

## “The Highest Level Of Happiness” In Pursuit Of Meaning: Working For A Credit Union

Tony Ward-Smith

Dr. Martin Seligman is someone I'd like to sit and have coffee with. And listen to. He has fascinating ideas about humans and their levels of happiness...theories that should be very useful to credit union CEOs and HR professionals.

Dr. Seligman is Professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania and Director of its Positive Psychology Center. A past President of the American Psychological Association, he is well known in academic circles and is a best-selling author. While he talks proudly of his chosen discipline, he laments that its primary emphasis has, for too long, focused on such negative problems as mental illness, rather than on the side of boosting the happiness quotient. He explains himself this way:

“When I tell people I'm a psychologist, they back away. Psychologists, after all, try to find what's *wrong* with you. I tell people I work on **positive psychology** and explain that my job is to find out what's really *right* with you and then to get you to use those things more. My mission is to increase understandings of positive emotion— and help people increase their happiness factor.”

Seligman identifies three levels of happiness. First come *the pleasures of life*—finding fun in everyday things. Next, *the accomplished life*— knowing your signature strengths and putting them into play as much as possible. The third level of happiness is *the pursuit of meaning*— or reaching for a purpose beyond oneself. And here he says, the more significant the external purpose one attaches oneself to, the more meaning...and genuine happiness...one gets out of life.

So how does all this apply to employees and credit unions? Well, every time we do employee surveys for credit unions, there's always one set of scores that comes out at the very top of everyone's ranking. Every time! And considering that the list is always between 70 and 90 items long and covers the full gamut of employment considerations, the relevance of this cannot be overplayed. These highest-ranking scores reflect the views credit union employees have about *the perceived significance of the work they do*.

The survey asks respondents to react to a number of statements by indicating how much they agree or disagree with each one. Each question set evolves around a particu-

lar theme: The Credit Union, My Job, My Supervisor, Training & Development, Working Conditions, Comp/Benefits, etc. Each set includes between five and twelve statements.

Working For The Credit Union		
CU "A"	I'm proud to tell people I work at the Credit Union.	4.4
	I enjoy helping people improve their financial situation.	4.4
	I like my job and enjoy the type of work I do.	4.3
	I enjoy promoting the Credit Union and its services.	4.2
CU "B"	I like my job and enjoy the type of work I do.	4.4
	I am proud to tell people I work at the Credit Union.	4.2
CU "C"	I enjoy helping people improve their financial situations.	4.6
	I'm proud to tell people I work at the Credit Union.	4.4
	I enjoy promoting the Credit Union and its services.	4.4
	I like my job and enjoy the type of work I do.	4.4
	I feel that I can personally make a difference here.	4.4
CU "D"	I'm proud to tell people I work at the Credit Union.	4.5
	I like my job and enjoy the type of work I do.	4.4
	I feel my work has importance	4.4
CU "E"	I like my job and enjoy the type of work I do.	4.5
	I'm proud to tell people I work at the Credit Union.	4.4

Note: "Score" represents the making of each statement relative to the overall level of agreement. A "perfect" score of 5.0 would indicate that everyone taking the survey "Strongly Agreed" with the statement.

Again, out of all these, the questions that get the highest rating from credit union employees are the ones about the very nature of their work. These don't just rank near the top, they *are always at the top*. In all the years of doing this, not once have any of these statements relating to personal fulfillment and job satisfaction been ranked anywhere but in the top ten scores on any credit union's list. It is absolutely unfailingly clear that employees find great significance in what the credit union does for members. It is equally clear that they gain tremendous personal satisfaction from performing that helping function.

This job satisfaction factor counts more than compensation, more than benefits, more than any other consideration on the employment issues list. And there are several points to make of it.

1. Talk about a sense of purpose...it's definitely there, among credit union employees! They are quick to express it. And clearly, it has great significance for them. In terms of Seligman's "happiness" scale, it is at the top. Yes, em-

ployees enjoy the everyday pleasures gained from interacting with members. And yes, they find great satisfaction in developing and using their personal skills and talents over time. But the real payoff comes from the sense of “beyond myself” fulfillment they gain from making a positive difference for members.

2. This purpose goes well beyond just providing “good service”...to the extent such is measured by smiles, friendliness and calling members by name. It reaches right to the point of actually making a difference for them, solving problems for them, explaining things and offering financial insights. It reaches to people leaving the credit union not only with a warm feeling from being treated well and in a friendly manner...but of having gained or benefited as a result of the interaction experience. (Marketers note: “Fulfillment” is the buzzword here!)

3. In their survey responses, employees express the sense of wanting to perform to this level, yet often feeling restricted or limited in doing so by policies, time constraints and workload pressures imposed by the organization. An often-repeated statement runs along the lines of “...sometimes I feel that the CU talks about being here for the member, but doesn’t really hold to that as the top priority.”

So, what to do with this?

First, realize that your people, for the most part, are not only where you’d hope they’d be—attitude wise, they’re probably further along with this intention than you think they are. You should realize that, for them, the opportunity to perform in this dimension is actually one of the most important employment benefits the credit union offers.

Build on this two ways: First, incorporate this helping role forcefully into your “brand”, your market difference, your base function. Be sure to confirm this purpose as the very essence of the credit union...as the difference between it and other banking sources.

Second, build a training program around the “helping” dimension. Find, build or buy training tools and modules that help your people become more knowledgeable about matters of personal finance.

Managers should also hold serious discussions with member-contact employees about balancing the need to keep things moving, but also allowing for sufficient one-

on-one attention to members and their issues/ problems/ questions/ concerns.

Hire people based on their strengths, and help to build these strengths. Tell them that’s what’s going on, so they appreciate it. In a sense, hiring them is directly complementing them on who they are. The next step is to do everything possible to support their effectiveness. And this, again, is what an employee survey can help with. The instruction that goes with the survey is simply this: “Tell us what you think would help make the credit union a better banking place for members...and a better place to work for you!” Then, of course, you must heed their responses, their comments and suggestions.

The challenge for CEOs is to learn to talk skillfully and sensitively about meaning and purpose. Don’t do it by saying how important this work is to the credit union. Rather, offer verbal pictures of how very meaningful and important the helping services of the credit union are to members. Be able to speak easily about personal finance as one of the most important aspects of everyday life. People with financial problems have difficult lives. And everyone has financial problems, or questions, or issues, or concerns.

So in light of Seligman’s theory that the highest level of happiness is gained from having purpose outside oneself—working at the credit union is, for most employees, more than a job, more than a source of necessary income. It is a meaningful purpose. It can, and does, add considerable significance to the lives of those who do it. After all, according to all those employee surveys...it’s our people themselves who make this very claim!

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Tony Ward-smith has consulted with credit unions on matters of “Market-Based High Performance” for more than thirty years. Ward-Smith & Company provides online employee surveys exclusively for credit unions. Take a test run at [www.ward-smith.com](http://www.ward-smith.com). Check out Dr. Seligman’s Positive Psychology website: [www.authentic happiness.org](http://www.authentic happiness.org)