

crewmanship

how to be happy (on a superyacht)



You've worked hard to get your job and stand, well paid, on the deck of an amazing large yacht. It's a sunny day, in a beautiful location – happy? I hope so. David Melville of Symphony Teambuilding looks at the fundamentals of positive psychology and how working on a large yacht can help and hinder your happiness.

Let's be honest, we all want many things, but being happy is somewhere up at the top of the list for most people. I am fascinated by studies on happiness, because they attempt to explain something that we normally only experience intuitively. Researchers have shown that the ability to be happy is 50% genetic / childhood upbringing, and 50% interpretation and reaction to events. Significantly, those that class themselves as very happy are no more sociable, beautiful or successful than the average person.

A great number of studies have been undertaken on individual happiness, and in principal it's simple. But simplicity can be

illusive in practice, and life onboard a superyacht is often complex and demanding. You may work in an exciting and extraordinary environment, but don't kid yourself, your basic happiness drivers are the same as anybody else.

In my experience of working with crews, one of the problems I recognise is with people who have become swept up in the image of what a superyacht life should be, and have lost sight of the person underneath. Enjoy the partying and glamour, but if you are to sustain a career in the industry, you need to stay grounded and focus on core human behaviours.

Positive psychology practitioners agree on the following.
The happiest people:

- > Connect with close friends and family;
- > Pursue personal growth and long term relationships;
- > Judge their own relative success, rather than comparing against others.

Connect with close friends and family

One of the best things about superyachts is working with fun and positive people. Not much danger of being alone in the crew galley, I hear you say. But while surrounded by your crewmates you are nevertheless isolated from your immediate family and shore-based friends. Early studies of merchant navy crews found that those from sub-optimal family backgrounds often found the job the more satisfying than those from conventional families. The crew of the ship would become an institutional family, replacing the defective shore-based one. Problems for crew of contented families emerge when they attempt to replace their biological family with crewmates and suffer inevitable disappointment.

Leaving your family and friends behind can mistakenly cause you to focus all your attention on your crewmates. Those that have known you for years recede into the hinterland of your awareness and months slip by without meaningful connection.

Don't let distance weaken the bonds with those that mean the most to you. Spend time keeping in touch with your family, friends and loved ones. Write those emails, make those calls, send those photographs, put pen to paper. If you can't get home, see who can come out and visit you. Maintaining a positive relationship with your nearest and dearest costs money and takes time, but it is a basic building block in a robust happy personality.

“In the end the love you take, is equal to the love you make”
(The Beatles)

Celebrate your close relationships in the knowledge that meaningful connections safely weather time apart. If you are happy and succeeding in your chosen career, then those you leave behind will deal positively with your absence.

Psychologists know that successful friendships need to be close and include a great deal of self-disclosure to result in higher levels of happiness. If you can't connect with anybody, you can feel isolated in even a crowded environment. Surface-level conversation is the oil of everyday interaction, but happiness requires a degree of disclosure about hopes and fears – and unconditional acceptance of those disclosures. Amongst the rounds of shore-based partying and arduous onboard work – find the time to connect in a meaningful way with a crewmate or colleague. The further up the management ladder you climb the harder this can potentially be, and captains in particular are in danger of isolating themselves. Find someone to connect with – being the boss does not mean you can't reveal your hopes and fears.

A big barrier to being happy onboard is allowing small problems to develop into big ones. You need to be able to regularly review live-aboard issues in a safe environment and use constructive language to affect a solution. One of the key questions of team development surveys is “do you have a friend at work?” Take time to get to know your crewmates – you might like and enjoy them! Your crew can provide support, resources, sharing and caring – so long as you do too.

Personal Growth and Long Term Relationships

Personal growth is engaging in activities that you perceive as enriching and stimulating, rather than purely routine or mechanical. Your desire for personal growth exists upon a range dictated by your personality type. While some people can be happy working in the local supermarket, they are unlikely to be found on a superyacht.

Now all jobs onboard have an element of repetition. But hopefully the environment you find yourself in, the places you visit, the working challenges and opportunities to learn compensate for that. Happiness frequently occurs when people are absorbed in activities that cause them to forget themselves, lose track of time and stop worrying. These activities need to occur in some aspect of your work, or time aboard.

Successful working environments make it possible to learn and develop. Try and design your life so that you have a feeling of progress and create new opportunities for learning. Why not let the stewardess spend a day in the engine room, or deck crew in the galley. Learn new skills and understand each other's challenges. Request training, look out for courses and suggest enrolment. Be pro-active and remember, because it enhances your sense of self worth, you have the most to gain from developing new skills.

When all is new and you have much to learn onboard, then the job itself will deliver personal growth. But if you have been in your role for a while (and when not doing back-to-back charters) try and find time to engage in an activity that is not work related – and doesn't involve going to the bar! Learn the guitar, study a foreign language, take a walking tour ashore, learn the names of all the pesky birds that follow the yacht around, become involved in a local charity project – anything that causes you to lose track of time and stop thinking about yourself.

We all need intimacy – but single 20-year-olds can skip the next few paragraphs, it may not be relevant! For the majority of us, finding a permanent partner is a basic human need – we all want to be loved and find intimacy. If your partner is based ashore then putting effort into maintaining that relationship should be your primary objective. If they are onboard the boat, then you must interact and socialise away from the orbit of crew and guests to find your own personal space. Be aware that your relationship can have a big effect on the morale of the rest of the crew. If you are happy, they will be too (providing you are not all loved up in front of them.) However, couple arguments can totally pollute the working atmosphere onboard – it's quite a responsibility (see more on this subject in our Internal Affairs article on page 24).

If you are still looking for someone then a word of caution. Many successful relationships are formed between crewmates on yachts. But, oh dear, the number of disastrous ones! Please take care if you are becoming attracted to another crewmate – is it based on mutual compatibility or the pressure-cooker atmosphere of crew living? Should the relationship founder, it routinely results in one member of the couple deciding to leave their job – normally the more junior of the two. Crewmates take sides and others may leave in the aftermath. It's tough being the only single one on a boat, but better than waking up with the deckhand and living with the consequences! Happy people are able to make sensible choices, forgoing short-term pleasure seeking for the longer term reward of enhanced self respect.

Judge their own relative success, rather than comparing against others

So many people are hung up on somebody else's idea of what it means to be successful that they are unaware of what is truly important to them. The famous psychiatrist Carl Jung talked of the desires of the outer ego and the needs of the inner self. If you work on the largest yacht with the smartest crew, then on the surface level your 'outer ego' is being rewarded. If you work for a tight-knit supportive team and have the opportunity to learn and grow, then your 'inner self' is likely to be rewarded. The former is short-term gain, the latter long-term.

"You can't always get what you want, But if you try sometimes you might find, You get what you need"

(Rolling Stones)

Materialism can be damaging to happiness, as the rewards are relatively short lived. No sooner have you brought the latest iPod than the next one supersedes it. Talk to people ashore and everybody seems to be getting paid more (note: nobody ever tells their mates the truth about pay, so don't ask them.) Of course, the irony of this statement is that many of you will be working in a heavily materialistic environment – you are surrounded by the best and the latest of everything. Superyachts exist at the very apex of materialism. How do you reconcile this contradiction between what psychiatrists recognise and the world you find yourself within? Can you work in a materialistic environment and not be a slave to materialism? I believe you can, and the first step is to realise that it is not the ownership of assets that brings happiness. Work in large yachts for long enough and you will meet a lot of wealthy people, some of which are happy and others patently not. Don't blur the lines between you and those you work for.

Try not to use salary as the sole indicator of success. When examining why people are happy at work, financial reward is just one of six potential motivators, the other five being:

- > Personal development;
- > Ability to influence others;
- > Recognition;
- > Rewarding relationships;
- > Structured environment.

You need to set yourself challenging, yet achievable goals that match your motivators. Then put yourself in the right position to achieve them. Realising your goals enhances self worth and boosts happiness.

This does not mean that feedback from others can be ignored. Feedback is essential for measuring success at work. If you are

positive about developing and your boss is poor at providing feedback – then help them to provide it. Tell them you would really like to hear their assessment of your work. You are responsible for your own development. You are the person most likely to benefit from professional development, so take charge of that growth and ask for specific and meaningful help from your manager to achieve that.

Team Development helps make you happy

Successful high performance teams regularly check in with the key components of positive psychology. Well-run crews:

- > Avoid isolation and conflict by finding time for meaningful discussion and information sharing on their needs, issues and capabilities;
- > Take control of their working environment and leisure time to experience personal growth. They don't implode through inappropriate relationships;
- > Set challenging personal goals and measure their own relative success in achieving them. Avoid comparing themselves against other crew, yachts, guests and owners. Celebrate their success.

Ten simple things

The key components of individual happiness are simple. Don't make the mistake of thinking because you exist in an extraordinary world, that the principles of superyacht crew happiness are any different. A recent study found that acting out these 10 simple behaviours made a measurable difference in people's happiness. Why don't you try them?

- Count your blessings – at least 5 – at the end of each day.
- Have a conversation with a loved one each week.
- Give yourself a simple treat every day and take the time necessary to enjoy it.
- Cut your TV/DVD viewing by half, do something else.
- Keep a small plant and nurture it.
- Phone a friend who you have not spoken to for a while, and arrange to meet up in the future.
- Smile at, or say hello to, a stranger at least once a day.
- Have a good laugh, find something humorous every day.
- Get physical exercise. Half an hour, three times a week.
- Spread some kindness – do someone a good turn every day.

Cut out, stick by your mirror, and be happier!

Symphony is a leadership and team development company started by businessman and yacht racing skipper David Melville. It combines business school theory, with current sports psychology to provide a pragmatic set of tools from which to improve your team. Symphony has created an onsite Two-day team development workshop, specifically designed for large yacht crews www.symphonyteambuilding.co.uk Image courtesy of Corbis