

**Happiness as a Problem:
Implications for Record-Keeping by Organizations**
Owen Ambur, July 22, 2005

In *Happiness Is A Serious Problem: A Human Nature Repair Manual*, Dennis Prager argues the vast majority of human beings have the native intelligence to be happier, but most lack two critical prerequisites:

The awareness that what will make them happy demands a great deal of thought, and

The self-discipline to overcome their natural inclination to do what is most pleasurable at the moment rather than what is most happiness-inducing. (p. 7-8)

Peter Senge used similar terms to describe *personal mastery*, which he says “becomes a discipline – an activity we integrate into our lives – [when] it embodies two underlying movements. The first is continually clarifying what is important to us... The second is continually learning how to see current reality more clearly.”¹

Richard Davidson says the word happiness is:

... a kind of placeholder for a constellation of positive emotional states. It’s a state of well-being where individuals are typically not motivated to change their state. They’re motivated to preserve it. It’s associated with an active embracing of the world, but the precise characteristics and boundaries have really yet to be seriously characterized in scientific research.²

More crassly speaking, Robert Wright cites the operational purpose of happiness as “getting us to use our intestines, ovaries and testicles. People so reliably pursue food and sex,” he says, “because eating and copulating releases neurochemicals that make them feel happy.” Moreover, he suggests, “the laws governing happiness were designed not for our psychological well-being but for our genes’ long-term survival prospects.”³

With respect to the distinction between pleasure and happiness, Prager’s thoughts parallel those of Donald Norman, who laments the human tendency to engage in *experiential* cognition when *reflective* cognition would be more appropriate.⁴ Dacher Keltner points to research evidence on brain chemicals differentiating the positive feelings people

¹ *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of The Learning Organization*, Peter Senge, p. 141.

² “The Biology of Joy,” *Time Magazine*, January 17, 2005, p. A13.

³ “Dancing to Evolution’s Tune,” *Time Magazine*, January 17, 2005, p. A11.

⁴ For more on Norman’s views on things that make us smart, see <http://ambur.net/smart.htm>

experience from approaching a goal versus the enjoyment of sensory pleasures.⁵ Brian Knutson adds, “When people think of happiness, they think of feeling good, but a big part of happiness is also looking forward to something.”⁶ Martin Seligman divides happiness into three components – pleasure, engagement, and meaning – and suggests that, of the three, pleasure is the least important.⁷ However, he also notes, “the cerebral virtues – curiosity, love of learning – are less strongly tied to happiness than interpersonal values like kindness, gratitude, and capacity for love.”⁸ Thus, perhaps we should not be too surprised if the quest for knowledge and truth often falls victim to group think among the in-crowds of which we thirst to be cherished members.

Prager suggests human nature is the single greatest obstacle to happiness, because nothing can completely satisfy us. (p. 16) Carlin Flora observes, “The things we expect will bring us lasting joy rarely do.”⁹ Wright agrees. Although happiness is “designed to materialize under lots of circumstances,” he notes that it “is also designed to evaporate.”¹⁰ Because we are insatiable by nature, Prager says we must apply the rational and philosophical abilities of our brains to determine whether we are happy.

Claudia Wallis observes, “Our overall happiness is not merely the sum of our happy moments minus the sum of our angry or sad ones,” and she notes that Seligman believes “we are our memories more than we are the sum of total of our experiences.” However, she cites also research by Daniel Kahneman demonstrating that what we remember of an experience is disproportionately affected by the emotional high and low points, as well as how it ends. Since people miss many less salient aspects, Kahneman believes social scientists should pay more attention to actual experience than to the levels of happiness people report on surveys.¹¹

Likewise, organizations and, more specifically, organizational leaders are likely to miss many less salient albeit important factors if they rely upon subjective, qualitative reports based upon biased and faulty memories. Flora observes:

Our sense of well-being is intimately tied into our perception of time. The problem is that we usually get it wrong. Memory tricks us – we don’t remember

⁵ Time Magazine, January 17, 2005, p. A14.

⁶ Time Magazine, January 17, 2005, pp. A14 & A17.

⁷ “The New Science of Happiness,” Claudia Wallis, *Time Magazine*, January 17, 2005, p. A7.

⁸ Time Magazine, January 17, 2005, p. A9.

⁹ “Happy Hour,” *Psychology Today*, January/February 2005, p. 42.

¹⁰ Time Magazine, January 17, 2005, p. A11.

¹¹ “The New Science of Happiness,” *Time Magazine*, January 17, 2005, p. A7.

our experiences properly, and that leaves us unable to accurately imagine the way we will feel in the future. At the same time, expectations mislead us: We never learn to predict what will make us happy, or how to anticipate the impact of major life experiences. Focusing on the moment may help us understand how to be happy.¹²

Setting aside the debate over whether we as individual human beings are defined more by our memories than our experiences, perhaps we might be able to agree that hard data routinely recorded, from moment to moment, and maintained in reliable records are the best, if not the only rational basis for defining the essence of organizations as well as analyzing and auditing organizational performance. Perhaps we might also be able to agree that the organizations we establish for the purpose of conducting business, scientific research, and governmental functions are, or at least should be, distinguished by the public records they create, rather than merely the personal experiences of those of us who are privileged to be employed by such organizations.

In making determinations about personal happiness, Prager points out that *unhappiness* is not a necessary consequence of *dissatisfaction*. Instead, when we feel dissatisfied, he says we should do two things:

Maintain awareness of what we are feeling while not allowing it to sabotage our happiness.

Work on reducing whatever it is that causes us dissatisfaction. (p. 17)

If we are stressed by only one, two, or a few things, perhaps we might be able to maintain awareness of those issues in our minds, as Prager suggests.¹³ However, most of us are probably dissatisfied with many things in life, and David Allen says the stress of trying to keep track of things in our heads is itself a primary source of dissatisfaction.¹⁴

Thus, while Prager argues that dissatisfaction does not necessarily lead to unhappiness, to the degree that we aim to work *effectively* to reduce the underlying sources of our dissatisfaction, it would be prudent to maintain good and complete records of everything we know about those problems as well as their causes. Otherwise not only are our efforts to reduce our dissatisfaction likely to be ineffective but trying to keep track of the sources of our frustration will place needless strain on our mental processing power as well,

¹² “Happy Hour,” *Psychology Today*, January/February 2005, p. 42.

¹³ With reference to the limits on the human capacity for processing information, see George A. Miller’s famous paper entitled “The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two: Some Limits on Our Capacity for Processing Information,” which is available at <http://www.well.com/user/smalin/miller.html>

¹⁴ For more on Allen’s views on the “art of stress-free productivity,” see <http://ambur.net/done.htm>

leading to still more stress.¹⁵ With respect to Prager's suggestion that we must apply our rational abilities to determine whether we are happy or not, Robyn Dawes asserts we all commonly engage in *irrational* thought. He says the only difference between the average person and a schizophrenic is the *degree* of irrationality.¹⁶ Moreover, Charles Ford observes that we all lie not only to others but also ourselves.¹⁷ Thus, it seems reliable, objective records may be essential on this score as well. Lacking such objective measures, it seems likely that our powers of irrationality, compounded by the psychology of deceit, may prompt us either to overestimate or underestimate our degree of happiness.

That is not to suggest happiness can or should be expressed in purely quantitative terms, much less dollars and cents, for example. Indeed, of eight steps toward personal life satisfaction identified by Sonja Lyubomirsky, only one – compiling a gratitude journal – is directly related to record-keeping, much less to objective metrics, while others are only tangentially related.¹⁸

However, the findings of Dawes and Ford do suggest that, unassisted by external aids, human nature tends toward irrationality and deceit, neither of which are conducive to identifying and effecting real solutions to real problems. Moreover, Donald Norman argues persuasively that it is external aids that make us smart and, presumably, that principle would extend to being smart about the pursuit of that which makes us happy.¹⁹

Be that as it may, Prager suggests it is actually a blessing that we cannot be satisfied; otherwise we would lack motivation to accomplish anything, personally or professionally. (p. 19) In that event, we may as well live out our lives, for example, as a leafy vegetable or a pet rock. Moreover, Davidson believes negative experiences are actually beneficial to the human psyche because events that are mildly to moderately stressful enable us to learn how to recover from unpleasant emotions.²⁰ Thus, it seems not only should we take failure and disappointment as opportunities to appreciate the levels of success and happiness we have already achieved, but also to get smarter, become more successful, and lead more fulfilling lives in the future.

However, from childhood, Prager observes we have images of how our lives should be,

¹⁵ For information on the limitations of human memory, see <http://ambur.net/MemorySins.htm>

¹⁶ For more on Dawes' view on "everyday irrationality," see <http://ambur.net/irrationality.htm>

¹⁷ More information on Fords' views on the "psychology of deceit" is available at <http://ambur.net/Lies.htm>

¹⁸ "Eight Steps Toward a More Satisfying Life," *Time Magazine*, January 17, 2005, pp. A8 & A9.

¹⁹ For more on Norman's views on things that make us smart, see <http://ambur.net/smart.htm>

²⁰ *Time Magazine*, January 17, 2005, p. A14.

but rarely do our spouses, work, children or other important facets of our lives “live up” to our preconceived notions. Whereas our mental images may be perfect, life is not. Moreover, as Flora observes, memory deceives us, and since we misrecall our experiences, we cannot accurately imagine how we’ll feel in the future and our expectations mislead us.²¹

Yet, Prager says those images are so powerful that we can practically measure our unhappiness by the difference between our images versus the reality we experience. (p. 26) Perhaps that is still another reason we may prefer not to have good record-keeping systems in which reality is faithfully documented. Such records make evermore apparent the gaps between facts and our fantasies, and we may prefer to live in an irrational dream world supported by self-deceit.

If Prager is right, as natural as mental imagery may be, it can become self-defeating. “If unhappiness is measured by the difference between your image and your reality,” he argues, “unhappiness can be reduced by either dropping your images and celebrating your reality or keeping your images and changing your reality.” (p. 27) Either way, good records and records management systems are essential. The first step toward either celebrating or changing reality, at least in the professional realm, is to acknowledge its existence, as documented in reliable business records.

Prager suggests, “The greatest destruction wrought by images has been in the social realm. Although images of perfection in people’s personal lives can cause unhappiness, images of perfect societies – utopian images – can cause monstrous evil. In fact, forcefully changing society to conform to societal images was the greatest cause of evil in the twentieth century.” (p. 30)

Although she does not address the broader social impacts, Dr. Joy Brown, a psychologist well-known for her radio program, agrees with Prager as far as personal impacts are concerned. Acknowledging that we all indulge in fantasies on occasion, as a lifestyle choice, she argues such behavior leads to *disaster*. “Even if these seemingly harmless little devils don’t ruin your life,” she says, “they can cause a lot of avoidable misery. The alternative to fantasies,” she concludes, “is a happy and fulfilling life.”²² The eight steps toward a more satisfying life outlined by Lyubomirsky include:

- 1) Counting our blessings, such as by maintaining a *gratitude journal* in which we document on a weekly basis three to five things for which we are currently thankful, varying the entries as much as possible from week to week.

Interestingly, in effect this is what most organizations espouse in their record-keeping

²¹ “Happy Hour,” *Psychology Today*, January/February 2005, p. 42.

²² *The Nine Fantasies That Will Ruin Your Life (and the eight realities that will save you)*, Dr. Joy Browne, p. 3.

policies and actually do when it comes to “declaring” records. That is, on an occasional, ad hoc basis, they declare records documenting only their successes, while attempting to ignore, if not bury evidence of failure and problems that might readily be corrected if only they were made salient and systematically addressed.

2) Practicing acts of kindness, both randomly and systematically.

Systematic thinking toward continuous improvement and routinely occurring success requires good records and records management systems. Random success does occur, occasionally, albeit only at the lowest levels of organizational maturity. Such success is serendipitous due to the fact that it is not expected, indeed it cannot be regularly anticipated for these very reason that the “system” has not been designed to generate routine success.

To human beings who are wired for experiential pleasure, the risk of regular failure may be acceptable, indeed perhaps even paradoxically desirable, in trade for the gratification associated with occasional, unexpected success. For example, if everyone were kind or socially responsible all of the time, no one would be distinguished by or able to take personal pleasure from occasional acts of responsibility or kindness. Nor could we delight ourselves with unique and occasionally exciting behavior. However, business organizations that provide good service only occasionally and surprisingly are unlikely to survive for long in a highly competitive market.

3) Savoring the joys of life by paying close attention to momentary pleasures and wonders, perhaps including the capture of “mental photographs” for review in less satisfying times.

Again, this is typically what organizations do by capturing and celebrating evidence of success. There is a fine line to be drawn between focusing either too little or too much on either the present, past or future, and paying particular attention to pleasures of the moment may be a very good personal coping strategy. However, organizations failing to adequately document, in nearly real time, both failures as well as successes risk reliving the failures of the past, unless and until such failures lead to the organization’s ultimate demise. In the meantime, such organizations will be suboptimizing the service provided to their stakeholders.

4) Thanking mentors, in detail and in person.

Organizational leaders, whether they are mentors, strictly speaking, or not, are typically quite well compensated in relation to others. However, monetary compensation may not be the sort of thanks we crave. Ruut Veenhoven’s research suggests that once a threshold of about \$10,000 is reached, income has little effect on happiness. A recent poll by *Time Magazine* found that happiness tends to increase as income rose to \$50,000 but thereafter the effect was slight. Since the median household income in the U.S. is around \$43,000, the implication is that, for most Americans, more income is not a likely path to greater

satisfaction.²³

“Paradoxically,” Gregg Easterbrook observes, “it is the very increase in money – which creates wealth so visible in today’s society – that triggers dissatisfaction. As material expectations keep rising, more money may engender only more desires... As men and women move up the economic ladder, most almost immediately stop feeling grateful for their elevated circumstances and focus on what they still don’t have.”

Moreover, the disproportionate material success of the lucky few creates what Easterbrook calls “soaring reference anxiety” among the less fortunate mass majority.²⁴ He notes, “Millions of us spend more time and energy pursuing the things money can buy than engaging activities that create real fulfillment in life ...” That is because we tend to subjectively compare what we own to the material possessions of others, rather than objectively assessing whether our own possessions adequately meet our own needs.²⁵

5) Learning and practicing forgiveness, such as by writing letters of forgiveness to those who have hurt or acted against our interests.

While this practice may be personally self-gratifying, it may be demeaning to others, who may have been unaware of unintentional slights. Moreover, it is certainly no substitute for correcting organizational deficiencies contributing to the problem in the first place. Granting forgiveness places us in a position of superiority and scarcely could be satisfying to others, unless they take pleasure from subservience.

Documenting problems after-the-fact and lording such documentation over others is a particularly poor alternative for organizations interested in working with partners to provide exceptional service to stakeholders. In bureaucracies a telling truism is: It is easier to ask for forgiveness than to seek permission. The truth of that statement testifies

to the inability of many organizations to use the best available information to make decisions quickly and effectively, without apology or any need therefor.

While there is no doubt that to cope with our own, personal inadequacies, we must be able to forgive ourselves for occasional sins of omission, and we should grant unto others no less consideration in that regard. However, as far as friends, if not also family members are concerned, there are limits to how much forgiveness we can provide while still leading productive, fulfilling lives, and that is even more true of organizations. Successful organizations seek partners who are equals in terms of commitment to excellence to stakeholders, not patsies who require forgiveness for intentional or

²³ “The Real Truth About Money,” *Time Magazine*, January 17, 2005, p. A23.

²⁴ “The Real Truth About Money,” *Time Magazine*, p. A34.

²⁵ “The Real Truth About Money,” *Time Magazine*, p. A32 & A33.

accidental failure based upon faulty acts of commission or omission. Toward that end, there is no substitute for creating, maintaining, and effectively using reliable records in near-real time.

6) Investing time and energy in friends and family.

Easterbrook observes that love, friendship, family, respect, and a place in the community – together with the belief that our lives have meaning – are the essentials of human fulfillment.²⁶ Of Lyubomirsky's eight steps, *Time Magazine* concludes that the most important seems to be strong personal relationships.

With respect to personal relationships, Deborah Tannen says, "*Intimacy* is key in a world of connection where individuals negotiate complex networks of friendship, minimize differences, try to reach consensus, and avoid the appearance of superiority, which would highlight differences." Moreover, she asserts that secrecy plays an important role. "Not only is telling secrets evidence of friendship," she says, but "it *creates* a friendship, when the listener responds in the expected way." Indeed, particularly for women, Tannen suggests telling secrets is such an important part of friendship, that those of the fairer gender may experience social discomfort when they have no secrets to tell.²⁷

If strong personal relationships depends upon *intimacy*, which in turn depends upon personal trust in maintaining shared secrets, a logical conclusion would be that friendship may depend upon the lack of records making shared realities salient to all concerned. "As social beings," Richard Layard says, "we want to trust each other. So policies that encourage trust are thus extremely important."²⁸ Thus, the most important factor in personal happiness may be the avoidance of revealing the full truth, as we perceive it, in organizational settings.

Indeed, Annette Simmons asks: "How often do you tell the truth at work? A better question," she says, "might be, how often do you believe what you hear?" Acknowledging that most of us do not engage in outright lies, she observes: "We simply hide behind partial truths; prepolished, politically correct routines; or sins of omission that distort that distort perceptions and fracture an organization's ability to adapt. We end up basing important decisions on a series of doctored opinions, data, and information – each delivered with a missing piece or an accumulating 'spin'."²⁹

²⁶ "The Real Truth About Money," *Time Magazine*, pp. A34 & 98.

²⁷ *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*, Deborah Tannen, p. 26.

²⁸ Excerpted from Layard's book entitled *Happiness* in "To Make a Happier Society, Slow Down the Rat Race," *Time Magazine*, January 17, 2005, p. A66.

²⁹ *A Safe Place for Dangerous Truths*, Annette Simmons, pp. 3 & 5.

With respect to the psychological underpinnings of such social behavior, Simmons has noted that if we remain silent, we get to hold the view that our truth is *the* Truth, with a capital T. Whereas if we engage in dialogue, we may discover that what we have believed to be true in fact is not. Moreover, since truth may be unpredictable, it generates in us fear of unknown outcomes. However, with respect to knowledge work, she says lack of candor kills productivity.³⁰

Simmons' observations are certainly very much in accord with Ford's with respect to the prevalence of lying. However, she notes that when co-workers are only willing to speak privately about the "real problem," the dialogue required to solve it has become taboo in the culture of the organization.

Thus, it is ironic if the most important factor in personal happiness – sharing secrets – may be directly at odds with the requirements for business and governmental organizations to conduct activities we as individuals, families, and social organizations cannot perform for ourselves. A Catch 22 results: We cannot solve the problem ourselves but neither can we entrust the truth with an organization capable of resolving it.

7) Taking care of our bodies.

Among the most obvious ways in which this admonition relates to the effective use of records is in the so-called "tale of the tape," by which we keep track of our girth and its relationship to our physical well-being. The expansion of the average American's waistline is well documented and increasingly well recognized, even as the relationship of body weight to mortality continues to be debated.

In addressing the lack of relationship between personal income and happiness, *Time Magazine* has observed that the trend in incidence of depression in the U.S. since the 1950s suggests an epidemic occurring in parallel with an increasing economic standard of living.³¹ Although *Time* did not address a potential statistical relationship of weight or

general health to happiness, it is at least coincidental that girth and depression have increased in parallel.

However, Carlin Flora reports, "Most of us have a happiness 'set-point,' fixed by temperament and early life experience, which is very difficult to shift."³² Even after severe, life changing events we tend to return to our happiness set point. So at least with

³⁰ These points are paraphrased from remarks Simmons made in an appearance at the U.S. Department of the Interior on July 16, 1999, concerning prospects for using dialogue to overcome fear and distrust in the workplace.

³¹ "The Real Truth About Money," *Time Magazine*, January 17, 2005, p. A32.

³² "Happy Hour," *Psychology Today*, January/February 2005, p. 42.

respect to chronic obesity and physical maladies, the degree to which various recorded measures of our bodily health relate to personal happiness seems to be unclear.

Not so as far as organizations are concerned. Not only are bloated businesses unlikely to survive for long, but in the face of rising budget deficits in tandem with increasing taxes, government agencies are also under great stress to “streamline” their operations. Thus, it seems the “set-point” for organizations is constantly shifting upward in terms of expectations for doing more with less, and such expectations cannot possibly be met without more efficiently and effectively using information captured, maintained, and shared in reliable records.

8) Developing strategies for coping with stress and hardship, including religious faith or secular axioms in which we truly believe.

Many people take comfort from the Truth as they believe it to be recorded in holy books and religious doctrine, and others draw similar strength from what they believe to be natural laws and principles for an ethical life. While the ultimate truth of religious beliefs defies proof in this life, as *Time* observes, what truly matters with respect to our happiness is how strongly we cling to the belief itself.

However, beliefs are a double-edge sword. An unfortunate contemporary reality is that, with the well-organized support of others of like mind, suicidal bombers are blissfully killing and maiming dozens of others based upon the strength of their beliefs in the righteousness of their causes. They are only too eager to meet their maker and reap the rewards of their ultimate self-sacrifice in pursuit of that which is the ultimate Truth to them and their cohorts.

Moreover, to the degree that secrecy is key to intimacy, intimacy is key to friendship, friendship is perhaps the most important ingredient of happiness, and secrecy is of the essence to maximize the number of lives of the unbelievers that can be taken, one can only wonder about the depths of friendship and joy experienced pre-humously by those who have chosen to take others with them as they test the ultimate truth of their beliefs in suicidal leaps into eternity.

However, with reference to the risk of truly monstrous evil, what Prager calls “society” or the “social realm” others might call “government.” The risk of abuse of power is one of the primary reasons government agencies have a special obligation to keep good records and make them readily available to the public. Yet, Layard suggests that “we now have a society in which there is no agreed-upon philosophical basis for public policy or private morality.”³³ The collective exercise of power in pursuit of a self-centered, intolerant belief in the superiority of one’s own race, religion, national identity, or other distinguishing features is undoubtedly the primary source of the perpetuation of evil on the greatest

³³ “To Make a Happier Society, Slow Down the Rat Race,” *Time Magazine*, January 17, 2005, p. A66.

masses of human beings throughout recorded history.

In light of present day realities, perhaps the new basis that must emerge particularly for public policy, if not also for “private” morality in the cyberspace is the principle that our actions must be fully documented and made salient to others, to the degree they may be affected by our actions. In more idyllic times past, such an Orwellian suggestion would smack of unwarranted intrusion into our lives. However, the ever-increasing potential of technology and the way it is being used against us may now call for a reassessment of the degree to which we should embrace it to protect our interests not through secrecy but, rather, virtually complete transparency.

While we may be able to trust our friends with secrets, we certainly cannot trust our enemies with them. Moreover, to the degree that we agree to use electronic means to conduct business, it is now possible to have nearly perfect records of our agreements and actions. Thus, the question is whether we truly want such records and, if so, why we should allow anyone to have anything to do with us if they refuse to cooperate with us in creating, maintaining, and effectively using such records to establish near-perfect accountability for personal intents and actions.

On a more hopeful note with respect to mental images, without a vision of how life might be improved for the average citizen, Prager notes we would have little hope for a better future, much less direction on how to achieve it. However, he cautions, “images are like fire and need to be handled accordingly” lest we be badly burned by them. (p. 30)

Turning to another aspect, Prager observes that one of the more mundane ways in which human nature sabotages happiness is by fixating on whatever is flawed or missing in an otherwise beautiful scene, no matter how small the imperfection. (p. 31) In organizational settings, that is equivalent to ignoring the bulk of the record while giving undue weight to narrow snippets of evidence. No doubt, that may often occur in appraising the performance of subordinate employees, but the reverse – overly complementary assessment – seems more likely not only with respect to individuals but also in the group think regarding organizational performance.

Yet another common obstacle to happiness is equating happiness with success. When people are asked to write down the specific success that will make them happy, Prager says, many begin to understand that no amount of success they can imagine would much difference in their degree of happiness. In short, he emphasizes, “*If you equate happiness*

with success, you will never achieve the amount of success necessary to make you happy.” (p. 37)

It is noteworthy that Prager suggests “writing down” our thoughts can help us understand what might actually make us happy versus that which we may fantasize would do so. Creating such records enables us to engage in what Norman calls reflective cognition and,

thereby, perhaps to overcome our irrational thoughts and stop lying to ourselves.

While professional achievement cannot be equated with happiness, Prager observes that work can be a major source of happiness – if it is joyful and meaningful. However, those two conditions are often not present in the work of those considered most successful. Engaging in work primarily to make money and achieve success is self-defeating with respect to happiness, unless the work itself is joyful or meaningful to the star performer. (p. 39) Moreover, to the degree that such success affords organization positional power over others, the misery may be compounded as subordinate employees are forced by economic necessity to engage in dissatisfying professional activities directed by their “superiors”.³⁴

Ironically, Prager notes, “*Unhappy poor people at least have the fantasy that money will make them happy; unhappy rich people don’t even have that.*” Similarly, subordinate employees can at least fantasize that being the boss would make them happy, whereas the boss may have no such opportunity, except to the degree that there may be higher rungs on the bureaucratic ladder for them to climb in order to become yet a bigger boss. In any event, Prager admonishes that it is imperative to determine what we must sacrifice in order to make more money and achieve more professional success. (p. 41)

Prager cites the “the primal motivational force of male-female attraction” as a causal factor underlying our tendency to define success in professional and material terms. He says men are particularly prone to doing so because professional and material success attracts women. Another primal reason he cites is the competitive instinct, leading to a desire to know that we are more skillful or more wealthy than our peers. Yet another is that such forms of success are generally more “glamorous” than most of the more meaningful types of success. (p. 42-43)

Might that be because we can “keep score” on material success, while more qualitative forms of success may defy measurement? In any case, the “glamor” of material success should not be allowed to deflect attention from measures that may reflect more substantive benefits to more people. Indeed, with reference to the Declaration of Independence, Layard argues “public policy should be judged by how it increases human happiness and reduces human misery.”³⁵ The accuracy of such judgements and measures will only be as reliable as the records upon which they are based.

For example, do most highly paid executives truly “earn” their compensation? Or might

³⁴ Carin Joyce Klein’s research suggests that employee satisfaction with work is largely unaffected by the type of social power exerted by organizational leaders. For more on Klein’s findings and the seven bases of social power identified by French and Raven, see <http://ambur.net/French&Raven.htm>

³⁵ “To Make a Happier Society, Slow Down the Rat Race,” *Time Magazine*, January 17, 2005, p. A66.

it not be true that luck, personal connections, charisma and other intangible factors play a significant role? Is it not telling that the chief executive officers were not expected or required by law to certify the accuracy of corporate annual reports until recently, when the fraudulent and scandalous nature of some of those reports became too salient to ignore? What is the logic of compensating CEOs so highly when they disclaim knowledge of the actual financial results of the corporations they are anointed to lead? How can corporate officers possibly claim credit for corporate financial success if the finances of the corporation are so complex as to defy their understanding?

As human beings, Prager says we are seduced by the glitter of many ephemeral things, thus pursuing material success at the loss of things that actually do foster happiness. (p. 43) Our lust for ephemeral images is supported by the lack of persistent records highlighting the true, objective values of material goods as well as the more subjective qualities of intangible services and experiences. For example, Prager observes that "... many people attend parties not because they actually have so much fun ... but rather because they associate parties with fun and believe that fun leads to happiness." (p. 46)

One tongue-in-cheek definition of the term *party* is "a meeting for which no records are kept." However, in point of fact many business meetings are no more productive than a party and a major reason is that no one bothers to document the objectives, much less the results and who is responsible for them.

Be that as it may, to explain why fun doesn't lead to happiness and can even obstruct it, Prager emphasizes a primary distinction between the two: *fun is temporary, happiness is ongoing*. (p. 47) If we associate fun with happiness, Prager suggests we will associate pain with unhappiness. However, since happiness cannot be attained without suffering some pain, he argues that striving to avoid it by immersing ourselves in fun has the ironic effect of rendering happiness impossible. (p. 50)

Prager challenges the common wisdom that having expectations increases optimism and thus happiness. He suggests lack of expectations reduces optimism *only* if it is defined as "the assumption that we will get what we want." He says expecting to get what we want characterizes immaturity, rather than optimism, and he argues that "adults cannot long sustain happiness while holding immature beliefs."

Further elucidating the point, he notes that optimism is defined in two ways in dictionaries, one of which is immature: "A tendency to expect the best possible outcome." The second definition is "To dwell on the most hopeful aspects of a situation." By that definition, Prager argues optimism is essential to happiness and entirely consistent with having diminished expectations. Indeed, he says, "by greatly reducing our expectations, we greatly reduce the amount of disappointment in our lives, and reduced disappointment leads to *increased* optimism – because few people can retain optimism after suffering repeated disappointment." (p. 64)

In an article on the lack of relationship between marriage and happiness, Joel Stein

reinforces Prager's point, citing research evidence showing that "people with the highest expectations for wedded bliss often set themselves up for the steepest declines in happiness... Although past studies have stressed positive thinking as the key to a happy marriage," Stein says, "it turns out to be true only in the short term... high goals for happiness – when they're not backed up by equally robust communications skills – eventually lead to disappointment ..."³⁶

Moreover, based upon research by Lauren Alloy and Lyn Abramson, Alice Park reports that optimistic individuals consistently and grossly overestimate their ability to control reality. Relatively speaking, pessimists more accurately judge the actual impacts of their actions. Consistent with Dawes' assertions about the prevalence of irrationality, Park concludes, "Clearly, nondepressed individuals were just as capable of distorting reality as the mentally ill ..."³⁷

Why would any happy and "sane" person want to be confronted with evidence of their relative impotence faithfully documented in reliable records when, instead, we can tacitly agree not to keep and use such record and thereby maintain our optimistic illusions?

Turning to the relationship of love to happiness, Prager proffers that *adults* don't need or deserve and should not seek or expect unconditional love. Acknowledging that the concept of *earning love* is a heretical concept to many, he argues a key aspect of maturity is acknowledging that love must be earned to some degree. He suggests love is rendered infantile by the thought that merely existing makes us deserving of love. While it is reasonable to expect decent behavior from others, he says respect and love must be earned. (p. 76)

The term "earned" implies relatively equal value exchange of effort for recompense, and equality of exchange cannot consistently be determined except upon the basis of reliable records. However, as Prager acknowledges, few folks are likely to accept the notion that love should be based upon documentary evidence. Most westerners prefer to base it upon more ephemeral notions over which not only do records not prevail, but neither do our own intellectual powers. Not only is love "blind" in the conceptualization of most westerners but it is also illogical and fantastic – supported by fantasy – of the sort that Browne says leads to personal, emotional disaster.

However, aside from the nebulous nature of love, Prager says some rules about happiness are clear. One is that we cannot be happy if we primarily identify ourselves as victims, even if we truly have been victimized, because those who regard themselves as victims do not feel in control of their own lives. They perceive themselves as being acted upon

³⁶ "Is There a Hitch? Does marriage make you happy? Or do happy people tend to be the marrying kind? The facts about wedded bliss," Greg Stein, *Time Magazine*, January 17, 2005, p. A40.

³⁷ "How Full Is That Glass, Really?" *Time Magazine*, January 17, 2005, pp. A54 & A 55.

rather than being in able to control consequences in their lives. (p. 78)

Prager says some people continue to view themselves as victims due to the *historical* suffering of their ancestors because it is easy and somehow comforting to do so. (p. 80) However, when unhappy people blame others, he says, they do so because that is easier than to acknowledge life's complexity or to search within for the sources of their unhappiness. (p. 84) Such self-defeating attitudes and behavior are well supported by the lack of records making current reality salient, not only with respect to consequences to but also actions taken by those who feel victimized.

Prager asserts another reason victimhood is so attractive is that to abandon it means taking responsibility for our own happiness. If we are used to being in control, the realization that our happiness is in our own hands is empowering but, if not, that thought can be terrifying.³⁸ He observes that responsibility is not easy to accept and that personal maturity is required. (p. 85) Indeed, he asserts:

The ultimate reason people take on a victim mentality is immaturity. It takes maturity to avoid tempting but destructive choices, it takes maturity to want to be in control of your life and not to be controlled, and it takes maturity not to allow yourself in times of crisis to wallow in self-pity. The problem in our time is that maturity is not high on the list of goals we offer the next generation. We stress happiness, success, and intelligence but not maturity. (p. 85-86)

Effective management of records is a matter of organizational maturity. However, few, if any organizational leaders stress the importance of records management. Shortterm profitability is commonly deemed a more important objective. Just as we as individual human beings find it distasteful to delay gratification and accept responsibility for our actions, so too do the cultures of the organizations we form assume our abhorrence of accountability.

Prager points out that “*desires have no memory, only the mind does*” and argues that “Attaining happiness means doing constant battle with our nature. To do that,” he says, “we must first know what our nature is, and then we must control it.” (p. 92) Although writing was invented thousands of years ago and it cannot be said to be “unnatural” for human beings to express ideas in symbols, effectively managing and using such records requires discipline apparently lacking in many, if not most individuals and organizations.

Indeed, in his treatise on the discipline of personal mastery, Senge argues, “It is no accident that most organizations learn poorly. The way they are designed and managed, the way people's jobs are defined, and, most importantly, the way they have all been taught to think and interact (not only in organizations but more broadly) create fundamental learning disabilities.” (p 18)

³⁸ Connors, Smith and Hickman suggest the American culture is in crisis due to a cult of victimization. For more on their views, see <http://ambur.net/oz.htm>

Senge also notes that organizations learn only through individuals who do so. Without personal learning, organizations cannot and do not learn. (p. 139) A likely corollary is that we design learning disabilities into our organizations because we ourselves prefer not to face reality in many instances, much less to be accountable for our actions and inactions and the results they beget.

Prager observes that many people work for money or prestige rather than for meaning, so work is often not a source of happiness. (p. 103) Carin Klein found a lack of correlation between employee satisfaction with work and the forms of power exercised by their supervisors, and she viewed that as a cause for concern and further study.³⁹

However, by definition “supervision” is disempowering. Thus, we should not be surprised that human beings derive no satisfaction from being “supervised” and, to the degree that most of us work in organizations where the need for supervision is taken for granted, perhaps it should not be surprising that many of us work for money or prestige rather than more intrinsically valuable factors. However, Prager asserts such pursuits render hollow forms of satisfaction because “the greatest battle for happiness is with our own nature.” (p. 106)

Prager notes that clarity and understanding are “immensely important” to happiness so “having explanations ... matters a great deal. A lack of clarity suggests that our life is in chaos; chaos suggests meaninglessness and meaninglessness guarantees unhappiness...” He allows that clarity cannot change everything that may happen in our lives and, in particular, it cannot change anything in the past. However, it “transforms us from passive bystanders to actors...” In particular, he says, “People who make doing good and attaining good character more important goals than achieving happiness achieve happiness as a by-product of that goal. The peace of mind and sense of self-worth that derive from the pursuit of goodness are unattainable elsewhere.” (p. 112)

Creating, maintaining, and effectively analyzing and using records is essential to having good, complete, and reliable explanations of causative factors and results. It is human nature to want to preserve only those records documenting our successes. However, Prager understates the case in suggesting “something positive can be found or created in almost every negative development.” (p. 119) Indeed, it is impossible to understand the difference between success and failure, much less the factors contributing to each, if we fail to document in reliable records both failures as well as successes. The more important the functions performed by the organizations we form, the more critical it is that they created and effectively manage and use records.

Prager acknowledges some people think those who share his attitude are deluding themselves in order to be happy. However, he argues the naysaying pessimists are missing the point, because there are always a positive elements in a negative situation,

³⁹ For more information on sources of social power in relation to Carin Klein’s work, see <http://ambur.net/French&Raven.htm>

just as there are always negative aspects to positive situations. He suggests that choosing to find the positive and emphasizing it is not in any way a form of self-delusion. (p. 123)

On the other hand, if Gregg Easterbrook is right, it may be somewhat *unnatural* to do so, at least with respect to financial matters. Easterbrook says, “People tend to focus on the negative part and ignore the positive” and thus may be unhappy with their financial status, if it is not improving, even if it is far better than most people have ever had on earth. Paradoxically, the high standard of living in the United States may have become an impediment to happiness, since we have become conditioned to believe we should make more money each year.⁴⁰

Although it is only natural for humans, like lesser animals, to seek to avoid pain, Prager argues that trying to live free of pain assures an unhappy life. He cites tension as a good example, suggesting that it is necessary for growth. He notes that tension arises from competing demands and that is a characteristic of a full life, not an unhappy one. (p. 127) Similarly, Senge says, “The essence of personal mastery is learning how to generate and sustain creative tension in our lives.” (p. 142)

Prager distinguishes between necessary and unnecessary tension, terming the latter stress or aggravation. He notes that continuous stress can be harmful to happiness as well as our physical well being. If we are under a great deal of stress, he argues we must identify the source as precisely as possible and do whatever we can either to eliminate it, learn to live with it, ignore it, or reduce it as much as possible. (p. 128) In order to do so, we must rely upon reliable records to identify and manage the underlying causes of our discomfort, particularly if those causes are complex or persistent.

Prager observes the *everything* has a price and he suggests three rules for happiness in order to accommodate this “law of life”:

- Make peace with the fact that *everything* in life has a price.
- Determine what that price is for anything you desire.
- Choose whether to pay that price or to forgo what you desire. (p. 130)

He suggests the importance of the rule that everything comes with a price cannot be overstated, and he laments the fact most people do not regularly apply it. He reemphasizes the point in asserting this rule applies to *every action* we take, and if we ever think there is no price being paid for a decision we’ve made, he says we have not thought the issue through. (p. 135) Again, if the issue is complex or persistent, it will be humanly impossible to adequately understand and manage without the assistance of reliable records documenting not only the benefits we hope to enjoy but also the costs, including those that may be indirect or relatively obscure or well hidden.

⁴⁰ “The Real Truth About Money: Why we remain so keen for green even though it often gives us more social anxiety than satisfaction,” Gregg Easterbrook, *Time Magazine*, January 17, 2005, p. A34.

Prager notes two advantages to considering the cost of everything in advance: first, avoidance of unhappiness resulting from shock and disappointment when the prices do become known and, second, making salient the fact that *whatever else we might choose would also exact a price*, possibly one that is much higher. (p. 135)

Prager observes that we all have “miserable parts,” including “tendencies toward meanness, selfishness, envy, cruelty, gluttony, dishonesty, lust, avarice, irresponsibility, and hedonism.” Indeed, he asserts “the very best people have tendencies toward all or nearly all of these negative traits – because great character is defined by our struggle with the worst parts of our nature rather than by not having these parts.” (p. 137) He suggests leading a moral life means identifying our darker parts and controlling them. Moreover, he says learning how to identify and defuse our darker attributes is a significant aspect of psychological health and happiness. (p. 140)

Prager defines evil behavior as that which hurts innocent people, and he says the human species would self-destruct if doing evil made us happy. Thus, he argues the problem is not that doing evil increases happiness but that it increases *immediate pleasure*. (p. 144) Prager suggests there is no doubt that immorality often brings immediate benefits.

Indeed, he emphasizes, “*If doing the bad thing never brought benefits, no one would ever do it*. People cheat precisely because there can be immediate benefits to cheating. People lie, steal, murder, and rape for the same reason.” (p. 146) The short-term pleasure associated with evil doing is abetted by systems and procedures that fail to create and maintain records rendering salient the harm such actions inflict upon others, and that is an obvious reason that evil doers don’t want good records and record-keeping systems.

Prager observes the “secret” of every great religion and philosophical system is “the more you reach outside of yourself and your ego and do good, the more peace you will attain.” He notes that wisdom is required to understand that but, unfortunately, few of us become wise until late in our lives. (p. 148) Taking his argument to the next logical conclusion, Prager suggests, “if human nature is the single greatest obstacle to happiness, controlling our nature is the single greatest step toward happiness.”

Again, Senge uses similar terms to describe *personal mastery* as “the discipline of continually clarifying and deepening our personal vision, of focusing our energies, of developing patience, and of seeing reality objectively.” (p. 7) Yet, when we theorize and communicate our thoughts about happiness, we seldom consider self-control, and Prager cites several reasons for our failure to do so:

First, self-control is difficult and most people want easy paths to happiness.

Second, self-control sounds like a “downer.”

Third, self-control doesn’t sell.

Fourth, self-control goes against the *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of our times, which glorifies getting all we want and makes us feel deprived and even somewhat of a failure if we do not. (p. 149)

Prager suggests that self-control gives us something else vital to happiness, and that is freedom. Sadly, though, he says many of us understand the value of freedom incorrectly – as meaning we are free to do whatever we want. However, doing what we want commonly means satisfying our bodily desires and, Prager argues, not only is that not freedom but it is actually more like bondage. Instead, he emphasizes, “*Freedom is being able to do what will bring you happiness* – and that takes constant self-control.” (p. 150)

Prager highlights two guidelines for developing self-control. One to develop habits of self-control and the other is never to lose sight of our goals. If we keep our eyes on our goals, he says we will always know what we must do to achieve them and thus be less likely to give in to the human nature and to do what we wants at any moment rather than what our goals demand of us. (p. 150-151)

Toward that end, he suggests it is worthwhile to document in writing what we want most in life and how it can be achieved. (p. 152) Such a document might be considered to be a personal strategic plan and its elements may be essentially the same as those in the strategic plans of organizations. Indeed, ultimately, the plan of any organization should be an aggregation and generalization of the personal strategic plans of its stakeholders.⁴¹

With respect to our personal relationships, Prager proffers:

All of us establish a moral bank account in life. Over the course of our lifetime, our acts of decency and integrity are our deposits and our indecent and dishonest acts are our withdrawals. Those with large balances in their accounts deserve the benefit of any doubts we may have about them, and they deserve forgiveness when they have actually made a withdrawal (i.e., done us wrong). Unfortunately, among the many miserable traits of human nature is an unwillingness to assess others’ moral accounts accurately. We tend to remember withdrawals (the bad that people do, especially to us) far longer than we remember deposits (the good that people do, even to us). And if we do this to our friends, we will eventually lose all of them. (p. 161)

Besides the net balance of good and bad acts, Prager says motivation is second factor to be taken into account in assessing whether a hurtful act is serious enough to end a friendship. (p. 161) However, he concludes that consideration of motives applies only to

⁴¹ The author has proposed the specification of an XML schema as an international standard for the strategic plans of individuals and organizations, including government agencies, worldwide. Rendering strategic goal and objective statements in valid XML instance documents on the Web would enable automated establishment of linkages among individuals and organizations with mutual goal-directed interests.

relationships with intimate acquaintances. By Tannen's reckoning, such acquaintances are those with whom we share secrets. Thus, it is logical to conclude that for all other relations – and particularly those involving business, commerce, and government – ***all that matters are results, as documented in reliable records making salient the relevant aspects of reality.*** (p. 162)

Creating, maintaining, and effectively using such records is a serious problem indeed.