

# Coaching With Positive Philosophy

Stop the 'Stoppers' to happiness with Aristotle as your guide

By Geraldine Markel, PhD

**W**hy do individuals seek out coaches? A primary reason is, they are unhappy at work. How often have you heard statements like these in an initial coaching session?

- “Things aren’t going well at my job and I don’t see it getting better.”
- “If only I got a promotion, then I’d be happy.”
- “I don’t like the way things have turned out, but I don’t know what to do.”

Your clients may feel pressured by the tough economy, overwhelmed by never-ending digital demands, or frustrated by circumstances seemingly beyond their control. Perhaps they can’t pinpoint the problem; they just know work/life balance eludes them and they don’t feel happy.

Employee dissatisfaction is not just a personal issue; happiness and productivity are inextricably linked. In the best-case scenario, they complement each other. One report says, “...employees who are most productive are also the happiest.” They may be more energized, stay longer at their jobs, take fewer sick days. They are more motivated, more likely to achieve their goals, and often are willing to help colleagues.

Unfortunately, only 30 percent of American employees feel engaged or inspired at work and 70 percent fail to reach their full potential. By some estimates, “the U.S. is losing about 100 days of work a year from ‘unhappy’ employees.” Viewed in monetary terms, widespread unhappiness or disengagement costs the U.S. \$450 billion to \$550 billion each year in lost productivity.



## What about Your Clients?

Whether they work from home or within a business setting, clients need to understand the relationship between productivity and happiness and pinpoint factors, which stop them from achieving their desires. You can coach clients to greater work/life happiness and productivity ... with Aristotle as your guide.

Why Aristotle? This Greek philosopher addressed the happiness dilemma over 2,300 years ago. Philosophy means love of wisdom, and Aristotle gave his wisdom to the world. He examined deeper issues, such as,

“What is the meaning and purpose of life?” and “What morals should guide us for a meaningful life?”

Using logical analysis, Aristotle provided a rational way of deciding how to deal with life’s difficulties and gain happiness. According to him, the use of reason is an essential

attribute of being human, and happiness is both a central purpose of human life and a goal in itself.

Happiness, said Aristotle, involves the totality of one’s life, not just a pleasurable sensation. He believed each person has the potential for a flourishing life. In other words,

happiness doesn’t come by happenstance. Aristotle’s philosophy reveals the need for self-determination and self-regulation and underpins contemporary approaches toward happiness such as Positive Psychology.

**What are Stoppers?**

Stoppers are barriers to happiness, such as actions or emotions. Stoppers can send people down the wrong path, diverting them from achieving a happy life. For example stoppers may:

- cause individuals to define happiness in ways which don’t lead to sustained satisfaction.
- allow them to be passive, not considering the right course of action or doing nothing at all.
- cause them to be driven by emotional decisions rather than by rational thought.
- obfuscate their own responsibility to avoid the negative consequences of their actions.
- blur the line between success and happiness.

Self-Check: Your Happiness Rating				
	Low: 1-3	Moderate: 4-6	High: 7-10	Comments
Work				
Personal Life				
Overall Life Satisfaction				
Other				

Worksheet: Doing the Right Thing (at the Right Time in the Right Way)				
Situation	What the Right Thing is	Possible Stopper(s)	What You Need to Say	What You Need to Do
Work				
Life				
Other				

Applying Aristotle at Work			
Stopper	Aristotle’s Basic Tenet	What the Coach Hears or Sees	What the Coach Says or Does
Failure to consider the right thing to do for the right reasons.	Do the right thing, at the right time, for the right reason.	“No one appreciates what I do” or “I did this for someone and they should do something for me.”	“If we stand back for a moment, and use logic, what was the right thing to do in this situation? Did you have a sense of accomplishment? Did you do something for your coworker because it was the right thing to do or because you wanted something from him or her?”
Denial of responsibility in order to avoid the negative consequences of one’s actions.	Assume responsibility even if/ when you might have failed.	A performance appraisal of a client’s department shows a loss of revenue. The client has refused to change the processes in light of new market demands. The client blames those guys upstairs.	The coach can guide the manager to consider ways in which he or she owns responsibility for the situation and then move on to discuss effective ways of addressing the problem, including reaching out to others in the company. This is much more constructive than either blaming others or taking on all of the guilt, which leads to ineffective emotional responses. Having a goal of balance and harmony might be helpful toward easing the pain of assuming responsibility.

- or cause them to focus on only one goal, such as material success, to the exclusion of all others.

For each stopper, the coach can refer to one of Aristotle’s basic tenets in the chart at right, and discuss how to “Stop the Stopper.”

### A Coach’s Guide

Coaches can use Aristotle’s philosophy to help achieve happiness at work (and in life) by seeking to shift negative mindsets to positive. Of course, Aristotle’s contemplative and action-oriented view of happiness requires time, patience and practice. Any musician or athlete knows, becoming proficient takes practice, and this is where coaching comes in. A coach can:

- Help clients assess their current level of happiness in general and in terms of work and life. This may mean looking at survey results for the general population regarding happiness, and then initiating the client’s self-survey. (See, Self-Check: Your Happiness Rating.)

- Discuss Aristotle’s definition of happiness with its focus on self-determination and self-regulation as opposed to the common assumption that happiness just happens.

- Help clients develop an individual moral compass or virtue (defined by Aristotle as the right way to act in different situations), including finding the mid-point between excess and deficiency.

- Explore how clients can move from reacting emotionally to being proactive and rationally solving problems.

- Drill down more into Aristotle’s basic ideas such as: doing the right

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Coaching Guide: Stopping the Stoppers to Happiness			
Stoppers	Aristotle’s Tenet	Action	Idiom or proverb
Misunderstanding the true nature of happiness (according to Aristotle)	Happiness is a state actualized by an activity and is continuing general life satisfaction.	Embrace the notion that something must be done for happiness.	“Actions speak louder than words.”
Denying personal responsibility	You need to accept responsibility for the actions taken and judgments made.	Embrace the responsibility for your actions, even when you might have failed.	“If you mess up, ‘fess up.”
Confusing success with happiness: focusing excessively on one goal such as money	There is no single end – achievement, fame or fortune – which assures happiness.	Look for a variety of goals, rather than a single one. Look for ways to enjoy material goods, but don’t forget to nurture your soul.	“Success is not the key to happiness. Happiness is the key to success. If you love what you are doing, you will be successful.” Albert Schweitzer
Struggling with imbalances within work and life	One should seek the mean between excess and deficiency to find balance.	Continually think about decisions and actions which lead to greater balance.	“All work and no play make Johnny a dull boy.”
Resisting life’s inevitable changes	Change is a continuing and inevitable life condition.	Actively look for signals of change or possible failure. Use reason to problem-solve.	“Hope for the best, but prepare for the worst.”
Experiencing overly emotional responses	Rational thought and reason can help you control emotional responses and make balanced decisions.	Control your emotions with the use of reason and avoid impulsive actions.	“Count to 10!”
Being unfamiliar about the distinction between intelligence and excellence	A person with intelligence knows what to do, whereas a person of excellence does it.	Ponder how to do the right thing, at the right time and in the right way.	“Two wrongs don’t make a right.”

thing, for the right reason, at the right time; understanding excess and deficiency; the search for balance; personal responsibility. (See Coaching Guide: Stopping the Stoppers to Happiness.)

- Help clients find ways to do the “right thing, in the right way, for the right reason at the right time.”

- Discuss expectations. Realize change is inevitable in a constantly changing world, but choices still exist – accept, deny, or remain the same – even in the face of change. Learn to anticipate change and plan in a proactive manner, “hoping for the best” while rationally “planning for the worst.”

- Expose barriers or Stoppers which keep clients from attaining happiness.

- Provide possible actions or strategies to eliminate Stoppers to happiness.

- Facilitate an action-oriented approach using worksheets and discussion to clarify how clients may address the question, “What is the right thing to do?” (See Worksheet.)

### Summary

Research shows happiness or lack of it affects one’s health, welfare and productivity. In a culture of instant gratification and constant partial attention, coaches can show clients how to use Aristotle’s tenets to step back, take a broader view of purpose and plan, and use happiness as a driving principle in setting a course of thought and actions within work/life. The over-arching ideal of doing the right thing helps clients deal with modern problems and can provide strategies for achieving greater self-regulation, productivity and satisfaction even in today’s demanding, 24/7 world.

“Happiness, said Aristotle, involves the totality of one’s life, not just a pleasurable sensation.”

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