I brought out two preprinted questionnaires: the *Subjective Happiness Scale* (Lyubomirsky, 1999), and the *Satisfaction with Life Scale* (Diener, 1985). Only two leaders had completed these in advance. In the other cases, I asked each person to complete them at the end of our conversation.

I concluded by thanking each one for his/her time and agreeing to share my findings. The interviews lasted an average of 55 minutes.

**My Thoughts about the Questions**

Overall, I found these leaders to be authentic and generous in their conversations. They really seemed to consider the questions. Many times the responses began with, “I never thought of that,” or “Tough question,” or “Hmm, let me think a moment.” Their apparent candor created a comfortable dialogue.

I selected the CEOs based on those I had had an opportunity to see or others who were referred to me from people I trusted. I tried to select people who seemed to be happy. I think those who rejected my request may have not been sufficiently comfortable with their own sense of happiness to consider an in-depth conversation.

After meeting all the leaders, the only factor that appeared to cause differences in the responses was age.

Reflecting on the conversations and the questions I asked, some questions had less value in terms of yielding strong responses; a few questions had a detrimental effect on the momentum of the conversation. Two questions did not solicit the responses I expected.

- When I asked about the *influence of social capital on happiness*, none of the leaders confessed to feeling any ego satisfaction from the social capital derived from their positions.

  I would hypothesize that since that social capital has been accumulating over a lifetime, they
are not as aware of their social capital and only with its absence would they gain the full
capacity to describe its value.

- The question regarding the influence of political and personal freedoms was presented
to the wrong audience. Of 18 interviews, 16 leaders had very little exposure or personal
experience with suppression of these freedoms. Thus there was no contrast that gave them a
perspective from which they could deliver a response.

In the first few interviews, I asked a question about success in business:

"Popular teachings at the business school level promote profits and growth as the
ultimate measure of success. How would you define success for yourself?"

This question usually derailed the momentum that previous questions had built, typically
transporting the leaders back to their familiar territory of quarterly profits and the like. In the
few interviews where I included it, I got glimpses of their most recent conversations with
analysts, but nothing that contributed to any understanding of what happiness meant to them
personally.

The question I wish I had asked came up about halfway through the list of interviews
was:

"What influence do you think faith and spirituality have on happiness?"

One of the leaders brought it into our conversation, and I was sorry that it had been omitted.

As others read the questions and the responses captured in the "Conversations" chapter,
they may have their own queries. I would encourage them to pursue answers, since my own
search for a definition of happiness indeed uncovered much happiness.
Responses to the Two Questionnaires

The first questionnaire used near the end of the conversations is authored by Sonja Lyubomirsky, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Riverside, and a recognized leader in research on happiness. In her paper “A Measure of Subjective Happiness: Preliminary Reliability and Construct Validation,” she and her coauthor introduce what has become a widely accepted instrument, the Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS). Since its introduction in 1999, it has been assimilated into the psychology literature and widely used. Lyubomirsky's scale was valuable for generating insight into each leader's personal perspectives. A copy can be found in Appendix E.

Using tools available on the website, I input the gender, age, educational level, and occupation of each leader into the general profile, followed by the responses gathered from the SHS questionnaire. This process produced results that reflected each leader's position in relation to their position among all Internet users, among others of their gender, among others of their age group, among others of their occupation, and among others of their educational level.

The purpose of administering the SHS questionnaire was to assess each leader's "set point," derived by using Seligman's (2002) formula for understanding happiness:

\[ H = S + C + V \]

where an "enduring level of happiness" is achieved by adding together 'S' (a certain set level), 'C' (the individual circumstances one faces in life), and 'V' (voluntary control). This idea of a constant level of happiness and the concept of it holding constant throughout one's life appears repeatedly in the literature. According to Lyubomirsky, and concurred across the literature, about 50% of one's happiness is a product of genetics, about 10% is a product of one's

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1 This questionnaire is incorporated into the Authentic Happiness website based at the University of Pennsylvania's Positive Psychology Center (www.authentichappiness.com).
circumstances, and the remainder is a mystery. This mystery is what Seligman labels “voluntary control.” Many of us who know happy people would call it a certain je ne sais quoi that is found in the lives of happy people, and which seems to make the difference—their “glass half-full” perspective.

The SHS questionnaire is simple, yet it has proved accurate through cross-checks and analysis. The mean (score) for adult Americans is 4.8. Two-thirds of people score between 3.8 and 5.8.

Seligman defines eight general circumstances that comprise 10% of a typical level of contentment:

- Money
- Marriage
- Social Life
- Negative Emotion
- Health
- Education, Climate, Race and Gender
- Religion

Among the leaders I spoke with, many enjoyed similar circumstances. All are well compensated, all are married. Their social lives meet their desired preferences. The hardships they have faced are varied and individual. Their health as a group is good. Their education levels are similar. The circumstances of climate/gender/religion vary by individual. One can deduce that the differing individual responses derive from the combined effects of the hardships they have faced, their climate/gender/religion circumstances, and their religion as the ‘voluntary’ component.

The following data reflect information gathered during the leaders’ conversations following administration of the Subjective Happiness Scale.
Responses to Question No. 1:

In general, I consider myself

Responses to Question No. 2:

Compared to most of my peers, I consider myself
Responses to Question No. 3:

Some people are generally very happy. They enjoy life regardless of what is going on, getting the most out of everything. To what extent does this characterization describe you?

Responses to Question No. 4:

Some people are generally not very happy. Although they are not depressed, they never seem as happy as they might be. To what extent does this characterization describe you?
The responses to the Subjective Happiness Scale show an upper level consistency among the leaders. When compared with other populations these scores are very high. One might consider the bias of the situation; did the leaders want to appear happy? According to research shown by the author of the scale, Sonja Lyubomirsky, there has been strong consistency shown through the results collected in repetitive testing across large audiences. If we understand that the self reported data is reflective of general happiness levels, the leaders demonstrate a consistent above average ‘set point’.

The second questionnaire is authored by Ed Diener, a professor of psychology at the University of Illinois since 1975. Diener is among the founders of the positive psychology movement, and his research consistently focuses on the measurement of and influences on well being.

From his perspective, Diener sees one’s satisfaction with life as a “cognitive judgmental process.” When an individual considers his or her general level of satisfaction, the considerations that form their responses are entirely individual. Every person’s index is developed based on circumstances (like those described previously) and experience. There can be many commonalities in the general conditions that create the perspectives from which leaders reflect their personal satisfaction. However, it is critical to recognize the individuality of each life, and this is achieved with Diener’s test. His short questionnaire was developed and validated in 1985 in an attempt to look inside the individual perspective and measure satisfaction.

The following data reflect information gathered when I administered the Satisfaction with Life Scale questionnaire during each leader’s interview. A copy of the Satisfaction with Life Scale questionnaire can be found in Appendix D.
Responses to Question No. 1

In most ways my life is close to ideal

Responses to Question No. 2:

The conditions of my life are excellent
Responses to Question No. 3

I am satisfied with life

Responses to Question No. 4

So far I have gotten the important things I want in life
Responses to Question No. 5

There is much to consider when trying to understanding the scores elicited from administering the Satisfaction with Life Scale. Diener gives his perspective on generated scores:

**30 – 35 = Highly satisfied.** If you score in this range, you love your life and feel that things are going well. Life is not perfect, but it feels as thought it is about as good as life gets. Furthermore, just because you are satisfied does not mean you are complacent. In fact, growth and challenge might be part of the reason you are satisfied. For most people in this high-scoring range, life is enjoyable, and the major domains of life are going well—work or school, family, friends, leisure, and personal development.

**25- 29 = Satisfied.** People who score in this range like their lives and feel that things are going well. Of course life is not perfect, but you feel that things are mostly good. Furthermore, just because you are satisfied does not mean you are complacent. In fact, growth and challenge might be part of the reason you are satisfied. For most people in this high-scoring range, life is enjoyable, and the major domains of life are going well—work or school, family, friends, leisure, and personal development. You draw motivation from those areas of your life that you are not satisfied with. (Diener, Authentic Happiness website, 2007)
According to Diener, there are common factors that contribute or detract from one's life satisfaction scores. He lays out three primary areas that affect one's general satisfaction with life:

1. **Personal sense of self** – This includes spirituality, learning, and leisure, which define one's position and value in the world.

2. **Productivity** – This can be homemaking, work, school, or general achievements toward designated goals that align with one's values.

3. **Personal Relationships** – This can be family, friends, or other social relationships.

No single one of these areas determines one's sense of satisfaction with life. It is the interdependencies that are created and the balance between them that weave the fabric of happiness. One's satisfaction with life appears to require adequate stature in each of these three domains. As a table needs no less than three legs to stand, these three elements each must manifest an adequate level that balances with its counterparts.

### Table 3.1 Satisfaction with Life Raw Scores and comparative scaling

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Table 3.2 Subjective Happiness Scale Raw Scores and comparative scaling

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These tables reflect the raw scores of the leaders and their ranking as a comparative percentile when positioned among different audience selections. These percentiles were extracted using the template formulae on the University of Pennsylvania's Authentic Happiness website. (www.authentichappiness.com)
The questions I raised were surprisingly effective at provoking conversations that elicited consistent themes. The questions that asked the leaders to rank the influence on happiness of Money and Income, Aspirations, Productivity, Social Relationships, Social Capital and Political and Personal Freedoms, set the stage for them to express a wide range of philosophies and personal insights—more than their responses to other questions. The other questions addressing areas of corporate purpose, career progression, and social relationships gave them opportunities to share their ideas about resources, talents, and drive in the context of happiness.

In sifting, organizing, and categorizing the interwoven themes that arose throughout the interviews, I identified three themes. In my readings on philosophical, psychological, and medical research, I could not find any structure with a similar division. Whether responding to questions addressing specific topics like wealth, ambition, family, or public leadership, they repeatedly brought up their need to be connected with others, the thrill of being able to discover and meet challenges, and a notion of seeking and reaching a balance or moderation. I label the three themes as:

- **Social Relationships:** the happiness derived from interactions with family, friends, and co-workers.
Focus: — the happiness connected to a sense of an internal locus of control. This theme has three features: a compartmentalization skill, a ‘self-righting’/compassing quality, and a drive toward accomplishment.

Threshold: — the happiness that is derived from achieving a ‘balance’ in life. It reflects moderation and recognition that there is a threshold level to most pursuits, such that going beyond the threshold does not benefit happiness. This theme encompasses indexing, self-scaling, learning and appropriateness in competition.

Social Relationships

I define social relationships as the experiences (and possibly the associated renewed energy) derived from interactions with family, friends, and co-workers. Mastering and optimizing social relationships means assessing the benefits one will derive as even more meaningful relationships develop.

My definition of social relationships is fairly broad. I assumed that since none of the leaders asked for clarification of this question, the concept was general (if self-defined). For myself, social relations include family, friends, and co-workers in relationships that are created through shared exchanges and experiences that shape the depth and dimensions of the relationships. The leaders described varied perspectives when selecting the relationships they pursue. Some leaders felt a sense of control as the originator in the relationships; others described themselves as more of a recipient.

One question asked about the influence of social relationships on happiness. Other questions specifically sought to develop this concept:
In two questions slanted toward business and career, I asked how the leaders’ families were impacted or considered. These questions developed a better understanding of the role of social relationships in the lives and happiness of the leaders:

"They're the foundation."

"The impact of social relationships on happiness... I guess it's pretty profound."

All the leaders communicated the importance of social relationships as part of their perception of happiness. Many said their social relationships were enmeshed with their professional lives:

"I have a very high importance placed on social relationships, professionally as well as personally."

"The social relationships I have at work are very strong, real strong. I have a good team, we spend a lot of time together, we have fun. I actually have translated social relationships into work."

"When I think about work, it's the work that's motivating, but it's also who you do the work with, and I don't think I have a lot of very close friendships, but those that I have are very deep. I don't see my social satisfaction coming from quantity, but those relations that I have, when you accomplish things with other people, there are people who you can count on."

"My sense is for most people it's real important... particularly with jobs like this, because I think so much of being successful is to be able to work well with people inside and outside, and I think people can generally rate if you like to be with them or not."

"There's a great deal of happiness and equality in social relationships with disparate people."
Leaders said that diversity in their social relationships enhanced their own happiness.

"I like a really high quality of relationships with people who think about things differently than I do, or just have different strong opinions on a variety of issues that are different from mine ... that just have a different view of life or money or social responsibility.

Many of the leaders saw themselves as the locus of control in their network of social relationships:

"As I get older, I'm much more critical of who I spend my time with and how I spend it. The older I get, the harder I'm working.... I have a small number of people who I think are really fabulous, people who, if I had to decide who I wanted to spend my time with.... If I was dying, who would I see? It wouldn't be this whole cabinet of people who probably think that I might see them. I would say that my friendships as I get older are more much eclectic.... I subconsciously seek out people who are quite different from each other, and I love to bring them all together."

Discerning the value in some relationships, describing a preference for some over others, and differentiating between popularity and social relationships seemed to be essential aspects of understanding social relationships and the value they brought to the leaders' happiness.

"I think one of the things I've learned from this job that I wasn't aware of is, every decision in today's world is probably going to upset somebody, and that somebody, whether it's an employee who ends up suing you, or whether it's a special interest group... they all have voices in a way that they never did before. As a member of society you can say that's great, that's empowering. But as a recipient of that, it's different. It's different being a CEO these days, so I think the happiness quotient probably goes down."

The dynamic quality of social relationships was appreciated by all of the leaders, but how to best leverage and enjoy that dynamic was highly individual.

Some leaders expressed frustration with the superficiality that is often part of social relationships:

"I think social relationships are important but only in the right context. It has to fit in with what I'm trying to do with my life. I work really hard and I don't have time to play around with...with useless conversation."

"Social relationships are important at work, and I guess relationships with my family are important, and outside of that I don't rank them very high. Social relationships take a lot of time and effort. You can't have a relationship without putting a lot of effort into it, otherwise it's an empty relationship."
However, there were positive comments on the value derived from constructive social relationships. Many leaders drew a connection between social relationships in the workplace and the happiness one can derive from work.

"It's because of the human connection. The only thing that's ever worthwhile is that there's a human connection...at the end of the day that makes a difference."

"I think that creating personal connections is still a terrific component of happiness for me"

"I like to develop relationships and it adds an element of intellectual interest to the job. I learn things in all the countries I visit, it's not the kind of stuff I used to think about thirty years ago...it enables you to continue to grow and learn while you expand your business, it's a plus over time."

The leaders sometimes correlated happiness with a sense of personal energy and motivation.

"I think that relationships nourish this energy that you need...the positive energy."

"There are tons of different places I could work, tons of jobs I could do, but one of the things that I absolutely love is that fifteen minutes from now I could get six people in this office that make me smarter, make me laugh, make me funnier, you know, that is why I've been working at this company."

The leaders did not try to separate their social relationships in terms of intimacy and enduring qualities. Rather, social relationships had two distinct segments: coworkers/colleagues and family. Any segregation between rank and relationships with coworkers/colleagues and between external and internal relationships with family was unclear and inconsistent. The value that social relationships bring to the lives of the leaders and the influence social relationships have on their happiness was clear.

"I actually think that being surrounded by people that you care about, and that care about you, is enormously important. While true happiness has to come from within, it can certainly be helped and expanded by being around people with whom you love and who love you. They can't generate happiness for you, but they can certainly enhance it."

"I do believe happiness has to come from within, but I think it can be really helped...people with strong social networks tend to live longer."

"The best relationships, they bring out your best self, and kind of reflect it back on you a little bit, I think that's very rewarding."
There was an implicit ranking among the leaders' comments about social relationships. Spouse was most valued, then children and generational and extended family, then non-family relationships. The question about a committed relationship brought a few comical replies as leaders emphasized the importance only as it applied to healthy and satisfying relationships.

"You have to be in a married or committed relationship that you're happy in, or it doesn't work."

"It depends on what day you ask! (laugh) I think it does, because ultimately there is somebody who knows you very well, and who understands what makes you unhappy and can help you work through that. I think that is a huge benefit of a committed relationship."

Beyond the banter, many of the leaders were sincere about the strength and stability that they derive from their marriages.

"It has a very meaningful and positive impact, in a couple of ways. I think as a CEO's life gets scattered and shattered and fragmented, then having an emotional anchor is immensely important. When I talk about energy, this kind of positive psychological energy for someone to nourish your psychological energy is really fantastic and I'm extremely lucky in that way. I think a really good partner can also be a sounding board."

"I certainly think it's one of those foundational social relationships, someone that knows you intimately, cares about... celebrates the good and I can say that's a priority."

"I think that's the most important thing. For me that's the foundation."

"I think it's necessary and critical."

"Part of happiness is being able to share success with people, or someone to work through tougher times with, I think most people are wired that way, I think there's a real link there."

"I think it gives you an anchor, I think it allows a level of communication about things that are going on... where you don't feel like you're always on stage, saying everything precisely correctly. I think it also, if you don't have anybody to share your thoughts with, that can get old in a hurry... you can get very isolated if you don't have that type of relationship to fall back on. It's very understandable."

Most of the leaders felt that social relationships kept them steadfast in times of tribulation and doubt, providing security, stability, and support. All of the leaders agreed that constructive social relationships had the dynamic qualities of a virtuous cycle.

"I do think for healthy dependent social relationships, you still need a strong core, you still need the ability to be happy within yourself. You can't rely on others to make you happy, however one's association with another is a primary source and contributor to it."
"I think you need other people in a lot of different areas. Not just the professional areas, I mean obviously you need people who can give you good input, but you just need people who have good common sense, you need some anchors in your life, I think that's part of it as well."

Comments often noted the complicated balance between self definition and reinforcing social relationships. The leaders communicated a general consensus that social relationships were an essential element in their definition of happiness.

All of the leaders saw time and interest as essential components when building social relationships. It is my perception most of the leaders I spoke with are extroverted individuals, aware of and concerned about their social and physical environment. Many seemed to gain energy and motivation from their exchanges with others. Yet it was also clear that they distribute their time so their commitments in social relationships are efficient and high-yielding.

Focus

I define focus as a personal vision based on one’s belief system. It creates a mission and supports a constancy and stability in an individual’s energy and direction. Focus captures the integrity, the alignment of one’s actions with one’s values, and the confidence that supports the drive to achieve and accomplish.

The discussion of social relationships led to broader discussions about family life and the inevitable trade-offs that most leaders must negotiate. I believe these choices were possible because all the leaders possess a clear sense of focus. I see this focus as a compartmentalization skill, a ‘self-righting’ or ‘compassing quality’, and a drive to accomplish. The challenges they face daily are numerous and varied, and their resilience seems to come from a strong sense of confidence and purpose. Some of the questions explored this internal locus of control. Several
questions provoked responses that seemed to capture and highlight this theme of focus as a primary tenet of happiness:

- **What do you see as the influence of Money and Income, Aspirations, Productivity, Social Relationships, and Social Capital on happiness?**

- Some people say happiness is living in the present without planning or looking backward. In contrast, a CEO spends most of his/her time anticipating the future. How do you reconcile this gap?

- As CEO, many of your missions are related to maximization (ROA, ROE, profits). Do you conscientiously maximize your own happiness? What about your family?

- Popular business school teachings promote profit and growth as the ultimate measure of success. How would you define success for yourself?

- How have promotions from your previous high-level position to your current CEO position affected your happiness? How has it affected the happiness of your family?

- If you were to identify the fundamental components of happiness what would they be?

- With the conveniences of transportation and communication there is increased mobility in society, how do you think this new “small-world” perspective influences happiness?

- What influence do you believe happiness might have on an individual’s general health?

- Leadership requires adaptability. But with that comes an ever-increasing goal. The literature identifies something called the ‘hedonic treadmill’, which refers to regenerated avarice and ambition that often accompany accomplishments. How do you see happiness and this quest for satisfaction relating?

- Do you think happiness has played a role in your success?

All the leaders I spoke with have families, and all of them referred to their spouses and children with great affection and dedication. And they all suffered from that universal human constraint: 24 hours in a day. With ever-growing demands on corporate leaders, coupled with tremendous social pressure to play a greater role in family life, many of the leaders spoke of the
enormous challenges and choices brought on by this paradox. The concepts of focus and compartmentalization were discussed in many of the conversations:

“My family life and my business life are converging, but in a good way, they’re not. I don’t believe in this overlap where you’re half working and half personal life... that’s really significant, developing these muscles to be able to compartmentalize. I don’t believe in sort of being with your kids and doing e-mail where you’re half there... my kids have given me very helpful feedback. Basically what I do is, I quite sharply compartmentalize to say... now I am working, now I am spending time with a family dinner. Don’t confuse convergence with mush.... So I think part of the balance equation of this model of happiness has to do with the ability to sharply compartmentalize what’s going on in that moment so that you don’t get the mush. The mush is very, very grating and very ineffective.”

“I have a very acute ability to compartmentalize my life, and my private life is what produces satisfaction and pleasure and contentment. My professional life is what it is. Things can be going really well professionally, or not, they could be going really badly, or not, it has very little bearing on how I feel about myself.”

The leaders who expressed this concept of focus and the accompanying balance were quite clear that it was an essential component to their success:

“I think if you’re in balance... if your personal life sucks, it will invade your business capability. If your business life sucks likewise it will invade your personal life. People compartmentalize... they’re connected - though, I’ve been blessed, both have been a great place for me to be. I think to some extent you have to be happy in your life generally to have the energy and the patience and the thoughtfulness and the creativity and the drive and the wisdom I suppose to continue to do your business year in and year out.”

The leaders characterized focus in many different ways:

“Resilience...is just critical, whether you’re a kid or a CEO, most days you get some good things that happen and bad things and you have to be able to deal with the bad things, and get more pluses from the good things than minuses from the bad things.”

“For me, you really need to do the best you can in whatever you do, that’s a key element of happiness, that’s for me... someone who looks at things constructively, looks for upsides rather than downsides, approaches tasks, opportunities with enthusiasm and can-do spirit, and gets them done obviously.”

The desire to live each moment to the fullest and the commitment derived from this focus were defined almost as an edict by many of the leaders:

“Be fully present, whatever it is you’re doing, be fully present... I think about that with my kids sometimes, if you’re going to go and make snow angels or whatever, be fully present in the moment.”
As many of these leaders spoke about themselves, their candor and confidence was palpable. I developed an image in my own mind of a white-water kayaker navigating the rapids on a challenging river; skillfully maneuvering the boat through complex and unforeseen situations. If the swells and rocks overturn them, and they find themselves careening breathlessly underwater, they do not panic. They believe in their ability to right the boat, avoid other rocks, and keep paddling to their destination. Those skills, the compass, sense of direction, and their commitment to the destination guide them to achieve their goal. Their successes led to a growing appetite for—and ability to accomplish—greater challenges.

"It has a cumulative effect. You build confidence in yourself so when things don't work out, you say it's not because I'm a dolt, it's because something comes up. It's cumulative over a lifetime."

This theme of focus exemplifies Fredrickson's *Broaden and Build* theory. She characterizes what many of the leaders alluded to in their responses: “Experiencing a positive emotion leads to states of mind and to modes of behavior that indirectly prepare and individual for later hard times.” She goes on to suggest that “…the positive emotions broaden an individual’s momentary mindset, and by doing so help to build enduring personal resources” (Fredrickson, 2003).

This idea of developing focus and abilities through experience was expressed by some of the leaders.

“I don't think that happiness is derived from never having any pain, and I do think that, in the US particularly, there is this notion of anything bad happening must be wrong. I think life has its hardships, that's part of its fabric, but you ... push through.”

“You take on a tough issue, plot out a plan, you execute it... things could be bad, but you see your way through and they become good.”

“Some of my greatest growth as a business person has been as a result of the most miserable times I've had: I mean having a tyrant for a boss, for a six year period, just a maniacal, mean-spirited, really smart person who look great delight in making other look like nothing. But I came out of that much tougher, much more adapted, being more decisive, a much better planner, much more readily able to step up and deal with the issues. I think a lot of the personal growth comes from the really lousy stuff.”
In reflecting on their own happiness the leaders said that their satisfaction was sharply highlighted by their contrasting negative experiences.

The leaders’ responses revealed how their perspective of focus and an internal locus of control affected their perceptions of other people’s happiness:

“Having seen very poor people, people with limitations on their personal freedoms, they didn’t focus on this... they didn’t spend their time hating this fact of their life, but that doesn’t mean they liked it, or it didn’t effect them, because of course it did... but I do think that you can be happy in your life while being unhappy with a situation.”

“You think about the stories even, people whose heritage come from slavery, when you read about it, you see a tremendous amount of celebration of life, celebration of faith, and intrinsic happiness while not necessarily being happy with that aspect of life; choosing not to... depriving all of life’s happiness... So I’d say that personal freedoms are important, however, they’re not determinant of being able to be happy, not at all.”

The leaders demonstrated a strong sense of confidence in themselves and others and an in the strength of the human spirit. This confidence motivated them in their pursuits and stabilized them when facing challenges. This self-regulating quality exhibited by all of the leaders had an authentic human aspect. One leader I spoke with was recovering from cancer treatment. Along with the stress and responsibility of leading a large American corporation, it also meant a battle for that person’s life. We spoke of the choices that had to be made and the subsequent battle to keep the treatment private until it was completed and the outcome could be reported.

“It’s important to share with you...I was diagnosed with cancer about a year ago...I had just finished chemotherapy... I’m fine now...all the way through, my approach...was how lucky I was that I got it early... I did not share it publicly at the time, I am [sharing it] more now because I want to help more people, but at the time it was helpful to be discreet about it.”

When I sympathized with the hassles of inquiries and updates throughout the process, the reply came back:

“I had a lot of discussions over how I handled it versus how other people handle it; I was happy pretty much all the way through it except for those days when I just felt terrible. I knew I would be okay, and how sad it was for people who don’t have the same outcome.”
This response is a superb example of focus. It gives insight into the leader’s focus on life, a strong sense of an internal locus of control, compartmentalized skills, the self-righting/compassing quality, and an indefatigable drive to accomplish a desired goal. “Looking back, I wasn’t okay, it was terrible, but I just put my mind to it, I said I would be fine, and it was.” The leaders held differing thoughts on the correlation between health and happiness, but they also concurred that there was a psychological element to one’s general state of health.

The theme of focus and the concept of an independent center of control in each individual came through in many of the leaders’ comments. They knew that decisiveness enabled them to choose the parts of life in which they would participate. This sense of autonomy is enhanced by the power and authority wielded by each leader. Some spoke about their appreciation for the systems embedded in their positions that enables them to focus on achieving the most effects from their energy and effort. Referring to the dedicated service exhibited by administrative support, one leader said, “For the successful executive, the way your job is structured, a lot of that frustration and time wasting activity is taken away.”

Another part of focus for the executives was the sense of accomplishment and purposeful intention. Many leaders portrayed themselves as overachievers, unfamiliar with true satisfaction:

“The status quo is unacceptable.”

“I’m never really happy with my accomplishments, I constantly have aspirations. That’s my greatest strength and my greatest weakness. I’m always pushing myself incredibly hard and everybody around me. While I enjoy things, I can always go back and rewrite the script of how I could have done it differently. There are very few things that escape that filter. My aspirations are often met but not really in a totally satisfactory mode. I’m cognizant of that, but I really can’t help or change it, it is what it is.”

These successful executives, with their impressive resumes, seem to have little interest in resting on their laurels:
"Your achievements last year don’t portend anything for the future, your achievements yesterday don’t necessarily portend to tomorrow. I sort of start over everyday in order to be the best I can be."

"I set goals and as soon as I get near anywhere them, I set them further. I have no interest in ever attaining a goal that I set for myself; it’s just a point to head toward and as soon as you approach it, you move on. It could be a pathology (laughter) I think a lot of driven people are always looking to raise the bar.”

It was that kind of response that corroborated this statistic: 9 of 10 high achievers do not consider themselves happy (Caesar, 2005). This highlighted for me that satisfaction and happiness are too often considered synonyms when they are frequently not synonymous at all.

Many of the leaders expressed disdain for the concept of productivity and migrated instead toward the language of accomplishments and focus:

"I would be quite unhappy if I was spinning my wheels and being inefficient and not doing things better, faster, cheaper, smarter than I was last year or last month.”

"I don’t believe you have to pound out tasks all the time; I’m more outcome-oriented.”

"Frustration is an important notion—important to productivity.”

"Wasting time is the opposite of feeling accomplished… professional or personal, it doesn’t matter, wasting time for me is a very frustrating thing… It does not make me happy, so I can’t say it’s all about productivity as much as it’s about feeling a sense of accomplishment about having achieved something.”

The concept of focus reached across personal as well as business lives; leaders demonstrated confidence and a commitment to carry out their plans. They spoke of diligence and destination in their personal focus toward accomplishments. The quantity of effort applied waned in value when compared to the quality of the effort applied toward accomplishment.

The leaders spoke about how focus helped them maintain a sense of perspective. All of them enjoy the pleasure and the pain of media attention. Sometimes it is good.

"I think with the family it’s also more rewarding because… your family participates along with the accomplishment. The whole family participates, you get a little bit of a reputation, that it’s a sense of accomplishment. My wife and my kids are… proud of me, reading about me in the paper, and I show them some clips when I’m on CNN. They’re like wow that’s really cool. I think that’s all rewarding, they’re part of who I am and they want to see me be successful and it makes me happy.”
And other times the attention requires one to take solace in one’s focus.

“It’s hard to understand what a completely different job it is than anything else, because everything, the company sort of becomes personalized in you, so you pick up the paper and read ‘XXX said this and XXX said that’ but I didn’t, it’s a company thing… Sometimes you get credit for stuff you had nothing to do with, sometimes you get criticized for things you had nothing to do with. It’s almost impossible to relate to.”

Focus was a strong theme among the factors that contribute to happiness. And with focus came a necessary understanding of one’s thresholds.

**Threshold**

I define threshold as the palpable edge or beginning of an experience or insight, that moment of revelation. Thresholds characterize the point at which experiences or understandings transition from one level to another, and they bring with them the pleasures of learning and mastery. Thresholds are the boundaries of variation in responses that are perceived as equal. Just as “edge” is colloquially translated as “advantage”, so too can “threshold” be understood as the benefit one gains from well-developed sensitivities and tolerances.

Psychology uses the phrase “limen” or “liminal,” which characterizes “the threshold of a physiological or psychological response” (American Heritage Dictionary, 2000). In our everyday conversations, the closest we come to the concept is “subliminal.” The definition complements the concept of threshold: “1. Below the threshold of conscious perception. Used of stimuli. 2. Inadequate to produce conscious awareness but able to evoke a response” (Amer. Her. Dic., 2000).
The theme of thresholds was conveyed in the leaders’ conversations. Some questions seemed to draw out the leaders’ own considerations and use of competencies with thresholds:

- What do you see as the influence of Money and Income, the influence of Aspirations, and the influence of Social Relationships on happiness?

- As a CEO, many of your missions are related to maximization (ROA, ROE, profits). Do you conscientiously seek to maximize your own happiness? What about your family?

- How has promotion from your previous high-level positions to your current CEO position affected your happiness?

- How do you perceive the relationship between responsibility and happiness?

- With the conveniences of transportation and communication there is increased mobility in society. How do you think this new “small-world” perspective influences happiness?

- What influence do you believe happiness might have on an individual’s general health?

- Leadership requires adaptability, but with that comes an ever-increasing goal. Research identifies something called the ‘hedonic treadmill’, characterized by regenerating avarice and ambition that often accompanies accomplishments. How do you see happiness and this quest for satisfaction relating?

The leaders often discussed a basic level of satisfaction or saturation and the valueless quality of excess. Many times this concept referred to materiality, but sometimes the leaders expressed it in terms of tolerance for experiences and optimal time utilization.

“How do you get as much time as possible, more importantly, quality time, and how do you not crowd out your kids’ desires for their independent lives. How do you not smother them, how do you be supportive and a foil to bounce ideas off of? How do you not give your opinion when it’s not asked, and how do you pick your battles? I’m really hopeful that I will be able to, and I already am, but I am really hopeful I can... I think I’m more of a friend to my kid, and that may just be generational, but yeah, I think a lot about optimization and when your kids are less available because they have their own lives... How do you get your arms around their time and maximize that?”
Malcolm Gladwell popularized this concept as “tipping point”—the precise moment at which the difference is made. Captured in the theme of thresholds are the concepts of timing and tolerances.

“I am acutely aware of the trade-offs I make everyday—business versus personal, personal versus personal, business versus business—and that trade-off is always motivated by a broad sense of personal happiness.”

Knowing when to make the choices is inherent in the concept of threshold; making the choices relies on focus. In my conversations, these two themes were interwoven and often tied to the third theme of social relations.

“I’ve talked to a lot of young guys...they have two young kids, and they feel like they have to do everything. They need to develop skills of managing the trade-offs so that they actually end up, ultimately, making you happy, which is this business success, relationship success, personal success.”

“I do think there’s a model going on as I observe how I make decisions and how I try to add things. I come up with some pretty good coping strategies that seem to work well. I think there’s an optimization model going on, I can see it work. That’s probably an accumulated life skill to your point of happiness optimization.”

“I make career choices for my personal happiness, but I don’t trade off my personal happiness for the company’s well-being. There’s a long-term answer to that and a short-term one. I don’t optimize for personal happiness in the immediate, but in the long term I absolutely do. If there’s an appointment at my daughter’s school, I will be there. I manage my schedule to try to find the things that matter the most. If I had a job that required me to make too many trade-offs, I wouldn’t take it. As a CEO, if I’m not willing to make sacrifices for the enterprise, I probably don’t belong in the role. I would guess that most CEOs would feel the way I do, which is, the job itself contributes to happiness.”

Knowing how much and when indicates a mastery of thresholds.

“I don’t think about it proactively, it could be one of those things that comes from instinct.... Sometimes it’s what you like to do, sometimes it’s not. If you have tough issues...you may need to spend a lot of time there, it may or may not be your favorite thing to do. I think you tend to move your scale to successfully doing what needs to be done rather than doing what you like to do.”

The choices faced as CEO require a set of instincts that develop through exercise. These guide the leaders in the timing and flexibility of their decisions. One leader spoke of timing in decisions, characterizing success as “50% serendipity and 50% skill.” This balance between success and failure is the essence of threshold.
Many leaders spoke about the interdependencies between motivations, aspirations, and accomplishments.

"Learning new things is very motivating to me, so I say gosh, here is a new position that would undoubtedly teach me enormously, and it fits my personal goal and how I want to make my contribution and how I want to think about my life."

In my interview preamble I spoke about the noted psychologist Csikszentmihalyi, who in 1975 introduced the concept of ‘flow’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). Flow is characterized as the euphoria experienced in that moment of mastery when the skills acquired just match the challenge of the task. Flow is the satisfaction generated from that accomplishment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). The concept of threshold embodies many of the characteristics Csikszentmihalyi enumerates:

1. **Clear goals:** expectations and rules are discernible.
2. **Concentrating and focusing:** a high degree of concentration on a limited field of attention. A person engaged in such an activity will have the opportunity to focus and to delve deeply into it.
3. **A loss of the feeling of self-consciousness:** the merging of action and awareness.
4. **Distorted sense of time:** one’s subjective experience of time is altered.
5. **Direct and immediate feedback:** successes and failures in the course of the activity are apparent, so that behavior can be adjusted as needed.
6. **Balance between ability level and challenge:** the activity is neither too easy nor too difficult.
7. **A sense of personal control over the situation or activity.**
8. **The activity is intrinsically rewarding,** so there is an effortlessness of action.
9. **When in the flow state, people become absorbed in their activity, and awareness is narrowed down to the activity itself,** *action and awareness merging.* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975).
All the CEOs agreed on the direct influence of aspirations on happiness:

"If you aspire to something you can never have, you will never be happy, you'll always be looking for more.... So if you constantly are surprised by your good fortune, then you will say Wow this is really cool I never imagined this could happen. Then your life will constantly look better."

"It's fun to create something, to build something. There are lots of extraordinary intellectual challenges every day, stuff you can anticipate and stuff you can't. I think things you can't anticipate are a much better indicator of your capabilities."

"I think for me if I aspire to do something or get to some point or achieve some goal that I set for myself, the minute I do that... it's like okay, that validates my capabilities."

Social Relationships, Focus, and Threshold are the three themes that were most clearly presented as the fundamental components of happiness during my conversations with the leaders. Their interdependent and complementary qualities were deeply interwoven. However, it took lengthy reflection and numerous iterations of analysis to clarify the varied appearances of the three themes. But true clarity is nearly impossible when the study hinges on self-reported data and the subjective manipulation of that data.

Wealth, a Mixed Bag

All three of these components arose in the leaders’ extensive comments concerning money. In categorizing their various responses, it became clear that parsing the influence of wealth and income on happiness was not possible. However, when the topic of wealth emerged directly via specific questions about money, or indirectly in the course of other discussions, the thresholds, focus, and social relationships components frequently emerged.

Most of the responses to the first question (the influence of money on happiness) would fall in the threshold category. This categorization of mine rebuts the common perception surrounding the leaders of corporate America. Many people believe that if someone is earning a large salary and has achieved a high level of career success, then that person is happy, and
his/her happiness is derived from their position, achievements and rewards. I wanted to know if this was the case (i.e., that success leads to happiness) or, counter-intuitively, their happiness lead to their success? The responses to this question were somewhat cagey. Determining any clear influence of wealth and income on happiness was not possible. But in surveying their responses, several nascent themes were apparent as the other happiness factors were discussed.

Many of the leaders seemed to correlate money with material goods and a high standard of living. There was a general consensus that money was necessary to make life go on, but beyond satisfying daily needs—differently defined for each individual—the “excess” had no positive effect on one’s happiness. Some seemed almost disdainful of the burdens associated with the wealth and status of their positions. Others conveyed a sort of awestruck gratitude.

Leaders talked about excess and how it influences happiness. One said:

*I grew up and around great wealth, and I was never captivated by it. I saw how unhappy many people who had it were, which sort of goes against one of those issues of happiness and money. Growing up in a very wealthy community surrounded by money, I never in my life saw so many unhappy people.*

None of the leaders believed that an absence of income was going to make life happier, but as a group they agreed there was a finite accretive value to income and wealth beyond one’s basic needs. This concept of a threshold was echoed across many of the conversations. From their perspective, money does not equate to happiness.

*I mean, hey, listen, it’s nice to have money, we’re not working for our health, we like nice things. There are some things that I really want in my life, and (my spouse) wants, and my family wants. Being able to travel, being able to choose education, fine food… I like clothes. All of those things… that contribute to happiness when you achieve a level of material wealth that enables you to do those things that matter to you. Above that, for me personally, I don’t need it other than to give it away.*

*After you’ve crossed the threshold of being able to take care of your needs, to me, after that it makes no difference. I don’t believe I’m any happier now that I have a lot of money than when I didn’t.*
In later conversations, I asked:

Leadership requires adaptability – but with that comes an ever-increasing goal. In the research, they identify something they call the “hedonic treadmill,” characterizing that regenerating avarice and ambition that often accompanies accomplishments. How do you see happiness and this quest for satisfaction relating?

Although this question sought to understand the leaders’ internal motivations, it highlights the dynamic quality of thresholds. Some responses addressed issues of material wealth and a lack of pleasure from various gluttonous pursuits specifically related to income and wealth. Many of the CEOs referenced the American vernacular “keeping up with the Joneses,” as characterizing the competitive aspects of many social groups resulting in a sort of “addictive materialism.”

Having reached a general consensus greater wealth did not increase happiness, the themes of burden and social comparisons emerged:

“The fact that I’ve grown in income over the years hasn’t added to my happiness at all. In fact I think that for me, wealth and possessions can be burdens.”

Some of the leaders communicated almost a sense of oppression that came with the abundance in their lives:

“To me it has ramifications that… don’t necessarily bring happiness.”

“I’m no happier now when I’m sitting on what many people would consider a fair amount of money than I was ten years ago when I didn’t have as much money in the bank”.

Comparisons were given to help explain an individual perspective on the influence of income and wealth on happiness. Sometimes the comparisons were humorous.

“Do I get bothered that my good friend who runs Morgan & Stanley gets paid approximately 25 times what I do? (laughing) … It’s nice to provide for your family, live comfortably, to do stuff with them. You feel good about being able to help like that.”
Other times a frustrated envy was expressed over the more simple lives enjoyed by others: "Why do I have it? Those people were extraordinarily happy and they had nothing."

In some conversations, the leaders examined their motivation for continuing to pursue higher income and wealth. Wealth as a measure of accomplishment or success emerged as a component of the ‘focus’ and ‘thresholds’ themes.

"With the money I have, there’s a massive percentage that I don’t use. If it made me happier, I would use more of it. I’m not sure the quantitative money itself is the happiness driver as it is that it’s a measure of success, and a sense of accomplishment. To me it’s a sense of accomplishing, and I think money is a bit of a measure."

They expressed a drive for accomplishment and a desire for an index that measured their accomplishments.

"Happiness doesn’t necessarily come from the money, but it’s more of a quantitative measure of your success. If you have more, it means you’ve accomplished more."

In considering the influence that income and wealth have on happiness, some leaders became philosophical about how they believe others in business perceive the relationship. "I think it’s far less of a motivator than is generally held as practice in corporations." Leading their organizations has given all the leaders great wealth. Many communicated gratitude and appreciation for the advantages they had achieved. "I think it’s a dangerous game, not being happy when you should be."

Although the question centered on income and wealth, the fundamental value of ‘social relationships’ as a component of happiness arose repeatedly in the conversations about money

"I guess it doesn’t really make you happier, it doesn’t make you a happy person… I think it makes life easier. I think it can get in the way of relationships, I think the quality of relationships is purer for people who don’t have this stuff."

Many leaders tried to identify contributors that influence happiness.

"I think that there’s an inverse correlation between the quality of time spent with family and wealth."
From the perspective of the leaders, money was a means and a metric. The leaders were clear that money was not an essential influencer but more of an indexing measurement.

The conversations were an opportunity to peek at the perch of a few 'catbirds'. The leaders all approached life with a confident individuality. Their mastery of social relations, focus and thresholds shaped their definitions of personal happiness.
CHAPTER 5

The Leaders Define Happiness

When asked, “Do you think happiness has played a role in your success?”, some of the leaders believed there was a strong corollary.

“I do…. You look life in the face, with confidence, with optimism, which allows you to take risks to do different things and to believe that you’ll be successful in trying different things. I think if you’re unhappy then you’re less likely to motivate change because you’re less sure of success.”

“Yep, no doubt…. I’m a very optimistic person and I think it shows. I think people want to be around optimistic people more, I think it comes across in an interview, I can hire someone in an interview that another guy can’t, just because I get wound up and pumped up and excited and passionate about things and people can see it and they might have another meeting with another CEO and he might be some ego maniac and when it comes down to who gets to hire that guy, I for sure will get that guy. That’s all part of success, who you hire, how you come across, people can see if you’re happy or not… they can see it, feel it, and people want to be in the environment when people are happy. They don’t want to be on the team when a bunch of people are unhappy.”

Other leaders saw a relationship, but it was not as clear:

“I have no idea. It’s just who I am, so I don’t think about it that way. I believe that my ability to inspire others, and make leadership decisions and make smart management decisions has contributed to my success. If I were not a happy person, would I have been as good at that? Would I have been as confident? Would I have been able to make those connections? I don’t know.”

There was one exception however. One leader responded “I don’t know, I doubt it. I don’t think of myself as an unhappy person, but I don’t think of myself as a particularly happy person either. It’s so funny, it’s just not a value that I’ve ever been conscious of thinking about.” The rest of my sample agreed that their personal happiness played a role in their success.
Finally, as our conversations came to an end, I asked each of the leaders the question they had been expecting.

**And for the final drum roll – what is your definition of happiness?**

There was a universal sigh ... and then some wonderful responses. A few of the highlights of these responses follow. They are in no particular order.

"I think happiness has to start with self-awareness. From that, it's staying true to that self-awareness in a way that enables one to have a compass as one goes through life. I really believe that, and it gets back to what I was saying earlier, that people don't... you can't find happiness anywhere else other than within yourself. It really starts with self-awareness, and an adherence to that self-awareness even in the most distracting of times. Being a CEO is very distracting, people tell you you're great, you ride around in company airplanes, you live a lifestyle that puts a lot of strain on that self-awareness. You can very easily lose who you are in that whole process. I think the key to happiness is self-awareness. That will not change, shouldn't change... If you were in the Donald Trump peak of hedonism, living on a mountain, that shouldn't change. Who you are and what you believe in, I think that's the one constant, and that can be the only source of happiness."

"I think it's the net positive energy that your whole self contains, and radiates to others. It's sort of that pale wind which is, you kind of wake up in the morning and there's a bit of a wind on the back of your neck. I think that sort of feels like happiness."

"For me, it's about making an impact, so it doesn't really matter what the form is, I can't be in the background. I just can't. It gets me in trouble sometimes, I can't be quiet sometimes. I have to speak my mind, I have to have an impact, so whether that's an impact on someone's career, or this company, or gross margin, or where my son decides to work, or whether it's an impact on... his ability to socialize well, whether it's an impact on a not-for-profit genre... that takes its toll. I'm not sure I always think of it in terms of happiness, although that's the question here. I guess I always have to make a difference."

"If you can find a way to look at your life and feel fortunate for all the great things. I think there's a sort of feeling of counting your blessings, look at all the amazing things that I have, amazing blessings for my children, where we live, the opportunities I've had, family I've had, friends I've had, in the fabric of life, there are all these amazing things. I think the ability not to look at what you have and others who have more material things, and instead of feeling jealous you should just enjoy it. There's pretty much nobody I'd change shoes with. I don't feel the need to look outside, I feel very satisfied, I feel astounded with what I have. I couldn't give you a sentence..."

"It's a sense of pleasure and contentment and fulfillment, both in one's own goals and ambitions, but also in one's relationships to others. Whether that's a spouse, a family, or a whole network of people, it's the ability to take pleasure in what you're doing and what others are doing."
“I think happiness is working on the kind of stuff you like to work on with people you like to do it with, and achieving progress and success.”

Many of the leaders’ definitions overlapped, and all of them were corroborated by the conversations that preceded that final question.

It gives one reason to consider: What is happiness? Is it a thing thrust upon us or simply a state of being? Abraham Lincoln was quoted as saying: “Most people are about as happy as they make up their minds to be.” Perhaps he was right. And the 50% of happiness that scientists have not yet figured out yet is still left to our own imagination and choice.
My need to meet the defined deadlines of the thesis is the only force bringing an end to this project. When I first conceived of the project, I did not really understand its scope or its potential. One might argue that my selected sample of Fortune 1000 leaders are not representative of CEOs as a whole. That could be true if one is trying to understand the role of CEOs. However, if one wants to assess reasons why some people are happy in their high-profile roles, then I believe the sample in this research may be useful, if not indicative. Business researchers often abandon the potential “quagmire” of emotions in favor of so-called objective statistics, but all businesses rely upon leaders. Leaders at all levels in society find personal motivation in certain common areas. Understanding and defining those areas may help future leaders identify a more enjoyable pursuit of their quest. Defining happiness seemed a way to begin to understand the common motivations among leaders.

I am aware that there are certain limitations presented by a sample of only 18 people. For example, the selection process I used was subjective and I must acknowledge the effect of interviewer bias. I wanted to speak with leaders I felt could comfortably communicate their thoughts and maybe share a glimpse of what makes them different from—or the same as—other people. In reviewing the conversations and my interview notes, I saw consistent authenticity, generosity, and intellect displayed in these individuals.

I confess to some skepticism and concern that the responses would be rehearsed, pat, convention l, altogether socially correct. I was not confident that the leaders would really expose
their emotional sides or much of their private lives. But as the conversations accumulated, I was surprised to realize that my original skepticism about the sincerity of the responses had disappeared. In fact, the responses seemed to me candid and human, and I can only surmise that it is their integrity that supports their confidence and willingness to share.

Maybe I am placing too much confidence in their trust of my promise of anonymity, but these are smart people who have already made sufficient money that more is not going to make a difference. They have achieved their positions and are in them by choice—they are happy in their jobs. There was no particular risk in our conversations. Perhaps there was some intrinsic reward. Most people do not ask these leaders what they think about subjects like happiness, so curiosity may have been a factor in their willingness to speak with me. After asking all my questions which crossed over many topics, I think by the time we were almost finished and I asked them for their personal definition of happiness they could not resist the opportunity to put a cherry on top of their sundaes.

For me, the greatest learning satisfaction came from hearing the theories of researchers echoed in the voices of real people. Organizing the components of happiness in themes helped me make sense of the theories and made the information more portable. The significance of social relationships as an essential component of happiness is undisputed and reflected throughout the literature. The concept of focus as an essential component of happiness is a hybridization of themes presented in the literature under such monikers as “purpose,” “vision,” “beliefs,” and “meaningful work” (Caesar, 2006). The significance of social relationships and focus as two of the essential themes came across in the conversations with the leaders. This was not unexpected, yet the validation in the conversations was a wonderful complement to the research literature.
The concept of threshold is my own. Undoubtedly the theme resembles other components of happiness developed by other researchers. Its importance in this research project was probably highlighted by the positional and historical experiences of my respondents. Making choices and knowing when to make those choices is a required skill if one hopes to find personal happiness in the hectic reality of leading large American corporations. Knowing the "when" and "how much" in situations makes a difference in the outcomes. If time was endless and we did not have to make choices, this theme might not exist. But every day we all experience the value of trying to achieve a confident, competent "decisiveness".

One of the interesting lessons I took away from these conversations was that thinking about others and listening to them is itself a significant component of happiness. But, in the end, I think it is only after we have considered ourselves that our considerations of others is truly satisfying. This idea seems to be a synthesis of the eudonic and hedonic perspectives on happiness. Happiness exists in the enjoyment of virtuosity. Virtuous pain exists in vain.

Research in the social sciences offers many arguments for the value and effect of positive emotions—the emotional contagion effect. Yet there is a lack of research correlating positive affect among leaders with corporate successes. Do positive leaders breed more leaders? Are there signposts in our careers that we are not equipped to recognize? Are there moments when our choices unknowingly direct our future happiness or our potential as leaders? Do the people who want to be happy end up as top leaders? Do the people who want to be the top leaders end up happy? Were these leaders happy because they were in the “catbird seat”? Or did they find themselves in the “catbird seat” because they were happy?

In today’s business world, filled with increasing regulation (e.g., Sarbanes-Oxley), the role of chief executive has become one based almost entirely on leadership. The decisions made by a
chief executive are generally rendered only when there is clear and substantial data that can be
cited in justification and any risks are well defined and calculated.

The chief executive often represents the personality of the company, the hero when
times are good, the villain when times are bad. With this casting, the affect of the individual at
the top becomes a major source of the corporation’s emotional gestalt, and he or she is the
captain of its corporate culture. One leader spoke of the challenge in finding the right person for
that “catbird seat”:

“It's very hard to find generalists, that, I think is one of the toughest things for companies to find. You
almost have to say to yourself If I close my eyes and look at this person, can I really see them doing all
the things that they need to do as CEO, addressing the analysts and the wholesalers. Could I see them
in a sales convention and see them making fairly important quantitative decisions between pieces of the
projects that require the proper analysis. To get the same person and envision that they can be
successful in all those different roles, that’s the generalist.”

Future Pursuits

In thinking about these leaders and my perceptions of what they had in common and
how they were different, I realized there was an age concentration. The United States
Constitution states that the President must be at least 35 years of age; in fact, the average age of
U.S. Presidents is 55 years (White House, 2007) (see Figure 6.1). Is there an “age” that one
must achieve before becoming the chief executive of a large American corporation? In charting
the ages of the Fortune 1000 leaders in my research, a clear distribution pattern arose.
Table 6.1 Age Distribution of Leaders

I found as I described it to my husband, it felt something like the boa constrictor that swallowed the elephant in Antoine de Saint-Exupery’s *Little Prince* (1943). Other more ‘adult’ researchers might have seen the ‘hat’, but from my perspective – the ‘elephant’ was indisputable.

My husband directs a fellowship program in Child and Adolescent Psychiatry where he is a Professor of Medicine at one of the New England Universities. When I presented this age distribution ‘elephant’ to him, he went downstairs to our library and returned with a psychiatry textbook. As he paged through the chapters looking for something, he started to explain Erik
Erickson’s eight stages of psychosocial development. According to Erickson, most of us achieve the first six stages before we finish our fourth decade:

1) Trust vs. mistrust (birth ~): the virtue of Hope is developed
2) Autonomy vs. shame and doubt (~ 18 months ~): the virtue of Will is developed
3) Initiative vs. guilt (~ 3 years ~): the virtue of Purpose is developed
4) Industry vs. inferiority (~ 5 years ~): the virtue of Competence is developed
5) Identity vs. role confusion (~ 13 years ~): the virtue of Fidelity is developed
6) Intimacy vs. isolation (~ 20s ~): the virtue of Love is developed
7) Generativity vs. stagnation (~ 40s ~): the virtue of Care is developed
8) Integrity vs. despair (~ 60s ~): the virtue of Wisdom is developed (Sadock, 2000)

My first thought was: “That’s too psychosocial for MIT.” Then one day at the Hayden Library at MIT, I looked up at a poster on the wall—it was a photo of Erik Erickson! And, he had taught at MIT between 1958 and 1959 (see Figure 6.1).

So I decided to pursue this concept of stages. Are we all charted to follow a path through our lives? Does this small sample of leaders resemble a larger sample?

The leaders I met all seemed to fall into Erickson’s 7th stage: generativity vs. stagnation. They were highly motivated to be creative, to seek opportunities, to make a difference in their worlds. Their conversations exhibited an authentic, caring generosity in their workplaces.

The two younger leaders in my sample group surprised me. Their companies were somewhat smaller than the others in the sample. Yet nothing in their conversations, except perhaps the ages of their children, indicated any variance from their peers. The two oldest leaders in the sample group both communicated a wisdom emanating from their experiences. It
was my perception that their perspectives were a bit more detached than those of their younger counterparts.

Fig. 6.1. Erik H, Erickson (1902 – 1994), an intellectual giant in the field of psychology, and a visiting professor at MIT, 1958-59.

This concept of being in the right stage of life to be a top leader is interesting. Whether it is a consequence of societal constructs or a sequence of psychosocial staging is a debate. No one would ever comfortable saying “In order to be a Fortune 1000 CEO you must be 50 years old.” But maybe they do not need to say it … is it possibly an accepted societal norm?

If I had another year and no other obligations, there is much more to be discovered and considered. I would try to meet researchers in the field of positive psychology and gain a better understanding of the perspectives they have laid out. I would like to speak with Mihaly
Csikszentmihalyi, Martin Seligman, Daniel Goleman, Barbara Fredrickson, Daniel Gilbert, Vance Caesar, Darrin McMahon and others, to understand more about their studies of happiness. I would spend time researching “quality of life” issues and their effects on happiness. I would speak with as many happy CEOs as I could find in large publicly traded companies, in private family firms, in startup environments and in non-profits to understand their views on happiness. There might be added value in reconciling a leader’s perspectives with the perceptions of those in the leader’s inner “cabinet,” i.e., their families and colleagues. I would investigate the cultural and global differences in the perspectives of happiness. So much to discover and only 24 hours in the day…
Considerations

After a conversation with one of the CEOs, I was surprised and pleased to realize just how successful I had been in selecting the leaders I interviewed. That leader said the premise of happiness coupled with being a CEO seemed almost paradoxical:

"My experience, knowing other CEOs is, I'd say the opposite is true. I think there's often inner demons driving these guys, and I think of the CEOs we've had here before that I've known... forever, and then I think about the CEOs I know elsewhere, and there have been a number of people who have struck me as the unhappiest people—but there's something that drives them. That unhappiness drives them, I think. I've had a lot of discussions over my life about this topic, and one of the challenges in one of these roles is how do you retain your humanity? If there's a trade-off that has to be made, then I'm out of here. There are so many times when it sort of creeps up on you inexorably, and it comes at you in a lot of ways. One is, you're surrounded by people who tell you how great you are all the time, so you're not getting a lot of honest feedback, and you start to believe it after a while. All of a sudden, everything I do is right, I'm infallible, everyone else is an idiot if they don't agree with me. I've seen that happen so many times. Some of the saddest things to see are the ex-CEOs, which would also be a very interesting study, I think. What's the before and after like, in terms of happiness, because the ex-CEO who are truly happy make the transition quite well. Those who believe all this crap around them, whether it's the office or the cars or whatever it is they get off on, the minute it's gone, they're like lost children. It's really kind of pathetic to see. That makes me wonder how much real inner happiness is in these people."

When I began the initial process of selecting leaders for the study, I had some considerations. Did the organizations they lead function at a level that necessitated a public aspect to their role? Did they seem at least nominally interested in my inquiry? With promises of anonymity, were they comfortable enough in their position to share their perspectives? Did I think I could speak with the individual in a comfortable conversation that would help me to understand more about them and their perspectives? All of my leaders met this criteria except one.
Confessions

I confess that in one instance I chose an individual who leads a large not-for-profit organization. My decision was purely personal. I was certain that the person’s job was so wonderful—at least from an outsider’s perspective—that surely the person must have had great experiences and a wonderful sense of the happiness I hoped to define.

As it turns out, that wasn’t quite the case. Among the 18 interviews and questionnaires, only one was an obvious outlier. I expected there would be some variances by geography, or size of the corporation, or gender, or age. But in fact the clearest distinction came via the one leader who did not lead a publicly traded company. That person’s response to questions, where there was otherwise unanimous consensus, was distinctly different. As an example, one of the early questions was, “What is the influence of social relations on happiness?” Without explanation, this individual responded with a 3—below the 4.5 and 5 ratings of the other leaders. Some responses from this individual aligned with the group, but in several instances this person’s responses were distinct and detectable.

Why is this? I cannot begin to know the answer. It is possible that this individual was having a bad day, did not like me, or had some other extraneous complication. Maybe it serves to highlight the obvious similarities in the individuals I included in this thesis. I can only guess at the underlying dynamics that created this differentiation. However, the individual did give their time generously and gave me the opportunity to experience a contrast I had not previously expected. But it is necessary to note this outlier.
A Comment

A comment made by one CEO made me believe there is great value in developing a better understanding of happiness in leadership:

“I don’t think it’s coincidence that the tenure of a lot of CEOs these days has shortened compared to what they were say ten years ago. A lot of CEOs burn out because I think they neglect their own happiness, and maybe their families’ happiness as they head down the road toward corporate goals. I think it’s an issue in America. A lot has been written about carrying companies and all that, but by the end of the day, Wall Street judges you based on your returns.”

Something to think about…
## Appendix A

List of 40 major publications selected in Factiva search  (see Figure 1.1)

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<th>The Atlanta Journal Constitution</th>
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<td>Barron's</td>
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<td>The Boston Globe</td>
<td>The Philadelphia Inquirer</td>
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<td>The Christian Science Monitor</td>
<td>Seattle Post-Intelligencer</td>
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<td>The News &amp; Observer (Raleigh, N.C.)</td>
<td>Financial Times</td>
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Appendix B

Additional images of PET scans showing the comparative results of brain scans during episodes of happiness, sadness and disgust.
Appendix C

A System Dynamics Diagram of Happiness
Appendix D

Introductory Guide for the Interviews

I have pursued my thesis out of curiosity and an intuitive sense that there may be some as yet unproven relationships between leadership success and innate personal happiness. Accomplished individuals should be happy by all modern definitions - you have achieved the power, the authority, the influence, and the wealth that many in business aspire to. What defines happiness once you are there? When you are sitting in Thurber's proverbial 'catbird seat', what is 'happiness'?

In researching this topic there is simultaneously a wealth of literature and an absolute dearth. In looking for corollaries between happiness and success in leaders, definitions became the greatest stumbling block. “Success” was more definable when I narrowed the scope of my research to publicly traded companies because then the accepted definition of success is increasing shareholder value.

But happiness… there have been many attempts starting with its unchanged inclusion in the first edition of the OED, with an origination date of 1530 in French literature. Its generally recognized significance seems to be constantly increasing and can be evidenced with its increased frequency in popular business media. You’ve seen the covers of Time and the Economist just at the turn of the year. Yet, even though we have given it more dimensions by adding phrases like 'subjective well-being' and 'positive affect' – real understanding of a simple definition that can be used in an analysis or a measure has remained elusive.

In my research, I have come upon many different and interesting details relating to a definition. One researcher, Kehr, asserted that happiness comes from three fundamental areas: 1) implicit motives (those that come from enjoying activity or a thing for their own sake), 2) explicit motives (e.g., originating from a desire to exercise activities or possess items that increase one's social status), and 3) perceived abilities. (Kehr, 2004)

In economics, utility is a measure of the relative happiness or satisfaction (gratification) gained by consuming different bundles of goods and services. One article, by Ruut Veenhoven, introduces four measures of happiness: 1) livability of the environment, 2) living conditions for the individual, 3) external utility of life and 4) internal utility of life (Veenhoven, 2000). The breakdown is considered to give insight into the different dimensions of the emotional, psychological and environmental contributors to happiness.

Csikszentmihalyi, defined happiness as ‘flow’. He defined it as an “optimal experience” during which a person produces a sense of enjoyment, energy, fulfillment and selflessness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). The prerequisite for a ‘flow’ experience is a balance between the challenges perceived in a given situation and the skills a person brings to it (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). In order to remain in ‘flow’, one must increase the complexity of the activity by developing new skills and taking on new challenges.

Another researcher, Easterlin, proved out three thoughts that are in one way completely expected and in another way most disturbing, 1) people with higher incomes are happier than those with lower incomes, 2) people generally expect to be happier in the future than they are now, and most significantly to my thesis 3) happiness tends to be ‘constant over the life cycle’ (Easterlin, 2001).
Appendix E

The Satisfaction with Life Scale

By Ed Diener, Ph.D.

DIRECTIONS: Below are five statements with which you may agree or disagree. Using the 1-7 scale below, indicate your agreement with each item by placing the appropriate number in the line preceding that item. Please be open and honest in your responding.

1 = Strongly Disagree
2 = Disagree
3 = Slightly Disagree
4 = Neither Agree nor Disagree
5 = Slightly Agree
6 = Agree
7 = Strongly Agree

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item Number</th>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>In most ways my life is close to my ideal.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The conditions of my life are excellent.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>I am satisfied with life.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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Appendix E (continued)

Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS)

By Sonja Lyubomirsky, Ph.D.

For each of the following statements and/or questions, please circle the point on the scale that you feel is most appropriate in describing you.

1. In general, I consider myself:

   1  2  3  4  5  6  7
   not a very happy person  a very happy person

2. Compared to most of my peers, I consider myself:

   1  2  3  4  5  6  7
   less happy  more happy

3. Some people are generally very happy. They enjoy life regardless of what is going on, getting the most out of everything. To what extent does this characterization describe you?

   1  2  3  4  5  6  7
   not at all  a great deal

4. Some people are generally not very happy. Although they are not depressed, they never seem as happy as they might be. To what extent does this characterization describe you?

   1  2  3  4  5  6  7
   not at all  a great deal

Note: Item #4 is reverse coded.
References


