

Be Happier at Work with Jenn Lim Transcript

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Chris Congdon: Does work make you happy? It may not be all unicorns and rainbows. But who doesn't want to be happier at work? Today's guest has dedicated her life to bringing more joy into the workplace.

Welcome to Work Better, a Steelcase podcast where we think about work and ways to make it better. I'm your host Chris Congdon alongside our producer, Rebecca Charbauski. If you like this podcast, we would appreciate it if you rate and review it – which helps others find it.

Rebecca Charbauski: Our guest today is Jenn Lim – who has spent years understanding how to create happier, more successful workplaces. Jenn is founder and author of Beyond Happiness. She is also CEO of Delivering Happiness which is a company she founded with Tony Hsieh, the late CEO of Zappos.

CC: Stick around after we hear from Jenn because Cherie Johnson, who is director of global design at Steelcase, will join us. Cherie will help us understand how design can help us create happier places at work.

CC: Hi Jen! Welcome to Work Better.

Jenn Lim: Hey Chris, so good to be here. Thank you.

CC: Thanks! Do you know, Jenn, how I discovered you? When I was listening to one of my favorite podcasts, "How to Build a Happy Life" that the Atlantic does and I heard you talking to Arthur Brooks about when you started working with Tony Shay on 'Delivering Happiness.' In case our listeners don't know your background, I was wondering if you could just talk about "Delivering Happiness" and how you got started on that?

JL: I'll rewind a little bit back in 2010. Tony and I launched this book called "Delivering Happiness" and that was after me probably consulting at Zappos.com for about 17 years so we launched this book – just thoughts to check off the list of things to do and it turned out to do a bit better than that. We just realized there was a demand for happiness in the world and specifically in the workplace because that's what Zappos was all about. So that's what pretty much said to us that we need to do something a bit more and that's when we created it and co-founded the company called "Delivering Happiness." Since then I've been running that as what we call ourselves – our culture coach consulting – it's a mouthful I know but basically helping organizations, businesses, nonprofits, for-profits, governments hospitals etc. help figure out how to create an environment where they have sustainably happy employees. Their customers will be happier and they'll have a more sustainable organization at the same time. And most importantly, creating more meaningful lives.

CC: One of the things that struck me at the time when I first learned of that work was, “what do shoes from Zappos have to do with delivering happiness other than, I like shoes and bad shoes are unhappy?” What was the connection?

JL: Yeah, it does seem a little bit far fetched. Some people do find their happiness in shoes but a lot of people don't so the connection came when essentially Tony and I started geeking out on the academics behind happiness. So there was an actual body of science of happiness – positive psychology largely led by Marty Selegman and it was just this new – you know, I can't believe people have been researching this and trying to understand it from a scientific point of view. So these existential questions we're having about what is this all for? Why are we trying to build businesses? It was really because of that geeky curiosity to understand “oh this exists and how might we apply it to the workplace?” That's when Zappos became a petri dish and then fast forward to when we kind of saw the correlation in really cool ways of how profit doesn't necessarily need to be driven without people involved. It actually can go hand in hand and that's kind of the genesis of it all.

CC: When I first heard you had just introduced your book “Beyond Happiness,” the first thing I thought was what's beyond happiness? I thought happiness is the penultimate goal, so I was really intrigued with that and what was it that you saw that was missing that you wanted to tackle?

JL: After 10 years of Delivering Happiness and 2020 was when I was supposed to start writing this book and it wasn't called Beyond Happiness at that time. I was ready to just share all these great stories of how this can be done and I had this nice tidy outline and then 2020 hit right? Everyone in the world has 2020 and so every time some newsite, some soundbite, something hits the media in a way that changes our lives forever from the pandemic, social unrest, climate change, etc. I knew there was something more that I was missing. That this book I was supposed to write was so small in my head. Not worth it. So I really wanted to go without knowing it and beyond. Peace didn't come to the very end when I had to come up with the title but it came from this place where we can talk about happiness and for us, it's not about rainbows and unicorns. It's about grounded scientific happiness of purpose. Connectedness progress; autonomy – things that we know increase our happiness but it didn't feel like enough, especially what we went through as a global society. What I wanted to do was go beyond in the sense hey you know what? Let's just make it clear that it is not about chasing those highs or reaching those highs, it is about the lows well and truly acknowledging and identifying that embracing those lows teaches us as much of our happiness as our highs do if not more. If we choose to embrace that and learn from it and I think especially in the last three years of what we went through I just feel like this is the time to actually get real with that. To embody not just happiness, but you know fulfillment in a more meaningful way, especially at the workplace. But of course how it exudes into our life.

CC: One of the reviews of your book that I read, I really liked, because this person said “If personal happiness and professional success are mutually exclusive, *Beyond Happiness* is essential reading for people who want to find purpose in their work.” That really intrigued me because I feel a lot these days people are asking a lot of really big important questions about their work and rethinking their priorities. I mean, going through something as traumatic as a pandemic, will kind of have you do that. You start rethinking your life a little bit in some respects, and I feel like getting the right relationship with our work is really important. One of the things you said I found interesting was this idea about connecting your purpose is like the most sustainable form of happiness – like an organization mission statement – it’s not enough. And I was just wondering if you could talk a little bit more about that relationship between an organizations’ mission and purpose and work and how that’s going to help us be happy.

JL: I believe mission statements are a little bit archaic because usually it’s about the company itself. But I think what purpose does have is it broadens the conversation to something of a higher level and not just from an organizational standpoint. Its purpose is beyond making money. But it also especially right now is deep diving into the personal purpose as well and the interconnection of that. When someone walks into – well now it could be remote and hybrid – but into their workplace, they still have that sense of purpose. So how might that align with the organizational purpose? Why I bring that up is because again we always go back to science. So what we now know is like the most sustainable form of happiness. Knowing there’s different types – and you might have heard this – in that the podcast you heard from Arthur is that there’s pleasure and their senses of passion and flow. But the most sustainable form is having that sense of purpose just you know, simply being a part of something that’s bigger than yourself and so I think that’s what has really turned as the silver lining of what happened in the last few years is that people are acknowledging that purpose has a really distinct place in the workplace. Great Place to Work just shared very recently that those that have a sense of purpose at work are 3 times more likely to stay and be loyal and recommend to their friends. Those things that we’ve all known to be true but are now more important than ever. Because like you said we had a lot of time to think and some people chose to reflect and integrate their newfound sense of why am I here into their workplace and everyday lives so that’s why I keep on prioritizing purpose in a meaningful way.

CC: It’s not like I hadn’t heard before that people who feel a sense of purpose are more likely to stay, but I think that’s really important for a lot of us who – whether you’re in a leadership role in an organization or whatever your role is – how can we help ourselves and help other people feel that connection with purpose? One of the things I wonder about and I’d love to get your take on this one is – because you mentioned hybrid work a minute ago – I’m curious what you’re seeing with your clients or your own experience about hybrid work and how that impacts our ability to feel that sense of purpose and connectedness.

JL: We think about hybrid and remote work now. It's just kind of like the future of work. We've been talking about this for so long and then with the pandemic – the pandemic is like nope, it's here. We're living in the future now. So it's now even more important than ever because of this new way we work physically and virtually to have those senses of purpose and values to be instilled in a workplace. To have meaningful connections that can still be had differently but can be done as we've been doing with a lot of remote companies – the companies that we've been working with. Why it's more important now is because we have a bit more separation of physical space. Then we have a lot of other different stimuli that can come in a workday whether it's next door we got – well once we step out of our office we had to cook dinner for the kids – that kind of thing. This work life integration of time and space means that we have a greater need to have a grounding. And this grounding can come organizationally in a team with your colleagues to have a shared sense of purpose and shared sense of values to remind us how it is that we want to be doing our work quote unquote “away” from each other. That's why these organizations that did have that before the pandemic, before Covid, are still maintaining that because they still have that shared sense of oh yeah, these are our values and this is our higher purpose. But more importantly I think now people are actually being more vocal about their own purpose and values. And that's when you see really great alignment and therefore growth during these hard times.

CC: Jenn, in your work you developed this framework or this greenhouse model to talk about how we can go about establishing or clarifying our purpose and I was just wondering if you could talk about that a little bit and in particular some of the attributes of the greenhouse model. How does that work?

JL: Sure! This is part of the evolution because before we were about delivering happiness and it was a happiness model and greenhouse model came about when I started working on this book. Because, just looking across the board, there was still a perception about happiness. There are still people who say I don't really think happiness needs to be tied to my workplace and that's fine and good. There are always naysayers and I'm not here to twist anyone's arm. But I evolved it to the greenhouse model because there really isn't anyone out there that you can talk to who would say I don't want to grow and that sense of growth can be from any age you know whether you're a millennial, Gen Z are coming out. You want to grow, you want to learn or you're on the other end like Baby Boomer, Gen Z or Gen X where they want to grow personally too, not just professionally because they've reached a certain point. So I adapted it to the greenhouse model because in that sense everyone in an organization can get aligned and can rally around that sense of yes, how can we grow number one first personally and number two as a team, and number 3 as an organization and therefore impacting our ecosystem of customers, partners, vendors and now more than ever society and the planet more directly. So that's why I evolved at the greenhouse. The whole backstory to that is Tony and I used to talk about being a good leader is really growing and creating the conditions so that others can grow in a greenhouse and that's super important still but what I realized during writing of this book is that we were missing a big piece which is we tend to try to grow other greenhouses. But we forget our own. So we need to tend to our own greenhouse as we grow others. It's like the whole oxygen metaphor in the plane – we all felt like we forgot it because maybe we didn't fly for 3 years but now we're coming back a little bit. It's just having that more of a growth mentality has really helped this model in this time and place so that we can get aligned again.

CC: I would just add for our listeners I tend to be very visual. I love listening to what Jenn is saying. I actually found the book really helpful to be able to actually look at the diagrams. You've got great diagrams, Jenn. So I would just tell listeners to get the book because I think the greenhouse model is a lot easier to understand when you can look at it more closely - at least that's how I felt. I would like you to talk a little bit more with people about those 3 attributes that you mentioned quickly before this notion of control. And progress I think is a really interesting one too as well as connectedness.

JL: This is part of the greenhouse model in the sense that these are happiness levers that we've been able to apply over the years in workplaces. So one of the biggest things we lost during this time was a sense of control and that's number one. Sense of autonomy, sense of control of feeling like hey I'm trusted by others - my peers, my boss, because I know what I'm here for, what my role and responsibilities are, so we lost that immediately at the beginning of 2020. That's a huge part of getting people to feel they have that sense of autonomy to make their own decisions and be trusted for it. The second one is progress and this one is huge too because we lost that. But that's coming down to even if we have this seemingly unachievable job or role or project. It's so important to celebrate the milestones along the way, breaking it up in whatever makes sense to that project or team and take that time to celebrate because otherwise it just seems like we're you know that good all hamster in the wheel and having this never ending goal to achieve. Third thing and this one is also huge, especially given our conversation about hybrid work is connectedness and that has been broken up. You know we know that loneliness is at a height you know in the world's workplace according to Gallup and and so now we need to be more creative about how we can create those meaningful connections and that's why I always harp on purpose and values because when you have that and instill that in the system in your meetings in the way you work, you're no longer just talking about hey what are you bingeing on Netflix or what's your happy hour drink. Those things are important, pleasure forms happiness very important but when you get to that level of speaking about purpose and values, all of a sudden your conversations are more meaningful. You may know your colleagues in a way that maybe even their friends might not know them so that's how we develop meaningful connections - by opening up the conversations to what is fundamentally most important to us in the core of who we are.

CC: When we think about purpose at work, I feel like that's really important and yet there is a lot of pressure on leaders of organizations to deliver financial results. I was reading something coming out of Davos about what CEOs are talking about as far as results - so I'm just curious, do you feel like there's a tension there between really trying to live your purpose as a business organization and also trying to deliver business results.

JL: The cool thing about this is that the short answer is no. If we look at the data, that's the interesting thing. So the data is part of the ROI aspect. The return investment of basically investing in your people has been evident since the last ten to fifteen years. They've done the research on companies that essentially double down on their people - those that aren't a great place to work list or Fortune's best companies to work for, Glass Door, those have actually consistently financially outperformed the S&P 500 even in economic downturns. So we know the data is there. There is definitely a gap in those that want to implement it and actually believe in it. So that's where the tension comes in but at least the data is on our side but when we can actually show leaders how to measure then they'll start getting it because yes they want results. Part of the results is retention. How many millions of dollars are you losing every time you lose someone, lose a team, lose functions. When you're a company, that adds up very quickly. Especially right now given the climate of uncertainty so when we get to being able to show how to measure what matters then the light goes on as to okay, this is a part of our results and it's making people more productive and engaged and people are more fulfilled and happy. So why would we do this?

CC: I saw something that really struck me in your book that people with a sense of belonging perform significantly better than those without, which I personally really found relevant because we've been thinking a lot about this whole idea of how do you create a sense of belonging at work, and the idea that helping people in their performance - that really struck me and I'm just curious from your perspective, did that surprise you?

JL: Yes and no in some ways. I think of anything the biggest surprise was how much it got spotlighted in the last few years of what belonging's value is in the workplace. Because if we zoom out for just a moment there's not a thing and thinking about what happened with the Pandemic and we think about what we really want as human beings and one of the bottom lines I think is one of the core things is just we really want to be heard and understood and if we can bring that into the workplace that is really like cutting across all these conversations around DEI, all these things of just like how do we actually create these where there's this equanimity across people and so that sense of belonging is like - Is almost not just nice to have anymore. People are actually demanding this. Otherwise they'll go somewhere else. Equally we're seeing layoffs on the other side and we're seeing people that are saying I deserve more. I'm quiet-quitting because I deserve more. So how do we get this to a healthier conversation I think is creating an environment of belonging, creating an environment of psychological safety - whatever we share here. We're all human beings. I'm a boss, I'm a human being and my employees. They're all human beings like let's just create a new social contract. Rules are no longer here. We have to create new relationships, new boundaries, new rules in how we work so that sense of belonging ... it doesn't have to be. I love the simple solutions like democratizing meetings, using a Google doc so that the most you know, an introverted person will have something to say. And just like little simple techniques and tactics to create the everyday sense like hey we all have a voice here and I as a leader will attentively listen and let you know whether it can be done or not but at least we're going to do this together.

CC: I have to confess a little bit that one of the things you talk about in terms of bringing your authentic self to work – I’m a bit of an authentic self skeptic because I’m always like, “I’m not sure you really want to know my authentic self and in fact I’m not always sure my husband wants to know my authentic self.” But he’s stuck with me. But you use this exercise. It’s called the happiness heartbeat. Tell us about that.

JL: It’s a way for people to start thinking about happiness as definitely part authenticity but also part values – identifying your values. So it’s a combination of that and now because we’ve all gone through – everyone has their own 2020 stories and beyond – their highs but also lows and now this exercise is really effective for recognizing your own resilience and grit. So if I could share really quickly. Do we have time? Ok. So, essentially like you’re the star of your own show. The director of your own movie kind of thing, just reflect on your own life and identify and pick out a few highs and a few lows, in your work in your life, that really resonate with you still today. And when you do this exercise step-by-step in the book but basically by identifying these moments you are able to pull out themes, and you’re all able to pull out themes therefore values that were there or not there. So for example, you know I did Kilimanjaro. That was a high. I got laid off, 9/11, I lost my dad – those were lows and what I saw in those was like oh these values of freedom, authenticity freedom, having meaningful relationships. Those just really rang strong and true. So I started understanding if I can live by these values for my hard, big decisions and my day-to-day decisions, at least I know I’m living according to how I want to show up in the world. So this exercise we’ve been using for 12 years but in the last few years people have been really appreciating it because they have been wanting to revisit what makes me feel full. What makes me feel happy and what’s been really cool about it is when we can identify those low moments and actually see what we were feeling and what we did to get to the next high then it becomes the agency within yourself to know we can do it again. It’s not the same as reading inspirational books or quotes or motivational speeches or listening to TED. It’s like you’re actually applying it to yourself because you know you’ve been there before so that’s where we’ve seen this exercise become really handy in recognizing what your authentic values are, how you want to live and how you’re going to get over whatever might be the lowest low.

CC: I think it was Arthur Brooks I was listening to after listening to you where he was talking about this idea that you kind of mentioned that it’s like you have to have that contrast to recognize – for instance – sometimes the weekend is great because you had a work week and there’s that contrast between the two. Vacations are great because you’ve been working hard and then you have that contrast between the two. Tell us more about your thoughts on that comparison.

JL: I think some people might cast it off as something cliché like you can’t feel the highs until you feel the lows, the depth and the height of it all, but it really is if you do experience and embrace both sides of it, you actually viscerally feel that difference of being able to take that comparison and actually add it to what it could lead into your sense of gratitude of being able to get through that to the next high.

CC: Before I let you go Jen, I just want to circle back to something that you talked about before which is ROI. A lot of people don’t think about ROI and happiness in the same sentence. You talk about something called the ripple of impact, and I was just wondering if you could talk about that a little bit – how measuring this is an interesting concept.

JL: Totally. I call it the double ROI in the book and essentially because like what I rattled off earlier in terms of the stats of the return on investment financially when you double down your people. On the second side of the same coin is that if you have the measurement for numbers and financials in place and you add that layer of purpose when you have truly embedded operationalized purpose and connected that to your individual people, that's when you have the second ROI of that ripple of impact and what that means is that every single individual within your organization – and I can give you an example – but basically that because they're living their purpose. They're actually rippling out that impact to the team in a positive way and therefore the organization and therefore their customers or their patients or the citizens of the city – that kind of thing of whoever they touch in their ecosystem or community. I love talking about, as an example, Northwell Healthcare system in New York. They've been a client of ours way before Covid and if you can imagine one of the most challenging workplaces during the time of covid was the hospital. No sense of control. No sense of progress. No idea what the hell is going on and yet because they did the work and they instilled purpose and values across from the custodian to the doctors and nurses they were that much more aligned to be able to not just realize, hey we're going to get through this but that ripple of impact being able to really serve their patients. Their local communities just came through naturally because they're already aligned to do that. So if you're imagining that, in one of the most unpredictable workplaces and conditions, imagine what we can do when we have a bit more sense of control and predictability? What we're doing now is getting a little bit more hope every day that we're at the light at the end of the tunnel.

CC: That is a great story. Thank you for sharing that with us because I do really think this idea of being able to have a connection between our happiness and business success, that those two ideas are not mutually exclusive. I think it is a really important message for organizations that like work. Our work isn't necessarily a bad thing. You know it can be a good thing for the world and for our communities and for ourselves and I think that's a really important thing for us to think about – how we do that. So, thank you Jenn, I have really enjoyed talking to you about this and I'm sure our listeners are really interested in hearing more about some of your ideas.

JL: Thank you. Thanks for having me.

CC: I knew when I was talking to Jenn I really wanted to reach out to my colleague Cherie Johnson, who is the director of global design at Steelcase. Cherie just recently completed a huge project to rethink leadership and what their spaces are like at work given the new demands on leaders today. Thanks for joining me to talk about this Cherie, I'm excited you're here.

Cherie Johnson: Thanks Chris. I too really enjoyed what Jenn said about the Greenhouse model and her analogy there, because it's a place, and it's easy for designers to think about how place encourages and supports the types of behaviors we want. And I think it's an interesting time right now given how highly structured our lives have all become – not just leaders – partially because we're on video so much and we've lost the social graces of before and after the meeting – those constructs of how was your day or your weekend that we would normally do. Or at the end of the meeting we'd step aside with an employee to maybe talk about more coaching related to next steps, and we've lost all of that. I think the greenhouse, with the workplace, the leader commons – place helps support those things. Those are human interactions that are important.

CC: It feels like the way people are meeting in general – whether they’re in a leadership role or not – isn’t making people happy. We’re just cramming so much in. When you did the work for the Leader Commons space, which is new, you thought about that... you intentionally designed ways for these transitions between meetings that are a little bit more human.

CJ: What we found out is that an executive’s calendar is highly full and highly structured, but the transition moments and context changes between when someone is individually focused or in a meeting are really important to allow a point to allow them to take a moment to recenter themselves – so how you place those collaborative spaces, those enclosed meetings spaces, those spaces where you can allow them to focus, and then those transition moments and actually taking those circulation paths – or those things that we just think are paths of travel – and putting little asides on them – putting little communication kiosks where the executives share a little bit about themselves – are places where you can pull over and have these interactions that are enriching for you as an individual and also meaningful to the individual that you’re working with. That metaphor of the greenhouse again and how you are nourishing and feeding both individuals – the employee and the leader – space plays a really critical role in supporting those types of interaction. I’m seeing more importance related to that, and that’s what I appreciate what Jenn’s doing. She’s saying don’t forget about this part that needs tending to also.

CC: I was also struck by what she had to say about greenhouses: that as leaders, our job is really to help create conditions so that others can grow, and that you’re also making sure you’re growing too as a leader and you’re also tending to yourself in that process. You have some really good insights into how you create those spaces for leaders that help them reflect who they are and help them bring their authentic selves to work.

CJ: As our world is changing we think about our professional self – this is my persona or role within the organization, and there is your individual self. The things we discovered through this process of working with our team, is that for instance someone has great musical talents. They like to go play guitar for a little bit during the middle of the day. Why hide that? Bring that out! Or someone actually has llamas and is selling yarn. We’re like, hey those are all important elements of who you are. If you as a leader express those, that allows other individuals to believe they can express themselves beyond their professional role here in the organization – I have other things that connect us on a human level that allows us to align our shared mind and shared purpose and empathize with one another.

CC: I think it’s cool the way you have approached the physical cues in space that allow us to behave differently from the way we’ve thought about in the past, and be more of ourselves when we come into work. Which, I hope, would help us all build more happiness at work. I know I could talk to you forever about this Cherie, but thanks for the reflections on some of the things Jenn had to say. Appreciate you being here.

CJ: Thanks for having me join, Chris.

CC: Thank you for being here with us. If you enjoyed this conversation – please rate or review it, so more people can find it and visit us at steelcase.com/research to sign up for weekly updates on workplace research, insights and design ideas delivered to your inbox. So tell us, what’s up for next week Rebecca?

RC: Join us next week for our conversation with Marcus Collins. Marcus is one of those people who has lived like 7 careers in one life. He's worked with Beyonce, Apple - and now he's head of strategy at Wieden + Kennedy in New York and teaches at the Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan. He's also adding author to his resume with a new book called For the Culture.

CC: Marcus says culture is the biggest cheat code when it comes to influencing human behavior and his stories from the world of pop and tech will change how you see culture in the workplace. We hope you join us.

Thanks again for being here - and we hope your day at work tomorrow is just a little bit better.

CREDITS

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