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Cracking up with a crack at the top job

Surveys find that a sense of wellbeing can desert even the most promising, writes **Ryk Bliszczyk**.

HAPPINESS is the new black. It's difficult not to have noticed the increasing attention and interest the topic of happiness has been receiving. A new discipline in psychology — positive psychology — has emerged, which has already resulted in a proliferation of research papers and publications that attempt to explain happiness and determine how to achieve it.

The results to date have offered a new perspective on the challenges of modern life and have generated some excitement among the popular media.

The study of happiness has not escaped the interest of economists either. As if to fulfil their negative stereotype as being always ready to dampen enthusiasm with a dose of rationality, economists' latest contribution to the research on happiness (or wellbeing as they refer to it) is to find that mid-life is the unhappiest time in our lives.

Blanchflower & Oswald (2007), researchers from the US and Britain respectively, have confirmed that, across most countries and cultures, there is a "U-shaped" relationship between age and wellbeing. This means people are happiest at the beginning and at the end of their lives but most unhappy in their mid-life, the pattern of wellbeing effectively mimicking a U-shape over a typical life cycle.

According to the research, high levels of happiness early in life gradually decline and

bottom out in the years between the late 30s to the early 50s. This is then followed by a rapid increase in levels of happiness so that by the time people are in their 60s and beyond they are again experiencing high levels of wellbeing.

The age at which the nadir of happiness is reached varies slightly across countries for which data was analysed, but the pattern was consistent across all. For the US, the low point for men is reached at approximately age 50 and for women at approximately age 38. In Europe, the low point is the mid-40s for both men and women. In Australia, the low point is about age 40.

The relevance of this latest research for Australian companies becomes obvious when we remember that it is about from the late 30s to about 50 that most ambitious and talented business people make (or aspire to make) a critical career transition to a leadership position.

Forty is about the age of most newly promoted senior managers and executives in Australian companies. It is close to the age when associates typically make partner in professional services in law, accounting or consulting.

It is when line managers get to become senior and executive managers — for example — and when finance officers become CFOs. It is also from this time on that senior managers can become CEOs of significantly sized companies, or are identified as CEO material.



Therefore, people experience the most unhappy periods of their lives right at the time when their professional careers are typically peaking. Is this why some otherwise promising managers fail to succeed in leadership positions?

The researchers went further and found that this low level of wellbeing in mid-life also correlates with the probability of depression. From a self-report survey of an additional 900,000 people in Britain, Blanchflower & Oswald found a

similar (but inverted) U-shaped pattern in the incidence of depression, with the high point — most cases of depression — occurring at about age 46.

That suggests that just when an ambitious and energetic manager is being given their

big break, their own personal demons are most likely to get in their way.

This of course does not mean that all men and all women will have major personal crises at these ages, but it does indicate very

strongly that people all over the world are at highest risk for such crises in their middle years.

Given these research findings about the state of mind of people in their middle years, their ability to cope with the stresses of leadership and respond constructively is potentially diminished. Which, of course, suggests that even a manager of high potential as a leader may fail in their attempt at their first major leadership role, possibly crippling any future ambition for leadership, because of issues arising from an age-related, low state of wellbeing rather than because of any inherent inability to lead.

Providing support and assistance for the psychological needs of managers and senior staff specifically to resolve these age-related issues would appear to be one logical talent management strategy that could pay off handsomely for a company.

Many companies already provide stress-reduction and lifestyle enhancement initiatives for employees, including:

- Policies and procedures that encourage work-life balance to reduce job stress.
- Access to crisis counselling.
- Good-quality mentoring from senior managers who also act as leader role models.

But for that critical transition to a leadership role, something more specific and targeted may be required.

While statistics are not available, it is clear that not all capable managers go on to become good leaders.

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