

Q & A with 2010 IWLA Annual Convention Keynote Speaker Shawn Achor

The 119th IWLA Annual Convention will be held March 7-9, 2010 at the Hotel del Coronado in San Diego. Keynote speaker Shawn Achor is founder of Aspirant, an applied research consulting firm that provides lecture and training services to companies, schools, and nonprofits. Mr. Achor has spent over a decade researching and teaching at Harvard University on positive psychology. As head of Aspirant, Shawn travels the globe giving talks and training on the science behind individual happiness and organizational success. His work has received attention from *The New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Washington Post*, and his book on the science of success will be released by Doubleday in the fall of 2010.

IWLA recently asked Mr. Achor about his research and to provide insights into his keynote address at IWLA's Annual Convention.

Q –Please share with our readers a little about yourself and your research focus at Harvard.

A - I study positive psychology, which is a new field in the study of outliers - people above the curve - to find out what causes us to raise our levels of happiness and success. Instead of focusing on depression and disorder, I study optimism, hope, resilience and energy. Having spent 12 years at Harvard, I began to notice patterns that caused some students to rise to the top and be positive and others to underperform and become depressed. When I began to bring my research findings to companies, I discovered that those same positive patterns predicted performance everywhere. During the current economic crisis, I have visited 38 countries researching and lecturing to companies on how to raise positivity and performance based on these patterns.

Q - What are some of the companies and publications with whom you have worked?

A - My work began in the financial sector during the worst economic crisis of the past few decades. I have worked with UBS, Credite Suisse, and American Express – companies that are reeling from restructuring, loss of profits, and the absence of performance bonuses. I've conducted research at several companies, including a large study at KPMG, attempting to inoculate tax auditors from the stress of the worst tax season in recent history. I just returned from a month speaking to businesses and schools in Africa, and will be bringing this research to schools and businesses in South America and Asia before coming to the IWLA Annual Convention. My research has been cited in the *Wall Street Journal*, *BusinessWeek*, *Forbes* and *Fortune*.

Q - What can attendees at IWLA's 2010 Annual Convention take with them from your keynote presentation?

A - There are three takeaways, based on research. First, attendees will leave with a mindset change: our brains at positive outperform our brains at negative or neutral. This changes how we think about our work every day. Second, attendees will understand how much they can raise their positivity by changing the lens through which they view the world. And finally, attendees can learn how to link that positivity to higher levels of productivity, performance and profit by practicing the five positive habits that increase long-term happiness and success.

Of all the metrics I have used in my work in over 30 countries worldwide, the greatest predictors of happiness and success are consistently (1) the belief that a person's behavior matters, (2) a positive social support network of coworkers, family and friends, and (3) the ability to manage stress to create positive energy. My keynote will describe how to connect all three predictors so attendees can achieve greater happiness and organizational success.

Q - In today's economy, it is more difficult than ever to maintain a positive attitude in the workplace and personal lives. What advice can you provide to our members to avoid these pitfalls?

A - During a crisis, we have limited brain bandwidth. One can use most of that bandwidth complaining, comparing yourself to others better off than you, or ruminating on our stress load. But that means we've devoted our brain to staying right where we are. The more you can focus your brain on stresses that dictate your ability to control change, the more likely you will restart forward progress.

Q - Anything else you'd like to add that would entice our members to attend your session and IWLA's Annual Convention?

A - Optimism is not about sugar-coating the present. False optimism is part of the reason we are experiencing our current financial crisis. Rather, rational optimism means taking a realistic vision of the present while maintaining a belief that our behavior will lead to growth. Optimism is the belief that behavior matters; during crisis, we must find ways to remind our brains that what we do matters a lot.