

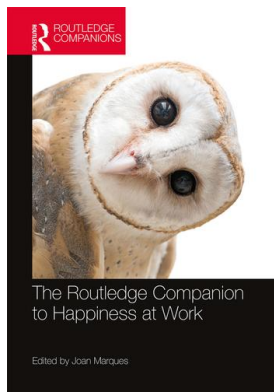
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The Routledge Companion to Happiness at Work

Joan Marques

Finding Happiness at Work

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Juanita Coleman-Merritt

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FINDING HAPPINESS AT WORK

Self-love, Self-awareness, Self-efficacy and Self-appreciation

Juanita Coleman-Merritt

Introduction

I am a teacher, who, over time, developed my own criteria for the kind of Principal and teaching staff I would agree to join. When I interviewed for a teaching or administrative position, I considered carefully the kind of work environment and team I was exploring: were the participants a team—did they seem to work collaboratively; would I have opportunities to learn and grow with the school; was the principal the kind of inclusive leader who would champion the best outcomes for the children in his/her care; would the school team welcome and nurture the support and active involvement of parents and community? In other words, would this work environment be a place where I could feel fulfilled and therefore happy? I exercised self-love and self-awareness as I sought out work settings where I could thrive.

Later, as an Administrator, I thought deeply about the kind of work environment my staff and I would need to develop a sense of self-efficacy and self-appreciation. For example, on one of my assignments, I inherited a staff of rather unhappy individuals—at odds with each other and other staff at the site. My first initiative was to help the staff members see themselves as a team and begin to function as one. They spent a great deal of time out in the field. So, I needed to build in time for us to get to know each other and talk about our common purpose and goals. One of our practices was to read from the work of Covey and Goleman and apply our learning to how we interacted with each other and our constituents.

I have offered insights from these administrative experiences to each of the four workers we meet in this article. Each has been able to find greater success and happiness in their work lives by focusing on Self-love, Self-awareness, Self-efficacy, Self-appreciation—or a combination of all of them.

Self-love

Karen had been working at her temporary job as an Attorney for a year when she was asked to interview for a permanent position. She was told that another person would also be interviewing. She had worked hard as a Temp, and she had the feeling that her supervisor, the General Council, would support her candidacy. He had trained her carefully when she was first hired, and had reviewed her work meticulously, always complementing and critiquing her documents with equal intensity. But she was nervous about being interviewed by administrators from other departments

with which she had interactions. And then, there was the CEO, who would have someone interview her on his behalf—and she had had limited interaction with him over the course of the year.

Karen was especially worried about her educational background. She had not graduated from an Ivy-league college or graduate school. She was convinced that she didn't have the "pedigree" in which upper level managers were usually interested. What if the other candidate did? Karen was also of Afro Caribbean descent and the only Black person on the payroll. What was the other candidate's background, she wondered?

In spite of feeling that she delivered a mediocre interview due to her nervousness, Karen was hired. What a relief! Yet, the doubts that caused her to be fearful about interviewing continued to interfere with her confidence for the next three years.

Karen continued to report to her original supervisor, and all of her evaluations were extremely positive. Her Supervisor was always warm and caring, but firm in the requirement that they agree on goals each time that she would meet before the next evaluation. Karen approached her evaluations with trepidation. She worried about whether she might have a negative outcome—she had made progress, but would her supervisor be satisfied? Was it enough? She worried about what kind of feedback he might be getting from others that she worked with. His assistant also gave her assignments—his feedback was always "cut and dry"—usually few criticisms, but no compliments either. Then too, there were two women in supervisory positions in another department with whom she interacted regularly. They were critical and often dismissive of her—in spite of her efforts to be positive and friendly. They seemed pleasant with all the men in the company, but acted as if they resented her very presence.

Karen was also concerned about her pay. Although she received an increase when she became a permanent employee, she and her supervisor had noted that her salary was below normal pay scale for her title and work assignments. He had explained that the company was at a crossroads and pay levels were stagnant. He said that he would work on getting her a pay raise as soon as the future of the company "was settled". But over the three years that she worked under him, she received only one small raise.

When Karen's supervisor announced that he would be moving to a new position, he informed both his assistant and Karen that they would become the only two attorneys in that department, and would be responsible for all assignments in the future. He advised them to ask for raises if no increase was offered, because the company did not plan to replace him, and both would have an increase in workload. The assistant requested and received a raise and a new title as the Head of the Department. Karen did not. She continued to worry that she was not valued and that her great efforts to improve and provide excellent service were not appreciated. Added to this discomfort was the fact that she suddenly found herself having to report even more frequently to the department supervisors who she was certain disliked her and now might try to get her fired. In her four years at ABC company, Karen had never attained a sense of balance and inner peace. Although she generally liked the work and felt increasingly proud of her growth in experience and skill, she continued to feel that she herself was not accepted, "not quite good enough".

Let's examine what factors might be root causes of Karen's discomfort. She had started out at ABC as a temporary worker. Because she had difficulty finding a permanent job after passing the Bar, she took the initiative and sought temporary positions in her field so as "to pay the bills". That could have been a source of pride, but she had difficulty shaking off the label "temporary" in her own mind. Second, she was a woman of color in an environment generally designed and controlled by white males. The white women that she encountered also seemed affected by this circumstance; they projected an unwelcoming attitude—perhaps out of defensiveness.

In addition, Karen took on one other perceived label of inferiority: "Not Ivy League". Due to her initial work experience at another company, she perceived that leaders in her field preferred to elevate those who came from prestigious universities as opposed to those who demonstrated merit.

A state of self-love might have led Karen to consider herself worthy—she would have focused on the inner strength, the drive that caused her to prepare diligently for a career that was meaningful to

her and to strive for excellence regardless of monetary compensation. Once she had the opportunity she had sought, she might indeed have felt worthy; but she was not confident nor assertive about her self-worth. Her supervisor, who had trained her and elevated her through mentoring her, had encouraged her to assert her value to her employers. He let her know that it was an opportune time to advance her career. When she might have “leaned in”, in the words of Sheryl Sandberg (*Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*), she hesitated.

My recommendation for Karen was to practice affirming her own value in her mind. I asked her if she was aware of self-affirming practices, and she was, but she had never implemented them on a regular basis.

I sent her some sample affirmations—some more spiritual, and some more specific to her situation. I suggested that she engage in a daily regimen of affirming her self-worth at whatever time of day she was able to relax, even for a few minutes, and have a private conversation with herself.

I also suggested that Karen practice daily meditation for ten minute periods, perhaps first thing in the morning or last thing at night. I thought that meditating might help to calm her anxiety about being criticized or fired, simply for asserting her desire for adequate pay. I shared some simple strategies for meditation—I asked her to try them and pick one that seemed most comforting.

Finally, I suggested, regardless of the perceived negative expectations of coworkers, such as her new supervisor or other significant figures in her workplace, that she find out who she needed to approach in order to voice her concerns about receiving adequate compensation, and take action: make an appointment as soon as she felt ready.

I asked Karen what she thought would be her own intelligent, reasonable response to a similar request from a subordinate of her caliber. She agreed that although she probably would not immediately commit, she would certainly agree to take a look at the company’s ability and willingness to offer an increase at the time, or she would establish when an increase would be possible. I asked if she had any reason to believe that the CEO was not intelligent or would not use reason upon hearing her request—which of course would include her ideas about why she deserved a raise. I asked if she could explain to me why she deserved a raise. She was immediately able to give me an impressive answer!

Karen took a few weeks to develop the inner strength to set up an appointment with the CEO. The first thing he said when they sat down was that he was up to date on the changes going on in her department and that he was interested in how these changes would impact her. The perfect opening! She took a deep breath, let him know what she liked about working with the company so far, how her workload would now change, and the title and compensation she believed to be commensurate with her additional duties. She got both the raise and the title because she had shown that she knew her own value. There were other outcomes from her decision to advocate for herself. The manager who had previously been dismissive of her began to show respect for her opinions and to interact with her as an equal. The next time she was asked to take on additional assignments, she was offered a bonus.

Self-awareness

Nona had six jobs in the last nine years. She had generally negative experiences at four of these work settings, but she had now been working at her current job for three months and was hopeful. She expressed optimism about the work, her relationships with coworkers, her opportunities for career advancement, as well as increased compensation. She was hopeful; I was hoping that I could help her continue to feel the joy that she now felt about going to work. When I asked her why she thought she had changed jobs so frequently in the past, she identified a different problem with each job. But when considered in totality, a common factor emerged: relationships. I thought that I could best support Nona’s chances for success in her new position by helping her examine her own level of self-awareness.

In 2010, Nona worked for a company that created and sold wallcoverings to construction companies. She was an Office manager who had started her career as a clerk and developed the skills to become a manager through on-the-job training. Nona describes herself as a “Loner”. She explains that she does not wish to be “micro-managed” while working. She likes to be told what her tasks are and be left alone to complete them. She believes that she is generally efficient and has her own system for planning out her work and getting it done.

She says that she is friendly with co-workers, but not interested in becoming too “buddy-buddy”.

Nona had worked for CDE company for three years when she returned from a vacation to a backlog of emails. She had over 200 responses to make, so she made the effort to move through them quickly and make her responses as short as possible. One of her correspondents complained to her Supervisor that she had responded to an email in “all caps”—and she was offended. Nona told her Supervisor that it certainly wasn’t her intention to yell at anyone and commented, “This B----h in Texas is just trying to get me fired”. Her Supervisor asked her to write to the recipient and apologize for the caps. She thought that was unnecessary since that mistake could have happened to anyone. Furthermore, she elaborated on the fact that two people in that construction office had caused her problems in the past by messing up their order, and blaming her for the resulting discrepancies. She repeated that she was not willing to write a note of apology. She was fired the next day. Nona commented that her Supervisor attempted to block her from receiving unemployment benefits, but she said, “I was smarter than he was—I knew the law!”

After a period of unemployment, Nona was hired as an Office/Inventory manager for a restaurant. She commented that, even during her interview, she could tell that she would not enjoy working with the Chef. It could be argued that it was probably not a good idea to accept a position in a restaurant, if you anticipated a disagreeable relationship with the Chef. Sometimes, it isn’t practical to turn down a position; however, it might be possible to anticipate what the difficulties might be and plan ways to ameliorate or avoid them.

Nona didn’t find it possible to avoid the difficulties she anticipated. She felt it was important to let the Chef know up front that she was not a person to be “walked over”. She noted that he was not her direct Supervisor; she knew her job and she intended to do it without interference. After a series of negative interactions, the Chef accused Nona of using drugs on the job. He had observed her injecting a substance into her abdomen. Although she was actually a diabetic, and was administering an insulin injection, she was suspended from her duties without pay the same day. Nona went to Court and won a suit for the way in which the company had handled the accusation against her, but she did not ask to be reinstated because of the toxic relationships she had encountered there.

At Nona’s next job, she was trained as a Customer Service Representative. The company was based in France, but had an office in New York. She was happy with the idea of learning and practicing new skills and even learning some French, but she felt that once the training was over, her supervisors did not give her the support she needed. I asked Nona how she had approached her need for assistance, and whether she felt that she still had some resistance to “being micro-managed”. She didn’t think that was the problem.

I had known Nona since she was a teenager. She had grown up under difficult circumstances. She was resilient and had developed what some might call “a thick skin”. She had a sharp mind, learned quickly, and was fiercely protective of her inner core. I wanted to help her explore her work relationships and examine to what extent she was aware of the way in which her truly forceful personality might trigger either reluctance to engage with her, or a tendency to become defensive. Even in talking with me, she “had her guard up”—she was convinced that the problems lay with the Trainers and Supervisors.

I wondered aloud, if there was anything she might have done differently to get more assistance—perhaps from a co-worker. She didn’t believe that was possible—when she needed help, they were all busy with their own work. I asked if she had made any friends since she had started the

job. “No,” she said, “I’m new on the job and I try to focus on my own work—I’m not there to socialize.” “Did they have any meetings so that Representatives could share any problems or concerns?” “They had a few—I attended them,” she commented, “but I didn’t find them that helpful.”

I decided to be more direct. I asked her to describe her personality as she thought others might initially perceive her. She offered that others probably thought of her as a strong person—one who is willing to “speak their mind”. Was she friendly? Receptive to meeting new people? “I’m outgoing—I like to have fun, but it depends on the setting”—she liked to “size up” the situation and see how others might react towards her.

I expressed support for the idea that when we meet a new group of people in any setting, it is good and natural to try to understand the personalities and the vibrations in the room; however, the more receptive and positive we are in our manner, the more we tend to allow others to be open and receptive. If we are wary and defensive, we tend to trigger similar responses in others. I let her know that the stories she told of her relations with people in some of her past work settings made me wonder if she was as aware as she could be of her initial effect on others. I suggested that she not only consider her choice of words, but also nonverbal communication—tone of voice, facial expressions, and hand gestures. Nona seemed more thoughtful after our conversation about specific aspects of communication.

I suggested, since she was feeling really positive about her new job, that she try to refrain from voicing criticisms or negative thoughts to co-workers, listen to their comments carefully, and voice any positive thoughts about the work environment, her co-workers, and her progress on the job. And ask for any help that she needed, not only from supervisors, but anyone who had the knowledge or skills that could enhance her performance. Showing receptiveness to understanding her new setting might help her build friendly relationships.

I also asked her to be aware of her own thoughts and feelings, and to take note of any concerns that tended to make her feel unhappy at work, but not to react negatively or defensively in word or actions until she had given some careful thought to how she might resolve issues in a positive way. Nona liked to read, so I sent her a copy of Covey’s *The 7 habits of Highly Effective People*, and suggested that she read the chapter on Principles of Empathic Communication.

I hoped that the questions I raised would set Nona on a path to greater self-awareness. It seemed to me that she was a fine candidate for training in Emotional Intelligence, which would give her an opportunity to explore her own level of self-awareness, her understanding of her own feelings, reactions and behaviors, and the importance of empathy in building relationships. Such training would also offer some tools for self-management under stress, ways to give and receive constructive criticism, and ways to approach disagreements that could lead to positive outcomes (Goleman, 1995, p. 149; Bandura, 1995). I recommended some training programs and hoped she would take advantage of the opportunity!

Self-efficacy

Nick has spent several years working with a company that provides recreational programs on college campuses. When I met with him in 2014, he expressed considerable angst and disillusionment with his career prospects. In exploring the source of his unhappiness, he lamented the fact that he had not earned advanced degrees in any field, and was stuck in a work situation where he had not found a career path for advancement. He felt he had important responsibilities for recruiting, training, and supervising 30 to 40 staff members, and providing a variety of programs for over 150 adults and children at any given time, as well as promoting and marketing the children’s classes.

Even when he looked outside of his company, the pay scale for his type of position without a Master’s degree was low, and opportunities for advancement were slim. He was not prepared to consider going back to school, so I noted that he had several years of experience and asked him to list

the particular skills he had mastered in his current position. He identified planning and scheduling, program logistics, providing training, risk management, and traffic control as skills he had acquired over his years with the programs. I suggested that he explore related opportunities as a regular employee on the campuses where he worked—which he agreed to do.

The second source of Nick's unhappiness in his work setting was his assessment of the culture. He felt that the Supervisors' lack of positive leadership fostered the development of cliques and gossip-mongering among co-workers. Some employees seemed to be a part of the "In-crowd", while others were discouraged from participating. Nick noted that he was generally included because of his longevity with the company and initial relationship with the Supervisor who had originally hired him. She had invited him to apply for the Coordinator position and she knew she could count on his loyalty to the program. But he objected to the way some of the other staff members were treated. Some were able to "get away with crappy performance", while others were held to a higher standard; some easily got the equipment and materials they needed, while others did not.

I asked Nick if there were aspects of his job that were rewarding and a source of happiness—after all, he had persisted in the company's employ for over ten years! He liked working with youth programming, and he liked the flexibility and variety of tasks and work sites. The workload was seasonally more demanding—mainly during spring and summer—but much lighter during fall and winter months. He liked training and mentoring Jr. staff. His work was compatible with his interest in music and the arts. He also agreed that he had good benefits and access to recreational and educational opportunities for his 2 children.

Generally, Nick acknowledged that the actual work he did was satisfying, even uplifting. But he believed that what was lacking was positive leadership. He had a vision of what would help create a more supportive and inclusive work environment, but he did not see himself as a person that could be an effective catalyst. I suggested that while he had limited options for increasing his compensation, Nick actually had no limitations on his efforts to improve working relationships in his department.

At that point, we discussed ways that Nick could begin to capitalize on his personal assets and raise his concerns about working relationships with program administrators. The first issue he raised was a request about equipment needed for the aquatic program. Aquatic instructors needed appropriate shoes, wet suits, and supplies. Nick had put in a request, but had been told that other more popular classes would have to be supplied first. He had waited, but nothing more was said or done regarding aquatic program requests.

Next, Nick put his request for the equipment in writing explaining the reasons for the items listed and the way in which they would enhance safety and bring the department into compliance with its own regulations. His Supervisor invited him to meet with her about his request. She acknowledged that the aquatic program was lacking some items normally provided, but said that funding was short and she was hoping they could "get by for this year".

Nick insisted that the particular equipment was essential and they should provide it or else not run the program until they could. Within a few days, the equipment was ordered. Nick found that he could be more effective in making changes than he had thought.

I asked Nick to reflect on some of the important changes he would like to see in his workplace culture: a more inclusive environment, where fellow workers felt that they were part of the team and that they were treated fairly. I asked him to consider the steps he might take and the people he might enlist, in order to become an effective catalyst for change. Since he had the ear of at least one of his supervisors, he might want to start with her. Nick was an employee that had invaluable experience running a complex program, and he was relied on for his expertise in Risk Management. Although he was unhappy with the status quo, he was not using the influence he had effectively.

Over the following year, as Nick addressed issues related to fair treatment, inclusiveness and consistency in providing resources for all departments, he saw more positive norms emerge. He made a

personal commitment that even if he was not affected by a negative or biased practice among his colleagues, if he couldn't change it, he would decline to engage in that practice or activity. He found that other employees also became more willing to express their concerns, and he was able to help them resolve issues in ways that benefited the whole staff.

Nick eventually had the courage to approach Senior Supervisors about increasing his compensation. Although he still feels that his salary is low considering the work that he does, his efforts have resulted in regular salary reviews and pay raises for him and his co-workers. He expresses a greater sense of accomplishment and inner peace as he goes about his work because he is increasingly effective in making positive changes.

Self-efficacy is an individual's belief in his/her capacity to exert control over his/her own behavior and social environment. In Nick's case, it is the confidence and willingness to take the actions that he can to make his work environment a better place to work. Once he pressed for one change that he truly believed was necessary, and showed the conviction to follow through until he attained it, he began to increase his influence and his success (Covey, 1989, pp. 81–86).

Self-appreciation

Charles has recently opened his own practice as an independent contractor working with substance abuse programs, mental health facilities, and individuals who seek him out as a counselor to help them overcome substance abuse disorders. Prior to opening his practice, Charles spent 15 years working with correctional and substance abuse facilities as a Counselor. He first became involved in this work at a state facility in Ohio where he worked with the Department of Youth Services Corrections and Rehabilitation as a Juvenile Correctional Officer.

Charles has a Bachelor's Degree in film and communications, but had moved to Ohio and was having difficulty finding work there. His neighbor, who was a minister, had organized a church group to visit young juvenile offenders. Charles volunteered with the group for a while and enjoyed working with them. The minister admired his efforts and recommended him for the position at the Department of Youth Services. Charles, who had grown up around many young people who made poor choices and became incarcerated as teenagers, felt that he had been fortunate to avoid similar circumstances. He wanted to help young people like the friends of his youth.

His first experience working with correctional programs was rewarding. The program took a creative approach toward substance abuse and juvenile offenders. Charles was able to use his communication skills in working with the youth assigned to him. In addition to one-on-one and group activities, he recorded their individual stories about their lives, the choices they had made, and their hopes for the future. He was able to use musical, theatrical, and artistic projects to provide them with creative avenues of expression. He liked the work so much that he enrolled in classes at night to obtain a Masters' Degree in Counseling.

Charles worked with the correctional program for three years, then decided to move to Southern California to continue his studies. While completing his degree, he took a job, again working with the Department of Youth Services; this time as a Substance Abuse Counselor. Each student assigned to him was scheduled for a full day of activities: safety class, social interactions, educational activities, chores, and recreational activities. He did not have the freedom to develop creative or individualized activities. The highly structured regimen meant that he spent less time with the juveniles and couldn't get to know them as well, and goals that he had focused on in Ohio, such as building self-esteem, were not easily incorporated.

In just under three years, Charles decided to move to a new position as a Probation Officer. He wasn't able to find satisfaction in this role either. His young clients were referred by the Drug Court. By participating in a treatment program set up by the Probation Officer, they would be eligible to have their criminal records expunged. Charles found that the treatments offered were not geared

toward making a positive change in the lives of the young people with whom he worked. Rather the program seemed to be about filling quotas and keeping the funding flowing.

Over the next ten years, Charles worked in several different facilities that provided services to rehabilitate clients suffering from substance abuse. He was unhappy working in all of them. When I asked him to describe the conditions that caused him to be unhappy with his jobs in a series of different settings, with different clients and different co-workers, he offered that they were not all that different. It seemed to him that none of the facilities fulfilled their mission statements—they were supposed to be rehabilitative, but did not make genuine efforts to help clients change their lives in significant ways.

Charles saw the substance abuse centers as another arm of a criminal justice system that was increasingly about the business of making money rather than delivering a service. He said that he personally disagreed with policies that he had to enforce to keep his job. He was witness to prejudicial attitudes—if not outright racist behaviors—toward members of specific groups, such as Native Americans and African American men. He had not found another work environment where he experienced inner peace and satisfaction since his initial work experience in the correctional institution in Ohio. Charles dealt with his unhappiness at work by setting up a practice of his own.

For the last six months, Charles has been counseling the same kinds of clients in his private practice. I asked him to identify the elements that have made this work experience a happy one. Charles believes that he is a well-trained and experienced Counselor for people who are struggling with substance abuse. He recognizes and appreciates his skills and ability to support and help his clients. He needed to give himself the space and peace of mind to treat his clients based on his interactions with them. He was no longer rushed, no longer trying to make guidelines with which he did not agree fit their needs. He was able to focus on the individual who was in front of him; he was able to sit quietly, in a stress-free environment, and in a more humanizing atmosphere, where he could truly listen with his heart. He stated that his therapeutic intent is to lift the spirit of the whole person. He feels free to use spiritual as well as psychological resources as he works with his clients.

Charles is an example of the importance of self-appreciation for happiness at work. As long as he continued to choose work settings where he was bound by policies and practices with which he did not agree, he was not appreciating his own skills and expertise, nor his deep commitment to actually making a difference in the lives of the people he served—his reason for going into his field. Once he demonstrated self-appreciation, he found a way to become happy in his chosen profession.

I have found that Self-love, Self-awareness, Self-efficacy and Self-appreciation are the most important ingredients for a person's happiness in the workplace. I always advise young adults to try and identify work experiences that appeal to them: tasks that they enjoy doing, a setting that feels good, co-workers who have similar interests. But since in reality not everyone finds that ideal work environment and is able to stay with it over the entire course of their working lives, it is wise to remember that with the capacity to know and manage ourselves, we Our Selves can become the catalysts for the happy workplace we seek.

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