

Want to be more productive? Have fun at work

The secret to producing more with less is not longer hours but making happiness a way of life at work.

KISHORE MAHBUBANI

The Straits Times (Singapore)

February 14, 2015 Saturday

Two contradictory sentences accurately describe my working life. First, I have not worked a single day in my life. Second, I have worked relatively long hours per week, since I often "work" seven days a week. How do I reconcile this contradiction? The simple answer is that I have enjoyed each day of my work.

It all began on April 22, 1971, when I climbed the steps of the City Hall opposite the Padang to go to work as a desk officer in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). All the desk officers sat together in a large room with no air-conditioning. Only the Deputy Secretary and Permanent Secretary had air-conditioned offices. As far as I can recall, I felt no discomfort. I say this because most university graduates today would find it inconceivable that they could work in a room with no air-conditioning.

My job as a desk officer was to find out about developments in all corners of the world. So, in the days before the Internet, I read a lot of newspapers. I enjoyed this. One day, the Ministry of Finance sent a team to "audit" the work of the MFA. This team came to the conclusion that MFA desk officers did no work because the desk officers sat around all day and read newspapers. They were at least half right.

Geopolitics has always fascinated me. Analysing geopolitics was more fun than any sport I played. Hence, when I was paid a monthly starting salary of \$900 a month to analyse global developments, I couldn't believe my luck. I was being paid to have fun. This pattern continued for 33 years till I left the MFA in 2004 to begin another fun career as a dean of a school of public policy.

Why do I tell these personal stories? I believe that these stories may suggest a solution to one of our most pressing national problems: the need to increase productivity. Several of our leaders have correctly highlighted that one of our biggest challenges is to improve productivity.

As Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam said in his 2014 Budget Speech: "That is why raising productivity is at the centre of our economic agenda. It is the only way we can raise our living standards in the years to come."

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong also said in his speech at the opening of National Productivity Month on Oct 7 last year: "In our new situation, productivity becomes more important, not less."

The word "productivity" is one of those peculiar English words that is frequently used but little understood by the man in the street. Hence, when most people are told that they should increase their productivity, the message they receive in their minds is that they should work harder or longer hours. Actually, working harder rarely increases productivity, and working longer hours to produce the same outcome in fact decreases productivity.

What motivates people

Indeed, having fun increases productivity more effectively. To understand how non-monetary and non-material incentives can be equally effective, please watch a short video by Dan Pink, available on YouTube, titled "The surprising truth about what motivates us".

This is easy to understand when people are working in highly skilled professional jobs such as doctors and lawyers, bankers and civil servants. However, it is hard to understand that this can be done with people who are doing relatively low-skilled jobs such as waiters or doormen. My 10 years of living in New York City taught me that workers in these jobs can both have fun and be productive.

Many restaurant owners in Singapore complain that the recent permanent reduction in work permits has led to a shortage of waiters. Yet, it is still true that the average Singapore restaurant still has more wait staff per customer than an average New York restaurant. Why? Why can two wait staff take care of a small restaurant in New York City when the same restaurant needs five in Singapore?

The answer is going to be complex. Many factors are at play. Economic incentives are part of the answer as New York waiters and waitresses are better paid. They also retain all their tips. But economics is only part of the answer. The other part of the answer is that many New York waiters have a sense of teamwork and "esprit de corps". They believe in the quality of the experience the restaurant is giving its customers. I have vivid memories of cheerful and happy New York waiters and waitresses rushing from table to table. They seemed to be enjoying themselves, not suffering.

Generating happy workers should be a laudable goal in itself. However, it is also the only way to achieve one of our national goals: to continue delivering economic growth. For decades, we have relied on foreign workers to generate growth. Amazingly, as far back as 1972, Dr Goh Keng Swee observed that Singapore's "position is probably unique in that she is now dependent on a continuing supply of foreign workers to sustain growth". However, as Mr Lee Kuan Yew observed in 2011, "we've grown in the last five years by just importing labour. Now the people feel uncomfortable, there are too many foreigners".

If we stop increasing the number of foreign workers (as we should), the only way to deliver economic growth is to get the same number of Singaporeans and permanent residents to deliver a higher economic product. In theory, they could do this by working longer hours, provided that the longer hours translate to more output or better outcomes. However,

Singapore already has one of the highest average working hours in the world - 2,287 hours a year, according to a study by the Groningen Growth and Development Centre in 2013.

Happy teams

This is why generating a happy workforce is so critically important for Singapore. If each of us is going to produce more and better output than we have been delivering, the only way to achieve this is for each of us to voluntarily decide that we want to do so.

From personal experience, I have long learnt that happy teams are the most productive teams.

The Lee Kuan Yew School is blessed that we get so many global luminaries to speak to our school. We organise over 400 events a year. In theory, our events team should be stressed out. In practice, they are not, because they are one of the happiest teams in our school. They enjoy their work and have a lot of fun working together. A behavioural scientist told me this is not unusual. He said research has established that happy workers not only perform their job better but they also help their colleagues, and so team performance and team morale increase.

This is the ultimate paradox. Productivity is a serious matter. As Nobel laureate Paul Krugman said: "Productivity isn't everything, but in the long run it is almost everything. A country's ability to improve its standard of living over time depends almost entirely on its ability to raise its output per worker."

Yet, to achieve this serious goal, our workers need to have fun and enjoy their work. We need to have a happy Singaporean workforce.

Happiness has never been a part of our national goals. It may have been seen as a distraction from our serious goal of building a strong and productive nation. For the next 50 years, if we are going to continue in our mission of building a strong and productive nation, we have to make happiness one of our core national priorities.

Happiness is a desirable end in itself, but it is also a very effective means to achieve other desirable ends.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

The writer is dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, NUS, and author of *The Great Convergence: Asia, The West, And The Logic Of One World*.