



Case Study: February 2023

Creating a Happiness Advantage in Community Health Centers

A health center in upstate New York focuses on positivity and culture to improve employee well-being and provide a better workplace.

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- Health Center Staff are positively happy at North Country Health Center (NY) in Fall 2022

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Introduction

Most would consider it highly unlikely that in the midst of a pandemic and persistent ongoing crisis within the ranks of our nation's community health centers—where burnout, uncertainty and acute staffing shortages are the norm – it is possible to create and sustain an optimistic, highly engaged workforce. A place where results improved across every measure for the entire organization including an 11.3% increase in optimism, a 30% improvement in motivation, a 31% reduction in conflict and a 7.6% decrease in burnout.

Following the journey of North Country Family Health Center (NoCo) in Watertown, NY, and its Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Joey Marie Horton, reveals how strategically prioritizing happiness can become the biggest advantage an organization has in a competitive, highly demanding health care delivery environment.

Challenging Times

Joey Marie Horton was 28 when she became the Chief Executive Officer of North Country Family Health Center (NoCo); notably one of the youngest healthcare CEOs in the nation. When she took the job, the organization was days away from closing due to significant financial issues. In fact, NoCo's prior Board of Directors announced it was closing on Friday of the week she started. She was pulled in as interim CEO in collaboration with the local hospital and a regional health planning organization. Together, they were able to keep the doors open. Since then, she has guided NoCo to annual profitability and received perfect scores on two HRSA Operational Site Visits (OSV).

Horton, an engaging leader with good instincts, naturally adopted a people-first way of doing things, leaning-in to sharing positivity among staff. When duty called, NoCo was on the frontline of the public health COVID 19 crisis, providing access to testing and vaccinations with a very lean staff all enduring added workloads.

Like many health centers, by the spring of 2021, Horton and the management team were seeing signs of unprecedented burn out. The NoCo staff was exhausted. Efficacy diminished. The prevailing talk was about what was negative within the organization. Moreover, internal positivity rates for COVID and the number of staff impacted by COVID between family responsibilities and childcare issues was even more prevalent than in 2020.

While frontline NoCo staff had been working onsite tirelessly from the beginning of the pandemic, others, who temporarily moved to remote work in 2020, were now full-time remote employees. They were adjusting for better, or worse, to their new solo work environments. Horton saw this new normal as a major setback to the culture she was intent on building. She wondered:

“Will we ever hold an all staff meeting in person again?”

“How do we celebrate wins at work without the ability to share meals and swap stories?”

“How can our people have fun together, and bond as teams, now that meetings are virtual, screen on, screen-off experiences?”

Horton felt the human connection among staff had been lost and that regaining, much less maintaining, a positive culture was in real jeopardy. She wasn't off track, [Gallup](#) (a national polling firm) began to see

employee engagement sink in late 2021, with workers indicating they felt less connected to their organization's mission, felt less clarity around what's expected of them and saw fewer opportunities to learn and grow.

A Leadership Challenge

Instinctively, in the face of suffering, Horton went back to her people-first point of view, prioritizing positivity.

"I wasn't sure what to expect initially talking about how we as an organization were going to focus on happiness and positivity at a time when we were going through a global pandemic. In fact, I was really surprised how much my staff desperately wanted to re-engage with each other toward a common purpose, and one that was focused on positivity," she says.

Despite the daily challenges NoCo faced to provide effective care, she began looking for opportunities to focus more on employee well-being. She began involving employees in a positive change process to improve culture and re-vitalize engagement. She instinctively made the right move.

When there is negative news everywhere you look, and unprecedented challenges facing so many organizations, it can be tough to advise people to stay positive (Consuming Negative News Can Make You Less Effective at Work, [Harvard Business Review, 2015](#)). Many leaders worry, especially during such times, that trying to emphasize positivity and happiness will make them look out of touch — and rather than helping their people, it will backfire. The great temptation is to wait until the crisis is over and things are back to normal before talking about such topics, much less prioritizing positivity.

The reason for this is quite sensible at first. It feels tone deaf to talk about the positive when people are stressed and suffering. Upon closer reflection a huge flaw is found in this mindset. If we are waiting until challenges lessen at work to find happiness and optimism, or for structural racism to be abolished, inequalities to go away, or poverty and violence to disappear, we will never find happiness. Nor will we receive its proven benefits in our personal and professional lives.

What we've learned, even in the most severe situations, is that in times of crisis, positivity matters more than ever. Positive emotions and a positive sense of urgency make people successful during periods of transition. The findings from a multi-year research project at a hospital system in Iowa support this premise. It's precisely in the midst of a setback or challenging time, that leaders should be actively encouraging positivity because it will help teams weather the storm ([A Pathway to Positive Change, Harvard Business Review](#))

In fact, when we have large challenges facing our worlds, we need our best brains possible to bear upon that situation. Research consistently shows that the greatest competitive advantage in the modern economy is a positive and engaged brain — especially during crisis and suffering. The more positive the brain becomes during challenges, the more capable it is to recover from stress, anxiety, and trauma, and pro-actively adapt to changing circumstances. This is the happiness advantage available to us all.

Positive Leadership

The research is conclusive. Positive brains consistently outperform negative or neutral brains. Reprogramming our brains to become more positive, more adaptive and more resilient is not only possible, but also essential in rapidly changing environments (Achor, *The Happiness Advantage*, 2010).

As is commonly said, hope is not a strategy, nor is it a tactic. For every leader, happiness is a choice. Leaders must first choose happiness for the organization and its people. For Horton, the decision was made, and she was looking for a solution to buttress the negativity while providing a structure and roadmap for positive change. After attending a [NACHC](#) webinar in April 2021, she chose the Happiness Advantage | Orange Frog workshop ([Orange Frog](#)), an experiential training intervention for her team.

This experiential training focuses on personal happiness as a foundation, and teaches the science of positive psychology, supports developing new positive habits, and provides the needed belief system, common language and new skills for participants to reach higher levels of optimism and engagement together.

The core application focus of the workshop centers around three things:

1. **Individual Habits.** Habits allow us to accomplish important behavioral repertoires. Individual 21-day action plans ensure participants develop positive habits.
2. **Team-based Work Routines.** Team leaders, with staff involvement, were tasked with examining how to change or enhance existing work routines to embed positive principles and create more desired behaviors and outcomes such as starting meetings with three positives, adopting a praise and recognition program, and team-based conscious acts of kindness. Each team and division designed positive changes tailored to their own sub-culture.
3. **Organizational Priorities and Reinforcement.** Strategic results and priorities are the focus of multiple workshop activities and set the path for post workshop follow-up. Reinforcement included: (a) Ongoing roles and expectations for NoCo's leadership team in support of sustaining the intervention's impact, (b) internal and external communication plans to highlight successful initiatives, reinforce desired social scripts (norms) and share key learning, and (c) ongoing action plans established to manage and measure key measures such as employee satisfaction and engagement.

"We wanted to provide our teams and our organization with a guidepost of what we expected in terms of the culture shift that we were seeing within the organization. Ensuring that people had a platform to be engaged and empowered to do great things was really important. The initiative (Orange Frog) that we chose to implement not only gave our employees the tools that they needed to focus on their individual levels of positivity and happiness, but it gave our organization a common language plus the principles and action plans to make it come to life at NoCo," she says.

To create the foundation and conditions (framework) for positive change, NoCo focused on:

- Embedding the core principals of positive psychology into their belief system, habits and work routines
- Making positive customer-centric experiences (patient and staff) everyone's responsibility
- Changing social scripts to align with intended outcomes
- Engaging people in ways that fuels performance and fosters connection and interconnected success

Two key components to bringing the happiness advantage research to life are incorporating positive habits and increasing social support (and connection).

Incorporating Positive Habits

One action that can have a significant effect on changing people's behavior is incorporating positive habits into their work routines. Creating building blocks of positive habits that remind us that we can be better than our genes and our environment, which changes our belief that others can change, is the beginning of positive change in a culture.

If you see the world through the same cognitive pattern for long enough, your brain retains the imprint of that pattern and seeks to find it again. This is why it is crucial to create a positive lens through which to see the world so that you can see more aspects of reality that can move you forward. Horton recognized that this "Tetris Effect", spotting patterns of possibility, would be an effective way of providing a foundation for actionable change.

"Initiating the Orange Frog training with all employees was our first step. It allowed everyone at once to focus on recognizing the good within our work environment despite the daily challenges. We then initiated an organizational "Orange" work plan – for incorporating positive habits into the way we work together – which is now updated annually to continually reinforce our positive culture," says Horton.

Horton also built new positive habits into her own work routines, including those involving senior leadership at NoCo.

In the midst of the pandemic, Horton found, like many leaders, that the majority of her e-mails to her teams were about negatives or restrictions. "After 63 weeks of sending a daily or weekly e-mail focusing on COVID data and information, I now send a 'Three Good Things' e-mail every Wednesday to all employees with good things that are happening at our Health Center and in our employees' personal lives. I also ask employees to email me stories each week and I typically don't have to beg for the stories any longer, which is great. Staff now come to my office to drop in to say hi and share good things," she says.

In her most recent strategic plan, the NoCo senior leadership team is now held accountable for employee satisfaction and happiness. She understands that daily we're battling our brains' built-in negativity bias, and culture is a powerful component of their leadership arsenal. It's a powerful strategy to consciously increase our expressivity of the positive and hold ourselves accountable for our mindset. (See last page for Horton's Brilliantly Orange One-pager [as she calls it] expressing employee happiness as a strategic priority of the organization).

Horton says the health center also gave employees gratitude journals as part of their holiday gift, "as we know how beneficial it can be to write down the positives in our lives."

Staff now start all meetings and team huddles with three good things and are encouraged to do gratitude journaling. For NoCo, the culture is now sparked by a Happiness Advantage in Action, including the initiatives noted on the top of the next page.

HAPPINESS ADVANTAGE IN ACTION



- 21 Day Challenges
- Brilliantly Orange Sparks Committee
- Weekly Good Thing Email
- Changing Social Scripts
- Celebration Boards
- Employee Recognition
- Joy Bombs



“I think one of the things that's been so important about this intervention for us is that we have chosen to include a number of really simple, easy to implement habits into our work routines and they're good because they create so many happy, appreciative and laughing moments,” says Horton.

The Benefits of Social Support in Sustaining Happiness

Along with optimism and belief that our behavior matters, the greatest predictor of our long-term health and happiness is our social support network. People in close relationships with colleagues are more productive, creative, and collaborative—and they're less likely to burn out. And when you capitalize on happiness, you are doing far more than improving your own well-being and performance; the more you profit from the principles the more everyone around you profits.

“After the Orange Frog training, we instantly began talking about creating positive social scripts within the organization and improving how we interact with each other. Employees now communicate more frequently. They engage more in social activities. They know that it's okay to have fun in our work even though we're doing very important, often serious and stressful, work. And I think most importantly they sense that we have now established a culture of gratitude and recognition. **We want our employees to know that it's okay to celebrate our positives and the good things happening in our work environment,**” Horton says.

In addition, staff now have an opportunity to be engaged in leadership as well as change management. “We're listening and actively getting their feedback, and making changes as needed including focusing together on how we can make our work efforts and culture one that continually focuses on positivity and optimism.”

“We're creating deeper connections to one another, too. For example, every meeting within the health center, including our clinical huddles in the morning and our primary care department staff meetings,

includes three good things to share at work or on a personal level. Selected good things, with permission, are then highlighted and shared via email.”

Another example of socializing a positive culture is NoCo’s Brilliantly Orange Sparks Committee initiated by Horton. It’s made up of positive employees, focused on spreading orange and positivity throughout the organization. Ways they do so include:

- Dividing the whole organization into teams and creating friendly competitions to encourage fun and engagement such as gratitude challenges, hidden superpower sharing and scavenger hunts.
- Instituting Music Mondays and sending out a positive song every Monday.
- Giving every location an orange basket filled with orange goodies so staff can spread orange to each other, replenishing positivity at any time.
- Providing orange lanyards, pens, post-it notes and thank you cards to use in expressing gratitude for someone being awesome.
- Posting highlights of colleagues’ good work online and using bulletin boards at different locations throughout NoCo to recognize good work and good things going on at NoCo and in the community.
- Providing Brilliantly Orange shirts with frog footprints to spread the orange, especially on monthly spirit days, a Friday when jeans and orange clothing is anything but optional.

These small, intentional acts can create lasting positive emotions and show the importance of valuing each other. The intentional use of the color orange serves as an activation reminder of the key lessons in the Orange Frog parable.

“After Orange Frog we have this open positive feel now. When you walk through our hallways people are openly talking, be it “I love your new shoes” or “have a great day” they are sharing smiles and positive moments; this level of open communication wasn't there across different clinical departments before. They're really focused on the idea that we want people to come to work who enjoy being here because we provide critical healthcare services, and we want to ensure that happy employees are in our buildings providing that critical care.”

Annual staff satisfaction surveys, which started six years ago, have been the highest ever since implementing this workshop and culture change.

Results and Impact

NoCo utilized the INTELLIGENCE module of the Clarity analytics platform to provide baseline and post-workshop data, to measure the tangible results and improvements from NoCo's deployment of the Orange Frog Workshop over a five-month period (measurement will be updated again in 2023).

Overall results improved across every measure for the organization.

- Ability to embrace change improved by 20.7%
- Burnout dropped by 7.6%
- Optimism improved by 11.3%

The 20.7% improvement in ability to embrace change (Change Readiness) was driven by improvements in every dimension, but particularly a 30% improvement in motivation and a 31% drop in conflict. The decrease in Burnout was driven by a 10% drop in exhaustion and a 12% improvement in efficacy.

Within the Executive and Management Teams

- Ability to embrace change improved by 26.5%
- Burnout dropped by 23.5%
- Optimism improved by 28.9%

The 26.5% improvement in ability to embrace change mirrored the full organization, marking a significant improvement in change motivation and decreased conflict. The drop in Burnout was driven by a 19% drop in exhaustion and a 28% improvement in efficacy and a 24% decrease in cynicism.

Across the key stakeholder groups of clinical, nursing and first-year team members, several consistent themes of improvement emerge:

- High single/low double-digit improvement across change fatigue categories,
- Meaningful improvement in burnout dimensions, with notable drops in exhaustion and improvements in efficacy, and
- Finally, confidence/optimism saw improvements in each measurable group.

In Her Own Words



Joey Marie Horton, Chief Executive Officer
North Country Family Health Center (NoCo)

We all understand that this may be the most difficult time in our modern history to work in healthcare. Our staff are burned out, leaving the field for non-healthcare jobs, and being enticed to leave for more competitive pay and benefits at other healthcare facilities.

Our Leadership Team and Board at NoCo takes employee wellness and happiness very seriously. We know staff are our most valuable asset and they have a choice to stay working for us. Given this, we made being an employer of choice and reinforcing our Brilliantly Orange culture one of our three strategic priorities in our most recently approved strategic plan.

Now the Leadership Team is held accountable to employee satisfaction and happiness. Initiating the Happiness Advantage | Orange Frog training with all employees was our first step. We then implemented an organizational work plan which will be updated annually to select tactics to reinforce our positive culture.

There has been no greater significant leadership tool that I've been able to use with our organization than to be able to put our people first and the workshop not only gave us individual tools but allowed us to engage our employees and get their feedback and perspective on how we manage an organizational culture change that focuses on positivity and optimism. We're now able to hold people accountable but at the same time ensure that our work environment is one of positivity and one that recognizes all of the good work that we do every day.

We've focused on celebrating the positive and making it the norm to share good things. We focused on gratitude; for example, we have pins that say, "Attitude of Gratitude" and encourage gratitude sharing as part of our culture. We've given employees gratitude journals as part of their holiday gift as we know how beneficial it can be to write down the positives in our lives.

This intervention has significantly changed how we talk as leaders within our organization. We are able to communicate to our employees that they are our most important asset but that we also want them to focus on their own individual happiness as well.

Staff are highly encouraged to take all their earned vacation time so they can focus on work-life balance. Leadership and salaried staff are encouraged to work from home to meet both their professional and personal needs. This is especially important in supporting leadership team members who often put in lots of night and weekend work.

So that whole person integration, I think is really important. Our staff have really embraced it and I believe it's one of the big changes that we've seen for organizations that want to continue to truly focus on their people.

As our mission is to provide excellent health care services, we believe that those employees who are highly engaged within the organization, and who genuinely are happy to come to work, are our best employees. We've seen improvements in our staff's ability to manage change as well as their ability to be productive in their work and in their work environments after implementing the happiness advantage.

So, it's very exciting to see so many staff at all levels of the organization, from clinical as well as management, come together and focus on what we're doing as a team and sustain this happiness advantage work within the organization.

Creating a culture of positivity and optimism now allows us the freedom to think about innovative and new ways to engage our employees and ensure that we are putting people at the forefront of our conversations. Especially today, I think leaders that focus first on their people are always the most effective and bringing the happiness advantage to life at NoCo gave us the tools as an organization to achieve it.

In Their Own Words



BARB

"Before the introduction of the Happiness Advantage, I was so burnt out I couldn't find the good in anything I did throughout the day. Journaling 3 gratitudes has changed my whole perspective on how I look at things. It is amazing how I can find joy in the day by focusing on the positive, no matter how small it may seem. I find myself much more productive, creative, and energized throughout my day."



HEATHER

"This initiative has changed my thought process when it comes to both my professional and personal life. It has taught me to focus on the positive first. My team is now sending good things each week before I ask for them and we celebrate the small things by sending thank you cards and doing small celebrations. The teams are excited to do their monthly celebration boards at their clinics. This has had a great impact on the school-based health team!"



ANGEL

"Being an introvert by nature, Orange Frog has helped improve my comfort zone when it comes to connecting or reaching out to staff I don't work with every day. The steps the BOS committee has taken has allowed us to get to know our coworkers in a different light that we would have never known otherwise. It has really brought a significant bonus to my work life."

Conclusion

Today, the research in the fields of positive psychology and neuroscience, consistently reveal a stunning array of benefits for happy organizations, including higher profitability and customer satisfaction ratings, increased productivity, lower turnover and absenteeism, and even reduced levels of stress and burnout.

Happiness is easy in good times but is a huge competitive advantage during difficult times. Happiness is NOT the belief that everything is great; happiness is the belief that change is possible. Small mental victories, especially in challenging environments or during a pandemic, lead to a cascade of success based on positive changes.

Can you create a happiness advantage in your organization? Yes, you can.

Joey Marie Horton and NoCo's success in this case study is a prime example. As demonstrated at NoCo key ways in which leaders are able to break negative social scripts, improve culture and well-being and lead positive change include:

- Creating positive habits to imprint the belief that change is possible
- Cultivating positive moments (small, intentional acts can create lasting positive emotions)
- Training our brains to scan for positivity (and break patterns of negative thinking)
- Doubling down on social connection and celebrating wins

But first remember happiness is a choice. It starts with leaders choosing happiness for their organization and its people. When you make that choice, happiness and its benefits are contagious.

NoCo's results are impressive. The ability to embrace change improved by 20.7%, optimism improved by 11.3% and burnout dropped by 7.6% across the entire organization nearly six months after the initial intervention. And within the executive and management ranks, results outpaced those of individual contributors across the board – evidencing the significant impact of Orange Frog on leadership where the ability to embrace change improved by 26.5%, optimism improved by 28.9% and burnout dropped by 23.5%.

We are seeing similar results in healthcare with systemic positivity interventions. An article in Harvard Business Review published during the pandemic profiles one such healthcare system where crisis and skyrocketing burnout was a realistic assessment of the present, while the opportunity for improving culture and well-being, including decreasing burnout rates, was also a realistic and attainable possibility ([What Leading with Optimism Really Looks Like](#), Harvard Business Review, 2020).

A positive culture and engaged workforce are never a cookie cutter formula, but it's the result of a reliable form and structure; a positive mindset combined with a skillset for positivity and optimism works. A willingness to create positive habits and work routines creates positive collaboration which yields benefits not only to well-being but the bottom line.

So goes the health of our nation's community health care centers, so goes the health of tens of millions of patients and staff. Everyone deserves a happiness advantage, including you and yours!

About Shawn Achor

Considered one of the world's leading experts on the connection between happiness and success, Shawn Achor is the New York Times bestselling author of *The Happiness Advantage*, *Big Potential*, and *The Orange Frog*.

Shawn has collaborated with NACHC since 2021, in response to the impact that the ongoing public health emergency was having on health center staff. Provider and clinician burnout has been widely recognized in the healthcare industry for some time, however, as a result of the pandemic, those same struggles extended through all levels of health center staff. NACHC's collaboration with Shawn provided national webinars, virtual workshops, and most recently, in August 2022, an in-person workshop to provide health center staff an opportunity to grow and develop key skills and strategies to improve their personal and professional outlook, positivity, and happiness. At the time of this publication, *The Happiness Advantage* has been directly implemented at 14 health centers across the country and Puerto Rico as a result of NACHC's programming outlined above.

Watch Shawn's TED Talk [here](#).

About Cindy Thomas

Cindy has a passion for curriculum design, leadership development, and adult lifelong learning, and has had the honor of creating programs for health center staff at the intersection of those areas for more than 11 years. Currently, the Director of Leadership Development & Training at the National Association of Community Health Centers (NACHC), Cindy has had various titles at NACHC with responsibilities spanning federal grants management (\$6.375M annual), clinician and other executive level leadership development, and curriculum design. She is excited to be expanding NACHC's training programs to further reach the heart of the health center, our frontline workforce. Prior to joining NACHC, Cindy worked at a community health center in Central New York for 6 ½ years, growing from an executive assistant to the Director of Development during that time. Cindy was recognized as a 2019 Training Magazine Top 5 Emerging Training Leader and was a nominee for the 2022 Resilience Impact Leader Award (Johnson & Johnson Center for Health Worker Innovation). She earned her bachelor's and master's degrees from the State University of New York, Cortland. Cindy is a member of the American College of Healthcare Executives, the Maryland Association of Healthcare Executives, The Association for Talent Development, and the Training Magazine Network. Cindy became a *Happiness Advantage* | *Orange Frog* certified trainer in March 2023 and is looking forward to helping more health centers achieve the positive culture change experienced by NoCo in this case study.



Brilliantly Orange



North Country Family Health Center actively encourages positivity and respect as core tenets of its organizational culture. Employee happiness is a strategic priority of the organization.

- All employees **RECOGNIZE** the good work of their fellow colleagues and provide praise for a job well done. Employees are encouraged to search out the good in their day and accentuate the positive.
 - Every single huddle and team meeting at the Health Center begins with the sharing of at least 3 *Good Things*.
 - An organization wide email goes out weekly highlighting *Good Things* from the previous week.
 - Employees recognize each other through Brilliantly Orange Impressions and Brilliantly Orange cards.
- All employees **ENJOY** their work and their environment.
 - The color orange is used to symbolize positivity within the organization. Orange frogs are used to represent sparking a culture of positivity, happiness, and success.
 - Employees are actively encouraged to spread positivity throughout their workday.
 - Sharing something orange with a colleague, whether it be an orange frog or an orange pen, is a discreet way of providing a positivity boost to a colleague who needs it.
- All employees are **STEADFAST** in their belief of our mission to improve the health, wellness, and quality of life of individuals in our community by providing high quality, affordable, patient- centered, and integrated health services. Our employees' dedication and commitment to our mission is what allows us to continually go above and beyond for our patients/clients to ensure they get the care they need and deserve.
 - Employees are unwavering in their support of our mission and are emboldened to put our patients/participants first – ALWAYS.
- All employees show **PASSION** for their work every day. Passion is contagious; employee enthusiasm allows our organization to achieve its mission.
 - Employees are actively encouraged to share their passion with their colleagues and their patients.
- All employees are **EMPOWERED** to lead the organization to success and to do what is right for our patients/participants. All employees are leaders and have the awesome potential to change someone's life for the better.
 - Employees are empowered to lead the orange movement within their work environments.
- All employees **CELEBRATE** successes, milestones, and achievements whether they are big or small. Celebrating as a team and having a little fun helps us to enjoy our work and the people around us.
 - Employees are encouraged to celebrate good things personally and professionally. Each location has a celebration bulletin board to share successes, milestones, and achievements and remote workers are encouraged to share via their Paylocity Community page.
- All employees are **TEAM** players. Nothing can be achieved in isolation; through collaboration, cooperation, and solidarity we can ensure success for our organization and high-quality services for our patients/clients.
 - Employees follow the *10 – 5 Rule*. Within 10 feet of anyone, make eye contact and smile; within 5 feet of anyone, acknowledge the person with a smile and verbal greeting (i.e., good morning, etc.). Staff members use each other's first names and/or high five each other with a verbal acknowledgment when within 5 feet of each other.