

The 5Ps of Leading Happiness

Turning Workplaces from Energy Drains into Energy Sources



On Leadership

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Executive Summary

This thesis is written from the perspective of both leader and coach. I have lived the tension of driving performance while also caring for people — and I have seen how easily workplaces can drain rather than energize. The Gallup data on widespread detachment only confirms what many of us witness daily: talented people running on empty, not because they lack discipline, but because the conditions around them fail to support their energy and purpose.

Research shows that happiness at work is not about perks or superficial cheerfulness. It is about connection: to purpose, to progress, and to one another. Leaders play a decisive role here. They act as emotional amplifiers, shaping the “inner weather” of their teams through tone, presence, and small daily choices. When the weather is warm, people open up, take risks, and collaborate. When it is cold, they withdraw.

To make this actionable, I developed the 5Ps of Leading Happiness: Positivity, Purpose, People, Progress, and Perspective. Each “P” translates research into simple, repeatable practices — like starting meetings with wins, telling stories of impact, or removing obstacles quickly. These habits may seem small, but they accumulate, creating teams that feel safe, energized, and proud of their contribution.

The lesson I carry as both coach and leader is clear: happiness and performance are not trade-offs. They are partners. Thriving teams deliver stronger results, and in turn, they make leadership lighter and more sustainable. In a world defined by volatility and talent scarcity, this is not just good for people — it is a competitive advantage for organizations.

Introduction: The Great Detachment

Sixty percent of employees worldwide say they feel emotionally detached from their work. One in five calls themselves “miserable.” (Gallup, 2023) Pause on that for a moment. In most offices, more than half the people around you are silently running on empty — not from lack of skill or discipline, but because the world around them has shifted faster than the workplaces inside it. Gallup calls this *The Great Detachment* (Gallup, 2024). After years of disruption, many employees feel stuck between rising demands and eroding connections. Constant restructuring has bred instability. Hybrid work has loosened social bonds. Customer expectations have surged while internal systems lag. And the things people now value most — flexibility, purpose, recognition — often clash with how work is still organized (PwC, 2021). This detachment is global — though its roots differ. In Western economies it often stems from burnout, work–life imbalance, and lack of recognition. In East Asia, including China, engagement scores are even lower, but for different reasons: hierarchical management cultures, job insecurity, and low psychological safety (Gallup, 2023; Zhang et al., 2022). Wherever they work, people are not coming as blank slates anymore. They arrive carrying uncertainty, fatigue, and emotional overload — and often encounter workplaces still designed for stability and control. Here lies the opportunity: leaders can ignite their people — turning workplaces from energy drains into energy sources. Because of their visibility and power, leaders act like emotional amplifiers. Their tone, attention, and daily behavior ripple outward, shaping what psychologists call the “inner weather” of an organization (Barsade, 2002). Some lift the atmosphere, making people feel safe, curious, and bold. Others lower it, chilling trust, dampening energy, and making people play small. And when that inner weather turns cold, the costs are brutal. Burnout is now classified as an occupational phenomenon (WHO, 2022). Emotional exhaustion fuels absenteeism, disengagement, and turnover, silently draining productivity and driving up costs (Hassard et al., 2018). Quiet quitting — employees doing only the bare minimum — has become so widespread that Gallup estimates it accounts for over half the global workforce (Gallup, 2023). This is not a “soft” issue. It is a hard business problem. Stress and fear narrow attention, reduce creativity, and push people into defensive thinking (McEwen, 2007). Hope, curiosity, and psychological safety broaden attention, spark learning, and promote risk-taking — all essential for innovation (Fredrickson, 2001). If your people are emotionally depleted, they will not be resilient, creative, or collaborative, no matter how many KPIs you set. And here is what makes this challenge even sharper: the ground never stops moving. The business environment has become volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous — the VUCA world (World Economic Forum, 2020). Technological disruption, geopolitical shocks, and social change demand relentless adaptation. Strategy cycles that once lasted years now collapse in months. The turbulence is structural. Which means: leadership must shift — from driving output alone to also sustaining the humans who create it. Because the reverse is also true: performance and happiness are deeply intertwined. Thriving employees think more creatively, collaborate more deeply, and sustain high performance over time (Harter, Schmidt & Hayes, 2002). Teams that feel safe and connected make better decisions (Edmondson, 2019). Cultures that foster well-being consistently outperform those that don’t. Well-being is not a luxury — it is a performance driver. It has also become a competitive differentiator. Millennials and Gen Z — now over half the global workforce — expect work to nourish them, not deplete them. They are more willing than any generation before to leave toxic environments (PwC, 2021). In a world of talent scarcity, cultures that foster trust, meaning, and well-being attract and keep the best people. Those that don’t, lose them — and pay the price in churn and lost knowledge. And here is what most

leadership models still overlook: happy teams give back more than they take. They don't just perform better — they make leadership lighter. They energize their leaders, protect them from burnout, elevate their reputation, and free their minds to think strategically. Through emotional contagion, their positive emotions amplify the leader's own vitality, clarity, and effectiveness (Johnson, 2008; Skakon et al., 2010). Leading unhappy teams is like dragging weight uphill. Leading happy teams is like having the wind at your back. This is why happiness has become a leadership imperative. Not as a moral stance, but as a pragmatic response to reality.

Theory: The Happiness Hypothesis in Business

"Happiness" is one of the most overused and misunderstood words in organizational life. It is often reduced to cheerfulness, perks, or a fleeting mood. But psychological research paints a much deeper picture — and one that is especially relevant at work, where most people spend the majority of their waking hours. Jonathan Haidt, in *The Happiness Hypothesis* (2006), offers one of the clearest and most useful definitions: happiness arises when the inner world — our mind and emotions — is in harmony with the outer world — our circumstances, relationships, and actions. It is not something you can pursue directly. It emerges as a by-product of living well: through meaningful relationships, engaging work, and a sense of purpose. Haidt writes: "Happiness comes from between". Between you and other people. Between you and your work. Between you and your life. This reframes happiness not as an individual mood but as a relational state: the quality of the connections between people and their work, their teams, and their leaders. This also explains why work exerts such a powerful influence on overall well-being. The German psychotherapist Hilarion Petzold described human identity as resting on five pillars: body and health, social relationships, work and performance, material security, and values/meaning (Petzold, 1988). If one pillar cracks, the others must carry the load. But because work consumes such a large share of our waking life, strain or emptiness at work can destabilize the whole structure. People may not be able to compensate through the other pillars — and their overall sense of happiness suffers. This is why leaders cannot treat workplace happiness as an optional extra — it touches one of the central pillars of human identity. And this is where Haidt's best-known metaphor becomes essential. The rational mind is the rider; the emotional, intuitive self is the elephant. The rider can pull the reins, but if the elephant refuses to move, logic alone will not help. Real motivation happens when rider and elephant move together — when people feel emotionally committed as well as intellectually convinced. This is where many organizations fail. They flood employees with strategy decks, KPIs, and business cases aimed at the rider — while ignoring the elephant's need for emotional connection, trust, and meaning. They win minds but lose hearts. And without the elephant, the rider cannot move forward. Haidt also shows that happiness arises from three main sources: biological set point (genetic predisposition), conditions of life (income, commute, workload, physical environment), and voluntary activities (practicing gratitude, building relationships, pursuing meaningful goals). While the first lies largely outside a leader's control, the second and third — daily experiences and activities at work — sits squarely inside their influence. Leaders cannot change someone's genes, but they can build environments that support meaningful goals, authentic relationships, and a sense of contribution. Martin Seligman's PERMA model (2011) reinforces this view, identifying five core elements of well-being: Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. These are not luxuries — they are the psychological infrastructure of high performance. Positive emotions broaden thinking and open attention

(Fredrickson, 2001). Engagement arises when people are challenged but supported, entering a state of flow. Relationships are the strongest predictor of long-term happiness (Seligman, 2011). Meaning makes effort feel worthwhile. Accomplishment builds confidence and momentum. Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer (2011) showed in *The Progress Principle* that the single strongest day-to-day driver of positive emotion and intrinsic motivation is making progress on meaningful work. Even small wins can lift mood, fuel engagement, and spark creativity. This means leaders can boost happiness not through grand gestures, but by helping people see progress and celebrate it — giving feedback, removing blockers, and showing that effort leads to visible results. Neuroscience underscores these dynamics. Positive emotions release dopamine, enhancing motivation, learning, and creativity (Ashby et al., 1999). Trusting relationships trigger oxytocin, which reduces fear and increases collaboration (Zak, 2013). Conversely, chronic stress floods the brain with cortisol, which impairs memory, focus, and problem-solving (McEwen, 2007). In short, happiness is not a distraction from performance — it is a prerequisite for sustainable performance. None of this means work should be free of challenge. Haidt notes that happiness is not about avoiding discomfort, but about finding meaning in effort. He describes our “psychological immune system” — the mind’s ability to recover from negative events faster than we expect. People overestimate how long failure will hurt; most bounce back quickly, especially in supportive environments. Leaders can strengthen this resilience by responding to mistakes with curiosity and compassion rather than blame. This speeds recovery and protects engagement. True workplace happiness is not about being perpetually upbeat. It is about being deeply connected — to purpose, to people, and to progress. And this is the essence of riding the elephant: Leaders who want happier, higher-performing teams must stop steering only the rider. They must also engage the elephant — the emotional core that fuels commitment, creativity, and courage. Their task is to build environments where meaning, relationships, and small daily wins intertwine, where the rider and elephant move together, and where people feel both stretched and supported. This is how happiness becomes not a perk, but a performance strategy — and not a fragile mood, but a durable force.

Practice: The 5 Ps of Happiness

Leaders can’t manufacture happiness. But they can create the conditions where happiness thrives — conditions that make people feel safe, energized, and proud of their contribution. Teams take their cues from leaders: your tone becomes their climate, your clarity their compass, your curiosity their courage. This chapter gives you a practical blueprint. The 5Ps of Leading Happiness:

- Positivity – set the climate
- Purpose – anchor to meaning
- People – develop and care
- Progress – fuel motivation
- Perspective – see the bigger picture

Each “P” combines a framing section and five detailed practices. They are not lofty ideals. They are everyday habits — small, intentional actions that shape how teams feel and perform.

Positivity – Set the Climate

1. Practice Solution Focus Over Problem Focus

When teams spend most of their time diagnosing problems, energy drains. Endless analysis without action breeds frustration. Leaders who redirect attention to solutions send a clear signal: we can move forward.

How to apply it:

- When a problem is raised, immediately follow with: “What’s one thing we could try?”
- Apply the 80/20 principle: no more than 20% of time on the problem, 80% on solutions.
- Reframe questions from deficit to possibility: “What would success look like?”

Example: A project team had become known for their “Monday Moans.” Every week was a list of blockers and complaints. The leader introduced a new rule: each issue raised must include at least one idea for how to address it. Within weeks, the meetings shifted from draining to energizing — and problems started getting solved faster.

2. Stop Toxic Talk — No “They vs. Us”

Nothing corrodes morale faster than gossip or “they vs. us” language. It creates silos, mistrust, and resentment. Leaders who address toxic talk head-on prevent negativity from spreading. Even more powerful is inviting people to shift perspective — to step into the shoes of the other side and consider their constraints, goals, or pressures. This builds empathy and reduces the “enemy image” that fuels division.

How to apply it:

- Interrupt divisive language: “When you say ‘they,’ who do you mean — and have you spoken to them?”
- Redirect venting into constructive dialogue: “What would help you raise this with them directly?”
- Model unity in your own language: replace “they” with “we.”
- Encourage perspective-taking: “If you were in their role, how might you see this situation?”
- Set expectations that complaints must come with respect and intent to solve.

Example:

A sales leader noticed her team routinely blamed “operations” for lost deals. She made a new rule: no complaints about another team unless they were invited to the meeting. In addition, she asked her salespeople to imagine the operational constraints their colleagues faced before voicing criticism. The effect was transformative. Cross-department conversations improved, empathy increased, and collaboration replaced finger-pointing.

3. Use Positive Language Intentionally

Words shape perception. The way leaders frame challenges influences how teams respond. Positive language doesn’t ignore problems — it primes resilience.

How to apply it:

- Replace “We failed” with “We learned something useful.”
- Swap “This is a problem” for “This is a challenge we can solve.”
- Add “yet”: “We haven’t cracked this... yet.”

- Balance critique with recognition in feedback conversations.

Example: Employees dreaded performance reviews because the tone felt harsh. A new manager reframed them as “strengths to build on” and “areas to grow.” Suddenly, reviews became developmental rather than punitive. People left motivated instead of deflated.

4. Recognition and Gratitude Every Day

Recognition fuels happiness more than perks or bonuses. Gratitude builds a culture of appreciation. Without it, people feel invisible.

How to apply it:

- Recognize effort, not just outcomes: “Thanks for unblocking that step.”
- Mix formal recognition (team meetings, newsletters) with quick informal thanks.
- Create rituals like “shout-out rounds” at the end of meetings.
- Link recognition to values: “That showed real teamwork.”

Example: In a fast-growing startup, the CEO opened a #kudos Slack channel where anyone could thank a colleague. Within months it became the most used channel. Employees reported they checked it first thing every morning because it made them feel valued.

5. Focus on Resources and Strengths

Under stress, teams obsess over what’s missing — time, skills, money. Leaders who redirect focus to existing strengths restore confidence and capability.

How to apply it:

- Ask: “When have we solved something like this before? What worked then?”
- Name strengths explicitly: “You’ve handled conflict well before — how did you do it?”
- Encourage colleagues to remind each other of past wins.

Example: A product team panicked over an “impossible” deadline. Their leader asked them to recall times they had delivered under pressure. They listed tactics like pairing up, short stand-ups, and rapid escalation. Confidence returned, and they delivered successfully.

Purpose – Anchor to Meaning

1. Connect Tasks to Human Impact

Purpose becomes powerful when people see who benefits from their effort. Without that link, tasks feel abstract; with it, they feel urgent and worthwhile.

How to apply it:

- Share stories of how the team’s work has helped customers, patients, or colleagues.
- Translate tasks into benefits: “This will save small businesses hours each week” instead of “Submit by Friday.”
- Invite team members to meet or hear directly from end-users.

Example: A software team felt detached from the company’s mission. Their leader arranged quarterly calls with customers who described how the product protected their businesses.

Suddenly, bug fixes weren't chores — they were safeguards for livelihoods. Energy and pride surged.

2. Tell Stories, Not Just Metrics

Data explains what happened; stories explain why it matters. Without stories, progress feels clinical. With stories, it feels human.

How to apply it:

- Open meetings with a short story about how the work impacted someone.
- Frame new projects as narratives of change.
- Encourage employees to share stories they've heard from customers or colleagues.

Example: A logistics leader noticed that KPIs didn't inspire his team. He started every Monday meeting with a photo and story of a delivery that reached a community in need. Suddenly, moving pallets and trucks became a lifeline, not a routine.

3. Use the "Why Cascade"

Teams often know what to do and how to do it — but not why it matters. Leaders who explain the why give meaning to effort.

How to apply it:

- Always include the why when assigning work.
- Revisit the why during check-ins — don't let it fade after kickoff.
- Invite employees to ask "why" when unclear.

Example: A manager launched a process-automation project. Instead of saying, "We need fewer clicks," she told her team: "We're freeing frontline staff to spend more time with customers." Productivity targets turned into human impact.

4. Connect Purpose to Personal Values

People engage deeply when their work reflects what they care about most.

How to apply it:

- In 1:1s, ask: "Which part of your work feels most meaningful right now?"
- Look for opportunities to align tasks with personal values.
- Recognize contributions in ways that resonate with individual motivations.

Example: A hospital nurse admitted she loved teaching but rarely had the chance. Her manager gave her responsibility for mentoring new hires. Her sense of purpose expanded, and her engagement increased.

5. Ritualize Impact Reflection

Meaning grows stronger when people take time to notice it.

How to apply it:

- End team meetings with the question: "Who benefited from our work this week?"
- Build "impact reflection" into retrospectives.
- Encourage individuals to jot down one daily note on how their work mattered.

Example: A design firm ended each Friday with a five-minute ritual: everyone shared one impact their work had created. Over time, this ritual became the most anticipated part of the week.

People – Develop and Care

1. Create Psychological Safety

Without psychological safety, people keep quiet to protect themselves. With it, they share ideas, admit mistakes, and learn faster.

How to apply it:

- Model vulnerability by admitting your own mistakes.
- Respond to errors with curiosity.
- Encourage questions as valuable contributions.

Example: In one team, junior staff never spoke up. The manager began meetings with: “The only bad question is the one unasked.” Within months, even the quietest voices were shaping major projects.

2. Lead with a Coaching Mindset

Leaders don’t need to have all the answers — they need to ask the right questions. Coaching fosters ownership and creativity.

How to apply it:

- Replace advice with curiosity: “What do you think would work best in this situation?” instead of jumping in with your solution.
- Ask open questions that unlock thinking: “What outcome would be most valuable here? What options have you considered? What’s another approach you haven’t tried yet?”
- Strengthen confidence by reflecting back strengths: “I noticed how you handled that challenge last week — how can you build on that here?”

Example: A consulting manager used to jump in with solutions. She shifted to coaching questions. Soon, her team began generating their own strategies — and performance rose.

3. Invest in People Growth

Development signals care. Without it, people stagnate; with it, they thrive.

How to apply it:

- Ask: “What do you want to be better at this year?”
- Offer stretch projects and new responsibilities.
- Pair people with mentors or peer coaches.

Example: A junior analyst said she wanted to learn facilitation. Her manager gave her the chance to lead short stand-ups. She grew confident, and within a year she was leading full workshops.

4. Show Genuine Care Beyond Performance

People aren't just employees; they're human beings with lives outside work. Real care also means standing by them when they face challenges and cannot be at their best.

How to apply it:

- Begin 1:1s with a genuine check-in and listen beyond the surface.
- Respect personal boundaries while offering support in tough times.
- Acknowledge milestones — and show empathy during setbacks — with small, personal gestures.

Example: A leader sent handwritten notes to each team member on their work anniversary, naming one quality he appreciated about them. When one colleague went through a family crisis, he adjusted workload and checked in regularly. Employees said it made them feel seen as people, not just workers.

5. Foster Peer Recognition and Support

Cultures are strongest when people support each other, not just look to the boss for validation. When recognition and encouragement flow sideways — not only top-down — trust deepens and collaboration becomes natural.

How to apply it:

- End meetings with quick “who helped me” rounds to highlight everyday contributions.
- Create simple platforms (e.g. a kudos board, Slack channel) for peer shout-outs.
- Encourage teams to celebrate small wins collectively, so recognition becomes a shared habit, not just a manager's task.

Example: An engineering team added a ritual at sprint reviews: everyone named one colleague who had supported them. It shifted the culture from individual effort to collective care.

Progress – Fuel Motivation

1. Make Progress Visible Every Day

Progress is motivating when it can be seen, not just assumed.

How to apply it:

- Use visual boards or dashboards that show movement.
- Share “then vs. now” updates.
- Highlight small wins daily.

Example: A marketing team created a “done wall” where every completed task was posted. Watching the wall fill up gave them a sense of daily achievement.

2. Begin Check-Ins with Progress, Not Problems

The way a meeting starts sets the emotional tone.

How to apply it:

- Open 1:1s with: “What are you proud of since last time?”

- Begin team calls with progress updates before addressing blockers.
- Encourage everyone to share at least one positive step.

Example: A call center team flipped their weekly meeting from complaints-first to wins-first. Discussions became more energizing, and problem-solving improved.

3. Recognize Effort and Learning, Not Just Results

Progress is not only about outcomes — it's also about courage, learning, and growth.

How to apply it:

- Praise initiative, even when outcomes aren't perfect.
- Highlight persistence in the face of difficulty.
- Share learning openly after setbacks.

Example: A designer's prototype failed. Instead of criticizing, her leader praised her creativity and risk-taking. The team felt encouraged to keep experimenting.

4. Remove Blockers Quickly

Few things demoralize more than being stuck with an obstacle no one addresses.

How to apply it:

- Ask explicitly: "What's blocking you?"
- Commit to removing at least one barrier per person each week.
- Act quickly to escalate or cut red tape.

Example: A nonprofit leader introduced five-minute huddles focused on blockers and how to remove them. By removing obstacles fast, she turned frustration into flow.

5. Build Progress Rituals

Rituals help teams sustain motivation during long projects.

How to apply it:

- End weeks with reflection: "What moved forward?"
- Celebrate halfway points, not just final deadlines.
- Create symbolic markers — bells, emojis, or wall moves.

Example: A distributed team added a Slack "progress bell" that rang whenever a key ticket was closed. It became a playful way to keep motivation alive during tough sprints.

Perspective – See the Bigger Picture

1. Normalize Ups and Downs

Every journey has setbacks. Expecting smooth sailing makes dips feel like disasters.

How to apply it:

- Share stories of past bumps that ended well.
- Use metaphors: "This is just a steep stretch of the trail."

- Celebrate recovery as much as success.

Example: A leader called failed prototypes “steps closer.” Instead of despair, the team saw setbacks as progress in disguise.

2. Distinguish Signal from Noise

Not every urgent issue is truly important.

How to apply it:

- Ask: “Will this matter in six months?”
- Rank issues by real impact, not just volume.
- Pause before reacting to “urgent” requests.

Example: A finance team stressed over minor reporting errors. Their leader taught them to filter noise from signal. Stress levels dropped, and focus improved.

3. Encourage Multiple Lenses

Diverse viewpoints reveal possibilities.

How to apply it:

- Ask: “How would a customer see this? A competitor? A regulator?”
- Rotate agenda ownership so multiple voices shape decisions.
- Try role-reversal exercises in problem-solving sessions.

Example: During a pricing debate, engineers argued from the customer’s perspective. It uncovered blind spots and led to a better strategy.

4. Balance Short-Term and Long-Term Views

Fires are inevitable, but leaders must also protect the horizon.

How to apply it:

- Pair short-term deliverables with long-term vision in updates.
- Block time for strategic thinking.
- Name trade-offs openly.

Example: In a supply crisis, a leader reminded the team: “Today’s fix is urgent, but remember, we’re building five-year resilience.” Anxiety subsided, and focus sharpened.

5. Reframe Stress into Growth

Stress can be destructive, but reframed it becomes practice for resilience.

How to apply it:

- Ask: “What skill are we strengthening by handling this?”
- After tough sprints, name the resilience gained.
- Model reframing in your own language.

Example: After a chaotic launch, a startup leader told his team: “If we got through this, we can get through anything.” Exhaustion turned into collective pride.

Closing: The 5Ps in Action

Happiness doesn't come from slogans or perks. It comes from the daily experience of work — from the climate you set, the meaning you anchor, the care you show, the momentum you build, and the proportion you restore.

- Positivity sets the climate.
- Purpose anchors meaning.
- People builds care and growth.
- Progress fuels motivation.
- Perspective restores balance.

Do these consistently and you'll feel it: less drag, more lift. That's what riding the elephant looks like — creating conditions where both rider and elephant move forward together: stronger, happier, and more resilient.

Conclusion

As a leader, I know the weight of responsibility: targets to hit, changes to manage, decisions to make. As a coach, I know the quiet struggles people carry, and how much difference a leader's words, presence, and care can make. Writing this thesis has deepened my conviction that these two roles must come together. Leadership today is not only about driving performance; it is also about sustaining the people who create it.

The 5Ps are my way of bridging these worlds. They offer leaders — myself included — a practical compass for shaping climates where people can thrive. I have seen how something as simple as reframing a challenge, celebrating a small win, or asking a coaching question instead of giving an answer can transform the energy of a room. These are not grand acts, but they ripple outward, lifting both teams and leaders themselves.

My biggest insight is this: when teams are thriving, leadership feels lighter. Instead of pushing people uphill, it feels like moving forward with the wind at your back. That is the power of happiness in leadership. It sustains resilience, sparks creativity, and makes collaboration natural.

For me, the journey does not end here. As a leader, I want to practice these habits daily. As a coach, I want to help others discover them for themselves. Because in the end, happy teams do more than perform better — they make the work of leadership itself more human, more sustainable, and more fulfilling.

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