

Make wellbeing the goal for 2022 – by Richard Layard

“Where there is no vision, the people die” So what is our vision of the society we want? It is surely a place where people are enjoying their lives and feeling fulfilled. So why not let 2022 see in the Age of Wellbeing.

But critics say that’s just subjective - the goal must be more tangible than that. Really? Isn’t how we feel the most important aspect of our experience – the ultimate test? Many things are good, like health, wealth and freedom. But if you ask why, reasons can be given – they all make you feel better. But why does it matter how we feel? No answer can be given. It self-evidently does. So the overarching goal should be the happiness of the people.

This great idea goes back to the 18th century Enlightenment, so why is it still not accepted? It’s largely due to one huge misconception. People think it implies that everyone should pursue their own happiness. But in fact, it says the opposite - we need people to create happiness all around them.

What a wonderful objective for our young people –good at saving them from self-absorption and good for everyone else. In many ways, it’s a modern re-statement of the Golden Rule – but in more acceptable, secular terms.

If this is right, two things have to happen. First, we need a complete change of culture – away from the goal of personal success compared to others. That is a zero-sum game, since for every winner, there is a loser. Instead, we want a positive-sum culture where people get much of their happiness from making others happy.

In Britain, this change of culture is being spearheaded by Action for Happiness whose 250,000 members pledge “to create as much happiness in the world as I can”. Many other organisations worldwide have similar objectives – all at grassroots.

But, second, we need change at the top – in the goals of government, of education and of business. There have already been some changes. New Zealand has a wellbeing budget. And Britain’s Treasury Green Book on policy appraisal has a 90 page supplement on how to use subjective wellbeing as a measure of benefit.

In business too there is movement. The US Business Roundtable, including many of the world’s greatest companies, now say that business is responsible for the wellbeing of workers and customers, as well as shareholders.

But the pace of change is slow. The wellbeing movement is now roughly where the climate change movement was 25 years ago. As with any other cause, it needs an organised campaign. And in 2022 it will get one, backed by major international companies. The World Wellbeing Movement will be an assertive, high-profile movement to promote the goal of wellbeing, both in government, schools and workplaces.

To achieve a goal, there must be metrics and the new movement (based in Oxford University’s Wellbeing Research Centre) will promote these metrics and advise on their use. It will also bombard the media with briefings, proactive and reactive. It is already recruiting.

Cultures do change, just think of the change in attitudes to same-sex love, to women’s rights and to smoking. So we can have a better, happier culture. And 2022 could be the tipping point.

Note: Lord Layard is Emeritus Professor of Economics at LSE and author of Can We Be Happier?