The greatest metric for predicting job satisfaction and engagement is the social support perceived by the employee. And job satisfaction and engagement directly correlate with productivity. So the best and fastest way to more connected and therefore more productive is to receive more social support from others at work, right? Not so fast.

Some of the greatest discoveries in psychology occur when we decide to ask questions in a different way. Social connection is my favorite research topic, but until earlier this year, I had social support all wrong because I was asking the wrong question.

I had already found that social support was incredibly important. Based on the study I performed on 1600 Harvard students in 2007, I found that there was a .7 correlation between perceived social support and happiness. (That number may not sound sexy, but it is significantly higher than the connection between smoking and cancer.) Similarly, as I discuss at more length in The Happiness Advantage, the greatest metric for predicting the job satisfaction and engagement is the social support perceived by the employee. The more we have studied social support, the more we realize it is the key to every single business and educational outcome. Studies even show that high levels of social support is as predictive of longevity as regular exercise, while low social support is as damaging as high blood pressure. That’s amazing.

**We put warning labels on smoking packs; maybe we should put warnings on companies that have low social support.**

Since social support is crucial if you want to raise your brain’s happiness or productivity, we set out to test the amount of support
you feel in your life. We started with the kind of questions scientists had been asking for the past twenty years: “Are you receiving meaningful connection and support in times of trial from your friends? Are you receiving support and a belief that you have a high potential from your parents? Are you receiving a congenial and supportive environment at work? Are you receiving the benefits of social engagements from your managers at work?”

So what's the problem?

The past two decades of research on social support has mistakenly focused on how much social support you receive, not how much social support you provide. It turns out, that giving feels better, does more for you, and provides greater returns in the long run, than getting ever does.

Instead of looking at what your manager was providing to you, we looked to see if you took the initiative in developing work relationships, whether by, say, inviting your coworkers out for drinks or commenting on their Facebook posts. We looked not at whether your parents were providing support to you, but whether you were actively attempting to support them with love and encouragement. We looked not at whether your friends were there for you, but whether you were there for them.

The findings were extraordinary. We have identified several types of social support providers in the world based upon their scores including “work altruists” (top quartile), and “work isolators” (bottom quartile). A work altruist provides the most social support; a work isolator provides the least.

True work altruists (those who provide the most) are more than twenty times as likely as work isolators to make up for the work of other employees in an effort to help them. It seems that they do this mainly in the interests of co-workers, rather than in the interest of the company. Work altruists aren’t huge proponents of rigid work rules and making sure that everyone (including themselves) is showing up on time — rather, they just want to help their co-workers. Only 2% of work isolators help others with their work.

Amazingly, we found only 5% of work isolators are extremely engaged in their jobs. 95% of people who provide no social support at work have no work engagement! True work altruists are about ten times as likely to be highly engaged as work isolators.
In fact, more than half of true work altruists get along “extremely well” with co-workers. Only about 20% of isolators get along extremely well with co-workers. Work altruists are twice as likely as work isolators to be satisfied with their jobs and almost 2/3 of work altruists have excellent relations with supervisors.

Given these statistics it may not be surprising that only 7% of selfish isolators have received a promotion in the last year. About 40% of each of the other three groups received a promotion. So if you’re not giving at work, you’re not going to be getting a promotion either.

This research I believe adds a critical new component to the field of positive psychology. It also gives you a clearer picture of how you can feel more connection at work: by being a facilitator. It’s good news for altruists who may worry that by giving, they’re shortchanging their own careers, and it gives isolators good reason to rethink their reluctance to reach out.

In an era of do-more-with-less, we need to stop lamenting how little social support we feel from managers, coworkers and friends, and start focusing our brain’s resources upon how we can increase the amount of social support we provide to the people in our lives. The greatest predictor of success and happiness at work is social support. And the greatest way to increase social support is to provide it to others.

**My research in this area is still under way. If you have examples of how you or someone you work with provides social support at your company, I’d love to hear them. {end}

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