

# Satisfied employees - a symptom that something is wrong?



A few years ago the Czech prime minister was asked what his political goal was. His answer was to make the Czech Republic as boring as the Scandinavian countries! In his answer was an underlying wish of predictability, safety, coherence and wealth allocation. It is truly an interesting perspective on our Scandinavian societies: boring, but ideal.

I have over the last 20 years, through my work as an Adizes associate, experienced first hand both boring and very colourful cultures (and organizations).

What I would call colourful cultures have the exact opposite characteristics of what the Czech Prime minister found in Scandinavia. Unpredictability and lack of consistency typically characterize the situation, but I have found that this is not necessarily making people more miserable.

When Scandinavian organizations measure their own condition, they will look at customer satisfaction as one of the indicators. The other factor that always is measured is employee satisfaction. There are numerous so-called climate or temperature surveys where the employees are asked a million questions in order to find out how satisfied they are with their workplace. I always get a feeling that resources are wasted measuring the wrong factors when I see these assessments, and further; the measuring itself contributes to give the employees the wrong focus on what really matters.

I have met the most satisfied employees in stable organizations with a high degree of intrinsic and extrinsic predictability. What kind of companies is this? It is monopolies, public sector organizations or organizations with some kind of political protection, all with a bureaucratic behaviour, where the workload is moderate and the pressure not too tough. The focus is mainly intrinsic and focused on “rights” and benefits - for our self.

Where have I met the most discontented employees? In the same companies, only now they are forced to change because increased competition or external threats (e.g. liberalization of market conditions).

What if an employee satisfaction assessment is conducted in this company? What do you think will be the result? I do not need an extensive study in order to predict that the assessment will reveal stress, dissatisfaction, mistrust in management, poor leadership etc. Do you know what should be done in order to get the “satisfaction barometer” positive again? The leadership should simply reduce the rate of change. That is: they should allow employees that want status quo to dominate and delay necessary changes. The leaders should simply stop leading.

Why are satisfied employees not a goal in itself - but rather a symptom that something is wrong?  
Because:

Satisfied employees are less creative!

Satisfied employees will not go the extra mile in order to please the customer (they are going home at four o'clock -that is why they are satisfied)!

Satisfied employees are not flexible. They will fight change instead of adapting to it!

Satisfied employees are conservative!

Satisfied employees want more satisfaction - they simply cannot get enough!

Satisfied employees have union meeting ( “Scandinavian strike” ) while the passengers suffer and the company goes bankrupt (Scandinavian Airline Systems).

Satisfied employees are satisfied with their leaders as long as the leaders do not lead!

A pearl is the result of irritation (the sand corn in the mussel). Satisfied employees do absolutely not allow any sand corns entering their “shelf” , and they will never themselves be a sand corn.

Satisfaction (with work environment, wages, management, etc) is not the relevant factor to measure.

What should be measured is the level of mutual trust and respect.

One can be dissatisfied, but still have both mutual trust and respect. One can surely be satisfied, but have a low degree of mutual trust and respect.



As long as there is sufficient mutual trust and respect the organization, the enterprise, or the nation can handle even the largest challenges, problems and changes without destructive conflicts.

Darwin's expression "the survival of the fittest" is usually misinterpreted to "the strongest will survive" (at least in Scandinavia). That is not what Darwin proved. His point is to the contrary that it is not the strongest or the most intelligent of species that will survive, but the most adaptable ones! This is of course also true for organizations and nations - we need to adapt to change, and that is far more important than the present satisfaction (which will be temporary anyway, unless we change).

So what has all this to do with my introduction about boring Scandinavian societies?

From the Czech prime minister's point of view (and probably many other's) we are living in enviable societies. As a matter of fact I also think we are - I will not swap with anyone. I am myself quite satisfied! Nevertheless, what we should be aware of is to not be self-satisfied, that is: too full of our selves. There is a clear tendency in politics to seek the most frictionless way ahead. "Spin doctors", media, and elitist "besser wissers" are setting the agenda and portraying it as the majority will. Political leadership is more and more about how to please and satisfy everyone. "Don't make waves" could be the mission of all political parties to day. I see similarities in companies where the leaders do not dare to lead, address disputes with necessary firmness and lead the way, as they fear to get a low score in the next satisfaction assessment.

Written by Kjetil Sandermoen, June 2007