

School of Public Policy & Governance

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

Trust, service and happiness: lessons from life and recent research

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Introduction

Mr Chancellor, Mr President, honoured guests, graduating students, family, and friends.

It is a privilege to join those who have received an honorary degree from an institution which has grown from Victoria College during my undergraduate days on the other side of Georgia Strait to one of Canada's leading universities today.

Congratulations to all you graduates, and to your families and friends who have provided encouragement and support during your university years. You have worked hard. This is your day. You have a right to be happy.

On graduation day we cannot predict what opportunities our degrees will bring. I did not realize that mine would give me the chance to work with many people who have made enormous contributions to this country. I would like to share with you some of what I learned from them about trust and about service – the two themes of my address today.

Reconciling theory and observation

What I learned from great Canadian public servants over the years has been reinforced by findings from recent experiments in what is sometimes known as “happiness research.” These studies are demonstrating that trust and service are not just virtues that we should pursue for the general good. They turn out to be major contributors to our own effectiveness and happiness.

To me the findings from happiness research help reconcile theory with personal observation. They explain the difference between the human behaviour that could be expected if everyone acted to maximize personal gain, and the behaviour we observe in real life.

A narrow interpretation of economic motivation – reinforced by 24/7 consumer marketing – would suggest that people always become happier when their purchasing power is enhanced, and less happy when it is reduced. But this does not square with what I have seen over the years within or outside the workplace. It does not square with the stories my mother told about all the things that made people happy in the Fraser Valley during the depths of the Depression, or with the profound satisfaction my parents' generation garnered through their collective efforts during the War years – periods when the buying power of most Canadians' was contracting.

Narrow economic theory could not explain what motivated those great public servants who could have earned far more in other occupations. People like Tommy Shoyama, who spent his last decades here at the University of Victoria.

Trust

So, what have I learned from such people about trust and service?

Trust develops when we share a common understanding of what constitutes ethical behaviour, and a common conception of how to work with one another. Tommy Shoyama was deputy minister of finance and Gordon Osbaldeston was secretary of the treasury board when I was a young executive in government. When I faced ethical decisions, I found it very helpful to ask myself: “What would Tommy or Gordon do?”

But we no longer have to rely only on mentors to demonstrate the importance of trust. One field of happiness research is behavioural economics, which examines cognitive and emotional biases to better understand economic decisions. Behavioural economists have been able to show by experiment that people often value fairness and trust over profit maximization.

Research is illustrating the huge practical benefits of working in groups and organizations where the level of trust is high. Organizations that rely primarily on trust to govern behaviour are much more efficient and innovative than those which have to resort to detailed rules, regulations and monitoring.

There are now dozens of books and journal articles exploring the connection between trust and effective leadership.

So my first advice as you go into the world with your U Vic degree is to act in a way that enhances trust. Not only will this help your friends, colleagues and organizations, but it will help you to lead and to accomplish your own goals.

Service

Let me now turn to service.

What motivates people to serve their communities when they could devote that effort to improving their own purchasing power?

Answers are now being provided by happiness research, particularly in neuropsychology, which examines how the function of the brain relates to psychological processes, and in social psychology, which examines how social conditions affect human behaviour.

This research suggests we work most innovatively and productively when our work makes us happy, not when our work makes us rich. If you ask people what they find most rewarding about their profession, they usually mention three things: working with interesting colleagues, working on challenging problems, and working on things that are of service to others. These are exactly the kinds of situations that, according to the research, raise the level of neurotransmitters in the brain and make us feel happy.

We humans are ultrasocial animals and have a basic drive to relate to people. We also have a basic drive to make things happen. The research shows that we get an emotional reward from interacting harmoniously with others, from immersing ourselves in a task that is challenging but closely enough matched to our abilities that we can find creative solutions, and from contributing to a cause larger than ourselves.

We can see how a commitment to service can lead to friendships, membership in a valued group, and a sense of personal achievement. In other words, to happiness.

So my second piece of advice is to find the best way to make a commitment to serve the community in an important project. You will be doing both your community and yourself a service.

Happiness from giving back: the ultimate win-win

All of us who have received a degree from a Canadian public university have been very fortunate. Even though we had to make financial sacrifices, most of the cost of our education was provided through dollars raised from taxpayers, many of whom are less well off than we are. We all have an obligation to give back.

The good news from happiness research is that giving back is one of the things that will make us happiest. This is surely one of humanity's ultimate win-wins.

Again, congratulations on your graduation and best wishes for a future replete with trust and service.