

business issues

INTEGRATING HYGGE AT WORK

BY ANNE SCARLETT

Try giving a warm welcome to the Danish take on contentment and coziness.

MARCH 20 was the International Day of Happiness, as designated by the United Nations.

The overarching theme? To recognize happiness as a “fundamental human goal” and achieve “a more inclusive, equitable and balanced approach to economic growth that promotes the happiness and well-being of all peoples.” (You can find out more at www.dayofhappiness.net.)

Besides the fact that most if not all people aspire to be happy, why is this relevant? Because as AEC professionals, we sometimes encounter opportunities to work with worthy projects (or clients) to make the world a better place. That’s a gift!

But what about on a micro level? What about impacting the happiness within our immediate circle of family, friends and business colleagues? Even further, what about reshaping *ourselves* to ensure that our personal happiness is as good as it can be, 365 days a year? Consider this: Americans spend an average of 25% of our time at work (that’s loosely 36% of our waking life). Our professional life plays a significant role in our overall sense of personal well-being. As hard as we try to compartmentalize by separating work life from personal life, the two still intricately influence one another in terms of satisfaction and performance.

Since its inception in 2012, the World Happiness Report (www.worldhappiness.report) has measured the happiness level (aka one’s perception of well-being) in more than 155 countries. Northern Europeans (Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Iceland) top the list. According to the report, key factors supporting happiness encompass: caring, freedom, generosity, honesty, health, income and good governance. The report

data is sliced and diced in such great detail (including a chapter dedicated to work) that it’s hard to get my mind around it! But here’s my takeaway: It’s worth examining the happiest people on the planet and their philosophical approach to life. What’s their secret sauce? Perhaps we can integrate some of it into our own lives, starting with ourselves.

Cue hygge. Wait, what? Often described as “cozy, content and safe”—and pronounced “hoo-guh” or

“hue-guh”—hygge is a Danish approach to life, where the focus is on environment, experience and connection. It appeals to our basic needs of both safety and belonging (through comradery and conviviality). Setting up a hygge environment comes naturally to some of us introverts, who revel in quiet times spent at home with candles, fires, pets, warming food and drink, comfortable clothes and kindred spirits. But how can any of those things even remotely be transferred to the work environment? And how does a work atmosphere—filled with competition, big goals, hustle, deadlines, highs and lows and personality dynamics—even remotely jive with the aforementioned atmosphere and perspective? I aimed to explore exactly this.

One of my work environments is within academia: the college classroom. There, amid a group of about 25 undergraduates, I encounter generational differences (read: attitudes and communication styles incongruent with my own) among these ambitious yet often overwhelmed young adults. Tension can arise from all angles. So last quarter, I made adjustments to see how I could best integrate hygge into my academic experience. Here’s what I

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did. My (reasonably professional) attire included a cozy scarf or wrap. I'd allow plenty of time to get to class, so that my commute would be stress-free, regardless of traffic or weather. I switched out my favorite news source in favor of upbeat music that gave me a boost of energy and positivity. Since fresh air and exercise comprise a component of *hygge*, I would make time for a quick spin around the campus upon arrival. And finally, I would grab a warm drink prior to heading to the classroom.

During setup, I played music that my students would enjoy, adjusted the lighting and even lit several candles on my desk (according to my research, Danes are known to use candles not only at home but also in their work environments—just saying). I went through all my usual prep—setting up whiteboards, etc.—and then still had time to briefly flip through a collection of imagery on my computer that triggers pleasurable memories (travel experiences, pets, family, etc.). Once the students began to arrive, I'd discreetly do a bit of deep breathing in order to fully appreciate and connect with each breath.

The result? I noticed that the physical environment seemed easier for the students to settle into, and that the overall vibe—initiated by me—seemed more open and relaxed. I sensed that students found me to be more approachable, and I found them to be more committed to the course. And while I've successfully created meaningful connections with many students over the past decade, I felt that integrating *hygge* enabled me to reach a larger proportion of that group, relative to some of my prior courses. The bottom line: On a micro level, integrating elements of *hygge* into your own work environment is worth a shot. And if you are a leader in your firm, you could take this a step further by comparing the Danish corporate models to your own company. Consider this key excerpt from the 2017 World Happiness Report:

“Being satisfied (as opposed to dissatisfied) with your job is strongly correlated with the Cantril ladder measure of life evaluation, whereas feeling actively engaged with your job is more strongly correlated with positive affect. The strongest relationship across all of these measures of general and workplace well-being is that *feeling ‘actively disengaged with one’s job’ is most strongly correlated with low job satisfaction.*”

Let's look at a small snapshot of how the Danes inspire employee engagement (aka satisfaction, loyalty, commitment and high performance):

- Offering opportunities for **lifelong learning** through abundant continuing education and training
- **Reduce hierarchy.** Often, tasks are suggested—rather than directed—and are open for inclusive decision-making
- Strongly promoting **work-life balance** through five weeks of vacation, shortened business hours (typically 8:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m.; breakfast and dinner business activities are rarely scheduled!), minimal overtime, flexibility to tend to family matters, etc.
- **Connecting with colleagues**, such as reducing lunch hours to 30 minutes, which encourages people at larger companies to stay on site and hang out with their colleagues

For many years, I worked in a management capacity at various AEC firms. Today, as an independent consultant, I often think, “If only I had known then what I know now.” Many of these things are doable with the right mindset, priorities and careful budgeting. Think about it. Are you willing to make a shift, either on a personal micro level or as a larger initiative for your firm?

Take a page (or three) out of the playbook from the happiest people on the planet and make this year your best yet! ■