

## Self-leadership and Happiness within the African Working Context

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**ABSTRACT** The aim of this conceptual and theoretical research, is firstly to integrate self-leadership and happiness by means of a model and secondly to discuss the effect of self-leadership on happiness in order to apply it within the current African working context. A nonempirical research paradigm (conceptual research) was adopted. The social learning theory was utilised to integrate self-leadership and happiness and made applicable within the working situation. It was indicated that self-leadership can have an effect on happiness within the African working context. By implementing self-leadership and happiness practices, and integrating traditional African values and beliefs into that, all African employees will be aided in the achievement of their working potential.

### INTRODUCTION

A lot of changes and difficulties (for example, poverty, new legislation and affirmative action, corruption, crime, western ways of thinking and living, inequalities, urbanisation and HIV/AIDS) took place as part of the history of Africa (Van Zyl 2012). People in Africa therefore have to adapt to these changes and difficulties. These difficult circumstances have led to self-neglect, unhappiness and self-dissociation among Africans. Serious and numerous incidents of corruption and crime, as well as the emigration of Africans to different overseas destinations, are also indications of self-neglect, unhappiness and self-dissociation and the difficulty of coping with circumstances (Du Plessis 2011; McKinsey's Global Institute 2010). Qizilbash (2002) indicated that a huge amount of South African (approximately between 30-35%); can be classified as experiencing definite poverty, making them vulnerable for unhappiness and sickness.

Therefore, Africans (and employees in the African context) are forced to create ways in which to cope with self-neglect, unhappiness and self-dissociation. Self-leadership among employees in Africa is one way of coping with difficult

circumstances. Given the popularity of employee empowerment as well as self-influencing behaviour and its relation to effectiveness (Houghton and Neck 2002), self-leadership appears to hold great potential for application in today's dynamic organisations. Indeed, self-leadership has often been presented as a primary mechanism in both empowerment (Anderson and Prussia 1997; Prussia et al. 1998) and the successful implementation of self-influencing and effective behaviours (Neck 1996).

D'Intino et al. (2007) are of the opinion that self-leadership may have a direct effect on happiness. They suggest that individual happiness, far from being a fleeting and uncontrollable emotion, is to a larger extent than previously thought, something over which people can exert direct control. Employing signature strengths (Seligman 2004) and cultivating personal flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1990), can have a significant influence on overall levels of perceived happiness. In this regard, self-leadership skills can play a vital role (D'Intino et al. 2007).

Mbigi (2005) indicated that self-leadership (and its possible relation to other variables) among African employees should also include typical African values and beliefs in order to incorporate all Africans.

The aim of this conceptual and theoretical research, therefore, is firstly to integrate self-leadership and happiness by means of a model and secondly to discuss the effect of self-leadership on happiness in order to apply it within the current African working context.

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## METHODOLOGY

A nonempirical research paradigm (conceptual research) was adopted. The social learning theory was utilised to integrate self-leadership and happiness. According to the social learning theory (Van Sandt and Neck 2003), human behavior can be explained by means of the interaction between the person's actions, cognitions as well as emotions and environmental factors. The effect of self-leadership on happiness was determined and made applicable within the working situation.

## OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

### Self-leadership

#### *Introduction*

Manz and Sims (1991) postulate that an individual self-regulates by first perceiving the situation and comparing its current state with identified standards. Then, a gap between the individual's state and desired state is addressed by engaging in behaviour to reduce the discrepancy. The impact of new behaviour is assessed and incorporated as feedback into a perception of the situation, which begins the self-regulation cycle once more (Van Zyl 2012). Self-leadership occurs when an individual perceives a situation, chooses to engage in behaviour to align actions with standards, monitors activities and cognitions in order to encourage the leadership increases to such a degree that the individual not only regulates compliance with external standards but also establishes those standards internally (Mahembe et al. 2013; Neck and Houghton 2006; Van Zyl 2009).

#### *Definitions*

Houghton and Neck (2002) define self-leadership as a process through which individuals control their behaviour, influencing and leading themselves through the use of specific sets of behavioural and cognitive strategies.

According to Manz and Neck (2004), self-leadership is the discovery and maximising of self-potential. This should be done so that the individual can lead a preferential and not a prescriptive lifestyle (Coetzee 2001).

Mahembe et al. (2013) defined self-leadership as follows: "self-leadership is a self-influence process through which people achieve the

self-direction and self-motivation necessary to perform".

Blanchard (2007) provides a summarised definition of self-leadership as follows: it is a systematic set of actions and mental strategies which individuals apply in order to discover and know themselves better. This information could be used to develop themselves and others (by means of self-influence and other approaches) with the aim to maximise their abilities which, in turn, will lead to higher performance and effectiveness eventually.

#### *Components of Self-leadership*

*General Self-leadership Strategies.* Self-leadership strategies are often divided into three basic categories consisting of behaviour-focused strategies, natural reward strategies and constructive thought patterns (D'Intino et al. 2007; Javadi et al. 2013; Mahembe et al. 2013; Sahin 2013; Ugurluoglu et al. 2013).

*Behaviour-focused Strategies.* Manz and Sims (1991) as well as Zeitel-Bank and Tat (2013) indicate that self-observation and self-assessment (for instance, feedback from colleagues, subordinates and supervisors, and own reflections) are the most important behaviour-focused strategies. By means of self-observation and self-assessment, development areas can be identified and improved upon. Dolbier et al. (2001) state that self-observation and self-assessment help leaders to make contact with the real self. This can include the identification of personal thoughts, emotional needs, beliefs and personal preferences (Dolbier et al. 2001).

Kazan (2001) and Javadi et al. (2013) defines self-goal setting as the extent to which employees provide self-direction using personal goals. It comprises identifying specific end states that describe the frequency, intensity, duration, or other characteristic of a desired behaviour (Manz and Neck 2004).

Self-reward is described as the extent to which employees influence themselves using rewards at both the physical and mental level (Manz and Neck 2004). The strategy implies that a person creates a reward contingency linked to the self-set goals in order to motivate and direct the effort necessary for goal attainment. Physical rewards can be self-applied by, for instance, purchasing something for oneself. Mental self-reward can be applied by encouraging oneself by means of internal speech and imagination (Brown and Fields 2011; Manz and Neck 2004).

Self-punishment refers to self-correcting feedback which entails constructive self-evaluation of failures and unproductive behaviours in order to refocus effort in more positive directions (Manz and Neck 2004).

Management of cues is defined by Brown and Fields (2011) as reminders and attention focusers that help to identify important moments in everyday jobs. Manz and Neck (2004) claim that the environment we live and work in has a great number of physical cues which tend to encourage certain behaviour. When cues are managed, control is exerted over this external environment, which encourages desirable behaviour and reduces ineffective ones. The environment can be rearranged to increase physical cues (for instance, negative people who always see the downside in everything) which, in turn, leads to desired positive behaviour and eliminate distractions and influences that promote negative behaviour (Manz and Neck 2004).

*Constructive Thought Pattern Strategies.* These strategies include the evaluation and challenge of irrational beliefs and assumptions as well as mental imagery of successful future performance. Positive self-talk and evaluation of existing habits and ways of thinking (for instance, "Am I a problem thinker or an opportunity thinker?") can enhance constructive thought patterns (Manz and Neck 2004; Zitel-Bank and Tat 2013).

*Natural Reward Strategies.* These strategies involve seeking out work activities that are inherently enjoyable (Manz 1986; Manz and Neck 2004) as well as focusing on the more pleasant or gratifying aspects of a given job or task instead of on the unpleasant or difficult tasks. Rewarding activities tend to foster feelings of increased competence, self-control and purpose (Manz and Neck 2004).

*Specific Self-leadership Strategies.* These strategies include time management, assertiveness training, creativity development and self-motivation. The implementation of general strategies is a pre-requisite for the implementation of specific strategies (for instance, self-assessment is required in order to determine which specific strategies to use).

## Happiness

### *Theoretical Foundation*

Research (Albrecht 2012; Fleming 2006; Niemiec 2013) indicates that happiness may be

an outcome of positive psychology. Positive psychology is the study of human strength, resilience and optimal human functioning (Seligman 1991, 2002). Seligman (2002) asserts that researchers have discovered a set of human strengths that are the most likely to form a buffer against mental illness: courage, optimism, interpersonal skills, work ethic, hope, honesty and perseverance. Fleming (2006) indicates that the central objective of positive psychology is facilitating happiness and subjective well-being. Happiness and well-being are defined as referring to positive feelings, such as joy or serenity, as well as positive states, such as those involving flow or absorption. A goal of positive psychology is to understand and explain happiness and subjective well-being and to accurately predict factors that influence such states (Seligman 2002).

Sahoo and Sahu (2009) are of the opinion that the findings of positive psychology attempt to disprove the hedonic treadmill theory of human happiness, which suggests that every individual has a set point of happiness, which is close to neutrality, that changes for short periods of time, reflecting life circumstances, but eventually returns to neutrality. Contrasting this view, studies show that different individuals have different happiness points, and most people claim their state of happiness to be above neutral (Niemiec 2013; Sahoo and Sahu 2009).

Furthermore, Sahoo and Sahu (2009) indicate that, by using the field of positive psychology, one can improve upon individual happiness; thus, happiness can be an important outcome of positive psychology.

### *Definitions*

Sahoo and Sahu (2009) define happiness as the emotion in which one experience feelings ranging from contentment and satisfaction to bliss and intense joy. Simply put, happiness is commonly understood to be the extent to which one likes one's life or, more formally, the extent to which one evaluates one's life as positive (Sahoo and Sahu 2009).

Andrews and McKenel (1980) view happiness as consisting of affective and cognitive factors. These factors represent the emotional experience of joy, elation, contentment and other positive emotions, one the one hand, and the cognitive evaluation of satisfaction with various life domains, on the other hand (Fleming 2006).

Seligman (2002) proposes a definition of happiness that is similar to Aristotle's concept of eudaimonia, namely that individual happiness is a reflection of each individual's set of happiness points, life circumstances and factors under voluntary control. These qualities under voluntary control include strengths in virtues and character, improving upon an individual's signature strengths, flow (engagement), as well as finding happiness in the past, present and future by examining one's basic human thoughts, actions and reactions.

### *Components of Happiness*

Seligman (2004) is of the opinion that three components of happiness can be realised. He focuses on the pleasant life, the good life and, lastly, the meaningful life (Harzer and Willibald 2013; Niemiec 2013; Seligman 2004).

Firstly, the pleasant life refers to experiencing positive emotions and being positive in general by means of dealing with the past, to be happy in the present and to be optimistic about the future. According to Grenville-Cleave (2011), dealing with the past means to have gratitude and forgiveness. To have gratitude is to be grateful and to give acknowledgement to those people and circumstances which have helped you to be what you are. To have forgiveness is to fully forgive those people who might have affected your life in a negative way (Grenville-Cleave 2011). To be optimistic about the future means to have an outlook of hope and optimism. This means also to be involved with actions to ensure that your future is what you expect it to be (Grenville-Cleave 2011; Seligman 2004).

A second kind of happiness, namely the good life, is where individuals focus on an engaged life, in other words, being involved with what you are really interested in (D'Intino et al. 2007; Seligman 2004). D'Intino et al. (2007) and Grenville-Cleave (2011) compare engagement with actions to what they call "flow". Flow tends to occur when goals are clear and provide immediate feedback, and when the challenge of an activity is roughly equivalent to an individual's capacity to perform the activity (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). Flow experiences are generally characterised by an intense concentration that allows a person to become completely absorbed by the activity while being distracted from any pleasant aspects of life. Flow creates many emo-

tions, from feelings of control to an absence of worry about losing control. Interestingly, the experience of time itself can seem to be suspended and the individual can sometimes lose all awareness of the self (D'Intino et al. 2007; Grenville-Cleave 2011). Csikszentmihalyi (1990) describes psychological flow in terms of joy and creativity that come from the process of total involvement with life.

A third kind of happiness is to have purpose and to lead a meaningful life (Seligman 2004). Seligman (2004) suggests that individuals identify what he calls their "signature strengths". These are strengths that people already possess to varying degrees and include characteristics such as creativity, persistence and humour. Seligman (2004) identified 24 possible strengths and organised them into six categories: wisdom and knowledge (including open-mindedness, love of learning and perspective), courage (including bravery, integrity and persistence), humanity (including love and kindness), justice (including fairness and leadership), temperance (including forgiveness and mercy, self-regulation and modesty), and transcendence (including gratitude, hope, humour and spirituality) (Seligman 2004). Seligman found that the key is to learn to identify a set of signature strengths and then practise those strengths on a regular basis. In this way a unique identity and culture can be developed, and more positive interactions between people will take place (D'Intino et al. 2007; Seligman 2004). Seligman (2004) indicates that signature strengths should not only be utilised for oneself, but also for a purpose bigger than oneself.

### **Towards an Integrated Model of Self-leadership and Happiness within the African Context**

Social learning theory (Bandura 1986) proposed that human behavior can best be explained via a set of continuous, reciprocal interactions among three primary sets of variables, including the person, the behavior and the environment (Van Sandt and Neck 2003). Social learning theory states that the person (including internal cognition and emotion), the environment and the focal behavior, reciprocally interact to explain individual actions. It has been debated that other explanations of human behavior are too limiting and, at best, provide only a partial explanation of the complexities of behavior in organization



(Van Sandt and Neck 2003). The social learning theory attempts to overcome these limiting deficiencies because it includes all the critical categories of variables influencing organizational behavior- that is behaviour (actions), internal attributes (cognitions and emotions) and environmental factors (within and outside the organisation).

Van Sandt and Neck (2003) as well as Lyons (2011) are of the opinion that effective organizational behaviour can also be grounded in the social learning theory. According to them, one such organizational behavioural perspective is that of self-leadership. Although self-leadership behaviour will be affected mostly by the internal attributes of employees (cognition and emotions), environmental factors (like for instance the way the organizational climate is empowering the leader to identify and implement self-leadership strategies, the existence of self-leadership strategies within the organization, etc.), will also have an effect on self-leadership behaviour. Environmental factors and the internal attributes of employees may also be affected by behavior (for instance if certain employees are practicing self-leadership strategies like self-assessment and self-goal setting which may improve their productivity, this may change the way tasks are approached and implemented in the organization (environmental factors) and the way employees think and feel about themselves (internal attributes) (Van Sandt and Neck 2003).

Happiness may be another organizational behavior which can be integrated into the social learning theory. Happiness will probably be affected mostly by the internal attributes of employees (positive emotions and cognitions) (Seligman 2002), but environmental factors (like for instance life circumstances) may also affect behavioral actions. Behavioral actions (for instance to identify strengths and to practice that on a daily basis as well as to be involved with engagement activities), on the other hand, might have an effect on the internal attributes of the employee (for instance feeling positive about his/her work) and the environment (creating a positive organizational climate).

The abovementioned discussions therefore suggested that effective organizational behavior (like self-leadership and happiness) can be grounded in the social learning theory.

The role self-leadership can play in creating happiness within the African working context, will now be discussed.

### **The Effect of Self-leadership on Happiness within the African Working Context**

As mentioned previously, research studies (D'Intino et al. 2007) suggest that happiness, far from being a fleeting and uncontrollable emotion, is to a larger extent than previously thought, something over which people can exert direct control. Employing positive emotions (Seligman 2004), signature strengths (Seligman 2004) and cultivating personal flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1990), can have a significant influence on overall levels of perceived happiness. D'Intino et al. (2007) are of the opinion that self-leadership strategies can play an important role in the above-mentioned processes.

Natural reward strategies of self-leadership can help employees find enjoyment and positive emotions in the moment as well as in the journey of work and life (D'Intino et al. 2007). By focusing on work activities that are inherently enjoyable, can therefore contribute to happiness in general.

Constructive thought pattern strategies (for instance, positive self-talk, identifying and replacing irrational and dysfunctional beliefs, as well as engaging in positive mental practice), can also lead to more optimistic thinking (D'Intino et al. 2007) It is important for African employees to experience positive emotions in order to fight feelings of self-neglect, unhappiness and self-dissociation.

Behaviour-focused self-leadership strategies such as self-observation and self-assessment can help employees to identify their strong and less strong points (Malmir and Azizzadeh 2013) in order to utilise their signature strengths on a regular basis (D'Intino et al. 2007). By utilising their signature strengths South African employees can identify strong and weak points. By being aware of "who I am" and "what I need to develop", feelings of self-worth and self-respect will be promoted and feelings of inferiority, anxiety, fear and uncertainty will be countered (Coetzee 2001). Mbigi (2005) and Agumba and Fester (2010) postulate that strengths in the sense of self-knowledge and self-worth can be utilised in the best interest of fellow Africans.

Shonhiwa (2006), however, emphasises that, if self-knowledge is applied for personal preference and not for the advantage of the group (African traditions focus on group functioning), employees with typical African traditions will not

identify and conform. According to Kouzes and Posner (1993), whose research focused on principle and value-centred leadership, individual performance should always be assessed according to the contribution to group performance. In this way, personal preferences will always be inferior to group interests, and to the best interest of the organisation. Signature strengths like integrity and honesty (to combat unethical behavior in the work situation), forgiveness and love (to unite employees from different racial groups) and persistence (to help employees to attain objectives), may contribute to South African companies achieving results.

Another behaviour-focused self-leadership strategy, namely self-goal setting, can help to create goals. Self-goals with immediate feedback are integral to experiencing flow (D'Intino et al. 2007). Ideally, the African employee will create and identify with a work environment in which they enjoy continuous involvement and growth. Within the African working context engaged employees (those who experience flow), can lead to dedicated workers. Dedicated employees work harder than other workers, based on internal and self-motivation theories (Manz 2001). In this regard, van Rensburg (2007) indicates that, if team functioning and performance is emphasised in the African work context, employees from typically African traditions will be self-motivated, which will support them in being dedicated workers. Grobler et al. (2006) state that dedicated employees may also show creativity and innovation. Furthermore, they mention that African companies found creativity and innovation to lead to greater flexibility, lower operational costs and more rapid adjustment to technological changes. According to van Rensburg (2007), employees from typical African traditions will accept the advantages of creativity if they can express their feelings of innovation by means of poetry, stories, dramas and song. By doing so, employees may feel more engaged and, eventually, more happy.

Specific self-leadership strategies, for instance, time management, creativity development and self-motivation, will lead to employees' feeling more in control (Ho and Nesbit 2013), which will, in turn, contribute to happiness (D'Intino et al. 2007).

Lastly, van Rensburg (2007) points to happy and self-determined employees helping co-workers to accept responsibilities. He indicates that

responsibilities within the traditional African culture are easily shifted to the group as a whole, resulting in the group's responsibility easily becoming nobody's responsibility. If self-determined individuals were to utilise purposefulness to the advantage of the group, each group member would readily accept responsibility and act on it.

## CONCLUSION

It is important to realize that the practical implementation of self-leadership in the African society will not be easy. Employees who have not discovered and developed their potential (and may never reach that stage) will find the application of self-leadership strategies particularly difficult. African employees should be exposed to self-leadership concepts such as self-evaluation, self-knowledge and self-development from an early age in this way; a self-leadership culture can be created which could have a positive effect on employees being happy. Feelings of self-neglect, unhappiness and self-dissociation amongst employees can then be reduced.

By implementing self-leadership and happiness practices, and integrating traditional African values and beliefs into that, all African employees will be aided in the achievement of their working potential.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

South African companies may consider implementing self-leadership skills in the working context. Employers should train their employees to develop skills like integrity/honesty, forgiveness/hope and persistence. This will help South African employees from different racial groups to work together as effective teams in order to attain objectives.

Employees should also be learned how to focus on goal-setting (especially in group context). Within the African working context this may lead to dedicated and creative employees. Employees should also be trained in specific self-leadership strategies (for instance time management and self-motivation), which will improve feelings of "being in control" and happiness.

South African companies can by consider re-designing tasks to be inherently enjoyable (or making sure employees strong points are utilised in their current tasks), contribute to happiness and positive feelings in the work situation.

Lastly, by applying this study in a quantitative way, can improve knowledge on improving happiness and employees “feeling in control”, within the work situation.

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