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Happiness Arising from Well-being Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

The idea that physical and mental health is intrinsically linked to happiness is at the heart of the concept of well-being. As we are pressed to reassess our values amid the global COVID-19 pandemic, the concept of well-being is gathering attention. In July 2020, President Hiroshi Aoi and MARUI GROUP's own Dr. Reiko Kojima spoke with Yoshiki Ishikawa, a leading well-being researcher and an advisor at the Company, on the topic of how to achieve happiness in the new era.

Values Spreading Among Millennials

Aoi: A lot of talk of stakeholder capitalism has been taking place since 2019, representing the rise of a new sense of value that prioritizes contributions to the interests of all stakeholders, a shift from the approach of solely focusing on shareholder interests. During the process of examining the interests of stakeholders, we couldn't help but wonder just how many people are satisfied purely by having their monetary interests accommodated. Monetary interests are, of course, something we need to address. However, we are also expected to provide value that cannot be measured monetarily. This statement is backed by data showing that around 60% of millennials expect companies to place the resolution of social issues above the pursuit of profit. This belief, which is antithetical to the prior approach of shareholder capitalism, has been spreading rapidly in recent years. This trend serves as the backdrop for the recent focus on well-being.

Ishikawa: I have only been promoting well-being in Japan for just about two years. At first, this idea was met with question marks, but it has since spread rapidly. This is perhaps due to younger generations coming into power. For example, the presence of millennials is increasing among shareholders and venture capital firms. In fact, it is likely that millennials will become the main proponent driving society by around 2025. Sustainability, diversity, and, yes, well-being are all values that millennials have grown up with.

Aoi: Ah, so the value that we had noticed, but previously been unable to name, was well-being.

Ishikawa: In the past, society has stressed a single path to success, underscored by the idea that good lives come from working at good companies and going to good schools. My generation grew up amid the last breaths of this view. People younger than me, on the other hand, are more interested in finding the lifestyle that they personally think is best. Hardly any of them are obsessed with becoming rich at all costs. This is understandable considering you don't need to be rich these days to be happy. People can afford most things.

Aoi: I think that people who have fully sated the desires for physical things that can be satisfied with money will find themselves starved for things money can't buy. This hunger arises from a sense of external pressure that restricts and prevents one from feeling free. This pressure could be seen as associated with the desires of younger generations for things like diversity, sustainability, and well-being.

Ishikawa: Up until now, the idea of capitalism was seen as absolute. The children of today, however, probably do not agree. We cannot help but wonder what the right way to live is. In the past, people wanted expensive things. Today, they are seeking something more pragmatic. One company I am looking at in this regard is HAIR O'RIGHT INTERNATIONAL CORPORATION.

Aoi: We have one of their stores in Yurakucho Marui.

Ishikawa: One tube of O'right toothpaste costs about ¥3,200. People might initially be put off by the price, but they will soon realize the value as this toothpaste is made from 100% recyclable materials and is good for their health in addition to the environment. In fact, it is made entirely from food. Considering that, we could almost say that ¥3,200 was the right price for



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Yoshiki Ishikawa, PhD

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Born in Hiroshima in 1981, Yoshiki Ishikawa is a preventative medicine researcher with a Doctor of Medicine, which he received from Jichi Medical University after graduating first from the School of Integrated Health Sciences in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Tokyo and then from the Harvard School of Public Health. He is now the representative director of the Well-being for Planet Earth Foundation and is engaged in interdisciplinary research on what constitutes a good life together with companies and universities. He specializes in fields such as preventative medicine, behavioral science, computational creativity, and conceptual engineering and has written books on the subject of fulfilling lives.

toothpaste and that the stuff we have been using up until now has been too cheap. I suspect that the people of the future will be drawn to more sustainable and virtuous options.

Aoi: You touch on something incredibly important there. On the subject of sustainability, the biggest topic of late has been France's Danone S.A., which rewrote its articles of incorporation to define the company as an *entreprise à mission* (company with a mission). French corporate laws apparently are also changing to require companies to do more than just generate profit. Danone's rewriting of its articles of incorporation was a response to this regulatory change. It also looks like Danone has established a Mission Committee with a positioning similar to that of the board of directors at a standard company. If the company wants to do something that goes against the interests of shareholders, they have to get approval from the Mission Committee.

Importance of Well-being for Both Society and Companies

Kojima: You mentioned younger generations coming into power a little bit ago, Mr. Ishikawa. One change I have noticed is that, in the past two years, we have had three employees join who cited their reason for joining as a desire to participate in the Wellbeing Promotion Project Team.

Ishikawa: That is amazing. A little while ago there was a company in which employees were forced to telework for a period. When deciding the approach to be taken going forward, a younger employee suggested, to the president no less, that they only go to the office if there was a reason warranting a visit. This statement was founded on the belief that it should be the employee, not the company, that chooses the work style best for them. This story made me realize that we are entering into an era where people have more power than companies.

Kojima: The members of the 2020 Wellbeing Promotion Project Team helped plan an online school festival at a high school located near our head office in place of the regular school festival that they were unable to hold because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Rooted in this project was the belief that happiness comes from bringing joy to someone else, whether they be from within or outside of the Company. In other words, what these employees craved was not some expensive car, for example; it was to bring joy to as many people as possible. Regardless, when I talk about MARUI GROUP's wellness and well-being management practices at times such as when giving lectures at other companies, I still have people ask me how these efforts improve profits.



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Reiko Kojima

Executive Officer
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Ishikawa: One way I can think of is cost reductions, as such efforts would have a large impact by lowering recruitment and branding costs. Moreover, chronically "low happiness" can cause political and social unrest after enough years. The fall of the Soviet Union is one example of this, as is the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union. For this reason, well-being could be seen as an indicator that hints at the possibility of future social unrest. Such unrest does not result in decreased happiness. It is the decreases in happiness that leads to this unrest. The same can be said of companies. If we look at individual departments in a company, a department where well-being and happiness continue to decrease is incredibly likely to have some issue down the line. Well-being is therefore of utmost importance to ensuring medium-to-long-term stability in management.

Changing Use of Time and Money Stemming from the COVID-19 Pandemic

Ishikawa: An important element of well-being is how people spend their time and money. When comparing different decades, we will see a clear change in how money is used.

Aoi: I definitely agree that the way people spend their time and money is changing. This is probably mostly due to the change in how time is used, which is giving rise to new ways of using money.

Ishikawa: Some people talk about how they allocate their money based on how they use their time.

Aoi: Like how people who spend a lot of time at home also spend a lot of money on their home.

Ishikawa: Exactly. It was suggested that, if you spend one-tenth of your time awake in transit, you should spend one-tenth of your money on transportation. This idea clicked with me. Whether time or money is well spent may depend on the values of the spender, but I think that this approach toward spending is in line with the times.

Kojima: You mean they should spend their money on well-being.

Ishikawa: The COVID-19 pandemic has changed people's values. People are now focusing on how best to spend their money in their more limited life spaces. In this regard, I would like to



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Hiroshi Aoi

President and Representative Director
Representative Executive Officer, CEO
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talk about the weekly well-being surveys conducted in the United Kingdom. Every week, the United Kingdom polls 2,000 randomly selected individuals on their levels of happiness and satisfaction. The results of recent surveys have been incredibly interesting. Happiness and satisfaction have been falling for the past decade, but for some reason they jumped up following the lockdowns. I am sure that there are some people who are suffering under these conditions, but, on the whole, the people are happier and more satisfied. The reason is still unclear, but I think it might have something to do with the fact that capitalism has long brainwashed us into believing that money would buy us more free time. However, with their living spaces greatly restricted, when it came to doing something, the people of the United Kingdom were forced to reevaluate what was truly important to them.

Kojima: We were also concerned that the restrictions imposed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic would diminish employees' passion for work, but the result was the exact opposite. Scores related to work engagement and stress have improved over last year in the stress checks that are taken by almost all employees.

Ishikawa: This is just a theory, but I think the restrictions have made it easier for people to focus on the moment. Up until now, it was easy to be preoccupied with the future, always seeking more. This "more is better" mentality may have been replaced with "less is more."

Aoi: If we look at that idea in a slightly more abstract way, it could be seen as a form of harmony. The prior preoccupation with more, after all, did not allow for harmony.

Ishikawa: Happiness is an incredibly abstract notion. However, I think it boils down to how much joy you can find in your daily routine. For example, I used to hate washing dishes. My hands got chapped and it was boring. Realizing this was a problem, I put a portable speaker in the kitchen. When I first tried washing dishes while listening to music, I could not help but wonder why I did not think of listening to music in the kitchen much earlier.

Kojima: It is often said if you change your mind, your behavior will change; if you change your behavior, your habits will change; if you change your habits, your personality will change; and if you change your personality, your life will change. The current era might be the timing at which people decide to undertake such changes.