

# **Aimee Wall**

## **Happiness consultancy report**

**MACS325, “Happiness: investigating its causes and conditions”**

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**Media and Cultural Studies, University of Wollongong**

**Subject coordinators: Chris Barker and Brian Martin**

The happiness consultancy assignment had two parts. For details of the assignment see [http://www.bmartin.cc/classes/MACS325\\_11outline.pdf](http://www.bmartin.cc/classes/MACS325_11outline.pdf)

1. A report for an organisation, prepared by a team of students.

*Aimee Wall and Shauntay Hallett*, working as a team, prepared a report for the St Felix P&F, in the form of a newsletter. The newsletter starts on the next page

2. Reflections on doing the consultancy, written separately by each member of the team as an individual task.

*Aimee Wall's* reflections start after the newsletter.

This document is located at <http://www.bmartin.cc/classes/MACS325tops/>.

# P & F and Happiness

BY AIMEE & SHAUNTAY

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Happiness—the mental state of well-being characterised by positive emotions ranging from contentment to intense joy.

## The Role of the P & F ...

The P&F is a most vital and necessary organization of the school. It's primary purpose is to support the school whenever possible.

In order to best do this, it is important that the role of the P&F is clear to everyone involved.

The objective of the P&F is to promote the cause of the Christian education by bringing parents, friends, students and teaching staff at the school into fruitful cooperation.

An effective P&F is one which (amongst other things):

- \* Understands its role
- \* Accepts the advice of its

### In your words:

*"To find out what's happening in the school"*

*"To encourage a real sense of community in our school"*

*"An opportunity to share thoughts and ideas to enhance the school environment to benefit our children"*

*"To be the spokespeople for parents in our school"*

*"It's more than just raising money"*

representative parent body for the sake of the betterment of the entire school and parish

\* Does not limit its scope for fundraising, but is involved in the total life of the school

\*Affords parents the opportunity to contribute to the decisions made for the whole school

\* Provides opportunities for parents to meet

\* Encourages, affirms and cooperates with other groups working for the good of the school

Diocese of Wollongong Catholic Education Office  
Parents and Friends Manual 2006

members

\*Conducts itself as an authentic

## Let's be "Inclusive"

In the words of the St Felix P&F President, "let's be inclusive" to encourage greater parent participation.

There's no need to wait until next year's merger with SPC to adopt an attitude of inclusion. Many of the past and present P&F members interviewed as part of this happiness research expressed a wish for greater numbers of parents to be involved with Parents and Friends, and a corresponding desire to foster a real sense of community and belonging in the school.

There are many parents who would like to be part of the P & F but are being excluded from doing so by an inability to come to meetings on Tuesday evenings. Meal times, sporting commitments, children's activities, work times - many parents are overcommitted after school. However, there is a practical solution to this: problem: A day time meeting once a month to supplement the night meeting. Monday mornings after the morning assembly, when many parents stay to chat afterwards, would be the opportune time.

The room at the back of the school hall has tea making facilities and would be a secure and comfortable place for parents to meet and get involved in the school community.

As a bonus, the room is already equipped with toys for preschool aged children, so parents with younger children in their care may also feel welcome. The day meeting could be formal or informal, but should have a leader to facilitate communications within the group and between this group and the P&F executive to enhance the performance of both groups.

# The power of “thank you”

*“Coming together is a beginning... Keeping together is progress... Working together is success”*

[www.sfdow.catholic.edu.au](http://www.sfdow.catholic.edu.au)

Scientific studies have proven what the Catholic faith has always known—gratitude plays a significant role in a person’s sense of well-being and happiness (Lyubomirsky 2008). Gratitude encourages a positive cycle of reciprocal kindness among people since one act of gratitude encourages another. What’s more, the benefits extend to the general population, regardless of faith.

“A mere expression of thanks more than doubled the likelihood that helpers would provide assistance again” (Emmons 2007)

Every P&F meeting there are people to whom thanks and appreciation are extended - often in their absence. Every school newsletter expresses thanks to these or other people, who may not actually read the newsletter. The P&F clearly appreciates all that people do, big or small, to contribute towards the betterment of St Felix, but these people may not know it.

The best way to express ‘sincere thanks’

is by putting it in writing. A written thank you has lasting value because it can be read, reread, put on display and shared with others. For maximum effect a hand-written note should follow up a verbal thank you (Davidhizar 2005)

Custom-made thank you cards are an inexpensive and convenient means of doing this.

Try to have cards on hand at P&F meetings and make a point of writing them out to those who are deserving of thanks.

This will ensure your appreciation



Thank you!

is promptly and adequately conveyed. Photographs have been used for the sample cards however an idea is to have children make thank you cards for the P&F as part of their classroom craft activities for a cheaper and more personal alternative.

Experiencing and expressing gratitude also has fringe benefits:

- \*Measurable improvements in your mood
- \*Increased work performance
- \*Higher states of determination and energy
- \*Sense of being connected to others

(Center for Positive Organisational Scholarship, University of Michigan 2010)

‘The key components with connecting happiness and gratitude are the attributes of wonder, appreciation, looking on the bright side, thanking someone in your life, and not taking things for granted’  
Sonja Lyubomirsky, The How of Happiness

## Listen!

Listening is an essential skill to build an understanding of people. You can learn to listen better. Here are some examples of how you can improve your listening skills (McGrath 1984):

1. Ask questions to clarify what people are saying and elicit additional information.
2. Sit up and look people in the eye when they are speaking—your body language may be saying you’re not interested even though you are.
3. Never say, “I disagree with you” - it won’t lead to positive results. Use the words, “Yes, and” rather than “No, but”.

The most effective way to increase a group’s effectiveness is by conversational turn taking as opposed to having a few people dominate the conversation (Malone et al. 2010).

When a suggestion is raised, give everyone in the group an opportunity to express his/her opinion without interruption. Try to ensure that every voice is being heard.

Be open to ideas even if they may conflict with your own. Every opinion is valuable.

Importantly, remember that everyone in the P&F is working towards the same goal—the best possible school for our children.

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This reflection paper is aimed at the causes and conditions of happiness within the Parents and Friends Association (P&F) of the small catholic primary school to which my children attend, St Felix. The P&F quickly came to my mind as a fitting group for the happiness consultancy as I had often heard complaints from parents at the school about the way the committee was being run. Having never attended a meeting myself, I was interested to see what was involved with the P&F and I was also curious about what it was that could be turning enthusiastic parents away. It also seemed like a good choice given my familiarity with the school and easy access to the group. I obtained information about the P&F by talking to the principal of the school who explained that the main function of the P&F was fundraising. I also spoke to parents at the school I knew to have some affiliation with the group and perused the P&F manual on the Catholic Education Office's website.

Initially, I approached the school principal, John, in the playground of the school and explained the nature of our happiness consultancy. At first he thought I wished to study a group of children and was quite amused when I asked to research the P&F. John expressed that he was more than happy for us to study the P&F and invited Sam and I to the next meeting to seek the permission of the other P&F members. I attended the first meeting alone, however, as it was the following day and I was unable to contact Sam in time to organise to pick her up as she has no transport. The members of the P&F kindly agreed to take part in our consultancy.

The P&F meetings are held at the school on the first Tuesday of every month at 7pm. With afternoon activities for all three of my children on Tuesday afternoons, I barely had time to cook dinner before racing out the door to get to the meeting on time (hungry). It made me wonder how many otherwise willing time-pressed parents were prevented from joining the P&F due to the time of their meetings. This thought eventually led to our final recommendation for a supplementary P&F meeting to be put into operation during school hours.

I attended two meetings of the P&F to observe the group's interactions and dynamics. At the end of the second meeting Sam and I obtained the email and mobile phone numbers of the eight mothers who were present so as to later organise suitable times to conduct an interview. We divided the list in half and agreed to interview the four people whose names we had been given as soon as possible. I found this to be a lot harder than it sounds. Some of the mothers worked and could only meet after work hours when neither they nor I had any other commitments. Two of the mothers did not work, one was easy to interview as all her children are at school and the other wanted to find a time when her two preschool aged children would not be present to distract us, although I assured her this would not be a problem at all and I was grateful for her time. Three weeks later I had conducted four interviews. Interestingly, the interviewees expressed a wish not to be voice recorded which I

respected. This meant however that I was frantically writing the whole time we were speaking. The interviews gave me quite some insight to the group dynamic of the P&F and an understanding of how the P&F does and does not make the members happy. It also gave me the opportunity to get to know four new mothers at the school and appreciate how selfless, caring and hardworking they are. I can see myself remaining friends with at least three of them, for which I feel privileged.

At both the meetings there were no more than ten people in attendance, two of whom were teachers (one being the principal). I was very surprised by this as I know there to be in excess of 300 students at the school. I spoke privately and informally with John after the first meeting. He explained that he would “love” more parents to come to the P&F meetings. He expressed his concerns that a few “strong personalities” were the reason parents were not continuing their involvement in the P&F. I immediately realised that he was talking about the president and the treasurer, both of whom I had observed at the meeting to dominate conversation and at times become quite argumentative. This was also reflected in Lyn’s interview when she disclosed that she now refrained from making suggestions in meetings because she had so often been “shot down in flames” by Rose and actually described the P&F as a “dictatorship”.

Like John, each of the parents interviewed expressed a wish for greater parental involvement to both share the workload and to enhance the sense of community in the school. In fact, the terms ‘sense of community’ and ‘feeling of community’ repeatedly came up in our interviews and during the meetings also. Sarason (1974) describes sense of community as the feeling that one is part of a readily available, supportive and dependable structure that is part of everyday life and not just when disasters strike. I came to see that a major factor in these parents’ involvement in the P&F was a firm desire to foster a sense of community in the school. As Rhonda the P&F secretary expressed, “We should identify needs, such as families who may be struggling, and come together to help those families”. Research has linked a sense of community to a range of positive outcomes including improved wellbeing, empowerment, sense of efficacy and happiness (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990) and I came to understand that achieving a sense of community in the school contributed greatly to the happiness of members, allowing them to overlook the difficulties associated with being involved in the group.

It has been argued that individuals will be happier if they feel a ‘calling’ or a connection between what they do at work and a higher or important value (Seligman 2002; Wrzesniewski et al. 1997). Further, individuals are happier when embedded in a work environment that matches their values and goals (Fisher 2009). Many of the interviewees disagreed as to what the actual role of the P&F was, but it was clear that all the members were striving towards the common goal of bettering the

school for the children and this was the most common reason given for joining the P&F. Working towards this goal was a great source of happiness for members as was evidenced in the second meeting when the success of a recent Easter raffle was discussed. The money raised by the fundraiser was to be used towards the purchase of electronic 'smart boards' for classrooms that did not yet have them. That their efforts would tangibly improve resources for children in the school was a source of elation in the group. In fact witnessing the pure joy these members obtained from contributing to a cause they truly believed in has inspired me to continue my involvement with the P&F as a parent after the consultancy is completed. "Seeing the benefits of fundraising" was identified by Sonia as the thing she enjoys most at the P&F which felt to her like "rewards".

Conversely, the main area in which happiness was lacking in the group related to the behaviour of the P&F president, Rose. It was obvious from both our observations and our interviews that the overbearing nature of Rose and her failure to listen to differing opinions was a problem for both individual and group happiness. There is evidence to suggest that leader behaviour is related to employee happiness and that leader-member exchange is fairly strongly related to job satisfaction and organisational commitment (Gerstner & Day,1997). Sadly, Rhonda expressed that she was on the verge of resigning as secretary because Rose's negative attitude makes her feel "like a bucket of manure has been poured on my head". Similarly Trish, who had previously worked on the P&F executive with Rose, described her as "impossible to work with". As Sam and I had discussed the possibility of suggesting a day meeting for parents who were unable to attend of an evening, we now saw this as an opportunity for people who did not wish to deal with Rose to avoid her direct influence and still be involved with the P&F.

Otherwise, there is relatively little research on how individuals may volitionally contribute to their own happiness at work (Fisher 2009). Although much of the advice on how to improve happiness in general could also be applied in the work setting. An example of this is the practice of gratitude. Gratitude encourages a positive cycle of reciprocal kindness among people since one act of gratitude encourages another (Lyubomursky 2007). In the second P&F meeting that Sam and I attended, the president made quite a point of thanking "the people who sit around *this* table and work towards improving *our* school for *our* children" (Wall field notes 2011). I found myself feeling offended that she had neglected to acknowledge all the parents who help the school in other ways such as working in the canteen, assisting with reading and craft groups and escorting sporting groups, which may be the only means within their capabilities to help. The issue of inadequately thanking people who support the school also came up in some of our interviews with P&F members. For example, Trish explained that the main means by which the P&F thanked supporters was in the school newsletter.

This was potentially a problem as many people who donate time and/or resources to the school do not read the school newsletter and further, it is impersonal and not always appropriate. Sam and I subsequently created thank you cards for use by P&F to ensure that their appreciation is adequately conveyed.

As the P&F meets only once a month, I will be presenting our recommendations to the group this week (the first Tuesday of June), after this paper is due. However, I have sought out four of the members and the principal to discuss our recommendations. They were very supportive of all our suggestions. The thank you cards were a real hit and I was assured by the principal that they would be implemented as routine procedure. The recommendation for a day meeting also garnered support with the secretary offering to run them herself, which is really an ideal situation.

Studying the P&F for this consultancy I have learned a lot about the happiness that working towards something one values and believes in can bring. So much so, that I now wish to join this group to help in their endeavour to improve our school for the benefit of all our children. If I were to repeat this consultancy, the only thing I would change is the size of my group. I had mistakenly thought that working with only one partner would make it easier to arrange meeting times. Instead, it meant that I spent a lot of time working on the project alone and communicating by email for input by Sam. I would also ask for expert help in using Microsoft Publisher and save myself two days of toil!

*\*All names have been changed for reasons of privacy*

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